



Library podcast

Ian Rankin celebrates the 30 Years of Inspector Rebus with 'Rather Be the Devil'

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[00:00:38] Hello I'm Andrea a librarian here at the Seattle Public Library. Welcome to Central Library and thank you all for joining us this evening. It's our pleasure to welcome Ian Rankin to the library thanks first to our bookseller partner University Bookstore who has been selling both before and will also sell books after the event. Thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation to author series sponsor Gary Kunis and to media sponsor the Seattle Times tonight's program will consist of a short reading by Ian Rankin followed by a conversation with Mary Anne Gwinn and an audience Q and A. Mary Ann Gwinn is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who writes about books and authors for the Seattle Times book list and other publications. She's co-host of well read books and authors television show that airs nationally on PBS. She has read every single John Rebus book from knots and crosses to rather be the devil. Ian Rankin is the New York Times best selling author of the Inspector Rebus series. Rankin's work has been translated into 35 languages. He has won an Edgar Award a Gold Dagger for fiction. A diamond dagger for career excellence. The Chandler Fulbright Award and received an OBE for services to literature. This year Rankin celebrates 30 years of the Inspector Rebus series with his 21st book rather be the devil. John Rebus retired but never restful can't stop thinking about a cold case from 40 years earlier when the detective from the original case is found dead. Rebus is pulled into a current investigation full of power corruption and bitter rivalries.

[00:02:17] Please join me in welcoming Ian Rankin. Thank you very much.

[00:02:27] Thanks. Nice to see so many of you here tonight. And it's good to be back in Seattle which was the first American city I ever set foot in.

[00:02:39] Yeah.

[00:02:42] Back in 1992 when I was much younger than I am now.

[00:02:49] I'm gonna do that just. I don't do readings much because I'm not an actor.

[00:02:53] I find it difficult to do an array of voices and detective fiction is often driven by voices driven by dialogue. So I'm just gonna read a little bit a short extract from the very beginning.

[00:03:05] I can do voices I can do. Sean Connery for example. Oh. Yeah. Every every Scotsman and most Scots woman can do Sean Connery.

[00:03:14] But I might do that later on for your delight. So this is from the very beginning of the book so that I don't give away too much. Rebus placed his knife and fork on the empty plate then leaned back in his chair studying the other diners in the restaurant someone was murdered here you know he announced and they say romance is dead. Deborah Korn paused over her steak Rebus had been about to comment that she carved it with the same care she took when using her scalpel on a cadaver. But then the murder had popped into his head and he considered it the better conversational gambit sorry. He apologized taking a sip of red wine they sold beer here he'd seen waiters delivering it to a few of the tables but he was trying to cut down a new start. It was why they were dining out in the first place celebrating a week without cigarettes. Seven whole days. One hundred and sixty eight hours.

[00:04:16] She didn't need to know about the one he'd bagged from a smoker outside an office block three days back that made him feel queasy anyway. You can taste the food better can't you. She asked. No not for the first time. Alright. He acknowledged stifling a cough she seemed to have given up on a steak and was dubbing her most of their napkin. They were in the Galvin Brasserie Deluxe which was attached to the Caledonian hotel. Though these days it was really the Waldorf Astoria Caledonian. But those who'd grown up in Edinburgh knew as the Caledonian or the Cowley in the bar before dinner Rebus had reeled off a few stories. The railway station next door dismantled in the 1960s. The time Roy Rogers had steered his horse Trigger up the main staircase for a photographer Debra Korn had listened dutifully before telling him he could undo the top button of his shirt. He had been running a finger around inside of the collar trying to stretch the material a little you know these things he'd commented that cigarettes can add a few pounds of really he'd answered skipping up more peanuts from the bowl. No she had caught a waiter's eye and their plates were being removed. The offer of dessert menus was dismissed. We'll just have coffee decaf if you've got it do decafs.

[00:05:35] The waiter was looking at Rebus for guidance. Absolutely. Rebus confirmed on pushed a look of red hair away from one eye and smiled across the table. You're doing fine she said. Thanks Mom. Another smile. Go on and tell me about this murder. He reached for his glass but started coughing again. Just need to signaling towards the toilets. He pushed a chair back and got up rubbing his chest with his hand. Once inside the gents he made for a sink. Leaning over it hacking some of the gunk up from his lungs. There were the usual flecks of blood nothing to panic about. He'd been assured more coughing more mucus COPD. They called it chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. When told Debra Korn had formed her lips into a thin line not so surprising is it and the very next day she had brought him a glass specimen jar of indeterminate age its contents a section of the lung showing the bronchial tubes. Just so you know she'd said pointing out what had already been shown in a computer screen. She'd left the jar with him on loan or to keep it as long as you need it.

John he was rinsing the sink when he heard the door behind him open. Did you leave your inhaler at home.

[00:06:54] He turned towards her. She was leaning against the door one foot crossed over the other arms folded head cocked is nowhere safe. He muttered her pale blue eyes scanned the room. Nothing here. I haven't seen before. You feeling okay. Never better. You splashed water on his face and dubbed it with a towel. The next step is an exercise program. Starting tonight a smile broadened if you promise not to die on me. We're gonna finish our delicious caffeine free refreshments first though right. Plus you're gonna woo me with a story the murder you mean hot and dry upstairs in one of the bedrooms. A banker's wife who enjoyed the dalliance killed by her lover. That was one theory. She brushed invisible crumbs from the lapels of his jacket. Will it take long to tell the pants of a bridge. You want it. She considered for a moment the length of a taxi ride back to my flow or years that would just be the best bits. Then there was a throat clearing from the other side of the door. Another diner and sure of the protocol he muttered an apology as he squeezed past deciding on the safety of one of the stalls Rebus and Quan were smiling as they returned to their table where to decaffeinated coffees sat waiting.

[00:08:09] Thank you very much yes.

[00:08:23] Mike's working. Yes. I don't need one right.

[00:08:27] I've been told that before I don't need to know what you were doing in Seattle in nineteen ninety two in Seattle in nineteen ninety two.

