

Bestselling Author Proves That Crime Really Does Pay

Mark Billingham is the author of the bestselling Tom Thorne crime novels and winner of the '2009 Theakston's Old Peculiar Crime Novel of the Year' award. But what makes a successful stand up comedian and actor turn to a life of crime, albeit a literary one? Steve Barley searches for clues as he catches Mark on the run...up to his guest speaker slot at VWC's 'Get Writing' Conference, 2010.

Mark Billingham's first novel, *Sleepyhead*, was released in 2001 to become the biggest selling debut novel that summer, and launched a series of cases for Detective Inspector Tom Thorne of the Metropolitan Police Murder Squad. With a book count of eight and a body count much higher, Mark's hard-boiled London detective has been compared to Ian Rankin's Rebus and is now being adapted for television.

A family man by day and avid writer by night, Mark also co-authors a series of children's thrillers, and his first standalone crime novel, *In The Dark*, has been short listed for the *CWA Gold Dagger 2009* award.

Mark will be a headline speaker at the Verulam Writers' Circle 'Get Writing' conference in St Albans on Saturday the 20th February, 2010. Steve Barley, VWC committee member and conference press officer, visits the scene of Mark's crimes and asks him some probing questions about his writing motives.



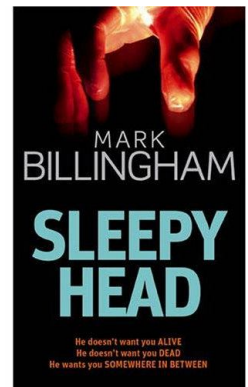
Q: *You've gone from being a successful actor and stand up comedian, with appearances on radio and TV, to becoming a bestselling author of hard-boiled crime fiction. What brought that about?*

MB: I'd been doing stand up for twenty years or so, and I wrote for television too. I was devouring crime fiction by writers from both sides of the Atlantic, so I began writing about the subject as a way to get free books! I interviewed authors, went to conventions and did reviews for newspapers and magazines. The missing piece of the jigsaw was to sit down and write a crime novel myself. During a fortnight's holiday with the family, I wrote a third of a novel, sent it off to a bunch of agents and chose one of the two who were interested. It went to auction with several publishers and that was it. Essentially, I got incredibly lucky very fast.

Q: ***Sleepyhead** was your debut novel released in 2001. Was there a particular eureka moment when you first thought, 'Yes. I've got to write that story!'*

MB: In a way. I'd read this book called *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* which was about locked-in syndrome (a condition in which a patient is aware and awake, but cannot move or communicate except by blinking). My wife was a director on *Casualty* and put me in touch with the technical advisor for the show – a doctor who became an early prototype for my forensics character Phil Hendricks. I went to him and said 'Could you do this to someone on purpose?' He kind of looked at me with an evil twinkle in his eye and said, 'Well you *could*, but it would be

really difficult and if you didn't get it right, you'd kill them.' I thought, 'Boom. That's it!' That was my light bulb moment. The other thing I was determined to do with the book was make the victim a major character. In a lot of crime novels there's a cop and a killer and somewhere in the middle is the victim who's there purely to make the plot happen. I'd had my own experience of violent crime a year or so before and I was determined the victim was going to be somebody you got to know, to care about. Interestingly, the character I got most feedback about from that first book wasn't Tom Thorne, but Alison (the victim), although Thorne has developed and become more popular since then.



Q: *That experience you mentioned was back in May 1997 when you and a colleague were held hostage in a hotel room by a gang of robbers. Would you say that gave you the edge you needed to write the more graphic scenes in your books?*

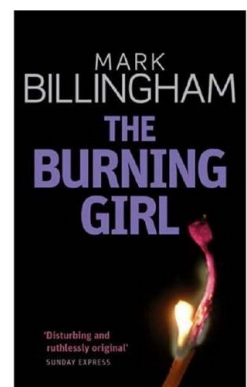
MB: It made me pretty good at writing about fear because I know what it's like to be scared. Not in a rollercoaster horror movie way, but a 'bouncing off the carpet because your heart is beating so much' sort of scared. Whether it gave me an edge, I don't know, it certainly made me angry.

