



Big Book Chat With Val McDermid

ALEX CLARK: Hello and welcome to The Big Book weekend. My name is Alex Clark. And on the other screen you can see none other than Val McDermid, the queen of crime, the dame of crime, the grand poohbah of crime is how I'm going to introduce you, Val. Is that all right?

VAL MCDERMID: Absolutely fine. Call me what you like. I'm used to it.

ALEX: I would introduce you and in fact I'm going to introduce you, but I have to say, with 40 books in 35 years, more than one a year, I can't possibly begin to list them. But I can, of course, say that you've written not in one not in two prime series, but in four different series. Your latest book is *Still Life*, that's a Karen Pirie book. You have done so many other things. Honorary degrees coming out of your ears. You do an enormous amount to advocate passionately for libraries, women's rights. You're very active in the political sphere. You also, I understand, literally from just chatting beforehand have made a series of cookery videos in lockdown, just in case you weren't doing enough. And I know that at some point we will take a sort of cyber diversion to Starks Park and talk a little bit about your love of the football team Raith Rovers but a very, very welcome to you Val. Thank you for being with us.

VAL: It's a pleasure to have a chance to talk about books, reading and kick back at the end of the week.

ALEX: Yeah, it is, isn't it? We need these moments to really focus on things that we love at the minute. Now, you have published a book in lockdown. It is *Still Life*. It takes us of course into the world of the historic cases unit, your cold cases interest. Just tell us a little bit about what you're doing at the minute with that series. And then we'll sort of broaden out.

VAL: It is as it often the way I find, an accidental series. I wrote a book a while ago called *The Distant Echo*. And one of the minor but significant characters in the book was a young detective called Karen Pirie. And a few years later I had a really great idea for another cold case novel and because I'm fundamentally lazy I thought well, I've already got a cold case detective I'll just stick her in this book. Then she grew on me and grew into something much bigger. She heads up the non-existent in real life historic cases unit of police Scotland. And they're a sort of an autonomous cupboard in Gayfield Square police station. Karen investigates cold case with her colleague Jason, 'the mint', Murray. I think she's an interesting character. She's dogged. She's absolutely dedicated to the idea that people deserve closure. People deserve to know what happened to their loved ones. And so that is what drives her. She has suffered personal tragedy during the series. And one of the things that, one of the ways she deals with that is she walks the city at night, getting to know the city, that is not her home city. I think that's, for me, that's been one of the interesting things to do with Karen is to explore Edinburgh through her eyes.

ALEX: She makes these – kind of just to quiet her mind and to get herself centred and grounded, she walks around the city and she just takes in. I know you've been walking through lockdown, haven't you?

VAL: Yeah. Certainly have.

ALEX: And a sort of penchant for visiting interesting graves and so forth.

VAL: Well, yeah, one of the things about lockdown, it's been going on for so long now, we're all trying to vary our walks. Edinburgh is a good city for that. There's lots of places to walk. I have found local cemeteries to be particularly interesting places to go for a walk. They're generally quiet, a bit away from the main road. You hear the bird song. You see interesting graves. Interesting things, you can have interesting conversations that arise from what you are seeing. The other day I was in the Dean cemetery with Mary Paulson-Ellis, a fellow Scottish writer and we came upon a gravestone with two names on it, two men's names on it, with a date of birth but no date of death which has set all sorts of speculation running around our minds. And that's the great joy of it. It's somewhere to go, that where you're walking you can talk about other things as well.

ALEX: You're so right also to think about that idea of closure. And of course, that does come up when we think of cold cases. But also, when we walk around cemeteries and graveyards and we see people who may have lived and died obviously perhaps centuries, generations before us. There's something so sort of compelling about trying to sketch in what their stories are. And I don't know if there's a more tactful way to put this, have you always been obsessed with dead people?

VAL: No, not at all. Really until this lockdown, I've not spent a great deal of time in graveyards at all. But it's been an opportunity. And I think it's quite interesting, because you can also see fashions in gravestones. Fashions in the fonts that they use. And in Edinburgh, posh society in the 19th century, there was clearly a period when anyone who was anything in the arts, whether it was a writer or painter, had to have these leaf medallions of themselves in profile on their graves looking very grand. And then that sort of fades away. And of course, in modern times, you have these inset photographs in graves. So, it is interesting I suppose from a point of view of figuring out how fashions change and how that might affect the way that I am going to write about a particular period.