[00:08:35] I was the Chandler Fulbright fellow. Oh yeah. Now this was a thing. They don't do anymore. I don't think they do anymore but it was a prize that was given one year to an American right to go to the UK and then the next year to British writer to come to the US for a minimum of six months. And it was the estate of Raymond Chandler. But the Fulbright Foundation were the adjudicators. I mean I arrived here. Well the reason we chose Seattle was because we had friends here and so we knew we could stay with them for a while and decompress and get to know them get to find out about the place why didn't realize was that the Fulbright foundation meantime would have fixed up for me an office at UDUB and I was supposed to be involved with the Justice program there and give lectures and stuff.

[00:09:23] By the time I found out we'd spent a few weeks in Seattle bought a VW bus and we were driving to L.A. so they never did get their series of lectures from Ian Rankin because I was too busy exploring the country. Their loss.

[00:09:39] Yeah. So this is the thirty years of Rebus tour yes. Yes. Exactly.

[00:09:47] That is a long time to spend with anybody.

[00:09:49] Yeah really. Tell me about it. Especially someone like John Rebus. You know he's not the easiest guy to be around. You know these.

[00:09:56] It's not easy to be inside his head looking out and I mean he was invented for one book and one book only. And the first draft of notes and crosses I killed him at the end. He shot and killed at the end of the first draft but for some reason I decided to bring him to life again. And you know that first novel was meant to be a literary novel.

[00:10:18] I didn't read crime fiction back then I wasn't a fan of mystery fiction. I'm the only mystery writer I know who wasn't a fan of the genre before they started writing it. I was doing literature. I was studying for a Ph.D. I was going to be a professor. And I want to update the theme the story of Jekyll and Hyde which to me is as a great Scottish novel. And I want to bring it back to Edinburgh because that novel is actually frustratingly set in London so I am I thought that Rebus was the Jekyll and Hyde character. And so he's supposed to be a suspect. You're supposed to think this guy who's having blackouts and wakes up in the morning unable to remember what he did the night before. Could be the killer. And he's got a locked room in his apartment that were never allowed to see inside. Nobody got it. Nobody got that was meant to be an update in the Jekyll and Hyde. And in my original notes it said you know the main the main character may be a cop.

[00:11:11] You know I know nothing about the police. I didn't read any. I didn't know what I was doing. Mary I had no idea what I was doing and I became an accidental crime writer only the reason I knew it was a crime. Was because I got a letter from the crime writers association in London saying no you've written a crime novel you want to join our association

[00:11:32] Here you are. And so here I am.

[00:11:34] But the thing was that as soon as I started reading crime fiction I was really taken by it. I mean I liked the sense of place. You know if you want to know about and if you find a quick liver any culture any city or country in the world and go to the crime fiction you'll get you know the geography you'll get the society. What the issues are in that society you'll get the politics you'll get the history you'll get the present day you'll get great places to go you'll get places you might want to avoid you'll get all of that from from the fiction. And so I like a sense of place I liked the roller coaster ride the strong narrative. And everything I thought I wanted to say about the world I thought I could contain very nicely in a crime novel because a detective you know has access to all areas the detective you know Rebus one minute can be talking to the politicians and the bureaucrats and the people who run the corporations and the next minute he can be in the projects talking to the dispossessed.

[00:12:31] Well yeah.

[00:12:31] And what you know what a detective can do that realistically. And apart from a journalist I can't think of anyone else any other character who allows you to look at all those different layers of society from top to bottom what is Rebus is backstory or Jesus too complicated.

[00:12:47] I don't remember it really. I mean I keep forgetting stuff. I mean it's you know again because it was meant to be a one off book. There's a ton of backstory in there that's convoluted in which then of course in future books you've got to remember is the back story.

[00:12:59] You know so he grew up in the same village as me in Fife, Scotland in the coal mining village approximately 10 years before I did. He's about ten years older than me when I started the series he was about 16 years older than me but I'm slowing his clock down.

[00:13:16] Slowly slowing his clock down a little bit.

[00:13:19] So when I first wrote about him he was 40 he'd left school at 15. Not many job opportunities for people at that time he left school without any qualifications so he joined the Army. He trained to be an SES which is like the Marines type stuff. He fell down and broke him. The training broke him. So you had a nervous breakdown later on recovered and joined the police. And when we first meet him you know he's been a cop for a decade or something. When we first meet him and he's got a busted marriage and he's got a kid he hardly ever sees. And you know that's like you want your cop to be a loner because you know you don't want him to be involved in this very exciting serial killer novel and suddenly say I'm sorry I've got two weeks vacation I need to take now or I've got to take my son to the dentist or I've got to take my wife out for dinner.

[00:14:10] You know it's Valentine's you wanted to be driven and focused.

[00:14:15] And so I decided he wouldn't have he wouldn't have these encumbrances. You have a constellation of really interesting characters that are around him and I wanted you to talk a bit about Swan And then about Malcolm Fox who I thought really brought up a lot of energy to the series when you put him in play.

[00:14:36] Ok. Well I mean yeah sure. Well yeah. Rebus you know having decided it was a series and having decided he would age more or less in real time I'd give myself a real problem. So eventually I got a phone call from a friend of mine who's a cop. And he says How old is Rebus. And I say oh 57 58. Why? You say yes. Yeah I know. He said he's got to retire at 60 he's got to retire at 60 I mean what I mean I thought the retirement age was 65. Turns out for cops in Scotland 55 for uniform 60 for crime really yeah. 55 and 60. So I thought Okay so I told my publisher the next because the final book. My wife said ok no you've got all this freedom you've got rid of Rebus. You can do any kind of book you want. What can you book. Do you want to write. I said I want to write about a cop in Edinburgh. And I'd seen a story in the newspaper that involved internal affairs and I thought well I've never really used them in the series but as you know I should have done because Rebus is the kind of cop they would have been interested in. And so I got to meet someone who worked in internal affairs and she was absolutely fascinating and it seemed like a really interesting set up because these were like spies.

[00:15:44] They had more power at their disposal than normal detectives do. And she you know she she got a sense from her that. If I was gonna write about these people internal affairs you couldn't

think you were getting Rebus light or Rebus 2.0 all because they were the antithesis of him. They were careful cautious team workers all the rest of it.

[00:16:07] So that's where Fox came from and the challenge was how do you make someone like that interesting cautious to use a little white bread as you know he is or isn't white bread teetotaler for one thing well he's an ok.

