

SERIAL THRILLER

Mike White grills Bristol-raised, Booker-nominated bestselling writer Neil Cross about his new novel 'Captured'.

As a tumour eats into his brain, a desperate and lonely man tries to tie off his life's loose ends. But when he finds a childhood sweetheart has mysteriously disappeared, he turns twisted vigilante, setting in motion a chain of events that spiral dangerously out of control. Set in and around Bristol, Neil Cross's latest thriller 'Captured' is a straightforward revenge tale, peppered with local references. Although he now lives in New Zealand, Cross was born and partly schooled in Bristol, and is the author of several novels, including the Booker Prize-nominated 'Always the Sun' and 'Burial', as well as the bestselling memoir 'Heartland'. He has been lead scriptwriter for the two most recent seasons of the BBC spy drama 'Spooks'.

Was it the ongoing resonance of your school years in Bristol that influenced your decision to root 'Captured' so firmly in the area?

Not really my school years, although I suspect the dole and bedsit years which followed played a role. The truth is, although I left Bristol more than twenty years ago, it taps a deep root in my psyche. It's where I'm from, it's where most of my family still live, and the kind of friends that count as alternative family. It doesn't matter where in the world I happen to be, I only have to open my mouth in order for people to hear Bristol's formative effect on me. Which is lush.



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Clearly you know this neck of the woods very well. Did you stay here in order to write it?

Sadly, no. Although I'm in the UK four or five times a year and in Bristol at least once, the Bristol in my books has less to do with geography than a particular, psychological landscape. Parts of the area are significant to me in a way that has little or nothing to do with autobiography - Weston Pier, the Paragon in Clifton, Avebury. I don't associate these places with happy times. Often, I don't even have specific memories of them. Their hold on my imagination is much more mysterious than that - which is a way of saying I don't really understand it.

'Captured' is pretty bleak - all the more so because there's no clear 'hero'. What was the appeal in pitching a violent main protagonist (Kenny) against a man who we know hit his wife and who (may have) murdered her?

See, I disagree. I think Kenny is a hero. In his own mind he's a mortally wounded knight errant who, in order to put right a dreadful violation, rides forth into unknown lands. He goes about it the wrong way and makes terrible, terrible mistakes, but throughout, his intentions are pure. The story could be on the bleak side, I'll give you that, but the end is happy. I'll also concede that it's a singular kind of happy, perhaps a kind that's unique to me - but, ultimately, it seems to me that 'Captured' is about the triumph of love.

In a recent interview, you said: "It doesn't take much to make us beasts." Is that what you were exploring with Kenny?

Yeah. I think Kenny was a nice man, probably the nicest character I ever conceived... then turned into a beast. It's an abiding fascination of mine, that the difference between me and the most inhuman killer is one of degree rather than category. Most human evil is a function of circumstance. This is why I seldom leave the house.

Writers often talk about their characters "running away with the plot". Has any of your writing taken on a life of its own in this way?

That did happen to me once; my novel 'Holloway Falls' twisted in my hand like a cat and became entirely different to the book I'd set out to write. Since then, I've learned a great deal about the discipline of composing a novel - no more experiments in "letting it take its own shape" for me, thank you very much. But it's still necessary to trust one's subconscious, which does entail giving the characters a certain degree

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of freedom. There's an alchemical moment when they "come alive" and start talking of their own free will. That aspect of the process is still a mystery to me, and in some respects it's a little creepy - sometimes it feels more like you're inviting these people in, rather than making them up.

Does the grim stuff you write ever worry your wife or your kids?

My wife knows me better than anyone, and she understands where these things come from - that it's all a function of fear, not appetite. I write about what I'm scared others might do to me, not what I'd like to do to others. Sometimes she'll be baffled if I take too much glee in an especially hideous idea, especially if I burst out laughing when it pops into my head. But that's about as far as it goes. To my kids, I'm just Dad. They've got no real interest in the content of my books. I did sit down with them once to watch an action-packed episode of 'Spooks' that I'd written - the one where Adam Carter dies, I think, which involves lots of running around and things blowing up. I think I had their full attention for about fifteen minutes.

The writing style in 'Captured' is quite stylized - very detailed, yet very simple. How easy was it to tailor your writing to this accessible, 'everyman' style?

In the early years, I was promoted as a 'literary' novelist, a perception exacerbated by my two minutes on the Man Booker long list. Although that stuff was in some ways flattering to a younger man's vanity, it never really interested me. I always aspired to be a thriller writer. It's only in the last

two or three years that I feel sufficiently confident in my craft to describe myself that way. I always admired very precise writers - Patricia Highsmith, Raymond Carver, Graham Greene - and I worked hard for a long time to understand how that precision works and how it relates to the craft of storytelling. Much of my process consists of removing words, until only what's essential remains. I love doing this; it's my favourite part of the whole business. There's great satisfaction in unearthing the one detail that vivifies the scene in the reader's eye.

Plotwise, similarly, there's very little fat - four or five key characters, minimal twists and turns. Did you make a conscious decision to avoid an over-scrambled story arc?

There's very little fat, but there are many more twists in the story than you might remember. But yeah, I decided to dispense with inessential material, including sub-plots and discursive passages. It's an essentially cinematic mode of storytelling. It's a cruel process, because sod's law requires those sub-plots and discursive passages to contain one's 'best' writing. But like Elmore Leonard said: "If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it."

Your next TV project 'Luther' is due on our screens in 2010, starring Idris 'Stringer Bell' Elba. Can you tell us a bit about that, and your other future projects?

With 'Luther', we set out to make something unlike any crime show you've seen. I think we've succeeded - not least because Idris is a truly phenomenal screen presence. When you've witnessed him in action as 'Luther', you'll know what I mean. He plays a brilliant mind that isn't always in control of its passions - a man whose resolute belief in love leads him to some very dark places.

And whose hunger to see justice done leads him to act way beyond the limits of the law. Next comes more TV and some feature films (including one to be set in Bristol), but I'm not allowed to discuss any of it yet. And, of course, there's going to be another book. When the idea hit me, I burst out laughing... so, hopefully, it's going to be a good one.

'CAPTURED' WILL BE AVAILABLE IN ALL GOOD BOOKSHOPS FROM JAN 7, (SIMON & SCHUSTER, £12.99). FFI: SIMONANDSCHUSTER.CO.UK