ALEX: I'm thinking more broadly about death. You have written about crimes, you know, in one way from the perspective of these four detectives, a journalist, a private investigator, a clinical psychologist and now you have this DCI. Can you be a crime writer who writes about often murder and violent crime and not be really fascinated by death and what it says to us about life, as it were?

VAL: I suppose one does have to take an interest in that sort of thing and think about these things. It's not something I spend my days brooding over. I think I'm quite a cheery person really. I don't worry about death. I don't think how many years have I got left to live? What's going to be on the other side of the grave? These are things that I don't really think about very much. I'm much, I suppose, more interested on the impact on the living that death has.

ALEX: I mean you're very interested in this book and in other books with creating the kind of portrait of society. And I was talking in another conversation with Ian Rankin, a friend and colleague of yours, who said the same thing. It's so interesting to try to create a portrait of the time that you're living through. And to address political questions and social questions. Is that something you've always wanted to do in your books? And how do you see it fitting into them?

VAL: Yeah, I think I read crime fiction from a very early age. And I read a lot of crime fiction from a very early age. I always wanted to be a writer from a very early age. But the thing that really kicked me into getting started was Sarah Paretsky's first novel, *Indemnity Only*. That novel has a great story, great impetus, but it deals with politics at both a personal level and general level. It also has a very specific sense of place that the crimes that take place, take place because of Chicago. Because of the kind of city it is, because of the kind of social constructs, because of the jobs that people do, because of the politics there. And that was sort of almost a lightbulb going on in my head, the idea that you could use the crime novel as a lens to look at the world that you lived in. And I think that uniquely, the crime novel allows you to do this. The possibilities of looking at different social strata within in the same novel are almost limitless. You've got the victim and their social circle and the people they work with, their family life. You've got the witnesses. Same thing, family, social life, where they work. You've got the investigators, whether they're police or private eyes or whatever. You have the forensic scientists. The media writing about the case. So, you can, within the same novel, go from the highest in the land, to the lowest in the land, without straining at it. That allows you to open a window on those lives and sometimes you go into great detail. Sometimes you just have a sort of glimpse in passing. But it enables, for me as a writer, I'm interested in the world that I live in. And it allows you to explore the issues that interest you and for everybody they're different. And that's another reason why the crime novel is so rewarding to read. Because we've all got our different bees in our bonnets. We've all got our different things that we care about and are passionate about and that creeps into the books whether we intend it to or not.

ALEX: I've been thinking a lot recently because it's been her centenary about Patricia Highsmith who kind of objected to a certain extent to that tag, crime writer. And she thought of herself as somebody who wrote about the human condition. You know, the battle between good and evil, motivation, the ability to cross lines. Do you see yourself in a kind of similar way? Do you see yourself as trying to explore something about the human condition with the crime itself simply as a way to do it?

VAL: I don't know if I'd claim anything quite that grand for myself. But I think what I'm trying to do is paint a picture of the way we live now, and I feel the crime novel does that very well. In the way if we want to know how Victorians live, we go and read Charles Dickens. In 100 years time people will read the crime novels of the present time to find out how we live. I guess, I suppose I'm trying to find a way to make sense of the world that I'm living in, in lots of ways. I'm not coming up with anything prescriptive for other people to live by. But it is interesting to explore sort of ethical and moral questions. I think that's one of the things about Highsmith, when she was writing I think she was writing ahead of her time in lots of ways. The moral landscape of when she was writing in the 50s and 60s wasn't quite ready

for Patricia Highsmith. Now we're living maybe in a more morally complex time, but her books, the things that she writes about and the way she writes about them I think have found a niche now that they didn't necessarily have when they first came out. She's a writer whose influence I think filters its way into a lot of writers. For example, Ruth Rendell would have written very different books had it not been for Patricia Highsmith lurking in the backgrounds. And so, I think she's one of those writers who is a bridge between one way of writing and another.