[00:16:17] He's like Rebus he's an alcoholic. Now this conversation and one of the books where he said you know he says I'm an alcoholic who gave up and you're an alcoholic he should have. And you know and but in the first book he thought okay. But then I thought I'm gonna do a few books and internal affairs and then I was told by someone who worked in internal affairs or you know you only go into internal affairs for four or five years what. So I'd invented yet another character with an inbuilt decrepitude you know. And so I thought Okay what happens after your five years in internal affairs or you go back into normal detective work surrounded by people who mistrust you or hate you.

[00:16:54] I thought well that's a really interesting set up in itself. So I've got the idea for a cold case novel. I thought ok there's a real unit in Edinburgh that deals with cold cases and it's staffed almost entirely by retired cops. I thought invent a new retired cop or bring Rebus back. So I brought Rebus back and I thought ok there's only one person that doesn't want Rebus back. And that's Malcolm Fox. So he became the antagonist of me the protagonist of his own series. He became the antagonist and then it just got interesting interchanges between them go interesting. Here's the thing although it's a series it feels to me like like a series of standalone books. So when I sit down and write a new book The relationships have changed the interrelationships between these characters have changed. Time has moved on the city of Edinburgh has changed politics has changed society you know economics has changed so. So when they restructured the police in Scotland a few years ago and built this brand new shiny facility called the Scottish Crime Campus. I got a tour of it and it's full of suits and yes men and people who always obey the rules and people who just want to get on. I thought that this is where Fox would end up. Malcolm Fox would end up here. So in a new book it made sense to me that that's where he would be right. And that then changes his relationship with Siobhan Clark because she's so pissed at him that he got the promotion she should have had so suddenly you've got a different dynamic from previous books and that keeps me that keeps the series fresh as an author it keeps me really on my toes.

[00:18:26] While another relationship that's changed throughout the books is between Rebus and big gear.

[00:18:32] Jack Cafferty. Yeah. Morris general Cafferty. Well Cafferty again you know there was never any rhyme or reason to any of this so it was just made up as I went along. I mean there was no shame. There was no sense. I'm gonna write five books 10 books 17 books whatever. And Cafferty was invented in book three because I needed to get Rebus to Glasgow to find the clue.

[00:18:54] I thought why is he in Glasgow. He's giving evidence in a court case. He's given evidence against a gangster at that time Glasgow had you know a culture of gangsters and gangs. The admiral

just didn't have Admiral wasn't big enough to have that. And so Caffrey it was envisioned as a Glasgow gangster and was based loosely on a series of real life Glasgow gangsters and there are two completely different backstories for Cafferty in the series depending on which book you read and one book. He was born and brought up in Glasgow and then I forgot that. And a few books later he's born number up in Edinburgh.

[00:19:31] That's the version I remember.

[00:19:32] Yeah. But that's just me being stupid and not going back and reading the books I've written. I mean the books are littered with errors and mistakes and procedure. We thought this guy was quite good but what can he suddenly think that he's just he's just an idiot who got lucky. And don't look down on luck because luck plays a huge part in becoming a successful author.

[00:19:54] It really does that and just that and just keeping on doing what you do and hoping that eventually readers come to the books because the earlier books were not at all successful. I want to ask you a couple of things about Edinburgh and throw some quotes back at you.

[00:20:10] At one point you said it's a city the size of a town that thinks like a village. What does that mean.

[00:20:15] Well it means what it says. I mean if I were T.S. Eliot I would say it means what it says. Somebody once asked T.S. Eliot what does this line mean in your poem and it just repeated it back to them.

[00:20:25] It means what it says No I mean it's okay. It mean like everybody knows everybody else.

[00:20:31] I mean it's a city of half a million people and it's hemmed in on three sides. This water to the north wall to the eastern hills to the south so it can't really expand. So it's pretty much contained in this in this small city the small geographic area. You can walk round in a day you can walk round the interest in parts of Edinburgh in a just maybe a day and a half say half a million. But it has all the amenities of a city. You know it's the centre of the law in Scotland it's a centre of politics in Scotland it's a centre of the banking institutions and the church and everything else. So it's got power. But yeah it sometimes feels like everybody knows everybody else. If you walk around the streets you keep seeing the same faces you go to the bar to keep seeing the same faces. So you know it's a hard place to keep a secret and yeah it's a city that thrives on secrets. It's never it has never had industry it's never really manufactured things. Glasgow used to manufacture things ships, cars you name it. Edinburgh is a city of of of secretive occupations private banking, insurance, the law you know these are people who are good at keeping secrets and for occupational and so it's easy to imagine it behind these thick Georgian stone walls. These two three feet thick walls and these thick net curtains that anything could be happening you know the landscape is very much on the surface it lays itself out to you when you arrived in Glasgow strangers begin talking to you straight away. It's very much surface whereas Edinburgh is all about what's beneath. And in fact if you talk to someone from Glasgow they will say that Edinburgh is all forecourt and nay knickers ok. So it's all on the surface it looks fine for

core it looks posh everything else but if you look underneath there's something disreputable about it no knickers no power.

[00:22:17] Well speaking of disreputable you've also called it a Jekyll and Hyde city.

[00:22:22] Yeah well I mean every book I've ever written has been basically Jekyll and Hyde rewritten. I mean well Jekyll and Hyde is this is a classic novel of good and evil and asks a very central question it's a question. Oh good crime fiction should ask which is why do we human beings keep doing terrible things to each other right. And it's a really easy question to ask. And it's a very complicated question to try and answer. But we but that's why we come to these books we're looking at these big moral questions what would we do in these situations or why do we get these kinds of crime. What is it about society. What is it about these cultures we have built that means we still get crime generation after generation in different cultures in peacetime and wartime. We get all these terrible crimes. And you know Jekyll and Hyde gives one example of that which is to do with chemistry the chemistry of your can change and where you are chemistry in your body or take in the ingestion of chemicals can change you. But that was based on a real life character I mean Jekyll and Hyde is partially based on a real life Edinburgh character called William Brody.

[00:23:28] Now if you go Edinburgh to visit if you can go Dick and Brody's Tavern which is up near the castle and on the outside is the story of Deacon Brody who was a gentleman by day a member of the establishment. But by night was a burglar who with his gang would break into your house hit you over the head and steal your valuables. He was a craftsman a woodworker a carpenter

[00:23:47] And he was hanged on a scaffold he had built but when Robert Louis Stevenson was a child he was quite sickly.