Q: *'Sleepyhead's plot sprang from an idea in something you read. Was it the same for your subsequent novels or did you apply any deliberate plotting techniques?*

MB: I get lots of feedback saying, 'Oh you're such a great plotter,' when really I write organically. It's plotting as if you're driving at night through fog. I know where I want to get to, but I can't see very far ahead. All writers have their own methods and you tend to stick to what worked the first time. I'm quite superstitious about those sort of things. I'll always buy the same kind of notebook, that kind of stuff. In terms of where the original idea comes from, absolutely anywhere: something tucked away on page seven of a local newspaper, snippets of conversation, something a friend tells me. Anything at all.

Q: *What about research? Police procedures, forensic techniques and so forth?*

MB: I've got to know a lot of coppers over the years which makes researching my books much easier. I do less now than I did. I used to be quite manic about it and would drive to a set of traffic lights just to check if you could turn left! I've discovered since that research is an excuse for not writing. Having said that, there are certain things I do need to get right. *The Burning Girl* deals with facial scarring and the treatment of burns. Similarly, there's a thread of Alzheimers running through my early books because Thorne's father suffers from it. I never make that stuff up otherwise I'd be taking liberties with a subject that affects lots of people, but worrying about geography and whether there's a Starbucks in Brixton or not really doesn't matter.

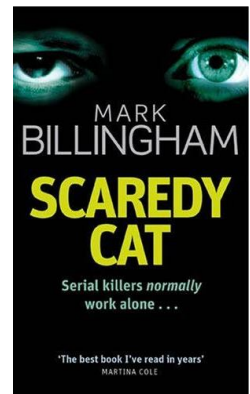


Q: *Does writing dialogue come naturally to you or do you have to work at it?*

MB: I like to think dialogue is the thing I do best. When I wrote for television, dialogue was all I had. Anything else I put in - stage directions, descriptions of characters - was completely changed once the directors and actors got involved. For me it's the most important part of any book and it's a thing I look for in any other writer. You can write the most lush and sensuous descriptions of landscape but if you've got a tin ear for dialogue I'm not interested.

Q: *I understand Tom Thorne is being developed for television by the BBC. How do you feel about your creation being converted into flesh and blood?*

MB: Television is a completely different animal, and I'm fully aware that lots of things will get cut, condensed or changed as that's the way TV works. You can't take a hundred thousand word novel like *Sleepyhead* and turn it into three hours of television without making a few compromises. I'm really excited about it though. They're doing *Scaredy Cat* as well.

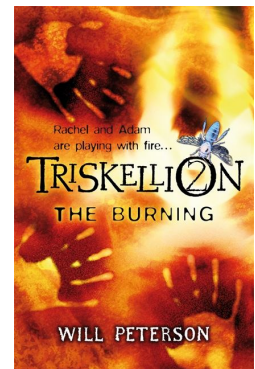


Q: *People say that writing is in the blood. You've written some children's books recently - the **Triskellion Trilogy** under the pen name of Will Peterson - but if crime fiction hadn't come along would you have switched genres and still penned a novel?*

MB: I don't think I would. I'd read enough crime fiction by then to feel like I could have a go on my own. It's amazing the number of times I meet people who say, 'I've got this book I want to write.' And I say, 'Okay, so who do you read?' and they say, 'Oh, I don't really read.' Which is ridiculous to me. How can you decide you want to be a chef if you've never eaten anything? Reading is really important and I think the best advice I can give to an unpublished writer is to write your own version of what you like to read. Yes, I write children's thrillers, but they're constructed in the same way as my adult work, only with less sex and swearing!

Q: *The **Triskellion Trilogy** is co-authored with Peter Cocks, who you worked with in your television days. Collaborative writing isn't always easy. How do you divide the work?*

MB: We write as we used to write for television – in the same room at the same time. Peter sits at his laptop on one side of the desk, and I sit on the other. We talk for an hour about, let's say, the next couple of chapters. Then he writes one, while I write the other. We literally email them to one another across the table, re-write and put them back together. We keep doing that until we can't see the joins. Writing Thorne is such a solitary experience that it's nice to have a few months writing alongside somebody else.



