



The Writer and the City

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WHEN I FIRST STARTED writing seriously, it never occurred to me that location would form the bedrock of my stories. Yet, my first stab at full-length fiction was a YA historical fantasy set in the Low Lands of the eighth century! Writing descriptions of the draughty, damp unforgiving castle of Ingelheim on the Rhine and of the surrounding countryside was perhaps my favourite bit of the process.

No surprise then, that when I penned my crime fiction debut – *The Girl Who Wouldn't Die* – I won a Dead Good Reader award for most exotic location! Amsterdam is at the heart of all five books in that series, and to a lesser extent, London too. Amsterdam's canals, its infamous red-light district, the low-hanging cloud, the drizzle and the faded hotchpotch splendour of four- and five-storey, rickety buildings suggested all manner of subterfuge and lascivious, murderous secrets. In a city that's the trafficking hub of Europe, where cannabis is legalised and where young women trade their wares in red-lit booths, I was never short of mysteries for the Dutch police to solve. The tough streets of Catford and Lewisham, where my short-haul flight-hopping criminologist's family lived, suggested characters who had been hardened by poverty and poor expectations. It helped that I've lived both in the Netherlands and in London. If you are embarking on writing fiction, where have you lived or visited or been inspired by? What stories are suggested to you by those rolling hills or claustrophobic alleys or sun-baked piazzas? Every location will demand that you write a tale entirely appropriate to that place.



Now, I mainly write about Manchester. It's my hometown where I've lived thirty-five of my forty-nine years. I know its industrial history, its grit and laughter, its music and subculture, its inner-city neglect and suburban opulence as well as I know myself, because, to an extent, my own personality has been fashioned by the place. In a London-centric publishing industry that has long sidelined the North West in fiction, I'm making something of a name for myself, not only as a writer of wrongs in Manchester, but also as an author of historical saga, set in the NHS's first hospital in Trafford.

The constant rain and pervasive damp tell me how my characters should dress; what the interiors of their homes should feel like. The music industry and drug trade have been hedonistic Mancunian bedfellows for decades. The quirky lyrics and melancholy of the Smiths will lend a tragicomic air to whatever I write. The thumping house of the Hacienda's halcyon days insists that even my gangsters, with money and murder on their minds, value fun. But it's the hard streets of 1970s council estates and cramped Victorian terraces that sing to me in bittersweet disharmony. They tell my protagonists to despair or else to dream, steeling themselves to be brave; to escape. The city motivates. The city inspires. When the city speaks to you, dear writer, you must listen!