[00:23:55] They spent a lot of time in bed in his home and in Edinburgh and his nursemaid would tell him the story of the wardrobe in his bedroom which had been made by William Brody here. So she and you can if you've been a deacon Brody's tavern and you've seen this story walk a few yards up the hill towards the castle turn right into the writers museum a museum dedicated to Walter Scott. Robert Louis Stevenson and Robert Burns and in there they've got the wardrobe so Stevenson as a kid got the story of someone who was good and evil contained in the same body and that must have got hard wired so that later on he would come up with a story this guy who was good and evil and I was researching, when I was doing my PhD, I researched Muriel Spark who wrote The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Great. I mean a great novel about Edinburgh and just a great novel about good and evil. She's a very complex character. We're never sure if Jean Brodie is the hero or the villain of that story. She seems to be both in fact Jean Brodie says in that book she is descended from William Brodie so a reading of of that book for my PGD took me to the story of Deacon Brodie which then took me to Jekyll and Hyde and another book that was an influence on Jekyll and Hyde was a book called Confessions of a Justified Sinner Memoirs and confessions of a justified sinner by a guy called James Hogg James Hoke started life collecting border ballots for Sir Walter Scott. He wrote this one extraordinary novel in which a very zealous religious young man in 17th century Scotland meets a charismatic stranger who persuades some that because he is a member of God's elect and is going

to heaven he should carry out killings on Earth especially dispatching those who don't agree with his religion.

[00:25:38] That sounds quite modern. That starts to sound quite modern doesn't it.

[00:25:42] Someone who feels that they are okay to kill people don't agree with their religion because they're going to go to heaven if they do it. No you'll never. It's a really complicated book and you never shoot off the charming charismatic stranger is the devil or a devil. Is is a psychopath who has managed to to you know ensnare this young innocent or is a figment of the the main character's imagination. You know because he's a shape changer this guy seems to be what change shape you can do different voices and unlike any stuff that's a really extraordinary book about good and evil. Again one of the very first serial killer novels as well. So all of this stuff was swirling around in my head when I was trying to be a young writer and the result was a book about Edinburgh and the darker side of Edinburgh and the fact to Edinburgh still is a Jekyll and Hyde city. I see that back in the 80s. You know seemed very cultured very civilized full of monuments and museums and art and history. But I had the biggest HIV problem in Western Europe at the time the biggest heroin problem in Western Europe at the time. It had projects that were so so so badly in need of help. The charity Oxfam that their first work on British soil in Edinburgh before that they don't go to Africa but nobody was talking about it. Everyone was pretending this was fine it was fur coat nay knickers. So what to write about that.

[00:27:07] Well one of the things I really like about the rebus novels is the some of the things you're talking about the fact that they do address racism immigration cyber crime child abuse. Is there

[00:27:21] an arc of what Rebus has worked on over the years. Did he start out with pretty basic police procedural stuff but things have gotten more complicated as his story has progressed.

[00:27:33] I think the stories did start to get more. I think the early Rebus novels were an apprenticeship. I was starting to I was find I was testing the war counting count you do in the crime novel without structure that very tight structure of crime investigation resolution what can and can't you do and how far can you push it. So the first and getting to know Rebus getting to know the character of Rebus and what can I do with him. And so the early books were an apprenticeship up until black and blue which is a much bigger book thematically in terms of plot and just longer much longer novel. And that was the first really successful book to my mind for someone really felt. Yeah. I'm seeing what I want to say no and I've got confidence that I can do this and want to go dagger to war which was a real fillip to me and it meant that suddenly my publisher was taking me seriously and said ok. Ian does know what he's talking about and people start to buy the books in numbers which meant I thought okay I can make as a full time writer because up until then it had been very I've been writing two novels a year to try and make enough money to live on. So that was that was a really important book for me. In the early days

[00:28:36] you know I thought of each book as a piece of the jigsaw and the jigsaw puzzle once complete would be a story of Edinburgh and Scotland at the end of the twentieth and beginning in the

21st century. So social historian from the future could get a sense of this country its politics its economics its society from the series of books and then I use that as a microcosm for Scotland as a whole.

[00:28:58] And then I found out that these things you're talking about were happening all over the world. You would write you might think that immigration policy or people trafficking is something only happens in one place but it's happening everywhere. You know financial crises are not just happening in one country they're happening everywhere when they happen. And so people all over the world start to go yeah we have these issues as well or we have these problems as well. So these books that were particularly to me to my mind quite Scottish suddenly had something else going for them right.

[00:29:29] That's probably one reason people like them so much, possibly, I don't know.

[00:29:33] I mean also Rebus right. I mean people like them because of Rebus. I mean he's an extraordinary character and I was I'm just so happy that he's hung around.

[00:29:40] So how do you stay engaged with him I mean at some point you sit down and you start the next book and you say well done here we are again really it's kind of like that.

[00:29:49] No it's actually a bit more tentative than the what happens is I get an idea for a theme I want to explore or something or maybe a big question I've got about the world. And then I just try and find the plot that allows me to explore that theme. Usually there's something like this newspaper clippings the stories I've been told anecdotes I've been told that police retirement parties all sorts of stuff and I will just sit down one day and go through all my corny ideas only ideas for stories and things and see what I've got. What themes are emerging from these. And then I find the plot that will allow me a plot that allows me to investigate that. And then I think okay which character characters are the best people to tell the story. And it is mostly it's Rebus but it ain't always read this ain't necessarily Rebus. But if it is then okay I start the book and then I say okay is there room for Siobhan Clark is a room for Malcolm Fox I need Cafferty. Who else do I need to tell the story. So it works quite organically. It works quite organically. And you know this there's definitely scope for a Siobhan Clark novel right with her telling the story I just haven't found it yet. I've not found the story. That's her story yet but does it mean to say it won't happen in the future so do the cops in Edinburgh help you help. The cops in Edinburgh. Well the very first. I mean it's an often told tale but I so I apologize if you've heard that. I'll keep it short. The first you know PhD student and I went to the police I wrote to the chief of police when I first read this and said can you help me. And I got sent to a police station to talk to these two detectives which was great but they said what's the plot of your book. And I said I gave him the plot of knots and crosses not realize and it was almost identical to a case they were working on

[00:31:31] So I became a suspect in a missing persons inquiry which became a murder inquiry with seven victims.

