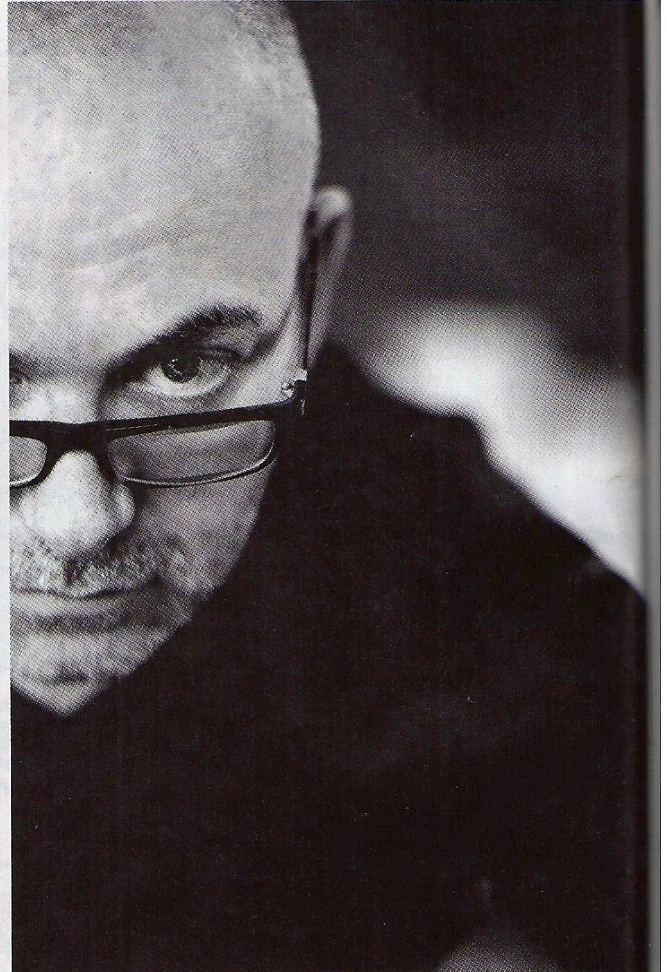


Arts & Books

THE MALE PSYCHE GONE FERAL

Messing with minds and leaving viewers and readers up to their necks in the unspeakable – that’s “absolutely my ambition”, says *Luther* creator Neil Cross.

BY DIANA WICHEL/PHOTOS BY DAVID WHITE



Early afternoon on one of those days of snow: where better to take in the chilly surrealism of it all than perched vertiginously on a hill in Wellington’s Crofton Downs, sipping sparkling water in the living room of a scary crime writer?

Neil Cross spends a lot of his life creating pitiless scenes that can snap-freeze your marrow. “The things people do to each other,” sighs a cop in his latest novel, *Luther: The Calling*. In Cross’s considerable oeuvre, which includes novels, television series and, recently, working on scripts in Canada for director Guillermo del Toro, even the good guys are driven to do terrible things. “People often express surprise that I’m not a psychopath,” Cross informed the *Guardian*.

In real life, he’s very nice and a highly

entertaining way to pass a freakishly arctic afternoon. Less psychopath, more working-class lad from Bristol made good, living here with wife Nadya Kooznetzoff, a New Zealander whose name is tattooed on his left inside wrist, and sons Ethan and Finn, aged 10 and eight.

Although small talk can be odd. When Cross first became a father, he took to carrying a weapon in the pram. His 2004 Man Booker Prize longlisted novel, *Always the Sun*, in which a father’s compulsion to protect his son goes seriously awry, was based on this experience. “That was absolutely true!” he says, of his days of poring over weapons catalogues. “One thing I’ve never mentioned is that it was the norm for boys of my class in the West Country to go armed.” With him, it was more for form. “I’ve been beaten up many times

while having a weapon in my pocket.” Fatherhood caused a reversion. “To the extent I genuinely wanted something to happen so I could hurt somebody very badly to prove that I could do it.” It ended when, on holiday in France, he found himself window-shopping for Tasers. “Nadya went, ‘It’s really time to stop this now.’ It turns out that this is not an uncommon male reaction to the psychic shock of fatherhood.”

The male psyche gone feral features strongly in Cross’s work. His brilliant, furious detective John Luther, played mesmerically on TV by *The Wire*’s Idris Elba, is a gentle man, driven near mad by the day job.

