



Peter Robinson

Close to Home
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Q: How and when was Detective Inspector Alan Banks born?

A: In the early 1980s I read a lot of British mysteries featuring a detective and sidekick operating in various parts of the U.K., and I thought it would be a good idea to do the same in Yorkshire, where I come from.

Q: At the time, did you realize that you would still be writing about him decades later?

A: No! And I have to tell you that it gets harder with each book, not easier.

Q: Readers and critics alike admire your ability to enrich and deepen Banks' character in each book. How do you, as a writer, approach this evolution?

A: There's no master plan for Banks, but I like to dig a little deeper into his feelings and his background each time around. This is one of the things, if not the main thing, that helps keep the series fresh for

me.

Q: Though you were born and raised in England, you've lived your adult life in Canada. However, the Inspector Banks novels are set firmly on British soil. What is it about your childhood home that attracts you?

A: Well, I think at first there might have been an element of nostalgia: I hadn't been away long when I started writing the Banks novels, so I still knew England far better than I knew Canada, which made Yorkshire a natural choice. I think I was feeling a bit homesick, too, so in a way writing about the place made me feel closer to it, at least in my imagination. I still have family and friends over there and go back frequently now.

Q: Your books contain countless references to musical work—everything from rock to opera to jazz. What role does music play in your writing process and in character development in your latest installment of the Inspector Bank series, *Close to Home*? More specifically, 60's rock music?

A: In general, Banks' tastes have developed over the years to include classical and jazz, but he started with 60's pop music, and in *Close to Home* we revisit his adolescence, specifically the summer of 1965, which he spent with his ear glued to his transistor radio and his eyes on the passing girls. The music of that particular August anticipated the experimentation and poetry of the later 60s, with the Beatles, the Animals, the Byrds, the Yardbirds and Joan Baez all in the charts. Bob Dylan's "Times They Are A-Changin'" and "Subterranean Homesick Blues" had both been hits earlier that year, and "Like a Rolling Stone" was to follow in September. The Beatles had begun the transition from simple pop songs to more complex musical and lyrical explorations when John Lennon entered his Dylan phase the previous summer, and this was coming to fruition in the August 1965 album *Help!*, which Banks and his friends spend a great deal of time listening to. Later that year came *Rubber Soul* and, by the summer of 1966, *Revolver*. But simple pop songs remained the staple of the times, and Tom Jones, Dusty Springfield, Billy Fury and the Shadows, among others, were all in the charts. These were mostly love songs, and they tended to reflect the complications of adolescent love and lust, which Banks and his friends could certainly relate to. So the music is central to the time, that mid-point of the 60s when the world was full of possibility, especially if you were young, and everything was about to change. In the midst of all this, Graham Marshall, a friend of Banks', goes missing. If there's one pop tune that ties the present to the past, it's Marcello Minerbi's "Zorba's Dance," which Banks hears at the beginning of the book around the same time he finds out that his friend's bones have been unearthed in a field.

Q: One of your tutors in your Master's program was Joyce Carol Oates. Are there lessons you learned from her that still influence and shape your work today?

A: I think the main thing I learned from Joyce Carol Oates was to take myself seriously as a writer, to believe in myself. There are so many people ready to discourage you in this business that it was really important to have someone of her stature actually being very positive about what I was doing. She didn't teach the nuts and bolts, and she wasn't dogmatic in her criticism, but you always came away from discussions of your work knowing where the strengths and weaknesses were.

Q: You are noted for confronting gritty details and dark themes in your work. Have you ever been shocked, or perhaps frightened, by the sinister truths you explore?

A: Certainly *Aftermath* took its toll in sleepless nights. Generally, at the end of the day, I'm able to put some distance between myself and my subject, but obviously some explorations into the dark side haunt me more than others, especially crimes involving children and young people in general.

Q: What do you like to do when you are not writing?

A: Travel. Watch movies. Read. Spend an hour or two in the pub. The trouble is that being a writer comes to involve much more than writing if you are at all successful. That means you have to act as your own bookkeeper, secretary and accountant, too, so it leaves less spare time than people might think. I also teach a couple of courses at the University of Toronto, so that keeps me busy, too, along with the touring, readings and other speaking engagements.

Q: Many of the ideas for your book stem from real-life crimes. When you are reading the paper or listening to the news, what is it that grabs you about a particular news story and inspires you to write about it?

A: Inconclusiveness. I like newspaper stories that are incomplete, that give me room to imagine the rest. It's no good to me reading about something that's all neatly solved and wrapped up. That's why so many of my stories revolve around human psychology, around why someone commits a certain crime, or series of crimes. I don't profess to know the answers but I like to explore the possibilities.

Q: You've taught writing in many different settings. What are the three essential lessons that you try to offer your students?

A: Put your bum on the chair and your fingers on the keyboard. I know that's only two, but they're the essentials. I might add read

widely, too. But when my students fail it's usually nothing to do with lack of talent but everything to do with lack of application. So many people want to be writers, but few actually want to write!

Q: Crime writing requires something of a morbid imagination. Is this something you always possessed, and has it increased as you've plunged deeper and deeper into your work?

A: Yes, I've always had a morbid imagination, and I'm only glad that I'm able to share it with others. If I didn't have some sort of creative outlet for it, lord knows what kind of shape I'd be in.

Q: Your books, of course, investigate the effects that crimes have on their victims. However, your writing also seems increasingly concerned with the broader effects on families, friends, and communities. How do you gauge those effects and capture them?

A: I suppose I dig back into my own experience and then subject it to my imagination. I mean, Banks isn't me, but we share many of the same memories of the 60s. I grew up on an estate much like the one Banks lives on in the flashbacks in *Close to Home*. In some ways these estates, at least back then, were rather like villages, worlds unto themselves, and something like the disappearance of a child would cast a very long shadow indeed. Also, because people lived so close to one another, there's every chance that someone would know something, and someone else would be keeping a secret. There's also a present day mystery in *Close to Home* which deals with the disappearance of a boy named Luke Armitage, whose real father, a well-known rock star, deserted his family when Luke was a baby, and then killed himself soon after. Luke is talented, artistic, moody and troubled, and because he's different, he's picked on a lot at school. As I remember from my own school days, young boys and girls can be extremely cruel. Luke's stepfather is an ex-footballer who doesn't have much time for his son's artistic tendencies, so there's conflict at home, too. Luke's and Graham's stories have many parallels, and past and present connect on a number of levels. Because the two boys are not present to speak for themselves, their stories are largely told through family, friends and other members of the community.

Q: With 13 volumes of Inspector Banks now behind you, could readers hope for another 13?

A: Perhaps. Right now, I'll be happy just to get the number 14 on deadline! Anyway, there's no end in sight yet, and people don't need to worry that I'm going to kill off Banks in the near future. He might even stop smoking.