

INTERVIEW



Photograph by Jerry Bauer

The mischief maker

Cathy Levy meets Wimbledon-based best-selling author, Philip Kerr

There are few boundaries within the world of Philip Kerr. Subjects ordinarily cast as mundane, in the hands of this best-selling novelist, become transformed into metaphorical time-bombs, runaway trains, forces beyond restraint except, here, the aim is not detonation, but explosion, eruption and impact. Philip Kerr's novels stretch the realms of the imagination, create

inconceivable, yet thoroughly believable worlds and challenge the reader to look far beyond their own experiences and beliefs. Even his characters agree; "‘Sometimes,’ said Dallas, ‘it’s hard to know where reality ends and where it begins.’" (*The Second Angel*)

Hollywood already loves the man - a bunch of his novels has been swiped up in a flurry of hypnotic noughts, making

this softly-spoken, mild mannered man a rather wealthy one. For me, it was *Gridiron*, a rip-roaring, page-turning thriller about a computerised building with a murderous and terrifying mind of its own, that first drew my attention to the author. Working Title, the film company behind *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, must have felt the same, purchasing the film rights for a tidy sum. The gates now truly

opened, there soon followed Tom Cruise, top Hollywood producer Jerry Bruckheimer, Robert de Niro and Paramount, who all independently acquired rights to *A Five Year Plan*, *Esau*, Kerr's own adapted screenplay of *Moby Dick*, his earlier novel *A Philosophical Investigation* as well as his latest, *The Second Angel*.

And all this, these strange and fantastical worlds, you may be surprised to learn, are created from a stylishly furnished office in leafy, picturesque Wimbledon Village, where each morning Kerr arrives, unharried, having made a rather pleasant journey – from the house next door. A fortunate arrangement, when the house came up for sale, Kerr jumped. Now converted for their own requirements, he shares it with his wife, author Jane Thynne. He has the basement and she the top floor (“it’s like Warhol’s factory”). Next door, family life resumes again, with their two young sons, aged six and three.

Books are quite a feature in the author’s spacious office, along with art, as signified by a most striking painting taking precedence on the back wall. “I do a lot of reading and thinking,” he tells me. If you’re familiar with Kerr’s novels, you’ll be aware of how intensely he delves into subjects; architecture, evolution, cosmology, quantum physics. His stories are not just the tales of murder, espionage and intrigue – they are all carefully encased within specific parameters, worlds which we must enter wholly or not at all. Sometimes it’s hard-going, there’s a lot of science, but don’t be blinded, it’s worth the work.

Remarkably, Kerr says he does not believe in over-researching. “The best research technique I’ve found is to know a little but not too much. So you still have gaps to fill in and these are usually the bits your imagination can handle. Then the trick is to hide the join,” he explains, a little modestly I feel.

In his latest novel, *The Second Angel*, the join is seamless and utterly convincing. It’s 2069, and Mankind is on the verge of extinction at the hands of a deadly human Parvo Virus which has infected 80% of the population. It kills within ten to fifteen years with the only cure being a course of drugs and a complete transfusion of blood. But blood is not cheap and at a cost of \$1.84 million per one litre of healthy human blood, people will kill to get their hands on it.

This is challenging stuff, covering some seriously mind-blowing concepts. “I try to make each novel more challenging than the last, not necessarily for the reader, but for me. This one was certainly

the most challenging, scientifically.”

There is indeed much to muse over, regarding the bigger picture – of life, the universe and our part within it. “I’m quite interested in cosmology and the whole idea of God. I’m not a practising Christian, although I was for a long time, as a young boy. I was brought up in a fairly religious household.”

The bizarre, the fantastical and sometimes the plain grim, seem to captivate the author. “I do have some fairly morbid tastes, it’s true. My explanation for it is that’s what an enquiring mind is, you have a curiosity and sometimes that overflows!” he laughs.

However, he also has another explanation. “I’m possibly a frustrated criminal. I’ve just had the benefit of a very good education which enables me to channel my anti-social, socio-pathic tendencies into writing fiction. I like that ambiguity, it’s what makes life more interesting.”

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Being interesting for Philip Kerr also means not being labelled. “People are forever wanting to stick you in a hole. I like to take myself out of that hole and almost perversely crawl away and find myself another hole to go in for a while. Don’t assume I’m this person, I can be that person too.”

It’s a sensitive issue, he tells me, having started out as a crime writer without ever really seeing himself as such. “Crime writing is a cosy world, very parish pump where you join the Crime Writers Association, a back-scratching little bunch of people, with a kind of unspoken assumption that everybody’s just interested in writing crime. I can’t imagine doing that for the rest of my life, I can’t think of anything less challenging, but if that’s what turns them on...” He doesn’t mince his words either.

Born in Edinburgh in 1956, Kerr began his career in law. “It was a big mistake really, I should have done English, but my father convinced me to do law. All fathers want their sons to be in professions,” he adds. It proved to be a not too fatal error; when at 30, Kerr became published for the first time. He had already written some four or five novels (all unpublished)

and “burned three good careers along the way”, one of which included writing copy for ad agencies (he doesn’t speak too highly of that industry either). “But I always knew I was going to be a writer. It was just a question of when and how long it took – and how often I got sacked along the way.”

It was the memory of one job at Thames Television that helped evolve the idea for *Gridiron*. “That was another lousy job I had. I remember standing in this tall office block on the Tottenham Court Road, staring out and feeling trapped, wishing and wanting the boss to fall down a man-hole.”

This dry sense of humour laces Kerr’s work, delighting in the mischief his unconventional ideas and imaginings bring upon the worlds he invents. “As an author, that’s part of your job; to entertain and to make mischief,” he surmises.

Salman Rushdie calls him, “a brilliantly innovative thriller writer”. And the compliment is repaid. “I do admire Salman. I knew him before and after the death threat and it seems to me, he’s grown infinitely as a human being and somehow managed to retain his sense of humour.”

As for Kerr, he’ll continue to play havoc with the world around him, taking ideas to the limit and further pushing back those boundaries. His next work is a script, this time an erotic thriller – “I haven’t done an awful lot of research for that one” – but until then, a new novel hits the shelves in the autumn. One thing’s for certain though; it won’t sit there for long. ■

The Second Angel is out now in hardback, published by Orion, £12.99 and out in paperback in August priced £6.99.

