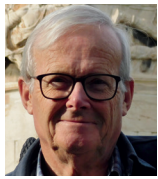




Mark's story inspires a novel launch



Publisher Mark Allen is about to see his first novel in print. Former school friend Jim Potts, OBE, has followed the writing process and meets the man behind the story, a 'compulsive' psychological thriller

THE YEAR 2020 was a strange, disturbing time for most of us, but one positive side-benefit was the amount of time that lockdown provided many people for extra reading (and writing).

Of all the books I read in 2020, there is one outstanding novel I am really looking forward to seeing in print in 2021: *Life Term*, by Mark Allen. It will be published by Colenso Books in March 2021. It is disturbing but makes for compulsive reading.

It has been a long time in gestation. I first read a draft version in November 2013, and quickly realised its power and potential, even though the darker incidents in the plot (child abuse and murder) held little appeal. The novel can be read on several levels, as a psycho-drama, a psychological revenge/payback thriller of crime and punishment or as a profound modern myth about an innocent victim who is driven to become a not-so-innocent killer - who eventually confesses and finds a form of freedom in prison. A perceptive reader (Mark Allen's editor and publisher) has found parallels with the plays *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles.

I sent my friend Dr. Faysal Mikdadi the prologue and first two chapters of Mark's novel. Dr. Mikdadi is a Palestinian-British poet and novelist, and academic director of The Thomas Hardy Society, whose writing and opinions on literary matters I greatly respect. Faysal wrote back enthusiastically, "I have just read the prologue and the first two chapters of *Life Term*. I found it deeply moving. The straightforward narrative style works superbly. The characterisation of the parents, brother, teachers and other persons around the narrator in a terse and economic language is quite memorable."

In the prologue, Simon, the protagonist-narrator, has been re-reading Albert Camus's novel *The Outsider*; neither the author, Mark Allen, nor his fictional narrator needs to spell out the parallel between a terrifying scene with

Simon in a swimming pool (I will spare you the spoiler), and the episode in the Camus novel, in which the blinding sun temporarily deranges Meursault on a beach outside Algiers. Camus's anti-hero is conscious only of the 'cymbals of the sun' clashing on his skull before he shoots a menacing Arab – the act which is Meursault's undoing.

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In a tense and overpoweringly dramatic scene in *Life Term*, Simon says: "I was feeling more and more strange. The sun was making me nauseous. I began to swim slowly towards the deep end, but the relentless light was playing tricks with my mind, as if I had taken LSD and I was in a trance...I was striving for breath, but the sun was beating out its violent heat and energy, making it impossible for me to think. I wanted to die. I could not face this moment. This moment was beyond my control."

There are other instances of relevant and illuminating intertextuality and aptly chosen literary allusions. Most chapters are headed by a literary quotation by the likes of Dylan Thomas, Philip Larkin, Alan Ginsberg and T. S. Eliot. A keen student of Eliot (it was Mark who introduced me to Eliot's work in my teens), Mark is preoccupied with the concept of time and the fragility of life ("Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past"). At one point the novel was to have been given a Shakespearian quotation (from *King Lear*) for its title. He is in good company!

The novel is presented in sections: Somerset 1954-1970, Sheffield 1971-1974, London 1974-2013, France 2013-2014, Bristol 2014.

Although not autobiographical, this work of fiction draws on some of the places in which the author has lived and worked.

It is a story of abuse, revenge and resolution (and the search for forgiveness). It is not a story that I would have ever expected Mark to tackle; we had never discussed the theme, which shows how little one really knows of another person's private imaginative world. I'm not going to give too much away. It's a brilliant work. How many authors in their mid-seventies find a committed publisher for a first novel? I hope it's not a one-off, because Mark Allen has much more to offer the world – including his poetry.

I have known Mark since we were eight years old. We grew up in the same Somerset town and we went, as day boys, to the same preparatory school. At the time we were heavily into early rock 'n' roll (Mark was something of a "hepcat" and might have made it as a songwriter, or later as a jazz musician).

We both had poems published on the same page in the school magazine when we were 13 years old. I also had a book review published at much the same time, a review of Lawrence Durrell's *White Eagles over Serbia*, which perhaps pointed in the direction of the overseas career that I would later follow.