Q: *So the end result really is a complete blend of the two of you?*

MB: Absolutely. We have different strengths - Peter is hugely talented and good at visualisation whereas I guess I'm stronger on structure and dialogue. By the time we blend the two even our agents and publishers can't tell who's written what, so we must be doing something right.

Q: *How does your writing fit in with family life living in North London?*

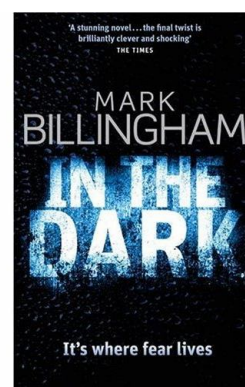
MB: It fits in pretty well. The kids are at school so I've plenty of time to write during the day although I tend to be most productive in the two or three hours after midnight. Looking out the window at darkness as opposed to a nice garden with squirrels scampering about is less distracting.

Q: ***Death Message** won the '2009 Theakston's Old Peculiar Crime Novel of the Year' award. Doubly prestigious as it's based on votes from the public as well as a panel of experts. Do you feel that you have arrived, so to speak, as an author, or do you have ambitions yet to achieve?*

MB: I know it sounds a really pat thing to say, but I just want to write better books. Things like the Theakston's award, and being shortlisted for the Gold Dagger are lovely - I'd be lying if I said they weren't - but you just keep trying to write a better book and not repeat yourself.

Q: *I suppose by raising your game it makes things more interesting for you as a writer?*

MB: You have to set yourself challenges. With *In The Dark* I wanted to write a standalone story and it was gratifying to see it short listed this year. I'm already thinking about next year's book where I'm hoping to write something that unfolds in real time. It will be a challenge, but exciting at the same time.



Q: *Writing a standalone book was a brave decision. Weren't you worried your established readers would demand another Tom Thorne novel?*

MB: Yes, a little, if I'm honest, but the writers who keep their series fresh are the ones who step away, do something else, then come back re-energised. It worked for me. I really wanted to write about Thorne again, and the result was *Bloodline*, my latest release. Thankfully, my readers did pick up *In The Dark* too, and I did put a cameo of Thorne in there!

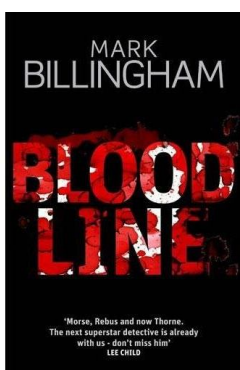
Q: *Some final advice for budding crime writers. You already mentioned about writing something you would like to read. Any other tips?*

MB: Write and keep writing. One of the things I hope to do at the 'Get Writing' conference in St Albans is explode a few myths about writing. Like the nonsensical idea of writer's block. Unless someone has broken all your fingers there's nothing stopping you from writing. Write something every day. It won't always be great but keep writing. Also, people talk about techniques - twists and reveals and complicated plots – but the real secret to creating suspense in thrillers is creating engaging characters that the readers care about from page one. Only by making readers care can you then make them fearful and apprehensive.

Q: *Thank you, Mark, and I can't wait to hear you speak at our conference in February.*

MB: I look forward to it.

For more interviews and tips on writing visit: www.stevenbarley.com



Many thanks to Mark Billingham for taking time out to be interviewed. His latest Tom Thorne novel, *Bloodline* (published by Little, Brown Book Group) is available in hardback from bookstores now. The paperback version will be on release from March 2010.

Learn more about Mark at his website www.markbillingham.com

If you want to meet Mark in person and ask about his work, what really happened during that hostage scenario back in 1997, or listen to him 'explode a few myths about writing' then book your place at the **Verulam Writers' Circle 'Get Writing' 2010 Conference**. Mark is one of many guest speakers on a list that includes bestselling authors, top agents and publishers. For more information, and to reserve a place visit www.vwc.org

