



## The Writer and the City

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**L**ANDSCAPES TELL STORIES. When I was small, I used to spend a lot of time asking older, long-suffering relatives whether this particular field had witnessed any particular battles, or whether there was any chance that the gooseberry patch at the bottom of the garden or the wych elm on the ridge had been planted atop a mysteriously interred corpse. It was impossible for me to go into a stately home (always a treat for a seven year old) and not enquire of the guide whether there had been any blood shed in the bedroom, or if bones had been found in the priest hole. Becoming a crime journalist and then a crime novelist was probably always on the cards.

And yet it's not the rural landscape that has repeatedly inspired me over the past decade. Somehow, despite being raised amid the felt-and-tweed topography of the Lake District, it's gritty urban locations that I have felt the urge to use as my canvas. To the trained eye, the cityscape tells as many stories as those timeless rolling fells.

A fourth-generation farmer can tell us how *this* field was worked in days of yore; how *that* gully was worn away by countless winters' rains, how *that* gorge was carved by a glacier. Urban landscapes tell more recent stories. Mucky bunches of dead flowers tied to a lamppost outside a pub tell of the young man who was killed in a fight after kicking-out time. The cig-ends in a gutter outside a shop show its owner nips out for a crafty smoke during quiet times. Some of the butts may have lipstick on the end where he natters with a neighbour he spends a little too much time



thinking about. The broken glass at the side of a residential road signifies a car break-in, perhaps, or accident.

If you attune yourself, if you learn to *see*, you can read the signs of an urban landscape in the same way an Injun tracker might have read the sagebrush trail in the Old West.

Today, to me, there is little that occurs in the countryside that requires this kind of scrutiny.

But cities are rife with life — and life leaves its mark.

Like rats and Man Utd fans, you're never more than ten feet away from somebody interesting when you're in the city. There are people everywhere, and that bizarrely makes for a more anonymous setting. But each person has their own tale to tell. My protagonist, McAvoy, is a people watcher. He's the modern urban scout, who just so happens to have been brought up in a very rural environment. He's an outsider to the city. An observer. And he has taught himself to read the city and its moods.

In the urban environment, the people and the landscape combine to make a story that's as rich as any written narrative, but you have to learn how to read that language. McAvoy is not quite fluent, but he's on his way. I hope I am too.