ALEX: So back to the figure that you alluded to, the childhood Val, the small Val who always wanted to be a writer and always was reading crime books and thrillers and puzzlers. What kind of things were you reading then? Pre your sort of reading Sarah Paretsky, when you were reading as a kid what did you read?

VAL: Pretty much everything. I grew up very much a working-class background. We didn't have a lot of money. There wasn't money to spare for books. But my parents understood the value of education. And my mum used to take me to the library well before I could read. She would read picture books to me. Stick me in the push chair, wheel me across the Council estate, take me to the library and read books at me. The first book I can remember as a child was *The Wind in the Willows* which she read to me when I had the measles, and I wasn't allowed to have the light on. And she sat in the hallway reading *The Wind in the Willows* to me. But when I was six, we moved house to live opposite the central library and that became my home from home. I was an only child. As is so often the way, that often translates to being a lonely child, spend a lot of time on your own and the library was my salvation. I just read my way round the shelves. It was back in the days when Presbyterian Scotland, although you could take four books out at a time, two of them had to be non-fiction. Heaven forefend you should have unmitigated pleasure.

ALEX: Fine you can have the story, and the imagination, but you must do your education as well.

VAL: Yeah, so I read all sorts of things that I probably wouldn't have chosen to read, sort of history, natural history. And for some reason, poetry and drama counts as non-fiction. So that was handy. But I read, I mean there were things that were particular favourites. I read 'The Hardy boys', and 'The Bobbsey Twins', 'Nancy Drew', 'Billy Bunter', all the Enid Blyton books. But as far as Enid Blyton books were concerned it was the mystery ones that I liked best, the mystery of, with the five find outers and dog. What for me was the real, I suppose breakthrough reading in lots of ways was the 'Chalet School' books of Elinor M. Brent-Dyer. And they were different for lots of reasons. They were set abroad, which was exotic. But with books like 'The Famous Five' or 'Nancy Drew' or 'The Hardy Boys' there's no self-reflectedness. Nothing is carried forward from one book to the next. 'The Famous Five', it's almost the same summer, they're always dotting off to Kirrin Island or something. There're never any consequences. Nobody ever says, "we mustn't go into the dark cave because the last time we went into the dark cave something terrible happened." It's always like nothing's happened to them before and there's no impact. And with the 'Chalet School' books it was different. Each book covered a term or year in the life of the school and things

had consequences. You know, if you broke your leg in one book, you were still limping three books later. Things had an impact on people's characters, psychologically, emotional. People grew up and changed. And I thought that was fascinating. It was all the more fascinating because of course being the library, there was no possibility of reading things in sequence. So, it was like some giant jigsaw puzzle. I'd be reading a book and suddenly think, that's why Grizel Cochrane is the way she is! There were all these moults of discovery. Because there was a genuine serial quality to them. And that was also when I discovered that being a writer was a job you got paid money for. One of the characters grows up to become a writer of girl's school stories. And in one book, she gets a letter from her publisher that has a cheque in it, and I sort of thought, oh, my God, you get paid money for this! I don't know how I thought the books arrived in the library, if it was just people writing out of the goodness of their hearts or whatever. But this was the moment where I thought, that's a job! I could do that. I could make stuff up. And so that was really important to me. And there were lots of other books from my childhood that were important books that I enjoyed very much. And I still go back to in some cases. Robert Louis Stevenson *Kidnapped* and particularly *Treasure Island* which is the book that has everything.

ALEX: Childhood books we read them so intensely, don't we? Would you say you carried that book round? It's had an intense impact on you.

VAL: Yeah, I think so because it seemed to me even reading it at the time that somehow it was a book that contained everything I wanted from a book. It had excitement, it had great characters, it had great settings. There was lots of drama. Although I didn't understand it in those terms at the time, it has an open ending. Long John Silver is still out there. There's still silver on the island. And for a child given to making things up, that was an absolute gift and so as an adult making things up, it's an absolute gift. What happens next? What happens with Long John silver? What happens with Jim Hawkins, where does it go? I like books that leave space for your imagination like that.

