

Mark Billingham

**Ahead of his appearance at CrimeFest later this month, best-selling novelist Mark Billingham chats all things crime, clues and comedy with Daisy Game...**

“It doesn’t matter where you are in society; it doesn’t matter whether you’re rich or poor, or where you’re from: once a detective is knocking on your door, you need to talk to them. Nobody can close the door in a detective’s face. And that means a detective has access to every stratum of society...”

According to crime fiction novelist Mark Billingham, his is the perfect genre with which to address The Big Stuff. “I think crime fiction is now the social fiction of our age,” Mark tells me: “There was a time when literary fiction made a point of doing that – in the 60s or maybe in the 70s – but it doesn’t seem to do that so much anymore. And crime fiction does that: whether deliberately, or not.”

In fact – the less deliberate, the better. Setting out with a particular agenda to push simply won’t do, the writer suggests: “Don’t get me wrong – story is king, story is everything. But if within that story you can shine a light onto a particular issue, then you should do that – and over the years, crime fiction increasingly has been doing that...”

When it comes to crime fiction, Billingham knows his stuff: the author of 21 bestselling novels, he’s been whipping up fictional felonies and the shady characters who commit them for over 20 years. With the exception of a few standalone novels, the writer spends the majority of his professional life busting crime with Detective Tom Thorne, who has an impressive total of 18 titles to his name. But it’s 2023 – and for the first time in a long time, there’s a new detective in town. The Last Dance, out on 25 May, will introduce readers to the eccentric Detective (forward-slash dancer) Declan Miller – aka, Blackpool’s best hope for keeping criminals off the streets. In this first instalment, Miller sets to work unearthing the connection between two men murdered in the same seaside hotel.

“Miller is very different to Tom Thorne,” Mark explains: “He’s somebody who is grieving his wife. By the time we meet him, she has been murdered, and he’s going back to work – perhaps too soon. He’s dealing with grief in a very idiosyncratic and strange way; he just doesn’t care anymore. Which makes him a very unpredictable and mercurial character...”

It’s been a different writing process too. “I never had a sort of Bible for Tom Thorne, or dossier of facts... I still don’t,” says the novelist, explaining that he prefers an off-the-cuff approach: “The reader knows as much about him, book on book, as I do. With Miller, it’s slightly different. I kind of feel like I know exactly who he is...”

Part of this familiarity comes from the fact that Miller was – and perhaps still is – destined for the screen: “I’d been asked a couple of years ago to write an original detective drama for the BBC. And as part of that, I created this character, Declan Miller, and wrote umpteens of draft scripts about him, and got to know exactly who he was. But

the wheels of television grind incredibly slowly... So rather than just sitting there, waiting for a series that may never happen, I decided to use him as the main character in the new series of books instead.”

Not that knowing Miller’s ins and outs beforehand made things easy for Mark. Moving away from Tom (momentary as the move might be: readers haven’t seen the last of Thorne, Mark is keen to emphasise) was no easy thing. Miller is, after all, the star of the writer’s first new series in over twenty years.

“There were times it was a bit scary. And I thought, what are you doing? But if things like this aren’t scary and exciting, you’re probably not doing the right thing. You have to step out of the comfort zone and do something different...”

Something different – and liberating, it seems. “The tone is much lighter. I’m still writing about murder and death and grief and pain and loss – but in a very different way”, the novelist tells me: “I wanted to write something that gave me the freedom to give full rein to that temptation to put jokes in...”

Jokes? In a book about murder and related mayhem? That’s off beat. But not, as it happens, for Mark, who spent his time treading the boards as a stand-up comedian before embarking on a writing career. I’m curious, then – how was it that that the writer’s gags turned gruesome? It turns out the two aren’t so far removed. “A joke is structured in exactly the same way as a crime novel: it’s all about the timing, and when you reveal a key piece of information. And crime fiction is full of punch lines – they’re just very dark lines. You plant clues in the same way that a comedian will lead you down the garden path and then hit you from an unexpected direction,” says Mark.

Plus, when it comes to really working an audience or readership, comedy has some pretty shiny pearls of wisdom to impart: “I learned as a performer that you’ve got to engage with your audience very, very quickly. You can’t go onstage at a comedy club and go ‘stick with me, I’ll get funny in about 20 minutes,” the writer teases: “You’ve got to be funny straight away or they’ll start shouting at you. Similarly with a crime novel, you have to engage that audience really quickly. As a reader, I’m not going to give a book any more than 20 pages: if there isn’t something that’s got ahold of me after that, I’m putting the book down and picking up another one.”

Staying briefly on the note of performing, Mark is also one sixth of the super-group Fun Lovin’ Crime Writers, which consists of noir authors Chris Brookmyre, Doug Johnstone, Val McDermid, Stuart Neville, Luca Veste and Mark himself. The band of best-sellers have been entertaining audiences at book and music festivals since 2017. Between them, they have sold over 20 million copies worldwide and won every major crime-writing award.

Having been introduced to Sherlock Holmes at the age of 13, Mark has been an avid reader of crime fiction since way back when: “I read nothing but crime fiction from a really early age. Don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing wrong with a wonderfully written literary novel. But I do find myself going: “Oh for God’s sake, kill somebody!” Or let’s

have a car chase, or something... I adore brilliant crime fiction. I really do. I'm a reader first and foremost: I don't think you can be a writer without being a reader."

As a reader first and only, I find the sheer number of books and stories Mark has under his belt pretty astonishing: do ideas come thick and fast, I wonder?

"I've heard plenty of writers go 'oh ideas, ten a penny!' I don't find them ten-a-penny: I find it very scary when you don't have an idea in your head," confesses Mark; but he simply has faith in the process: "Something always turns up. I never really plan a book – but once I know I've got a strong opening, I just write that, and then I see where it goes from there. It's almost like a pre-title sequence in a movie, at the end of which I want to be here to be lots of questions. I want the reader to be going: 'What, why, who – what's going on?'. And maybe I don't know the answers to all those questions at the time. I put it down and then Tom Thorne will enter and I will discover things as he discovers them. As long as I've got the seed of something, then I should be alright..."

Billingham prefers to learn alongside his reader – or at the very least, he likes to avoid lecturing them. He makes a point, for example, of avoiding overly specific descriptions of his characters: "That's doing the reader's job for them," Mark insists: "If you describe every detail of what a character looks like and what they're wearing, then you're stifling the reader's imagination. All Thorne really is what he says and what he thinks: what he looks like is up to the reader. To me, that's the beauty of reading: it's not a movie, it's not all laid out in front of you – you've got to do a little bit of work."

Later this month, Mark will meet readers aplenty at this year's CrimeFest. As a featured guest, Billingham will be interviewed one on one, before sitting in on a panel discussing the New Golden Age of Crime Fiction. The weekend is set to be a bit of a knees-up, too: "I'll know 90% of the writers there. So you know, it'll just be a big get together at the end of every evening. There'll be a good deal of socializing, there'll be a lot of fun..."

**Mark Billingham's *The Last Dance* is published by Sphere on 25 May 2023, £22. CrimeFest, sponsored by Specsavers, runs at the Mercure Bristol Grand Hotel from 11-14 May, 2023. For more details and to book tickets, visit: [crimefest.com](https://crimefest.com)**