In conversation with author Claire Macleary

After careers in everything from HR to antiques dealing (she was even once a laundry maid), Edinburgh-based author Claire MacLeary has now turned to a life of crime.

Cross Purpose, MacLeary's first novel about private detectives Maggie Laird and Wilma Harcus, was longlisted for the 2017 Bloody Scotland McIlvanney Prize and her second, *Burnout*, longlisted for the 2018 Hearst Big Book Awards. *Runaway* followed in 2019, and *Payback* (2020) is the latest outing for this unusual pair. The books cover such gritty issues as domestic abuse, coercive control, money laundering, people trafficking and drug running, filtered through the lens of two ordinary women trying to make a living in a traditionally male environment.

Although Maggie and Wilma are firmly based in Aberdeen, the author herself recently returned to live in Edinburgh. This offered the perfect opportunity to ask Claire a few questions about her writing, her life – and whether women have the edge when it comes to following someone down a street.

TER: Claire, you worked in several different areas before becoming a writer – have these had an influence on your writing?

CML: I've been – among other things – a market trader, an

advertising copywriter, a training consultant and a laundry maid. My time as an antiques dealer (with a baby under one arm) taught me to think on my feet. Setting up my own business necessitated rigorous market research, principles I applied when plotting *Cross Purpose*.

TER: Do you feel that you're a better writer now than you would have been if you had started earlier?

CML: I have written short stories since my schooldays, but I only returned to writing in earnest after my children left home. I'm fortunate to have lived a full life and travelled extensively, so I do have a wealth of material to draw on. I do occasionally wonder if I would have written crime had I started earlier, but I have a dozen novels in my head – not exclusively crime – and anyway, crime writers are a friendly bunch!

TER: You have a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Dundee – what are the benefits that such a qualification offers, and do you think formal study is essential to make a good writer?

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CML: My MLitt course was one of the hardest – and most rewarding – years of my life; the rigour of concentrated writing sessions with Professor Kirsty Gunn, networking at literary salons, the freedom of being 'Claire' again as opposed to 'Mum.' Creative writing courses abound, and vary in quality and content; from my experience, a good one will not teach you how to write, but how to write better, developing critical faculties and editing skills. Rather than the taught experience, however, I think extensive reading makes for good writing. Add to this the editorial eye. Agent Allan Guthrie was instrumental in bringing my debut novel to publication, and I continue to learn from my publisher, Sara Hunt of

Saraband, and my current editor, Russel D McLean.

TER: Your two main characters, Maggie and Wilma, are both middle-aged women with very ‘normal’ problems – mainly money, children, partners and lack of time. Many fictional detectives seem to have no life outside their work, which is rarely an option for women. Was this something you wanted to explore – just how hard women have to work to fit everything in and please everyone?

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CML: Multi-tasking is a way of life for most women, Maggie and Wilma being no exceptions, but I wanted to explore – in Maggie especially – the deeper truths of what it is to be a woman and a mother. Torn in different directions: husband (in this instance her dead husband’s legacy), children, ageing parents. Racked with worry, ridden with guilt, permanently short on sleep, she walks an emotional tightrope, feeling she never gets the balance right and leaving no space to support her own needs, mental or physical.

TER: Fictional female detectives are frequently female (Maisie Dobbs, Mirabelle Bevan, Kate Fansler), whereas fictional police officers more often seem to be male (Rebus, Morse, Logan McRae); do you think women are better at the kind of work where small details can be pivotal? Are they more intuitive, or is it perhaps that people will chat to them more easily?

CML: Private detective work has altered significantly in nature. Changes in divorce laws have rendered extra-marital surveillance all but obsolete. Fraud investigations are the mainstay; the private investigator is as likely to be indoors running computer checks as out in the field. But a degree of personal interaction is still necessary, and here female private investigators arguably have the edge over their male counterparts. They can indeed be more intuitive, have greater

empathy, be invisible: suspicions might be raised when a man follows someone down the street or lurks in a doorway, but who would give a woman a second thought?

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TER: Both Maggie and Wilma are hard up – Maggie is in especially dire straits. Would you say that it is still hard for most women with non-professional jobs to be financially independent? In order to keep her new husband happy, Wilma has to keep secrets and make compromises – is she doing this for love?

CML: Someone once advised me to 'have your own money'. I firmly believe lack of financial back-up keeps many women in abusive relationships and low-paid jobs. A nest egg is a pipe dream for most women. Wage parity has only come so far, jobs suited to women with school age children are predominantly in the retail, hospitality and domestic sectors, with affordable childcare often beyond reach. Wilma has learned hard lessons in her upbringing and first, failed, marriage. She loves Ian, but I feel she keeps secrets because she is a pragmatist and will do whatever it takes to advance her own prospects.

TER: Wilma is a larger-than-life character; she's often headstrong, takes risks and is prepared to put her own safety on the line to protect others. She's also desperate to catch up on the education she missed. Where did the inspiration for this character originate?

