

A Q&A with Cora Harrison on writing historical crime fiction

What drew you to Hampton Court in Tudor times as the backdrop for your writing?

Hampton Court is a microcosm of English history from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, but especially of the sixteenth century. And as the sixteenth century is my favourite era, it was inevitable that sooner or later I was going to place one of my imaginary characters in that setting. For Hugh Mac Egan, a lawyer to the Butler family of Ormond, one of the most powerful families in Ireland, the environment of Cardinal Wolsey's Hampton Court was a potent mixture of power, aesthetic pleasure and the heady excitement of the Tudor court.

Why do you think readers are so intrigued by the Tudor era?

Partly, I think, because of the wide range of written resources that are available to historians. But mainly, I suppose, because it has all the elements of a modern soap opera: love, lust, scandal, power, larger-than-life characters and, of course, marvellous clothes.

How do your experiences and background inform your writing?

I came to writing about Tudor Hampton Court from a slightly odd perspective. During the last ten years I have been writing about Ireland, the west of Ireland, where the native law of Ireland prevailed and where the Tudor-governed tiny area, known as the 'Pale' (from its surrounding fence – Donald Trump and his wall is nothing new in Ireland), was a threat to Irish laws and the Irish way of life. Now, in this book, I focus on the powerful politics of England as seen through the eyes of an Irish lawyer who was educated in the native, or Brehon law, but who served the Butlers of Ormond, one of the two most powerful Anglo-Irish families in the Pale.

What is the most difficult part of your writing process?

I'm one of those lucky people who don't find writing difficult. Ideas seem to flow from brain to finger tips and a full-length book for adults normally takes me under two months. On the other hand, the production of 90,000 words does require discipline, as well as enthusiasm, and I suppose there is a bleak time, usually about a third of the way through any book, where one suddenly doubts whether one has enough material. The thing I have discovered by experience, is just to drive the narrative ahead at this point, and worry about the word count later on. So far I have written over fifty books (my retirement project!) and I have never once, so far, found that I had run short of words by the time that I had reached the end of the story.

How do you go about researching and writing? Did you have any challenges?

I already owned quite a lot of books about the Tudor period, but I went on a special journey to the little town of Hay-on-Wye, on the Welsh border, which possesses over twenty second-hand bookshops, and spent a whole day rummaging. And came back with the boot of our car full of books – mostly enormous dusty tomes – but, also, a small, thin, brilliant find, a translation from Italian of a book written for painters in the late 15th century, instructing them how to make their paints and their glues. My best discovery, though, was a 19th century reprint of a book written in the 16th century by George Cavendish, the gentleman usher of Cardinal Wolsey's court – hugely inspiring.

There were some challenges – mainly how much erudite historians like David Starkey and Eric Ives can differ over the basic facts of Anne Boleyn’s life. There was so much black propaganda written about her (the Spanish ambassador, Chapuys, was a great provider) that sometimes it’s almost impossible to disentangle the truth. In the end, I had to make some decisions of whom to trust and of how to tell the story of a few weeks in the turbulent life of Anne Boleyn.

What did you enjoy most about writing this book?

I loved bringing people like Cardinal Wolsey and Anne Boleyn to life. And I enjoyed the research enormously. I love reading historical biography and there is such an abundance of books about Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn and about the first half of the sixteenth century that my passion to know about the minutiae of their lives and of the lives of those around them had plenty of material to devour. By the time that I had read and reread the books, festooned them with ‘post-it’ notes, my mind was overflowing with ideas. And, I thoroughly enjoyed constructing the murder within the walls of Hampton Court!

What about writing historical crime fiction most fascinates you?

I think that it is possible to be self-indulgent when writing historical fiction, to allow the fascinating minutiae of lives so far from our own to dominate the book. But crime rules all. Crime builds in a structure, a tension that moves the story along and allows the historical details to slip into place. I’ve now written fifteen historical crime novels and would not contemplate moving to another genre. History and mystery are a powerful combination.

If you could interview another author (living or dead) who would it be and why?

I would love, love to interview George Cavendish, gentleman usher to Cardinal Wolsey. His *‘Life & Death of Cardinal Wolsey’*, written over four hundred years ago, gives such a marvellous picture of the great cardinal and of his household. I read and reread it so often before writing my book *‘The Cardinal’s Court’*. However, he wrote it in his old age, a quarter of a century after the death of Wolsey, and so may not have remembered everything correctly. I would love to say to him: *‘Now, George, are you sure that King Henry noticed Anne Boleyn in 1522? Are you sure that was the reason why the love affair with Harry Percy was nipped in the bud? And George, could you tell me why the marriage arranged between James Butler, the future Earl of Ormond, and his cousin Anne Boleyn never took place? And don’t tell that it was anything to do with King Henry, George! Because if King Henry fell for Anne Boleyn in 1522, then he took a marvellously long time to declare himself – almost four years, George. Surely you must be muddling things, George, do think again!’* And George, who comes across as such a nice fellow in his book, would think again, and his face would light up and he would say: *‘Oh, I remember now. . .’*