[00:31:42] And so I learned a valuable lesson which is don't do any research don't go near the police you know. And so for years I didn't go to the police and then a cop who was a fan of the books was getting a book signed one day and he said you make quite a few mistakes. So he became a friend of mine and he would sneak into police stations he would sneak up murder case notes he would introduce me to pathologists and and lawyers. And so the books did start to get more realistic as a result. And you know I do get invited along to a lot of police retirement parties and I keep hearing anecdotes I think they all think I've got prostate problems because every couple of minutes I'm going off to the bathroom to tape

[00:32:18] The stories I've just been told. So I don't forget them you know.

[00:32:22] So I'm typing in these stories and combating them wait what was that and way back way back. What was that one again. I've just got to go to the bathroom sorry.

[00:32:30] So a recent book sense of the Shadow Bible which is a rebus is mentoring. When I was a young more idealistic detective I and all the detectives around him some of the stuff I mentioned happening back then is stuff that actually did happen. The problem is that fiction unlike the real world has to be realistic. It has to be credible and we all know both sides of the pond at the moment. We are not living in the most credible times you know. And fiction to be credible. So sometimes I sometimes I hear stories from cops that I think I can't use that nobody would believe it. And I'm going to give you a coda to this story.

[00:33:05] Me being a suspect in a murder inquiry they call caught the guy they caught the guy because somebody was working in their garden their yard and they heard the can in noise and it was a weird noise and they didn't know what it was and he went onto the sidewalk and he saw a van drive away and they got that license plate.

[00:33:23] So they phoned into the police and the police stopped the van on the outskirts of the town and said look we had a report something can be weird can we take a look in the back of your van. Sure. They took the driver took them run to the back of the van opened up and there was gonna be the next victim alive a deer wrapped up in a carpet. And the cop who stopped him was the father of the kid wrapped up in the car.

[00:33:46] Oh my God. Really. Yeah.

[00:33:49] And I was reminded of that recently because someone wrote a book a cop in Edinburgh wrote a book about another case and he mentioned that in passing and I'd forgotten that because it is so extraordinary you could put that in a book. You think that's a coincidence too far I'm sorry. But my writing career has been filled with coincidences you know huge the name Rebus which is a picture puzzle. That's why I called him that smart art student. Semiotics takes deconstruction. Call him Professor puzzle. You know basically Rebus you know I spent years explaining not name to people that it's a picture puzzle and then I haven't lived outside Edinburgh for 10 years we moved back and a bookseller said to me oh I drink in this pub on a Friday night come and have a drink. When any

interest me a few of his friends one was an ex cop. One was a guy called Jo Rebus. Wow! I didn't know it was a real name he said Yeah I'm in the telephone directory.

[00:34:37] I thought you just got the telephone directory.

[00:34:41] And he said it's a Polish name which is why in a lot of the books you get told that Rebus comes from Polish stock. I didn't know it until I met Joe. So we get the telephone directory from behind the bar and Rebus J for Joe. And he lives in Rankin drive. No. I mean not named after me but the three streets in Edinburgh. I don't know who the Rankin is they're named after Rankin road Rankin Avenue Rankin drive. And the only guy called Rebus in Edinburgh lives in Rankin drive

[00:35:11] Was meant to be where the X Files music started playing. I said I need a drink. He said you're in the right place pal said. So if I'm in Edinburgh on a Friday night I go for a drink which will Rebus

[00:35:22] Well I have one more question and I'm sure your fans have have a few things I want to ask. I

[00:35:28] Always wonder this after I get to the end of a rebus novel.

[00:35:31] This is this is a description you wrote of Rebus at one point a flawed pessimistic multilayered character a troubled brooding soul and a cynical loner.

[00:35:42] You can find no solace in faith who's obsessed with the work and happiest propping up the bar of his favourite pub The Oxford bar.

[00:35:49] A glass of IPA in his hand except for the IPA. I am I am not this person. I'm a law abiding person.

[00:35:59] I really try to maintain a sunny outlook on life but I love this guy and millions of your readers love him too.

[00:36:09] So why is that. What does that chemistry.

[00:36:12] I find that really difficult to answer. I mean I've thought and thought and thought about it. I think this is a complex character. I think fans make the pilgrimage to the Oxford bar from all over the world. And when you go there and see me they're sadly disappointed. Because I'm not as interesting as him. I thought of his back story. I'm not as dangerous as him I'm not as dark as him. I'm not as compelling as him. I'm not as complex and damaged as him. I think it's all these things. You know some people just is a guy you want to you want to hang out with a maverick. The person doesn't obey the rules. The person has always got a smart comeback line. You know the fun since he retired. The fun for me. It's a challenge but I do like a challenge again it keeps me on my toes is how do I get men to police stations when he's no longer carrying a badge. How how does in Vegas is when police

investigations when it's no longer a cop they he finds a way to do it engaging and charming and he is on this side of the angels.

[00:37:07] He's you know. Chief of Police in Edinburgh years ago reviewed one of the books in a newspaper and he said I wish I had one. There's room for one like Rebus in every police force. One maverick one free thinker somebody who's thinking outside the box somebody just goes off. He's like a Scottie dog, a terrier once he gets it gets that bone of a case between his teeth. He ain't letting it go. He ain't letting it go until he gets some kind of satisfaction or resolution. And you know he's no haunted any since he retired is haunted by all the cases he worked on where there was no satisfactory conclusion. Which means I do have the basis for future books if I need them. Yeah but you know is he. But if I met him in a pub we wouldn't get along. He would see me as being a wishy washy liberal. He's never to do a hard day's manual work and his life has been suckled by the state from birth. Free education free healthcare free this free that.

[00:38:01] I know he just makes up stories he tells lies for a living. I know it's a case of arrested development.

[00:38:08] I mean all authors owe novelists are just kids who refuse to stop playing. He refuse to stop playing with their imaginary friends. You know we all as children we all had this extraordinary act of fantasy life. That's Cray in our life where we had we had role playing games we told stories some things we wrote them down we wrote poetry we tried to do stories we drew pictures we played with our toys and we could go universities we could go universes and imagine how that would be how that would work and writers just go. I give up.

[00:38:40] Why would you. Keeps you young. It keeps you childlike and at the same time you have the power of life and death over your characters you are God. And that's therapeutic because in real life you cannot control the way things are going you know and you don't always get satisfactory endings to the things that are happening around you. But in fiction you can structure it in such a way that is pleasing to you as a shape and pleasing to readers as a shape but it's still taken on very challenging material. So it's lovely it's a lovely mix of the naive and the sophisticated. And why would you want to do anything else.

