

Q & A with Thomas Enger for Lovereading

1. When did you realise that you wanted to become an author?

- It wasn't one single day or point in my life, that's for sure. It was a process. I think the very first spark came at school, when I was about 14. We were asked to re-tell a dream we had had (I know, very original), and for some reason I had dreamt that I took part in the Michael Jackson movie Moonwalker. Yep, I'm 120 years old. Anyway, and for some reason, I just loved to tell that story with me and MJ in it, I distinctly remember the scary bits (not that there were many of them, but hey - I was young) and how much fun I had building suspense.

It took me a while before I actually started to tinker around with words in a more "I want to become an author" kind of way, but I guess I started in a more serious manner when I was about 19. I wrote a few short stories just for fun. And it was fun. So I wanted to write some more.

2. Tell us about your first novel. Your first attempt at a novel.

- Well, I was just coming out of a terrible relationship, my heart was completely broken into at least a thousand pieces, and for a while there I really needed a reason to get out of bed. An idea had been fermenting in my mind for a bit; it was a story about a woman in her 40's who started to work in a firm, only to realise, by chance, that her own husband was involved in shady business of some sorts. The more I wrote, the more fun I had. I sort of got back on my feet again through that writing experience, and even though it didn't amount to anything, I was happy with the end result and the process. I realised that I wanted to do this some more.

3. So you didn't become an author at the age of 20. How do you look upon that now - do you think you would have been the writer you are today if you had made your debut at such a young age?

- That's hard to tell, of course, but I'm really glad I didn't start my professional writing career at such an early stage. I didn't know much of the world at the time, and I certainly didn't know myself. Which might come in handy if you are going to write something good. I spent my 20's trying to become a better writer while going to school and gaining experience, and for me that whole process of reading and writing was my writing education. It took me 15 years to get there, and I don't consider that to be a waste of time. Not at all. It made me understand how badly I wanted to succeed at this, and there are lessons to learn for everybody who really want to achieve something. You have to be willing to go the extra mile and to make sacrifices.

I've grown more and more stubborn over the years. If someone tells me I can't do this or that, I'm going to do everything in my power to prove them wrong. At an earlier stage in my life I think I would have quit easier. Not now.

4. How has fatherhood influenced your writing?

- Good question. Everybody who has fathered a child, knows that once you've held your own son or daughter in your arms for the first time, there's just no turning back. Your life, as you knew it, is over. There's just a higher and better meaning to life after that. For me, becoming a father, changed everything. It changed the way I observed the world. I paid more attention to, say, the beauty of the trees and the forests. The colours on a large field of grass and how the wind sets that grass into motion. The graciousness of a deer poking its nose into her grassy breakfast. I just got so much more in touch with myself, I guess is what I'm trying to say. My feelings and how fragile everything is. It was easier after that to access those impressions and emotions when I sat down at my computer. I couldn't possibly write a character like Henning Juul without knowing what it's like to be a father.

5. What writing has inspired you?

Oh, a lot, I don't even know where to begin. As crime fiction is my genre, I think I have to mention Henning Mankell as the one that really got me hooked into this back in the day. I remember reading a novel of his on the plane from London to Mexico City, and I didn't want the plane to land. The story was that good. Those cliffhangers. Oh, man.

As I grew older, my focus shifted more towards non-Scandinavian authors such as John Irving, Dennis Lehane, Linwood Barclay, Harlan Coben - to name but a few. Nowadays I have found myself deeply impressed by Gillian Flynn and John Hart, but I'm also searching for authors outside of the crime genre. I recently read a Kurt Vonnegut novel (my first), and I just loved his prose. Sebastian Barry, who I had the enormous pleasure of dining with in Edinburgh a few years ago, is also a brilliant storyteller. The creativity of Neil Gaiman. Oh my God. I could go on and on. Ernest Hemingway. Per Petterson. Somebody stop me.

6. What role does making music play in your life?

First of all, music in itself is very important to me. I listen to music all the time, even when I'm writing. It's such a big part of my DNA, and to be able to write a piece of music myself makes my connection to it even stronger. It's just the greatest feeling in the world to listen to something I have written, especially if it's good.

