

Elaine Aldred, author of the *Strange Alliances* blog, interviews Christina James about her second novel, ***Almost Love***

Some reviewers have likened your writing to that of P D James. I think this is particularly applicable to *Almost Love*, because it does not follow a certain modern trend for quick reads. This is certainly something I've noticed with travel books, when older accounts of crossing a country, like Peter Fleming's 'News From Tartary', make it seem as if you can feel every stone trodden on, whereas modern travel books make it feel as if you're on an express tour of an area.

It's interesting you should say that, because I was recently on holiday in Barcelona and there are two Eyewitness guides to Barcelona, an ordinary Eyewitness guide and a compact one, of ten top things to do and see, and this was the one I bought, because I was going to be there for only three days. So I think you're right, but I won't buy short novels, because I just don't think they're worth the money! I can read a short novel in a couple of hours and that doesn't seem worth nine pounds.

I have to agree that ***Almost Love*** isn't a quick read, because the plot is complex and I want the reader to engage with that.

You have talked about *Almost Love* as different from *In the Family*. Would you like to explain what you mean by this?

Writers I really admire, like William Trevor, never write a novel in quite the same way twice. He writes an entirely new and different novel every time and that's what I try to do, because I don't want to fall into the trap of using more or less the same plot again, which many crime writers do in their second novel. I still wanted to use Spalding as the central place. The Archaeological Society in ***Almost Love***, which is at the centre of the book, is based on Spalding Gentleman's Society, a very famous scientific/historical club for gentlemen. It was founded in the seventeenth century by scholars and scientists, including Isaac Newton, who was of course a Lincolnshire man. When I was at school, I had the privilege, because I was doing an Archaeology A-level, of going to work there and helping them to classify stuff. As with ***In the Family***, the novel is based on a central place. In ***In the Family***, it is the shop; in ***Almost Love*** it is the Archaeological Society.

You must have done an enormous amount of research.

Yes, I did quite a lot of research; although I read history and archaeology and I've studied both of them (although not to the extent that I've studied English literature), it was necessary to check quite a lot of things.

How did you create a credible overlap between reality and fictional facts?

I suppose I'm able to do this because the story is based so closely on reality. All I've done is change dates and places. There hasn't, for example, been anything like a

Northern Rosetta Stone, but certainly different writings of different ancient societies have been found in the North. So there's no reason why you should not find something that's the equivalent of the Rosetta Stone in the Orkneys. I think that it would also have been credible for the archaeologist Dame Claudia McRae, who supposedly found the stone, to have gone to practise archaeology in Norway, a country considered to be a neutral country early on the war, though with people with Nazi tendencies. As this character was also well-connected and her father had influential friends, she could have got to Norway on a troopship, before the war started, if she'd wanted to. I try to make the situation credible by thinking about how she might have led the life she did.

I notice that DC Juliet Armstrong is coming into her own in *Almost Love*. She certainly seems very intelligent, because she is doing an enormous amount of the background research that is required for the case. What is interesting is the way she is now using very modern techniques for the research by searching the Internet and downloading academic papers where she can.

Juliet is mainly a desk-based policewoman, although she does go out sometimes and, when she does, she makes very good observations that will often really move the case on. Juliet is also able to pick up on discrepancies in Claudia McRae's work. This probably comes from my own circumstances, in which I have to straddle two worlds, having to write both an academic paper and a popular piece of writing on the same subject at the same time. Also, some of those early archaeologists did write stuff that was completely unscientific in the eyes of today's audience. It's important to realise that they were little more than treasure hunters at that time, ripping straight through all foundations without taking any measurements or photographs, just to get at what they wanted. There was no attempt to preserve what they dug through, so they were mavericks in that respect.

The plot is amazingly challenging, but highly enjoyable because of the way you drop breadcrumbs along the way. We talked about the issue of continuity last time, so have you changed your approach to how you construct a plot?

I'm afraid I made the same mistake as I did last time, in that I wrote sections of it out of sequence. It seems to happen to me now and again because I want to alternate chapters, because that makes it more interesting to the reader. It does cause problems and I have a lot of alterations to do myself to make sure I get everything in the right chronological order. Even so, it is still possible to miss some things and this is where a good editor comes in.

It's difficult, as a writer, to remember exactly when you have introduced an idea or concept, because you've got the whole lot in your head and it all seems very familiar to you. You're just too close to it, I suppose.

As with *In The Family*, I did write a long outline for *Almost Love*, on holiday in France in 2011. Obviously I wasn't doing it all of the time, but it did take me the best

part of two weeks. I did stick pretty closely to that original plan. When I write outlines, I do find myself writing a bit of the book anyway, so I must impose some self-discipline for the next one, because it makes life difficult for me and for the people who edit me when I write like this.

It's interesting you say that, because I know how busy you are and I wondered how you'd had enough time to write this book.