ALEX: Where you can participate. I'm absolutely fascinated when you talk about being an only child, to think that the two other writers, two of the other writers we mentioned today, I think Ruth Rendell was an only child. Patricia Highsmith certainly was. I am one myself, although I haven't turned out to be a bestselling crime writer – I must be the exception!

VAL: There's still time! There's still time, Alex!

ALEX: So, I'm kind of alive to what that world that you describe is. You know when you are the person at the sort of centre, the junior person in the family. And there aren't any others to bounce off of in that way. Did you think stories and then the idea of creating them yourself was a sort of way of kind populating that imaginative world, of making it reality?

VAL: Yeah, I think so. It was always, when I was quite young, my parents, we had a dog. And my parents thought it was perfectly safe for me to go off for the day with the dog. So, I would go off in the morning with my duffel bag, with a library book, my lunch and the dog. And I would walk along the coast often along to my grandparents who lived about seven

miles down the coast. And I would occupy my head as I walked with whatever I was reading. But I would inject myself into the story. I would find a way to move the story in a different direction. And I'd shift the story along, so I couldn't just go for a walk. I had to be, you know, sort of Maria von Trapp with seven children at the back or the entire famous five and make the story more satisfactory from my point of view, more in keeping with what I understood of the world. So, someone more like me than Enid Blyton ever imagined. I look back at it now and I think - although again, I wasn't thinking this at all at the time - it's where I learned to edit. Because I would tell myself a story and then I'd get to the point where it wasn't working or it was boring, it wasn't really going anywhere. I'd back track to where it was still interesting or exciting in my head. Then sort of try to take it off in a different direction. From that early experience, I suppose, that was how I learned that you didn't have - you weren't stuck with where your imagination took you on the first part of the journey.

ALEX: So, Val, this idea of you there loving stories, thinking about how you could manipulate them yourself. The central idea that actually you could write them and get paid for them, which somehow, at some level links to the idea that this might be a way to live your life. It didn't happen, sort of, instantly. You worked as a journalist for some years. How did the Genesis of you as a writer, as a professional writer begin to take shape?

VAL: Well, it was the thing I wanted to do. But I understood that people like me didn't get to be writers straight off. I didn't know anybody who was a writer. I didn't know anybody who was in publishing. I had no idea really how that world worked when I left university. And I got this job as a journalist not because I thought it was anything to do with writing, but it was the only job I could ever imagine doing. I'd never been very good with hierarchies and authority. I get very bored doing the same thing day after day. It was the only thing I could do that sort of seemed to fit. But even, right from the get-go, I was writing. When I was working as a trainee journalist down in Plymouth, I was trying to write the great English novel. Which is what you have to do if you just graduated from Oxford with a degree in English. And I wrote this novel which frankly was truly terrible. The one thing that I would say is I that I actually finished it. I started sending it off to publishers and they started sending it back to me by return of post. I don't think anyone has had a novel returned as swiftly as that was returned to me. But I wasn't daunted. I started to write my second great novel, but in the meantime, I showed it to a friend of mine, who was an actor. She read it and she said - "I don't know about novels much, but I think this would make a really good play." So, I thought, a play, that's really easy. Just leave in the dialogue, cross out the description, it's a play. That's essentially what I did. And wrote some extra scenes to cover the bits I'd crossed out and I trotted off to Plymouth theatre company with the play that I had wrote and the director there, I knew, because he was the ex-boyfriend of my best friend at Oxford's sister. So, I got an in there. He actually looked at what I'd written. And he got very excited. He said I'm doing a season of new plays in the studio theatre and I'd love to do this. Entirely by accident, I was a professionally performed playwright at the age of 23. But the basic problem was I didn't know what I'd done right. I couldn't replicate it. I had no idea how to write a play. I kept trying and trying and trying. I had acquired an agent because of the first play which I adapted for BBC Radio. He eventually sacked me after two, three years of getting absolutely nowhere. I was really down at that point. I thought, I don't know

why, but I was still determined I was going to be a writer. And I figured out that I hadn't known what I was doing. So maybe I should try and do something that I did understand. I'd always read crime fiction from the age of about nine, when I first discovered Agatha Christie. And I thought I know how a crime novel works. Maybe I could write a crime novel and I was toying with that idea. I'd read William McIllvanney's *Laidlaw* when it came out and I'd thought it was interesting to see a novel that could be written that accommodated the rhythms of vernacular speech and set in the kind of world that I recognised. And then as I said Paretsky came along with *Indemnity Only* and that was the lightbulb moment and I thought, this is what I want to do. And maybe if I try really, really, really hard, one day I could write something as good as this. And so that was what got me actually off my backside and doing it.