Although Mark and I had become close friends, we were always very competitive. In our mid-teens (both at different schools, from the age of 13), we would meet in the holidays to play cricket, table tennis and billiards and to discuss the arts, which were hard to access in a small, fairly isolated rural town in Somerset. We both began writing poems to our respective girlfriends at about the same time. The various female characters in *Life Term* are all fictional creations, but the relationships are portrayed with convincing authenticity.

I have always thought of Mark as more of an occasional poet than a novelist or prose-writer, in spite of his early career as a professional journalist. I beat him to it, in terms of publication, as my collection of short stories, *This spinning world*, came out in 2019. Mark was a man with a mission to write a novel, and the coronavirus lockdown

FIRST EDITION

gave him the opportunity to rewrite the draft he had written in France seven years before. *Life Term* is even more topical now than when Mark began to write it.

In spite of our competitive streaks, mutual teasing and mickey-taking, we have always respected each other and we've remained friends for nearly 70 years, even though I spent long periods serving overseas with The British Council.

Neither of us has ever lost the traces of our Somerset and West Country childhood roots. I am now based in Dorset, Mark in Wiltshire. I like to spend time in Greece, Mark in France. Mark became a successful publisher and his energy and tenacity amaze me; he is still working at the age of 76. Amongst other projects and accomplishments, he ran the annual Wiltshire Jazz Festival for many years, and plays the saxophone himself. When I asked him to expand on the significance of the West Country in his life, he was kind enough to share his thoughts:

"The West Country has always played a pivotal part in my life, even though for many years I was away from it. As you know, I grew up in Somerset town of Castle Cary, in the 1950s and the 1960s. At the time, Somerset seemed very parochial. Very few people travelled anywhere. They might go to Yeovil a few times a year, a distance of 13 miles, and to Bristol occasionally. They very seldom, if ever, went to London and were often baffled as to why our capital city might be of interest. When I was a teenager I could not wait to get away: I found life in Somerset too claustrophobic."

He went on: "Later in life I had a yearning to come home to the West Country. Because I went to boarding school when I was 13, I was never able to put down any firm roots in Somerset. The county holds some good

memories for me, but also some unhappy ones. This is perhaps one of the reasons why I have elected to live partly in the bordering county of Wiltshire, which I adore."

Mark has developed a passion for Wiltshire. "I love the expanse of Wiltshire, the timeless variety of its countryside, divided in the middle by Salisbury Plain, with the uplands' landscape of the north of the county and the chalk river valleys of the south. The archaeology of Stonehenge and Avebury is fascinating and absorbing, Salisbury and Marlborough are places of character. To take Salisbury, for example, the nearest city to where I live, it boasts (coronavirus circumstances apart) an awe-inspiring cathedral, a really dynamic theatre and a vibrant racecourse, in addition to its arts and literature festivals.

"I also love Dorset, particularly its beaches, coastal paths and pretty villages, a county with its echoes of Thomas Hardy. I can never decide which of these two counties has the edge, but as I live in Wiltshire, I would have to give this county my vote!"

Mark used his background in journalism and publishing as convenient backdrops to the novel, drawing on roughly the same places in which he had worked, and making use of a similar chronology. He has tried to capture some reality, with huge doses of fantasy, weaving fact and fiction loosely together. He seems to have enjoyed the challenge, while admitting that the process could be a little dangerous at times. The main character worked for a while as a psychiatric nurse, which Mark had never done.

Mark has always been interested in psychiatry and once worked for a few weeks in a hospital for people with special needs, so the episodes he describes in the hospital come out of the knowledge he accumulated from

his limited experience, his reading and from his imagination. The descriptions certainly convince the reader that he knows what he is writing about.

Although the novel is not autobiographical, Mark admits that there is a heavy autobiographical element to the book, particularly in the opening chapters:

"Like many people, I had a difficult childhood and I was beset by several traumas. I don't expect any sympathy because of this: it's just the way it was. Fortunately, life has got better, and I have tried to use my experiences to positive effect."

I asked the author what had motivated him to write the novel, and to tackle such a dark topic.

