



Julia Crouch

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## The Festival Experience

**Y**OU WRITE A NOVEL and it gets published, and suddenly you are being called upon to appear on ‘panels’ at festivals. But why?

‘What is a panel?’ I asked Sam, my first ever publicist, when she said I’d been put forward for one at Harrogate Crime Writing Festival.

Oh, the innocence.

I wasn’t exactly seasoned back then. Apart from my first book launch, which was strictly friends and family, the only public outings of my writing had been a couple of readings at short story nights, during which I could literally hear my knees knocking.

‘You’re on New Blood,’ Sam said. ‘Val McDermid chooses four debuts she really likes. It’s exciting, a really big deal.’

‘Great!’ I said.

We went up to Harrogate and I got to stay in a nice hotel and there were lots of publishers’ parties and receptions. It was back in my drinking days, and I was unused to the concept of free book wine, so my memories are a little hazy, but I came face to face with some of my crime-writing heroes and they were all lovely — warm, welcoming, inclusive. I also met amazingly dedicated and enthusiastic readers. I began to see at Harrogate how fantastic the crime writing community can be, and my experiences



at Killer Women, Capital Crime, Crimefest, Bloody Scotland, and the fabulously named Noirwich (to name but a few of our genre festivals) confirm this with every visit.

But: back to Harrogate. The time came for that New Blood panel. I lay on my hotel bed, butterflies muddying my slight hangover, and went through the notes I'd made on the other panellists' books. Actually, I felt like checking out of the hotel and running away back home. They wouldn't miss me, surely? And then the TV news came on. Amy Winehouse had, tragically, died that day. Somehow, that awful event put everything in perspective. I put on my big girl pants.

In the Green Room, we were wired with headset mics and pumped up with coffee. Everyone was nervous, but Val said something I'll never forget: 'You're talking about your specialist subject: your own book. You can't go wrong.'

Also helpful was the fact that she didn't mention that a) our event was sold out and an audience of 800 was waiting for us, and b) the path to the stage was right up the middle, through said audience. 'They've come because they want to hear about your books,' Val said as we quaked at the back of the room. 'They're on your side.'

I don't know how I made it up that aisle, but I did. The panel was over before I knew it and I realised that I had really enjoyed myself.

Those butterflies have long since flown. Since that debut, I have appeared at Harrogate on two further panels as well as chairing two more. I have spoken all over the UK, and at festivals abroad. It's *such* a great chance to connect with other writers and find out about their work and work processes, as well as to meet and discuss all aspects of writing and books with readers.

Writers work in our rooms, on our own, for hours, days, weeks, months.



Festivals force us out and make us realise that we are not alone and that what we do is, ultimately, something that connects with others and faces the public. And festivals help us to understand *exactly* what that means.