



Good Afternoon! It's Tuesday on November 01, 2011.

Literature for everyone in the South West

“

Flint, flaked quartz, a cache of axes. These crinkled eggs shaped us. They glint and roll in the flooding gravel.

”

From 'Axes, Devon Sequence'  
Checkpoint,  
Exeter Poetry Festival  
Ronald Tamplin

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## John Pilkington



John Pilkington worked at various jobs – in a factory, in offices, in a research laboratory, on a farm, and as a rock guitarist in several bands – before realizing he wanted to write. He took a degree in Drama and English, acted and directed in a theatre company touring schools, and then began his professional writing career with radio plays in the 1980s.

He has since written plays for the theatre and television scripts for the BBC. He is also the author of a series of historical crime novels, and a non-fiction book, *A Survival Guide for Writers*, as well as the popular *Elizabethan Mysteries* series published by Usborne ([www.usborne.com](http://www.usborne.com)).

Cyprus Well caught up with John to find out a bit more about his writing process.

*Thief!* is the fourth book in the Ben Button series. What is it about the Tudor era that holds such fascination for you? Will there be more in this series?

Sadly, *Thief!* is the last of the *Usborne Elizabethan Mysteries*. But I'm very fond of Ben, and you never know – perhaps he'll reappear one day.

You're right, I am fascinated by the Tudor era, in particular the Elizabethan period. I'm not a historian, but came to it first as a student of Drama and Literature: the plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe and many others, and the wonderful poetry. I love the richness of the language, the humour and the wit. From there I got interested in the history and social background, and have been studying it ever since. That 'Early Modern Period' marks the beginning of so many things we recognise now, from the birth of the British Empire to bureaucracy, and even banking.

Are there any writers who have particularly inspired you, and the way you write? Are there any new writers for young people that you particularly admire?

Many writers have inspired me, and no doubt influenced me too. The list would be very long: from Chaucer, via Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, through to Joyce Carey and William Faulkner, and

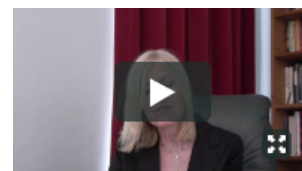
### Calendar

South West  
What's On



### Literature Clips

Our patron, Helen Dunmore  
(courtesy [Bloodaxe Books](#))



[Helen Dunmore](#) from [Neil Astley](#)



[Lee Weeks](#)



too many modern ones to mention.

Among the many children's authors I like are Michael Morpurgo, Geraldine McCaughrean, David Almond and Eoin Colfer, but I suppose they aren't exactly new. I don't read much contemporary children's fiction - though I should.

**Could you describe your approach to researching the specific era and details for the Ben Button books? How important is factual accuracy?**

Like all writers of historical fiction I spend a lot of time doing research, though it never seems to be enough. I do think factual accuracy is important – if you choose to set your work in a certain period, you should get the background details right at least. I was mortified when a glaring mistake was once pointed out in one of my books (fortunately, I was able to correct it when the book was reprinted). I do a lot of background reading, and also check things out on the Internet, although it's not always very good for in-depth historical detail. I like maps, and like to know the topography of where a book is set (town and city lay-outs, the countryside, borders, and so on). I build up a file of notes, pictures, character profiles and timelines which I use in working out my plots. I also think it's important to visit historical locations (old houses, museums, villages, churches etc) and to handle historical objects if possible. Anything that helps me get a feel for the time and the place is useful.

**What are you working on at the moment? Do you plan to write more books for young people?**

I'm working on a new historical novel for adults, again with a late-Tudor setting. I've also ventured into the late 17th century recently with the *Betsy Brand Mysteries* (published by Robert Hale), which feature an actress in the Restoration Theatre. Betsy's first book was published last year, and the second, *The Judas Blade*, will be out in December.

Regarding books for younger readers: I've written one set in Victorian times, which I'm now trying to get published! Otherwise at the moment I'm not certain when or even if I will be doing another - I'd certainly like to.

**Can you describe your writing environment and practice – do you have a particular place where you write, or time of day, number of words for example?**

I work in my study, which is a small, converted back bedroom with a desk, computer, filing cabinet and bookshelves. I've covered one wall with cork so that I can pin up maps, illustrations, cuttings and anything else that helps me with the piece of work I'm engaged on.

I try to treat writing as a job – it is my job. I work 'office hours', in other words I'm usually at my desk before 9 a.m. most days. I usually work six days a week but this varies: if I'm getting to the end of a new book I might work a seven-day week. When I was writing for television some years ago I even worked over Christmas and New Year (not much fun!). I don't have particular targets in terms of the number of words, though if I haven't got at least three or four pages written I feel that's been a poor day. But I'm talking about the First Draft here – there's always a lot of rewriting and revision to do later.

**When you have a germ of an idea for a piece of writing, how do you begin to plan for the writing stage? Do you map events in advance, for example, or do you simply begin?**

A good question. I've mentioned the background reading and the file I build up. Following the initial idea (or ideas) I do try to work out a plan of events in advance, though this doesn't always work out as intended! I don't think plotting is my strongest point, and I've written one or two books with only the roughest of outlines in mind. But nowadays I'm fairly disciplined, and try to plot the story out in some detail. There usually comes a point, however, when I grow tired of planning and feel I just have to begin writing, even if I'm not sure that I'm ready.

**Do you have any advice for our readers who may wish to see their work published?**

This is a tough one. There are so many people writing nowadays and sending work off to publishers, that many of them (leading ones, mainly) say they will now only accept submissions via literary agents. Having said that, I left my former agent after ten years and now look after my own affairs, and I find that I'm still getting work read (and even published!).

The fact is that if you really want to write you must persevere, and not let anyone put you off. Joining a Writers' Circle may help – at least you feel you're not alone. Look at publishers' websites; many offer advice to authors who want to submit work. Three chapters and a synopsis (not too long) of your book is the usual amount required; if they like it, they'll ask to see the rest of it. Some people think it's best to try and find an agent first (listed in *The Writer's Handbook* and *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*). You could try phoning them

before you send any work, to see if they're open to submissions from new writers; it will save time and postage. There are also websites nowadays for unpublished and aspiring authors. Do some research – and don't give up.

Good luck!

**At Cyprus Well we are keeping an eye on developments in the digitizing of books, Ipads, Kindles etc. As an author, how do you view these developments?**

Authors simply can't ignore these things. E-readers, Ipads and the like are here to stay, and they're getting better all the time. In fact I'm about to see one of my own books, *After the Fire*, published as an e-book – my first. I'm not against new technologies: in the last twenty years or so the majority of writers have embraced Word Processing, e-mail and the Web, and benefited hugely from these. We will also have to come to terms with digitization, though there are legal and copyright issues which concern us, and which the Society of Authors and other writers' organizations are addressing. I think we need to keep a close watch on these developments – indeed, we cannot afford not to.

**Thank you John!**

**SW Writer Profile PDF Archive**

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