"Writing the book has been both been painful but cathartic. A few demons needed to be tackled, so this was a big motivation in writing the book. However, above everything, I wanted to prove to myself that I had it in me to write a novel. I have written a lot of journalism, but rarely anything of much more than 1,500 words. The challenge for me was sustaining a book of more than 100,000 words which required a lot of time and dedication at a time when my life was extremely busy. Why such a dark topic? Quite simply, there was no other story that I could have written at that time. Now that I have this out of the way, perhaps I can in future pursue other topics which are less dark."

I asked him if he would write another novel, "I believe so, although I am not sure what this will be about and when. I would like to get this book out of the way first. I've written quite a lot of poetry over the years and I would quite like to publish a book of my poems."

Perhaps my last question was the most difficult. "As someone who has been involved with social work, how should society, families and professionals deal with cases of child abuse and the long-term consequences for victims?"

Mark thought about the question long and deeply before answering: "Child abuse is abhorrent, and the consequences last a lifetime. The sad fact is that child abuse has been around since time immemorial, but until the last 30 years or so, it's been largely hidden in families and close-knit villages and communities. I'm not sure it is more prevalent now than it was before, but today it is certainly in the public eye. We need to protect children as best we can, without putting them in risk-free bubbles. The victims of child abuse deserve our understanding and it is essential that they receive the right support and counselling."

He added: "At the same time, vilifying offenders is not the answer: difficult though this seems, we must remember that they are people. We must work much harder to find treatments for them and integrate them into society, whilst minimising the risks that they pose to society.

Left: The bottle remains unopened – Mark did not touch alcohol while he was rewriting the book



We can't just lock them away for ever and throw away the key. Many abusers have been abused themselves: we need to understand that fact and work from that premise”.

I probed him about the revenge theme which surfaces in this page-turning thriller of a novel. Could it ever be justified?

“Revenge is not an attractive motivation and I have little sympathy for it, despite the fact that, sadly, it seems part of the human condition. Some of our great literature and plays have revenge as a theme. Fundamentally, revenge only creates more problems and completely degrades those enacting revenge. Revenge can rarely if ever be justified. Nelson Mandela is a wonderful example of someone who chose the other path from revenge: forgiveness. For someone who was unjustly locked up in prison for 27 years his act of forgiveness was truly extraordinary and saved South Africa at that time from descending into hell.”

Had lockdown had an impact on his writing, or the focus of the novel?

Mark explained that he had first written the novel some years before, but that his publisher and editor, Dr Anthony Hirst, had rightly suggested that it needed to be rewritten in the first person, rather than the third, and that the story should be told chronologically, rather than dipping in and out of time. To rewrite the novel in this way was a mammoth undertaking. It was much more complicated than Mark had imagined. It needed new material and he must have added around 8,000 additional words.



Above: In work mode, checking proofs

“But for lockdown I would not have been able to undertake this task. As it was, I was inordinately busy with the enormous challenges of running my publishing and events business which, thankfully, has fared remarkably well during the pandemic crisis. I was getting up at 3am on many days, so that for much of the day I could still concentrate on the business. It was very intense. I was living with the demands of the business and I was preoccupied with the novel. I was in my inner world and I found it hard to focus on much else. During this period, I swam every

day, went for longish walks and did not touch a drop of alcohol!”

Choosing a title also proved extremely difficult. The original title of the book was, *Let me down gently*, but the publisher did not like it.

“We must have considered about 80 different names. Many obvious titles were rejected because they had been used before, although there is no copyright law on book titles. Eventually we shortlisted five possible titles and asked 100 people – 50 friends and contacts and 50 colleagues from my business to rate each title. I was amazed by how their views were often polar opposites, but *Life Term* emerged as the winner, which was the title which my publisher, Anthony Hirst, and I, both preferred. I have enormous respect for Anthony, and I have been enjoying working with him.”

I predict great things for *Life Term*. I'll be watching the review pages and the bestseller lists. I don't say that as an old friend, but as someone who has spent half a lifetime introducing and promoting British writers overseas, building cultural links and relations between countries.

WL

Jim Potts, OBE, worked in international cultural relations for The British Council for 35 years, in Ethiopia, Kenya, the UK, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Australia and Sweden. He was much involved in the development of bilateral relations in the arts and publishing.

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