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Val McDermid: Meet Queen Macbeth

Edinburgh International Book Festival
EFI Venue T, Edinburgh Futures Institute
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Crime writer Val McDermid took to the stage with the aid of a rainbow-coloured zimmer frame, decorated by her partner Jo Sharp, which she had been using since her spinal surgery a few weeks earlier, but she seemed already to be walking largely without it.

Her interviewer was Steph McGovern, who began by looking back on her career, much of which will be familiar to her fans. McDermid was the first student at St Hilda's College, Oxford from a Scottish state school. On graduating, she felt she couldn't do a job that was the same day after day, and journalism seemed to offer what she wanted.

She worked for a number of newspapers including the *Manchester Evening News* and the *Daily Record* in Glasgow, the latter owned by Mirror Group, and when Robert Maxwell took over the company, she knew she would need to plan an escape route. She rather naïvely thought that she could write two books a year and pay the mortgage and support herself, but it didn't work out quite that way.

But the book she was at the festival to talk about is *Queen Macbeth*, set in medieval Scotland like Shakespeare's play but attempting to give the various myths a sense of historical accuracy. Shakespeare's Macbeth is no sooner crowned and he is killed, but the real Macbeths ruled with some stability for seventeen years after he had killed Duncan in battle, not as he slept in his castle egged on by a power-hungry wife.

She compared the process with the writing of her 2006 novel *The Grave Tattoo*, which took facts about Fletcher Christian and William Wordsworth having been schoolmates and the intriguing detail that there is no grave for Christian on Pitcairn, unlike for the other Bounty mutineers, and "coloured in", as she put it, the known facts with her story. For *Queen Macbeth*, the facts are true, as far as is known, but she has coloured them in to complete the story.

She was asked about the continuation of the Allie Burns series set in the world of journalism after 1979 and 1989, which she began during lockdown when she struggled to write her other books as they are all set in the here and now, and at that time she didn't know what the here and now was, so she began to look back. She said she had planned to write 1999 until Karen Pirie started bothering her to tell another story, but she may write it next.

When asked about planning her novels in advance, she said she used to until one time when she got stuck in the middle and completed the first draft without a plan, which was terrifying, but she said her editor told her it was the best first draft she'd ever submitted. Now she has a general overview and points she has to hit, but then sees where the characters take it.

She did have a few other interesting anecdotes, such as being attacked by the wrestler Big Daddy when she was still a journalist and being 'fan-girled' by Marti Pellow when she played Glastonbury in her 60s with The Fun Lovin' Crime Writers, for which she is lead vocalist.

[Queen Macbeth](#) was released in May 2024.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)