ALEX: It doesn't sound like you'd been, you know, on your backside really. You'd been trying, but sort of trying in the wrong directions, in a way. But I mean I have to ask you, whether that first novel still exists and whether it will ever see the light of day in some form or whether it has? Just the idea of then, you know you're becoming a crime writer, it never occurred to you to do anything, this was a while back. So, it wasn't as popular an option, but you didn't think of going to a creative writing school or that sort of thing? You knew you had to find your way on your own?

VAL: Yeah I mean it didn't really occur to me. I don't think there were that many creative writing options back then. I didn't know about things like the Arvon Foundation or things like that. I didn't know there were places to go where you could learn your craft really. You can't teach someone to be a writer, but you can help them in matters of craft. You can help them be a better writer. But no, I just blundered on in my own sweet way. I've had a few lucky moments, when I've been in the right place, with the right book at the right time. And I wrote that first novel, *Report For Murder*, at a time when writers like Sara Paretski, Sue Grafton, Mary Wings, had been making an impact in the UK and there was sort of a bunch of small independent feminist publishing houses in the UK who were desperate for something broadly similar, but set in the UK. I came along with *Report for Murder*. Lesbian protagonist. It was set in Glasgow in the countryside. I just was in the right place, with the right book at the right time. Three years before nobody would have sniffed at it. Five years later, the market would have been saturated. It was just serendipity.

ALEX: Yes, that has to happen, doesn't it?

VAL: Yes, there have to be moments of luck. Right place, right book, right time. And you can't plan that. You really can't plan that.

ALEX: You mentioned right at the beginning that Karen Pirie was a character you created and then picked up and thought, ok I can do something more with her. I wonder at that point; you didn't necessarily perhaps think that you were going to create these discreet series of novels with these different characters and different aspects of the business of crime and justice – or did you? Was that the plan all along?

VAL: Well, I think the thing about crime fiction is there's a long tradition of crime series. When I started, I've never really planned a series as such. But I will come back to that in a moment. With the Lindsay Gordon books, I thought there were going to be three of them. I planned a trilogy. Mostly because the book I really wanted to write was the third book. I couldn't figure out how to get there without writing the first two. I have to say it's now, it's a six-book trilogy. She just kept coming back. She wouldn't go away. When I started writing the Kate Brannigan's I thought they were going to be a series. But I didn't have any idea of how many books there would be in the series. And there are six books in that series as well by coincidence. But it didn't finish in any real sense. She just stopped talking to me. She stopped being one of the voices in my head. I don't know why. I never had any kind of arc for Tony Hill and Carol Jordan. That was very much a one book to the next. And generally speaking, when I got towards the end of one book, I had a sense of where the next one might go. With Karen, as I say, she was accidental. But I've actually, my next book, which comes out this summer, it's called *1979* and that is the start of a very specific project. I want to write a quintet of novels, set at ten-year intervals -so 79, 89, 2009, 2019 with the same protagonist, but I think she'll be doing quite different roles in the course of those 41 years. I thought it would be interesting to explore one character's life over that period of time. And to use that as I suppose a lens to write about the changing social background, looking at it from here.

ALEX: Wow. Is this a whole new protagonist? This is a new central character. Are you able to tell us anything about her?

