


The Edinburgh International Book Festival – Stuart MacBride: brains, bad language and a skeleton called Bob

Chairpersons of some sessions at **The Edinburgh International Book Festival** are excellent (Stuart Kelly, Richard Holloway, I'm looking at you..), some are a little less impressive. If his first few lines are anything to go by, **Philip Ardagh** looks like he might well be in the former category; he's friendly, funny and knows his subject. Ardagh's skills, however, may never be known: once **Stuart MacBride** is let loose he careers through the next hour at the speed of light – conversation of any sort is not only unnecessary, it's impossible. 

In theory MacBride is here to promote his latest Ash Henderson thriller *A Song for the Dying*. In practice, he wants to talk about swearing, brains, and why you should never get into a lift with someone who's just eaten pickled cabbage.

So first the swearing. MacBride's early books are full of it, but like many a middle-aged man, he's having to cut down. He's even drawn a graph to prove it: *Shatter The Bones* was apparently his 'sweariest' book, by the time he got to *Birthdays for the Dead* the F-count was falling, and *A Song for the Dying* is his 'least sweariest' book to date. He's not altogether happy about this, but he felt obliged to humour the 'Blue Rinse Brigade' – elderly ladies who were more than happy with all the violence and gore for which his books are notorious, but who fired off emails in all directions about the Bad Language. MacBride discussed this issue with his friend, writer Allan Guthrie, and decided he'd better do the


decent thing. Good behaviour, he assures us, is now the order of the day – though he’s certainly not promising total abstinence. According to MacBride, science has proved that swearing is an analgesic that triggers a dampening of the brain’s response to pain. And only ‘proper’ swear words work, none of your namby-pamby ‘fiddlesticks.’

Then there’s ‘unintentional bad language’ – and MacBride is off again, with a story about Doric, which apparently doesn’t translate too well into Afrikaans. ‘Foos yer doos?’ (‘How’re your pigeons?’ – an expression you might think more local to Yorkshire than Aberdeen, but it seems not..) means something quite different in Johannesburg: unfortunately MacBride only discovered this after using it to sign rather a lot of his books, ‘Now half of South Africa thinks I’m a pervert.’

☒ And now Ardagh – and Allan Guthrie, who turns out to be sitting in the audience – finally have a role to play. *The Completely Wholesome Adventures of Skeleton Bob* (‘suitable for all ages...who have money’) was MacBride’s contribution to the University of Dundee’s **Million for a Morgue** campaign (though he’s quick to tell us that it should have been Mortuary – ‘We’re NOT AMERICANS’) Most authors want to read from their published work; MacBride wants to read the bit they wouldn’t let him publish. Of course. So now we are treated to a tale of zombies, worms – and brains – as Ardagh and Guthrie gamely join the stage. They’re the zombies, by the way, and jolly good actors both. MacBride soon bludgeons everyone into shouting **BRAINS!** at regular intervals, and he’s hugely entertained to think that the sound of a hundred voices might permeate the live streaming of George R Martin’s session next door.

So what of Logan McRae, who is after all meant to be the subject of this performance, (for performance it certainly is..)? Why, for example, are these books so unrelentingly gory? (my son told me that if I found *Cold Granite* hard to take, I should definitely stop right there...) MacBride is

obsessive about the writer's dictum 'show don't tell' and finds dialogue tags ('he said', 'she questioned') so annoying that he has to SHOUT examples at us. The books are gory, he says (oops), because he wants the reader to see what Logan sees. Similarly, they (or they used to...) include a lot of swearing because 'sometimes swearing is really appropriate at that moment.' He has not – despite readers' fears – killed Logan off. Which actor would he choose to play Logan on TV? 'Keira Knightly.'

MacBride doesn't know if there will be a sequel to his standalone *Halfhead*, though he's already thought up the title and the plot. He feels that *Halfhead* has been unfairly  categorised as sci-fi and that this may be why it sold far fewer copies than his other books; he prefers to call it a 'near-future thriller.' He hadn't intended to write a sequel to *Birthdays for the Dead* but he couldn't silence Ash's voice in his head any more than he could ignore the readers demanding to know what happened next. *A Song for the Dying* was difficult to write, but he feels it works.

More stories follow like bullets from a gun. It's been so hot in Aberdeenshire lately that he's been writing naked. He's pleased to learn that many of the audience read in bed – so if it's as hot in Edinburgh....'feel that connection.'

And that just leaves the pickled cabbage. And I'm afraid I'm going to leave that bit to your imagination; suffice to say that it involves MacBride, the effect of long-haul flights on his digestion, and incarceration in the world's slowest lift.

This was a fast-paced, entertaining hour, one in which we possibly learned more about MacBride than about his books. And I'm very glad to see that the long-suffering Philip Ardagh is the star of his own show at EIBF. MacBride was certainly the star of this one.