Or, as Cross writes in the new spin-off novel, as Luther’s corner of London begins to resemble a charnel house, “Luther’s

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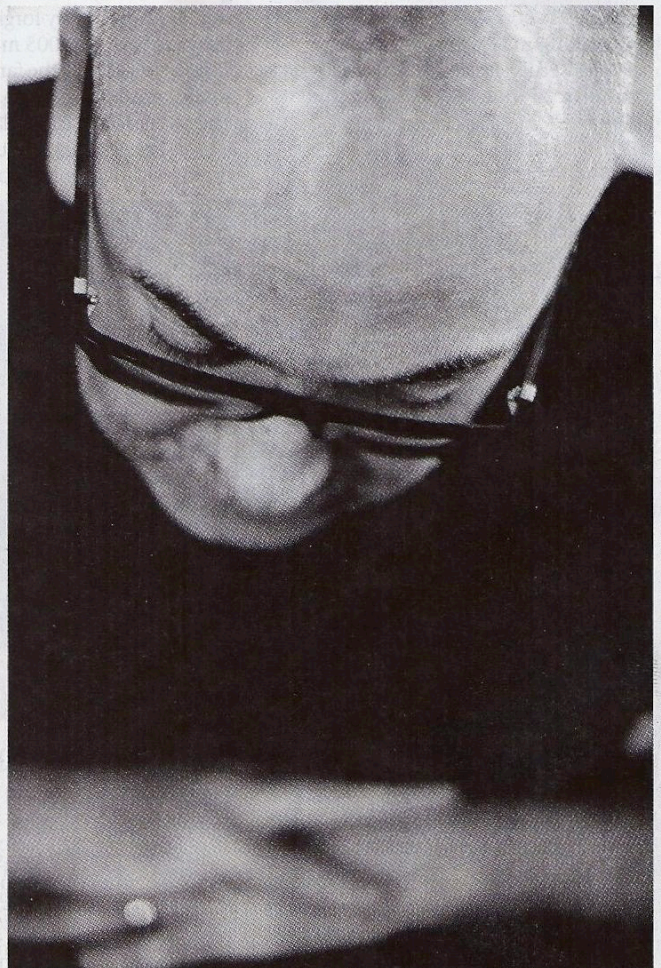
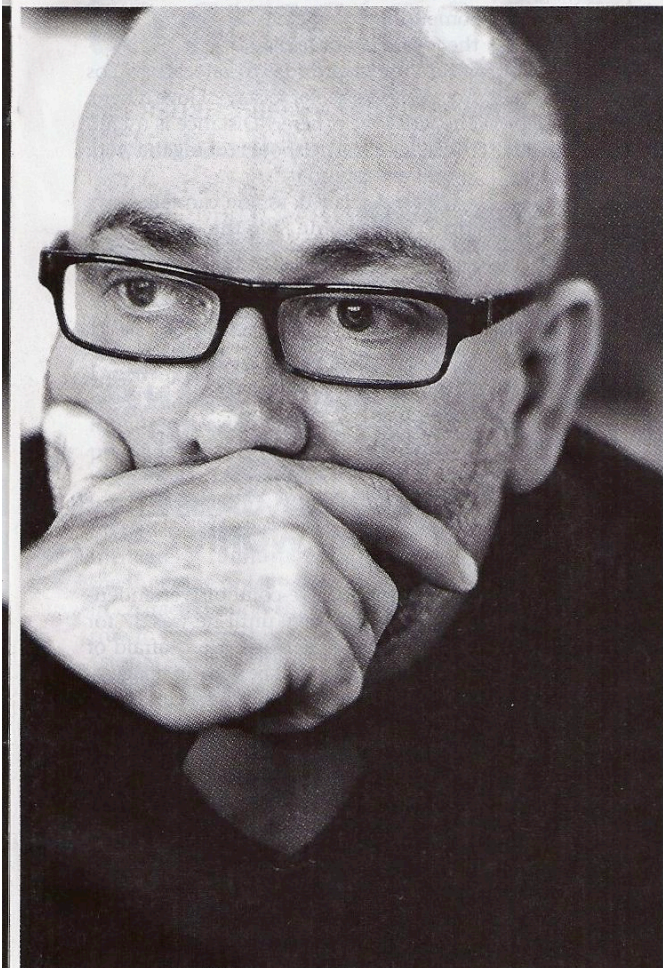
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skull bursts open like an egg sac. Spiders crawl out."

Yet he's such an appealing character. "Yeah, because he pays a price for what he does. We get hundreds of messages from people on Facebook and Twitter, essentially offering to have sex with him should the opportunity arise. But we get more offers, which I find quite moving, from people who want to be his friend."

Luther the TV series (shown here on Sky's UKTV) was sold as a new crime drama. "But I particularly wanted to do something darker and more operatic." After series two, there was a meeting with the BBC. "I said,

'Do you realise I've sneaked a horror show onto BBC1, nine o'clock prime time?' And, fair play to them, they want more."

Operatic? Well, Cross's novel, a prequel to series one of *Luther*, has a lot of death and shrieking. Binge drinkers, beaten women, self-mutilators and the pissing of blood – and that's just page one.

I have to tell him that settling down for a bedtime read, with nightmares to come, wasn't easy. "Damn you, Neil Cross," I would think. "Oh, thank you very much," he says. Cross takes critical flinching as high praise. "Filthily bleak" was one assessment he particularly liked. The world

Neil Cross: "I wanted to do something darker and more operatic."

of *Luther: The Calling* is like some outer circle of Hell where children are preyed upon, although not for the usual sick reasons. There are different sick reasons. And where a killer might rearrange, for a laugh, the heads of the family he has just slaughtered.