VAL: She's called Ali Burns, Alison Burns. She starts off as a reporter in Glasgow. And that's the first novel set in 1979, which was a really interesting year. I mean, we had the winter of discontent. We had the run up to the Scottish devolution referendum. And ultimately of course we had Margaret Thatcher come into power. So, it was an interesting time to be writing against, if you like. I felt really, my problem was when I got to the end of *Still Life* I finished it in lock down. I thought, I don't know what I can write next. Because all my books have broadly been set in the here and now, identifiably. And I just felt that there was no solid ground to stand on. Everything changed from day to day. I had no sense of the idea of writing a book that would come out in a year's time or nine months' time, who knows what the world would be like with Covid and Brexit and all that's going on? I just thought I can't write that book, because one way or another there's a fair chance it's going to be a lot of bollocks frankly. And I thought I don't know where to stand. I'll go back to somewhere where I can stand on solid ground. Because I know what happened in 1979. So, I can write from there. And it was great. It was fascinating to research it. To remind myself of things I'd half forgotten. I did manage to get back into the National Library of Scotland in that brief window that we had where we could go places and read some newspapers from that period. Because there's nothing places you more firmly in time and place than the newspapers. What was going on? What people were talking about? How much was a pint of lager? What people were wearing. And so, yeah, so that was fascinating. Especially finding a by line on stories I don't remember writing.

ALEX: That is a terrible thing about being a journalist, isn't it, that things do come back, and you think, oh, my God really? I thought that, interesting! I'm very interested in the idea of this idea of going back in time at these punctuated intervals because of course one of the things that has changed is our attitude towards crime, towards violence, often towards violence against women and girls which is of course something that we've all been thinking and talking about very intensely in the last couple of weeks. And also, the idea of policing, not simply the kind of technical aspects. Which I know you're interested in, the forensics, but also, a sort of society's attitudes towards it. Has that been part of the motivation?

VAL: Yeah, I wanted to explore our attitudes to all sorts of things. But yes, to the ideas of crime and punishment and what we think the police are there for. And what the rules are that govern the police. And yeah, also, all sorts of attitudes to various things. 1979 in newspapers in Glasgow was a whole different world. It was a world of misogyny, of homophobia, sectarianism. You know think of the ism and it was there. And I was one of three women in that newsroom. It was an extraordinary world. And the relationship between police and journalists was very different. There was a much more cosy relationship, a much more sharing of information. And there were so many things, different from the practical sense as well. There're points where she's running about looking for a phone box and 2p. But It's been fascinating to sort of immerse myself in that period. And to go back and read the novels that were being published at that point in the late 70s. What was Ruth Rendell writing, what was PD James writing? What other novels were around at the time? So that was interesting, about a year ago, I started thinking about this and I was going back and reading the historical record, if you like. And it's quite shocking. Some of it, the attitudes are just like huh? Really! You wrote that?

ALEX: It's so interesting when you're talking about that relationship between journalists and police. I mean, your life, your career as a journalist has fed quite heavily and crucially into your writing about crime, hasn't it?

VAL: Yeah, it has and not just crime I think one of the things about journalism, just a general news reporter, which is what I always did, did some investigative stuff, but I was basically a news reporter. You find yourselves in all sorts of lives, all sorts of living rooms. You meet people generally in a time of crisis. You're usually there because something bad has happened but sometimes it's when something good has happened. You see them in the moment of crisis. We all reveal ourselves in moments of crisis. So, I have this fabulous data set of faces and expressions and things that people have said in their living rooms, in their places of work, in their places of leisure, in the street. It's all tucked away there and sometimes things pop up that I had completely forgotten about, encounters that were lost in the mist of memory. But because I'm writing about something very particular, particular set of emotions or responses, up pops a cameo from the past. That, for me, is the real bonus of all those years of knocking on doors and talking to strangers.

ALEX: I wonder if you, you know, you haven't got to the end of the quintet and it's some time away. You're just beginning this project now, but I'm imagining that you will have

thought about ideas of crime and punishment that exist at the moment. It's a big question to say, where are we at the minute? But where do you think we are?