CML: When my son started primary school. I opened my first business: a sandwich shop staffed by young mums like me. These women were the inspiration for Wilma: women who hadn't been given the opportunity of further education or careers, but juggled housekeeping and child-rearing with whatever part-time employment could be fitted around school hours. Like Wilma,

they had aspirations. Their determination, stamina, resourcefulness and ingenuity were displayed to the full when the business developed an outside catering arm; it was not uncommon to serve lunch for 200 in an office building with no facilities before sprinting home to pick up our children from school. Wilma may be coarse at times, but she is big-hearted, fiercely loyal and essentially decent. And she's funny: I've tried to use couthy Aberdonian humour to deliver home truths.

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TER: Your Harcus and Laird novels are set in Aberdeen – why did you choose that location?

CML: Stuart MacBride's hugely successful novels aside, I felt the city was under-represented compared to Glasgow and Edinburgh. I lived in Aberdeen for thirteen years, knew the city and its hinterland well from my adventures as an antiques delaer, and had a passing acquaintance with Doric, so I felt I could write authentically about the area and its inhabitants. Canny population aside, Aberdeen has a host of distinctive features to draw on, among them its sparkling granite buildings, working harbour, rugged North Sea coastline and historic Deeside. Aberdeen also now has the highest proportion of foreign residents in Scotland, Poles foremost among them, and this offers the crime writer a rich seam to be mined.

TER: The police are investigating alongside Maggie and Wilma, and the scenes between the various officers, especially their low-level bickering, make them very human. Do you have any inside knowledge of police work?

When I first set out to write a crime novel I had scant knowledge of police procedure, far less of forensics, so I resolved to find a police 'mole'. I also made an early visit to the Aberdeen mortuary, and was greatly helped in forensics by Professor Dame Sue Black, then at Dundee University. I now

have both police and private investigator sources on hand to correct any glaring errors.

I am grateful to the many individuals who have patiently answered telephone queries, be they the number of beds in an ICU bay or the colour of a shroud. I am also known to accost police officers on the beat, asking questions about accident scenes or requesting sight of a pepper spray – and in this, being an older woman is a decided advantage!

I know to my cost how difficult it is to keep abreast of changes in procedure and legislation – Police Scotland was formed during the birth of *Cross Purpose* and the novel had to be heavily revised – but I believe readers are prepared to overlook minor inaccuracies so long as the action carries them forward and the book reads as credible.

TER: You yourself have recently returned to live in Edinburgh – what particularly attracted you to life in the capital?

CML: Although my husband's work has taken me to London, Aberdeen and Fife, I started married life in Fairmilhead and have lived in Cammo and, latterly, the New Town. Whilst based in Fife I made many a day trip to galleries and events in the capital, and observed the changes – not least the trams – since I worked in HR for the now defunct BHS and could park my car on Princes Street. Now I'm looking forward to revisiting old haunts and discovering new. We have returned to Greenhill, on the edge of Bruntsfield Links; green spaces are important to me, having spent a carefree childhood in Fort William, so having this in such close proximity to the attractions of both Old and New Towns is a delight. Book festivals and events, albeit temporarily suspended, are also within easy reach, as are my grandchildren.

TER: Tell us a little about your own writing routine; do you have a favourite place or time to write?

CML: I am blessed to have a dedicated study, furnished with

chersihed antique – though not especially valuable – pieces, a stack of reference books and a copious supply of black gel pens. The downside is that the room has French windows, which offer endless opportunities for procrastination. Unless I am on holiday I type sitting at my desk, and am most productive in the mornings. For me every day is a working day. If I'm not actually writing, I'm thinking about writing and am never without a notepad, even in bed. Especially in bed, for when a new book is going well I often wake in the early hours with dialogue running through my head.