This issue of time management actually came up at a presentation I did at a bookshop in London recently. There was a period last autumn, from about the end of September to the end of November, where I could do no writing of the novel at all, because I was doing so many other things. The Frankfurt Book Fair came right in the middle of this period and I also run a librarian advisory group, so I had to go immediately to Berlin after Frankfurt. I was getting pretty twitchy by the time it got to the end of November. Then, when I started writing again in December, it wasn't that easy to get going on it again. I don't share the view that you should write a thousand words a day. On some occasions, you do find yourself writing rubbish! I try to guard against this, as I don't want to paint myself into a corner that I hadn't planned for. I have to be a good self critic, but it's difficult.

So there is no doubt a good editor is invaluable?

Yes, especially to pick up the inconsistencies I was talking about. It's something that afflicts all writers, I think, so perhaps I'm in very auspicious company as far as this particular trait is concerned. For example, it is incredibly easy to change the name of one of your characters, particularly a minor character. For example, I spelt the name Macfadyen in two different ways; I also called this policeman Ricky for most of the time, but then, oddly, I changed it to Ray. This was something that the editor picked up. A good editor has to be very vigilant, because missing something like that might seriously affect the plot.

Compared to *In the Family*, in which the crime had occurred and the police were investigating it, *Almost Love* has not only a crime but also an underlying sinister threat to people who are in the story. How did you create a sense of disquiet with the affair that occurs early on *Almost Love*?

I wanted the female secretary Alex to be a sympathetic character, because she is the central character of the book, but one who makes mistakes. The affair was a device in some ways, because Alex is the chatelaine of the Archaeological Society. There have to be reasons why she lets down her guard, although she is very good at her job. Another reason for choosing to use the affair was that, if it hadn't been something like that, I should have probably needed to introduce more violence. I kept the violence to a minimum because I'm not into blood-and-guts writing at all. I may write crime novels, but I'm not into chapter and verse about how people get injured and prefer to keep the violence offstage. There are obviously gruesome finds, but how the perpetrator went about crimes is left to the reader to deduce.

I noticed that, where you had chapters with a bit of action going on, the chapter length was quite short. Chapters were longer when you introduced background detail and explanation. Was that intentional?

I write more psychological crime than action crime. I did, in fact, make a later scene initially more graphic, and longer, but I edited it considerably, partly because I was uncomfortable with being more explicit about the violence and partly in response to the feedback of one of my readers on Twitter and Facebook; my style of writing has enabled her to come back to crime writing after she had tired of too much explicit violence in many modern crime thrillers. I am always prepared to listen to readers' opinions, especially, of course, when their comments chime with my own feelings.

Coming back to the psychological aspect my writing, exploring people's thoughts and attitudes is, in my view, far more interesting than violence, which is, after all, just violence; there's nothing else to say about it really.

Your writing really lends itself to making a reader interested in the key characters' lives as well as the crime is going on. Is this deliberate?

Yes, it is. The other thing that's also deliberate is not tying up all the loose ends. I like to leave the readers guessing as to what exactly happened. Most of the denouement is looking at the case through Juliet's eyes, because she has deduced a substantial amount of the case; I make it clear that it's the best account we're likely to get and we don't necessarily know what happened and never will do.

There was a considerable amount of information that you needed to put over in order for readers to start building up their own views of what was going on. There is always this mantra of 'show not tell' - not easy, because you were having to describe what was in the academic papers that Juliet and Katrin were having to read. How much effort did you have to put in to those sections to make sure they didn't go on for any longer than they needed to?

I am very conscious that writers who have done an enormous amount of research into something then insist on putting it in their book. I might find myself doing that more if I weren't handling subjects I'm already familiar with; if I had to write about something I knew nothing about, such as football, I might parade the knowledge a bit more. History and archaeology are part of my background, because I did both of them at school and have continued to read books on them. It was just a question of checking details to make sure I got them right. I hope I managed to provide just enough of them without parading the knowledge too much.

What did come over was how credible the meetings of the Archaeological Society seemed to be.

I took the approach that committee or board meetings are the same the world over. You do get quite a bit of in-fighting and some very interesting dynamics occurring in these meetings.

You talked about feedback earlier. You do use social networking quite a bit to engage with your readers. So, as a writer, has your use of social networking been helpful in getting to know your readers?

Absolutely. I was very sceptical about social networking when Chris Hamilton-Emery, my publisher, first suggested I use it. But I find that it is great for getting feedback from readers, and I've also found my blog invaluable, because it makes me write every day. I do try to keep a diary, but the trouble with keeping a diary is that you tend to write the same things over and over again. For example, in a typical day, I get up, take the dog out for a walk, do some writing and then get on and do my other work; in the evening, I do some reading or revise the writing that I wrote earlier in the day. A diary would record this repetitively, whereas, when you're writing a blog, you've got to write something different every day or lose your audience, and that's really good practice and a challenge for any writer; you have to revise and perfect. The blog posts are probably not as carefully wrought as my writing in the novels, because there are time pressures, but I do try to craft the material on the blog so that readers will enjoy it. Getting feedback about those posts, as well as direct feedback about the books themselves, is very valuable to me and very encouraging. Mostly people write encouragingly positive things and only occasionally something less so!