VAL: I think we're in a time of huge problems in terms of dealing with crime. The prison system is absolutely falling apart around our ears. We send far too many people to prison. We don't deal with young people in difficulty early enough. And I mean I'm talking pre-school even. The way we treat young children in difficult family relationships is not sufficiently caring, it's not sufficiently good. Karen McCluskey, a campaigner against violence, has done some extraordinary work with offenders and their relationships with their very young children. And that's had really quite profound effects, particularly teaching young men to be fathers. And that makes an effect not just in the here and now, but beyond that. I think there are real problems with the relationship between the police and public at present. I think a lot of trust has gone. The policing of the Sarah Everard vigil was just horrifying. And yeah, I think, in the current climate, with the Home Secretary that we have at the moment, I think that there are really serious problems of law and order looming on the horizon. I don't feel particularly optimistic about the picture of crime and punishment at the moment.

ALEX: Val, you know, you've talked about wanting to explore issues like that, to reflect where we are as a society, what society is like at the moment in your books. I'm interested to know how much you feel that novelist can sort of actively participate in that. You do as I say, right at the beginning, you do all sorts of different things. You make your relationship with the community and society in many ways. Do you think writing fiction can also play a part in that?

VAL: I think it can I think because you can engage with people in a different way through the pages of a novel. People who wouldn't be inclined to read a long read in The Guardian, because they wouldn't read The Guardian if it were the last paper in the universe. They will read a novel that would make them think of something. The second Karen Pirie novel, *A Darker Domain*, is set against the backdrop of the miners' strike. When I was touring with that book, I was doing gigs in the south of England. I remember vividly one literary lunch in Windsor, of all places. And I was reading the section of the book that talks about the miners' families having no food to put on the table and children with no Christmas presents and no heating in their houses. And there were people in the room going, but that's not true. That didn't happen. And they were shocked because this had not been reported in the newspapers they were reading. So, there are ways in which you can communicate things to people that don't cross their horizon in the everyday. Another example, I wrote a book some years ago called *The Last Temptation*, mostly set in Germany. And one of the things it deals with is what happens with German children during the Second World War, where any children were found to be handicapped for example or socially difficult were taken away and put into institutions and were often experimented on medically. This wasn't something that had been particularly well known in Germany. My German audiences were shocked at what they were hearing from my book. And, you know, I'd researched it. I'd done the work. It's what happened. This was not part of even the extensive way that Germany has come to terms with its past, people didn't know about it. So, there are ways in which we can make

people re-examine their own lives, their own context, if you like. And it's not, you don't, I'm not doing this in a preachy kind of way. It's not like, you should know about this, kind of way! But this is the society that - this is the world that I live. I'm aware of it. There are things that I find really upsetting and difficult. And I suppose, dealing with them in a novel allows me to come to terms with some of this and to explore my own feelings for it. And again, there will be things I hope in each book that make readers pause for thought. I want to entertain people first and foremost as I want them to carry on reading the book. I want them to be engaged with the characters, to be involved with that. But I also hope that when they come to the end of the book, they close the book and they're still thinking about it. The fate of the characters, what happens next almost. But also, to think about the things that they've read. And if I do that, for even some readers, I'll be very happy about that.

ALEX: In Scotland, where you are based, the political leader of your country is absolutely front and centre as a reader. I mean, Nicola Sturgeon talks about what she loves to read all the time and it's really wonderful. We've seen other leaders like that, Barak Obama, for example. Now I'm not convinced that happens south of the border quite so much. Do you think given what you've just, you know, said that really we should be issuing politicians with novels as well?

VAL: Absolutely. I wrote a piece for one of the newspapers a little while back saying that it was quite interesting that the countries that have done best in Covid have been the countries whose leaders are avowed readers of fiction. Nicola Sturgeon, Jacinda Ardern, ...they read fiction. And fiction generates empathy. You don't generate empathy by reading a biography of Winston Churchill. Or the speeches of Franklin D Roosevelt. This teaches you about the political landscape, but it doesn't teach you about how people feel and think. I think people who read fiction do have a greater sense of empathy. That means that when they're coming to make policy, then they, I suppose, they look at more than just numbers on a spread sheet. And so, I do think that yeah Dominic Raab should throw out all his political biographies and go and invest in the Booker longlist or something. Fiction makes you look outside your own window.

ALEX: What would you press into the hands of Boris Johnson and indeed for balance, Kier Starmer?