Cross enjoys messing with heads, too. Like one of his own frightful characters, he grooms you with his crisp, cool, funny prose – "You can't

BINGE DRINKERS, BEATEN WOMEN, SELF-MUTILATORS AND THE PISSING OF BLOOD – AND THAT'S JUST PAGE ONE.

have enough duct tape," observes a child-killer – and before you know it you're up to your neck in the unspeakable. "Well, I hope so. That's absolutely my ambition," says Cross carnivorously. His novels are too layered and forensically observant of human frailty for the violence to seem gratuitous. Although mention of little dogs or bunnies soon has the sensitive reader whimpering in advance.

What's truly unnerving is the recognisability of the 21st-century malaise he evokes. We speak not long after the UK riots. "It's like Clapham bloody Junction here," observes Cross, as phones

with any Marxist anomie or atomisation. It had a lot to do with young men being drunk and aggressive. There is a certain visceral pleasure to be taken in smashing a window."

Chucking a brick through the window of his dysfunctional upbringing, in a surprisingly forgiving way, is what Cross does in his 2005 memoir, *Heartland*. Cross's mother left the family when he was small, returning later to reclaim her son. They went to live in Scotland with his stepfather, Derek Cross, a South African white supremacist conman. You couldn't make



Idris Elba in *Luther*: a brilliant, furious detective driven near mad by the day job.

ring and couriers call, "except it's not burning."

During the riots, he had emails and Facebook messages from the front lines, "friends saying they're looking out the window and they're seeing Luther's London". His own reaction: "A weird admixture of dismay and lack of surprise. Last time I was back was just before the riots. The Murdoch thing was really kicking off. It seemed that there was an air of despair and desperation about the place." The riots were more about a consumerist underclass rather than a political underclass, he thinks. "The barriers between the civilised and the bestial are very ephemeral, which isn't to say that politics don't play a part." Bookshops, he notes bleakly, weren't looted. "Some of the Waterstone's [bookshop] people said, 'Clearly, the rioters all have Kindles.' It's a post-literate, consumerist riot."

He also recognised the impulses of young men of a certain disposition. "I was a vandal between the ages of 14 and 17 or 18. I came from a very working-class background. I was on the dole. There wasn't a lot of work around but it had little to do

it up. "He was massively improbable. He's still improbable now."

Between beating the dog and making Cross become a Mormon, his stepfather nurtured the boy's love of books. Inevitably, he left. Is he still around? "I don't know. I had an offer to make a documentary looking for him but ..." No desire to make contact? "Not really."

He keeps in touch with his mother. Cross called after *Heartland* came out. "I said, 'Mum, how are you?' and she said, 'I better not tell you, love. You might write a book about it.'" With plenty to choose from, his mother objected to only one detail, about Cross's second stepfather, Brian. "I talked about his shrivelled little cock." Bridge too far? "Bridge too far." Brian was the only one Cross never really forgave. "He didn't have any deep motivations. He was just an arsehole."

Cross never intended to write about any of it. "But – this sounds horribly vulgar – when I was offered some money to do it I thought, 'Wouldn't it be ironic if I was able to give my kids a nice life by telling the story of my childhood?'" Redeem the whole disaster. "Exactly."

That background may account for Cross's ferocious drive. Current projects include another series of *Luther*, a possible *Luther* movie ... "I've just done a really big deal for American television to write my own shows." Cable? "Network." Do they know what they're in for? "Yeah, they love *Luther* in the States." He'll be free to create something completely his own? "That's the idea. That's the plan."

He's under pressure to relocate to Los Angeles. He'd prefer to stay. "I love it here. The kids love it here." Distance is useful. "It means all I care about is doing the work as well as I can do it."

"I'm not relaxed, as you can tell," says Cross at one point. "I'm the world's least relaxed person." We spend some time

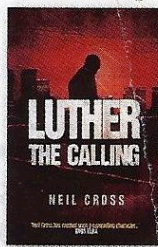
"I'VE JUST DONE A REALLY BIG DEAL FOR AMERICAN TELEVISION TO WRITE MY OWN SHOWS." CABLE? "NETWORK."

swapping obsessive-compulsive tendencies. He didn't drive until he was 37 for fear of hurting someone. He is afraid of the dark, as you might be with an imagination like his. But, actually, he seems pretty firmly in control: of himself; of his brilliant career; and of the psyches of his tormented readers. A man heading steadily for the top of his game.

Although he has more reason than most to be aware of the blows life can deal. He doesn't dwell on how far he's come. "Once you think, 'Look where I've got to', that's fatal. Almost like inviting it to stop." When he says he's never had a smug moment, you must believe him.

His existential unease has probably been a fair price to pay for his ability to convey as few writers can state-of-the-art states of anxiety. "That's exactly the emotion which I'm most interested in trying to capture," he says, "because it's the emotion which I most often endure."

And – damn you, Neil Cross – he makes a reader want to endure it, too. "The bit with the home invasion?" he says, of a particularly pitiless scene in *Luther: The*



Calling. "Nadya came up and hit me for it." I know exactly how she felt, I tell him. Perhaps, for a moment, he does look just a little smug. ■ **LUTHER: THE CALLING**, by Neil Cross (Simon & Schuster, \$35).