[00:39:14] You think of a reason you're making things up. Yeah. So let's open it to questions. Would you like me to appoint you. Yeah. He's got a question yes.

[00:39:29] Ok. Wait what. I was so so engrossed in Rebus. Why did I come up with these other thriller books. Well as I've pointed out I wasn't making much money from the Rebus books and I was even write two books a year. No publisher at that time wanted to read Rebus books a year. They were having enough trouble selling one Rebus book a year. So I thought ok I've got to do a thriller. I didn't want people to read them thinking they were getting a Rebus book. So I invented Jack Harvey my alter ego Jack being son's name Harvey being my wife's surname. And I thought ok thrillers are supposed be international in scope. The crime novel is usually quite focused in place a sense of place. But the thriller International Thriller can range far and wide. And yeah I used to Pacific

Northwest a couple of times because I actually in one of the Rebus books because you know we had friends here would visit. There was about the states when you really well before it did all that. So I did write a thriller called West Wind which is almost impossible to find because I've never allowed it to be reprinted because it was.

[00:40:25] And it was partly set in the states although I'd never been here and I was living in Tottenham in England at the time and all I did was get the Rand McNally road atlas which is why not book people take very intricate road journeys and their cars. Turned off I five and went then you know and it's all taken from a Ron McNally road out. So I've never been in the states dreadful book dreadful book. But yeah. And one of the rebus stuff was maybe dead souls. There's a killer who serve time and comes but served time in Walla Walla. But he met someone who knew someone who'd worked in Walla Walla State Pen Walla Walla Washington. Rough place. Yeah. Yeah. And so I had this killer who was a true story of a killer who'd served time in Australia and then been sent back to being sent back to Scotland. And I was based not a little bit but decided Walla Walla was a much because I know this part of the world better than Australia.

[00:41:20] Everybody hear the question.

[00:41:22] Yeah. Rebus ever regret anything. Yeah. Has he got any regrets. I guess he has.

[00:41:28] I mean for example in Dead Souls you know a paedophile has moved back into the communities without anybody knowing it.

[00:41:37] And Rebus out some to the community and a guy ends up dead and Rebus goes oh my God you can if he was culpable I think he does carry a lot of weight around with them he carries around the weight of all the cases he never felt that he was satisfactorily involved and or they got a proper conclusion sometimes he gets the right person for the wrong reasons or the wrong person for the right reasons and Caffrey in their relationship with Caffrey you're never very sure if he's ever gonna manage to put Caffrey away or does he really want to put Caffrey away.

[00:42:05] Yes. I'm never sure if those guys are gonna end up best friends sharing a room in the old folks home running around in their electric wheelchairs investigating the case of the missing soft boiled egg or if they're going to kill each other. You know both are absolutely entirely possible to me.

[00:42:22] But I think I mean yeah I think I entirely agree this is quite a religious individual who goes to church a lot it goes to different churches goes to different branches of religion he's looking for big answers to big questions as well as looking for the answers to questions as a as a detective. And I think there's quite a lot of guilt hanging over him he thinks he's been a terrible father. He was a crap husband see all that stuff he carries around with him as well and he focuses on the job. He doesn't think too much about that stuff which is why even when he retired he's got to keep active. Otherwise you're just gonna really sink into himself and sit there in the Oxford bar getting more and more sullen and morose and depressed.

[00:43:01] I want to impute that I have into the TV and the two actors who played him on TV none literally none.

[00:43:08] I mean that was my own choice. Originally when when Rebus was bought for television it was an English actor who want to played the role. He was a guy who was on a soap opera called EastEnders and when it first read this novel was published he was gonna buy the rights he was gonna bring the story to London and have Rebus be a Londoner. That all fell through thank God from my agent mysteriously disappeared. True story. And then the BBC picked it up and they were gonna give it to Robbie Coltrane, the actor who played Hagrid and stuff and that fell through. And then eventually John Hannah picked it up and he was young and quite good looking and you know the TV company said ok if you play him then we'll make it. So he didn't really want to do. I don't think he did it. But in the meantime was cold and a few writers I knew his work had been televised and said Should I get involved should I walk away. They said well you know it will change the way you write about your character. Well I don't want that to happen so I never saw a script never tried to write a script never watched it I've never watched an episode of Rebus never because I didn't want actors voices mannerisms faces and fear and what was already in my head and John Hannah went to Hollywood and Ken stock came on board to play Rebus.

[00:44:26] And what they did was take it down from two hours per story to one hour. No one hour on TV with ads is for five minutes. So you the four a five minute novel. They were trying to do a novel in four or five minutes and it just fell apart. They would keep the title of the book but change the story to try and fit the format. And so fans weren't happy. So I was unhappy. So I got the rights back. And I said no you can't make it anymore until you do three six eight 10 hours. Her book. So we're in negotiations again. Ken Stott still very keen to play Rebus as far as I know but we're in negotiations to try and get some I want some of that Scandinavian screen time

[00:45:06] Even if they have to do it in Swedish with subtitles.

[00:45:08] I want so I want I want some of that Borgen time.

[00:45:12] Some of that the killing time you know 8 hours 10 hours 20 hours to tell one story that's what I'm after.

[00:45:17] Yes.

[00:45:19] Do I hold the game of golf and ill regards. Yeah I do too. Well I still hold no regard. I just I'm the worst golfer in the world. I you know I tried to learn when I was a kid and I was hopeless.

[00:45:31] And then when I became a father I was my son ever the one sport he was interested in. And we went for golf lessons and after 10 lessons with a professional I was worse than I was.

[00:45:42] Look at me look at me. Tee off and we'd go for a 10 yards horizontally and then go for a right angle along the ground and you go how can you be doing that.

[00:45:53] You just couldn't work.