After I quit my job as a journalist back in 2008, I was going as much for my music as I was for my writing. I made contact with all kinds of people in the music business, sent them tapes, told them I could do scores for short films for free, just to get something to show for. But once I was published as an author, my books kind of took control over my life. I didn't and couldn't spend that much time making music when I had novels to write.

I know it's stupid of me to say this after having written six novels (soon seven), since I don't have a single album, radio hit or a score for a block buster movie to my name, but I actually think that I have a stronger talent for writing music than writing novels. Music comes more naturally to me, it's more instinct, whereas writing is more about the craft and putting in the hours; It takes so much more effort. I can easily write a musical theme in ten minutes, or at least have a draft for it. And who knows, maybe in time I will get to finish that musical of mine or get a phone call from Steven saying: "Hey, Thomas. John Williams isn't available for me this time around. You up for it?"

7. *Isn't it strange, though, that we use the same term "writing" both for composing a piece of music and composing a story by the use of our words?*

- It is strange, and to me it always feels a bit wrong or weird to say that I'm "writing music", because I'm not doing any physical writing, I am simply playing my piano and thereby creating music. So to me *creating* is a better word for composing music. The term "writing music" probably is a relic from the olden days when composers really did write their notes and scores with a pencil. Nowadays it's all computerized. And thank God for that, because I don't know how to read notes. It's like a foreign language to me. I just play and compose by ear.

8. *Tells us a little bit about the Henning Juul series.*

- Henning is one of the best crime reporters in Norway, and he has been so for many years. One day he wakes up on his sofa only to find that his son's bedroom door is covered in flames. As he tries to rescue his son, he fails miserably, and his son dies.

The Henning Juul series starts two years later, with Henning returning to work, still deeply traumatised by what happened, but he has to try and pick up the pieces of his life somehow. But he has an ulterior motive as well. For two years a question has been burning in the back of his mind: *Why was there a fire in the first place?*

Having been a very good crime reporter for many years, he is certain that he had made a lot of enemies along the way. That's the basis for the whole series: Henning returning to work to find his son's killer.

There are five novels in the series (*Burned, Pierced, Scarred, Cursed* and *Killed*), all of which have their own mysteries in them, but Henning's quest goes through the whole series. It's kind of like a TV series, only with a different narrative.

9. *So what's next for you after having written a whole series like that?*

I'm certainly not going to dive into a new series straight away. Writing the Henning Juul series took six years of my life, and a lot of other ideas came to me in that space of time. So I'm going to explore a few of them first, just to see where that takes me. I'm definitely going to write more crime fiction, and I'm certainly going to write more books for young adults as well (I published one in 2014, a dark fantasy thriller called *The Evil Legacy*).

I think I'm also going to write something that's not crime fiction one day. I have a story in mind which is set in the Middle Ages, and while people die there as well, it's not a crime mystery. So to be able to mix a historically-correct story with deep portraits of the people of that time is something I see as a great challenge and also an enormously time-consuming one. I hope I will be able to have the time and energy to explore that universe one day.

I have also written a few short stories over the last few years, and that is definitely something I would like to do more. It's a great writing exercise.

10. *Enough with the serious stuff. Tell us three movies you're embarrassed to admit that you like so much.*

Mamma Mia. It has such a good vibe to it. In our household we watch that movie once a year during mid-winter, as we need to remind ourselves that there are brighter and warmer days to come.

The scene where Meryl Streep is preparing her daughter on her wedding day almost tears me up every time. I guess I'm envisioning myself giving away my own daughter at some point in life - with all that implies. Pathetic, I know.

Catwoman. For obvious reasons.

Under Siege. I just love Steven Seagal. The scene where he, as an on board chef, beats the crap out of a bad guy in the kitchen, is just hilarious. "Nobody beats me in the kitchen". Cracks me up every time. He's also the best close encounter fighter in the movies. Not a single expression on his face even when he's in grave danger. Absolutely brilliant.