

The Interview

Neil Cross

Dirty crime and circular saws: **Mike White** talks to former Bristol resident and author of the hugely popular 'Luther' detective series.

I'm attracted by characters who've already got one foot over the edge. I suppose it's a taste thing; when a character has nothing to lose, their behaviour can be that much more unpredictable. It's fun for me, and hopefully the reader too.

The imagination can be as much a personal impediment as a professional asset. The best thing about it is I ended up doing this; I ended up with [bestselling thrillers] 'Burial' and 'Captured', and now 'Luther: The Calling'. The worst of it is that, whatever I'm doing and whoever I'm doing it with, I can't help but obsessively visualize the very worst thing

that could possibly happen. As I write, I've just returned to my hotel after visiting a theme park – and let me tell you, imagining every possible calamity, from E.Coli in the hotdogs to losing a child's grip in the crowd, all the way to a full-blown trapped-on a crashing roller-coaster scenario; that can get a bit tiring. And then of course, there's the drive home. And getting into a lift. At the same time, I do kind of cultivate it; not long ago I took my younger son (he's eight) to the local DIY superstore in order to look for a really interesting but readily available murder weapon. The sheer unfettered nature of a child's imagination, unhindered by fear – or indeed shame – can be really interesting. My son was, for instance, very taken with the disarticulating potential of a bench-top circular saw. (If only, he wished, it could be more portable.) We did get some funny looks, though.

When we first talked about the casting for 'Luther' all I knew was, we wanted someone pretty special. But step into the Tardis, go back a couple of years and throw a brick: chances are, it'll hit a British writer or producer who really, really wanted to cast Idris Elba in their drama. I loved him, but in that I was far from alone. I never considered Idris a serious possibility, because it would have smacked of hubris and I fear the wrath of the gods.

Idris is a star in the classic sense. You only have to look at his fans: they cross all barriers of age, sex, gender and ethnicity. They're unified only by their absolute adoration of him, and of John Luther. There's something very affecting about it. Yes, some people advertise that they'd very much like, if at all possible, to have sex with him. But at least as many

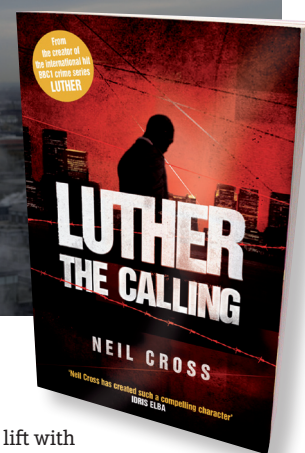
Neil Cross's 'Luther' as played by Idris Elba for the Beeb's monster TV hit



want to help him – to be his good and loyal friend. I absolutely love that. It gives me faith.

Have detective dramas got nastier lately? Maybe. But I doubt it. There are two broad sub-genres within crime fiction: the essentially bloodless conventions of Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, where ingenious eccentrics treat the solution to murder as an intellectual puzzle. And the crime thriller, where such intricate plotting takes second place to psychology – this tends to be much dirtier. At any given moment, one or the other of these sub-genres may be slightly in the ascendant, but only slightly; the nastiness has always counterbalanced the cerebral. In the late 19th century, lurid chapbooks – essentially crime and horror stories – competed for shelf space with Holmes and Watson's elegant cogitations. In the 1920s, hardboiled detective stories were dripping with sex, compulsive self-destruction and violence; this was precisely during the 'Golden Age' of Detective Fiction.

I keep a 'nightmare tally' of the number of people who've confessed that my work has kept them up all night. It's one of the greatest little pleasures of my life. Since 'Luther 2', I've also kept a list of people who've said they'll never again get



in a lift with a motorcycle courier; that they'll never again fill their tank after dark; that they now double check they've locked all the doors and windows before going to bed.

In the books we get to see what sent John Luther over the edge. And we get to understand why it sent him over the edge. And hopefully, the story is full of twists and surprises. And little passages that make you wince. Or maybe have nightmares. And lock your doors and windows.

I've worked on a number of feature films, mostly in Los Angeles. But there will be a Bristol movie: an adaptation of my novel 'Burial'. Bristol is never actually named as 'Burial's' setting, not least because my geography wasn't completely accurate. But it was Bristol, really. Bristol's a big part of what I am. We're keen to set the film there and in the surrounding countryside – which is bafflingly ill-served by British cinema. That's fine by me, though. It means there's more for us to use.

'LUTHER: THE CALLING' (SIMON & SCHUSTER, £14.99) IS OUT ON 4 AUG. FFI: WWW.NEIL-CROSS.COM



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