[00:45:55] And so I'm fine at putting I'm a good putting and I do like putting when I was a kid. You still love putting green and just do you know nine holes are putting it near us an editor as a pitch and part of course Grunsfeld links and I've been known to give it a go but I'm not I'm getting worse not better with age. So yeah. So that's why Rebus has an antipathy for golf like me. No I'm no good at any sports in any sports. I was never sporty writers usually aren't very sporty where they can where be shines shy. Kids who sat in their bedrooms listened to Pink Floyd. Somebody at the front who was at the front sir okay. Thanks. Tell me about the music in the books. Well like most crime writers I'm a frustrated rock star. ok. I'd much rather be an successful band than be a writer. And I tried to when I was seven. I mean when I was 12 I invented the band called The amoebas who existed only on paper and in my head and I would tour. I would get the Atlas out and do their tours for them. I would script TV shows that they were in. I would have a top 10 every week which meant invent nine other bands in the past. Now you know other personnel. So the lead singer of the members was Ian Kaput you know out of you know I used to design their album sleeves. I would and I would write the lyrics. And I was doing what all kids do is getting to create an alternative universe then 17-18 I joined a punk band as a singer didn't last long. When Rebus came along I decided how do you delineate character a useful way delineate characters through your your choices of hobbies or whatever.

[00:47:25] And I thought ok well you can tell quite a lot if you're new to the series it's book number 21. You've not read the first 20. You open it up and revisit listening to John Martin the Rolling Stones The Kinks Rory Gallaher Van Morrison Leonard Cohen you go. ok. I'm getting a sense of this guy straight away. He's not a party animal. He's a bit of a loner is introspective. He was born in a certain period of history and he's really a blue collar guy. He prefers the stones to the Beatles. He probably thought of himself as a bit of a maverick at school a rebel at school. So you get a sense of the guy straight away from his music and it keeps it vicariously it keeps me close to the music scene. And so I started using the titles of songs and albums and in the series as well did because I was doing it so much musicians became fans of the books. So eventually I did get close to them. And there's a guy called Jackie Leven who was a huge fan of the books and didn't know that but Rebus was a fan of his music so we got together and eventually made an album together and we toured it. Van Morrison who found out I was a fan and Rebus because he knew Rebus was a fan of his music got in touch and said what a write in introduction to his collected lyrics which I did and haven't done. Then said Hey you come on stage and interview me. So I've done that five times now and if you in Van Morrison face to face for half an hour on stage. Nerve wracking but great.

[00:48:44] I've got to be all the Rolling Stones because you know I've just been I mean come on us is close to being a successful rock band you can get without having to do all the hard work.

[00:48:56] Yes. Madam. What I'm doing now I'm doing it.

[00:49:01] I'm a professional. Come on. Yeah. What was it like. What was it like to get an OBE.

[00:49:05] I was kind of funny I was away on tour and I came back. There'll be ease there. I'd be an officer of the British Empire it's an award that the Queen gives you. There's a whole bunch of them again Elton John is he not. No he certainly isn't going to be certainly. He's well he's above me and I've got to kneel in front of him and you know Fritz

[00:49:25] Yeah. Don't go there. That's you. That's not me that's you. Bad Seattle audience bad Seattle audience.

[00:49:36] No. Yeah. I was way too and I got back my wife said it was a bunch of mail for you upstairs. One of them I've put on top is hilarious. Do you see it. There was this letter saying if you were offered an OBE for services to literature would you accept it. Because you're not allowed to turn them down.

[00:49:49] So if you were offered it would you accept it. Very carefully worded and I came down and my wife said Well I went Yeah. An important thing for me was it said services to literature. It wasn't services to popular fiction that people will read on a train journey or a plane journey and toss away. It was it was seen crime fiction as far as the queen was concerned. Was literature so. Yes definitely. So I don't actually yeah I fell for that I would I would take it said great there's gonna be a ceremony at Buckingham Palace on the 5th in November. Oh I can't. I said I can't go on tour in Australia I can't go. Well there's one you wait six months or this said you can elect to get your will be in Edinburgh. Okay I'll do it in Edinburgh. So then you get the Queen's representative who's like the Lord Mayor of Edinburgh present you with it. Now if you go to London to Buckingham Palace to get one of these things you take a maximum of two guests with you and it's no photography. All right I got a phone call from the City Chambers in Edinburgh and he said Ian we've never done this before. This will be thing we've never presented before.

[00:50:48] How many people do you bring with you. I said Well can I bring the whole family. Yeah of course we'll have some hot food we'll learn some food for you. So I went along and we had you know my son got to where the mayors chain of office never turn and with with a great time at Curry and all. And then and then the Lord Provost the mayor of Edinburgh said right let's go for a pint and we jumped in a taxi we went to the Oxford bar and any bought me a pint with the best will in the world the queen would not have taken me. For a pint. And if she had done, she wouldn't have any money or

[00:51:24] Borrow ten from you Ian, you got any ideas. Yeah yeah. Look at the note. Look at the note

[00:51:33] Get in car the of the Queen. Sarah. Well you know what Brexit is difficult because the follow is that we don't know what it means yet we still don't know what it means it's a very difficult time if you if you write about it no for a book to be published next year by the time we get there everything have changed.

[00:51:48] I mean it's still the tiny tiny tiny possibility won't happen. A tiny possibility it won't happen. And if it does happen we don't exactly know what it means. I mean we could have a hard border

between Northern Ireland and Ireland which would be disastrous for the Northern Ireland peace process.

[00:52:02] You know border guards and customs guards and everything so that could end up with a canny Irish situation blown up again Yeah like a wall with Mexico or indeed a wall with Canada but we've kind of just built one right now.

[00:52:16] Yeah. So the thing about politics is it can age the story very quickly. I mean I wrote about the G8 when the G8 came to Scotland because it was just a fascinating time to be in Scotland but not books age very quickly people don't remember the G8 been there and don't remember President Bush falling off his bicycle or 77 happened that week in London stuff so it makes it turns into historical novels sometimes. So yeah I mean I try and use politics in the books but sparingly or only if it's needed who don't like to read I like to read lots of lots of crime writers. In fact one of the first Kramer is ever read was was a Seattle based Seattle Washington state based that was Earl Emerson

[00:52:51] Yeah. And I mean when we first came here in 92. I don't know how I got an introduction to him but I did. And and he was great.