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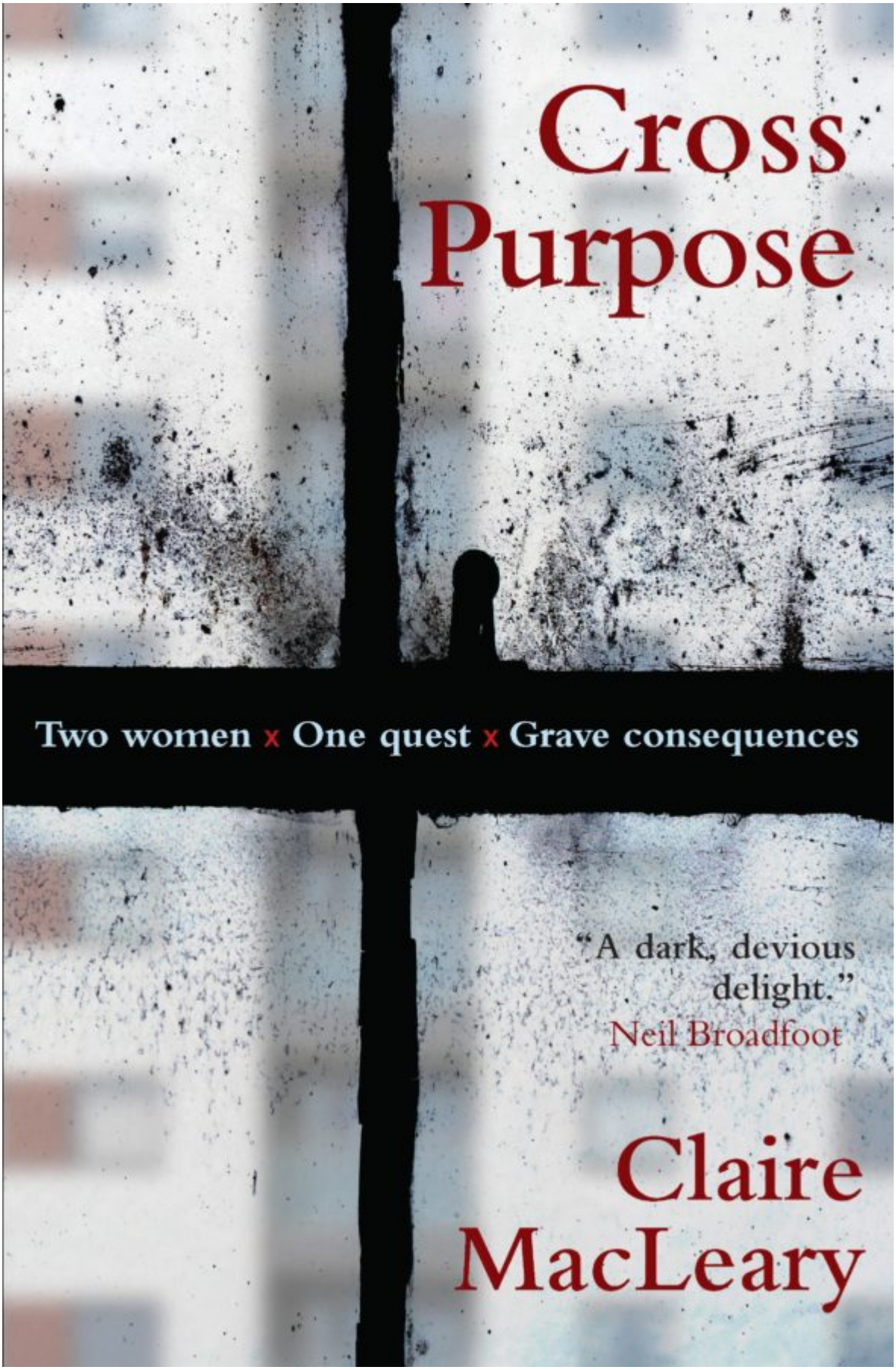
Cross Purpose
Two women x One quest x Grave consequences
"A dark, devious delight."
Neil Broadfoot
Claire MacLeary

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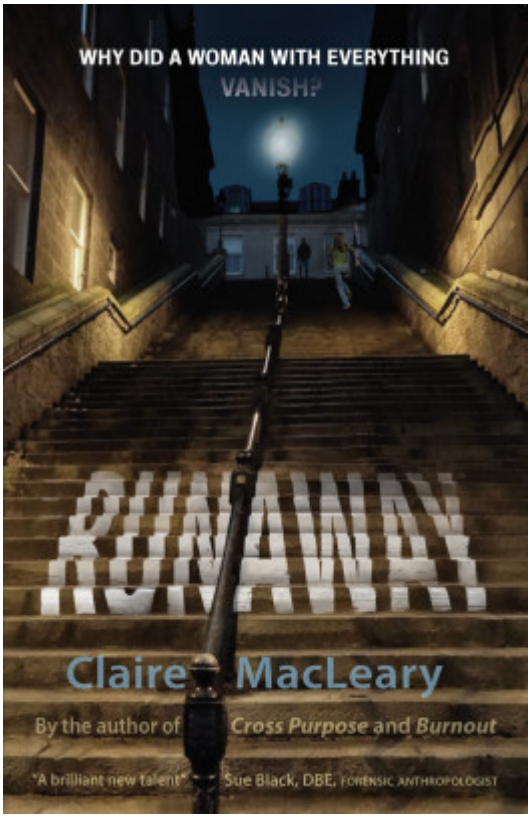
- 

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TER: Finally, the dreaded C word. Two of the characters in

Payback have jobs that give them easy access to people's homes. Do you think coronovarius restrictions will have to be incorporated into novels in future, or is it best to carry on as if nothing has happened?

CML: This topic came up recently in a Crime Writers' Association Zoom meeting. Given the time lag between a novel's submission and publication, my intention was to make only passing reference to the pandemic in the current book, as I previously did regarding Brexit. The consensus was that readers expect to be entertained, and that no – or little – space be given to coronavirus.

TER: Thank you so much, Claire, for taking time out from your busy writing schedule to answer these questions in such interesting detail. And good luck with the new book!

Cross Purpose, Burnout, Runaway and ***Payback*** are all available from bookshops, or direct from the publisher Saraband.

https://clairemacleary.com/