VAL: I would press into their hands, initially I would give them the Ali Smith quartet, seasons quartet. Which is very much set in the here and now. Writes about contemporary Britain and drawing on historical resonances and resources and paints a picture that is damning, but also somehow manages to be infused with hope. I think Ali Smith is the sort of genius of hope and imagination. When I read her work, I come away from it experiencing a whole range of emotions. But what always beats in my heart afterwards is hope.

ALEX: Yes, and I would add sort of generosity. There's a great generosity to that writing and a welcome.

VAL: And a humanity. Humanity. You can't read her work and not be moved.

ALEX: Yes. Agreed. We are very nearly out of time. And I cannot, we have talked about crime, a lot. We've talked about all sorts of things. But we have to talk a little bit about your many other interests, as I mentioned you've been cooking your way through lockdown and sharing your videos on YouTube and the recipes from the books themselves. You are an absolutely avid football fan, a Raith Rovers fan. And I will not make the mistake of saying how are things in Raith because that is not where Raith Rovers are. And also, of course, you are in a band. You are in a band of crime writers. How do you fit all this in?

VAL: I don't know. I think of myself as really lazy. I spend a lot of time dossing about not doing anything in particular. But when I focus, I focus really intensely. My partner says she's never known anybody who focuses with such intense concentration. But I do it in very short bursts. Being in a band is just great. I mean that is just so wonderful just to stand up there and make music with people who are your friends. It's an amazing feeling. And certainly, I didn't imagine I would spend my 60s with a bunch of guys on stage singing songs about murder and crime.

ALEX: We should make the point to viewers, and indeed, again, you can just see all sorts of your performances on the internet. But this is the fun-loving criminals.

VAL: 'Fun loving crime writers.'

ALEX: Not Fun-loving criminals, that would be a different career all together! However, you are all a band of crime writers.

VAL: Yeah, we do covers. That's one of the reasons why we don't fall out as band members. You know because we don't write our own music. Nobody is coming in with a great new song and the rest of us are going, "That's rubbish. " We do cover versions of other people's songs about crime and murder.

ALEX: And you sing, Val?

VAL: Yes.

ALEX: Let me ask you as we come to a close, what else are you up to at the minute?

VAL: Well, I'm, at the moment, I'm doing the rewrites for *1979*. I have delivered the draft. My editor loves it. There are of course tweaks and buffs that have to be applied to it. So, I'm doing that. And I'm thinking about *1989*. I'm going to sit down and watch that 'Deutschland 89' for a start.

ALEX: Yeah, that kind of fast forwarding ten years. Because of course so much will have changed and yet it still feels quite distant to us now. I mean there is a thing when you reach middle age, isn't there, that people, there are people who don't know anything that happened in 1989 and we feel like it's yesterday. But it's quite nice to tell that isn't it?

VAL: I remember my absolute shock, some years ago now when the daughter of a friend of mine said they were doing the miners' strike in history. I was going, that's my life! It's not history.

ALEX: Just tell me, Val, what you're reading right at the minute as we kind of give people ideas for what to read next?

VAL: I just finished last night, this *The Lamp Lighters*, Emma Stonex. I found it absorbing, really interesting. It's about the disappearance of three light house keepers from their light house in the middle of sea in Cornwall. I found it really fascinating. I've started Chris Brookmyre's book *The Cut*. I have been reading lots of odd bits and pieces, partly for research this year. I have been picking up non-fiction that are in those nice short chunks. So, I read 75 short pieces about particular pigments, full of dyes, and paints. Full of fascinating information. And I have also been dipping into Laura Lippman, the collection of short memoir-type pieces called *My Life As a Villainess*. So, there's lots of fascinating stuff out there, at the moment. There's too many books and not enough time to read them all. That's my great frustration I suppose. There's just not enough reading time.

ALEX: Well Val, I could look at your career and say there's too many books and not enough time to write them all. You're still carrying on with a whole new series. We look forward to it immensely. I can't thank you enough for being with us today. It's just been wonderful to talk to you. Val McDermid, thank you so much.

VAL: Thanks Alex, it's been a pleasure.