[00:53:00] He would take us out for drinks and meals introduce me to a few other writers who were under a Ann was one of them. And Steven Greenleaf was another. So I was a huge fan and my wife as well a huge fan of various books and I like to American model I like to carry the gritty urban noir so writers like Lawrence Block with his much other novels. James Ellroy I love Sara Paretsky's books. oh bunch of them and people like Michael Connolly whose character Harry Bosch has had a very similar trajectory in life to Rebus. Michael and I never sit and talk about it but suddenly we oh your guys your time. Mike as retired. Oh you guys back in my guys back in you guys cold cases my guys cold cases your guy what Vietnam. My guy was in Northern Ireland you know and it's just like oh and you know Bosch and Rebus again almost you know similar length a name and it's just a lot of connection between them. So I've always been a big fan of his books but around the world now there's some great stuff happening in Northern Ireland as an amazing writer called Adrian McGinty who lives in Australia but sets his books in Northern Ireland during the Troubles and he's got a Catholic cop who would've been very rare at that time. So you get the politics is in there and the religion is in there from the get go. Adrian McGinty's six or seven books with his character Sean I forget the surname are terrific. And every time you know I've said it but if you know about any culture in the world the crime fiction got some great stuff coming out of India I just know some great stuff coming out of Eastern Europe of course Scandinavia we're wondering where's the next big thing going to come from you know where's the next big voice going to come from. Could be France. There's a lot of good French crime writers but not many them translated at the moment. So who knows it's time for one or two more modern

[00:54:42] Oh. Have you seen that. Oh it wasn't a last week it was it was the rebus comeback book every was stunning of the man's grave. A TV documentary a BBC documentary crew.

[00:54:52] You didn't follow me around but they gave me a camera and said just film yourself right and your next book and then they would come and interview me from time to time and I went to festivals they would follow me to festivals and we did this one hour documentary how I write a book basically. Yeah it's pretty interesting. It's an interesting process. Lee Child is taken at one stage further. There's a book called Richard Said Nothing which is a book in which an academic sits and watches him write a book. So an academic actually physically sat in the room which I couldn't do certain urban watch Lee Child right is like a couple of books ago now and then they discuss the process and the guy wrote the book. It was fun. A lot of fun. I mean I would just switch the camera on at the end of a days right and say well it's been a hard day today I've been doing research or I've been know got stuck and I went for a walk and I made you know the phone would ring and interrupt me as I'm talking to the cameras I'd go off and swear in the phone. It's yet another automated caller try to sell me something. They kept up their end. I can't believe it. And they interviewed my dad early interviewed my wife about what it's like to live with her.

[00:55:58] That's a whole other documentary. What it's like to live with a writer. It was a fascinating thing to do and I'm glad I did it and a lot of writers got in touch afterwards and said oh my God it's not just us who have the page 56 problem in a crime novel novel the first 56 pages write themselves murder the team come get the autopsy you find out who the deceased is you look at their family and workmates and everyone check the CCTV footage over 56 pages and you go OK. What no so you can you hope by then you've got some stuff happening that takes us to the next page will take one more sorry. How much how much work put into character before I start writing about them. Not much that I can. It's an organic process. And so the more you write about them the more you get to know them and you know what they would do in a certain situation. I mean someone and you know I'm finding out more about them as I write about them and because they are holding back information from me. I keep writing about them to find out like Rebus if I got to the heart of his character the very scent at the very core of his being as an individual I could stop a thing but every new book I find oh there's something else I didn't know about you and you're telling me this book and the same goes for Siobhan Clark and her relationship with Fox and Fox his relationship with Rebus and his relationship with Cafferty.

[00:57:10] I think the past couple of books specifically have been books about mortality so specifically about Rebus and Caffrey two men of a certain age who are looking around amused and bewildered at the way the world is changing and wondering if they have any role left to play any useful role left to play that like two old heavyweight boxers who refused to leave the ring even though they are surrounded by younger or brighter sharper people and they're gone. What does the world mean of any role play. Do I play a useful part in this world. And the previous book even Dogs in the Wild ended with Cafferty walking away from Rebus holding up a finger to say I've got one last good fight left in me and this book segways from that. And this is a story of that last good fight someone interviewed me yesterday in San Francisco and he said it seems like Caffrey has been playing a very long game.

[00:58:01] I said Yeah but I didn't know that until I wrote the book. You know he ought to wait for him to tell me that the same goes for other characters you know how does Fox feel about getting a

promotion and suddenly is not admired anymore. How do you feel about the fact that has put distance between him and Siobhan Clark not just geographically but in sense their relationship. How does she feel about that. How does she feel about Rebus having retired but still interfering in her job. And how does Rebus feel about Cafferty and you know it's all these things all these questions are bubbling away and the story tells me what I'm going to do with them this time. And know there doesn't seem to be a sense of an ending. You know every time I write a book I think I've not quite finished with you yet. There's more stories to be told and because you will have moved on and the time between the books when I come to you I've got to be sharp and I've gotta be on my toes because you're going to surprise me yet again. You can not say these characters keep surprising me and that's why I keep writing about them and that's what keeps the series fresh.

[00:59:00] I'll go to a store to try and someday was gonna ask me about translation yeah for what not. And you know the translation is an art form and I have problems of translation between English and English right. So for example in the States you change the title of flesh market close real street and add more to flesh market alley because my publisher said American readers won't know what a close is. I mean come on readers are clever people and also they want these cultural nuances the company's books for the cultural nuances and you know you which sometimes sidewalk pavement becomes sidewalk. Even if readers are saying it just wouldn't happen. The boot of the car becomes the trunk of the car. He can't wake up in the morning with a fag in his mouth. I mean all these cultural nuances are no I mean you can't use a rubber to find his writing on paper with a pencil and all these differences you know which make Scotland that can be spent or make the U.K. different from straight from Australia from America and sometimes try and get ironed out by the publisher because they're afraid of losing a few sales. But my favorite story recently was one of the books was translated into French now in French if they don't understand the reference they put a footnote at the bottom of the page. And so the line was and I forget which book it was but it is one of the really recent ones. I think it's Rebus but it might not be that character is saying I get the feeling we're not in Kansas anymore Toto. Now I would have thought that was quite a famous line.

[01:00:18] Even to the French. All right. They kept it in an English they kept in English a little footnote Oh footnote window at the bottom of the page and it said in French. This is a reference to the two American AOR bands Kansas and Toto

[01:00:39] Which makes no sense whatsoever in any context.

[01:00:44] So you're at the mercy of your translator whenever these books are translated There is an art form and I just wish there were better paid and more time to do the job because it isn't well-paid and often the time constraints and you've just got to take a guess at what you mean. And let's just talk to Rebus would never listen to Toto and Kansas.

[01:01:03] Let me put that on the record and neither would I. Neither would I. Thanks very much.

[01:01:12] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

