

MATT LYNN



Matt Lynn was born and grew up in Exeter, before moving to London. He was educated at Balliol College, Oxford.

Matt is the best-selling author of the *Death Force* series of military thrillers, starting with *Death Force* in 2009, and followed by *Fire Force* in 2010, and continuing with *Shadow Force* in 2011.

News of the World gave the first book a four-star rating, describing it as “a Boy's-Own adventure guaranteed to get the pulse racing. It is up there with the finest that Andy McNab or Chris Ryan have ever penned.”

“A cracking action thriller. Lynn plans *Death Force* to be the first in a series. I can't wait to read the rest,” said the *Daily Express*

As a ghost-writer of action adventure stories, Matt also wrote three number one best-sellers for a well-know personality. As a journalist, Matt worked for many years for *The Sunday Times*; he now writes a column for Bloomberg, and is a regular contributor to *The Spectator*.

Cyprus Well caught up with Matt last week to ask him a few questions about his writing career and the writing world in general...

You mention on your website that you had the idea for the Force series after spending a few years' ghost-writing military thrillers. Many of our readers will be curious about the world of ghost-writing – can you say a bit about your experience of it?

It was a very mixed experience. Like most things in life, there were good and bad things about it. Most people have the wrong idea about ghosting. They think the ‘author’ gives you the story and ideas and you turn it into words. It isn't really like that at all. The ‘author’ usually just comes up with a setting. It will be something like. “So, we're in Afghanistan. And there's a really big explosion...” And then you take it from there. So in effect, the ghost just writes the book, as if they were the ‘author’ themselves.

The good thing is you get you a lot of experience. You get to write a lot very quickly. You can try out different styles and voices, and different types of plot. And they pay you pretty

well for it. So it is sort of like an apprenticeship in writing books. The downside is you don't get the credit. Someone else walks off with the credit for your work, which is really frustrating. And, although you get well-paid, you don't get really rich. I was writing number one best-sellers, which made a lot of money for the publisher and the 'author' but only some money for me.

Can you remember the exact point at which you decided to stop writing other people's books and write your own? Was there a particular spark or inspiration – for example, did you think at any point 'These ideas are so good I don't want to share them!'?

Probably from about paragraph three of the first book I ghosted! Actually, I always had a fairly well-worked out game plan. The ghosting was a stepping stone for me. I wanted to feel I had completely mastered the technique of putting together a book: creating a plot, filling it with characters, making the dialogue really snappy, and so on. When I started writing my own books I wanted them to be really good, rather than a good first effort. And I wanted to build a reputation, so that the publishers would know I could write best-sellers, and would back me. The first bit went fine. I think that *Death Force* is a fantastic book, and I could never have written it without all the experience I'd gained from ghosting.

The second part was more mixed. The publisher I was ghosting for wouldn't give me a contract. I think they just wanted to keep me in my place – churning out ghosted books. So I went to Headline instead, and they were really impressed by the sales figures of my ghosted books, and offered me a contract on the spot. And they turned out to be a far better publisher, so that was okay. As for ideas, I was holding stuff back from my ghosting work. If I thought of something really, really good, I filed it away to use myself.

Can you describe for us your typical writing environment and practice? For example, do you always write in the same place, at the same time? Do you write a particular number of words a day, and so on?

I can write pretty much anywhere, although it has to be on a computer. I can't really concentrate when I write longhand. I actually quite enjoy writing in different places sometimes – such as on the train, or on the balcony of a hotel room if I am on holiday. But as a matter of convenience, I usually write at the desk of my study at home. It's usually first thing in the morning as well. I find my mind is much fresher early in the day. And I suspect that some part of your mind is always working on the next scene you need to write, probably while you are sleeping, so that when you sit down to start working, it's all there already. I'd rather work for a few hours every day, including weekends, than try and do lots of hours at a stretch. There is nothing worse than trying to write when you are tired.

I'm very disciplined about how I write. I always do a thousand words a day as a minimum. Obviously you have off days, but it's still worth getting something down. Even if you have to change some of it later, there will still be some good stuff in there. And if you started taking days off because you weren't in the mood, then I suspect you wouldn't ever get a book finished.

You have obviously met and interviewed many soldiers for research during the ghost-written novels and your own. Does it have an effect on you to hear their stories – it must be hard not to feel very strongly for their experiences?

I've met lots of the kind of people I write about, and it influences my work a lot. For one thing, it gives you characters. None of the characters in my books are real people, but they are all based in part on people I have met and observed, even if they might be an amalgam of different characteristics. Next, it gives you stories. Not necessarily a whole plot, but just ideas that can be used as a starting point. You hear all about crazy plots and plans – particularly from the world of mercenaries and private military corporations, which is where my current series of books is set.

One of the advantages of ghost-writing was that I got to know that world pretty well. All the special forces guys come out of the Army in their thirties, and they go to work for Private Military Corporations because that is what they are trained for, and where they can make the most money. It is usually a very closed world. They don't like to talk to outsiders – ghosting gave me a chance to get to know those people.

But obviously you feel for them. Military life can be tough. I remember talking to one SAS guy I was doing some ghosting for, and he was telling me that of the twenty guys who joined the Regiment with him two decades earlier, ten were now dead. It's a high risk profession, and not everyone makes it to their rocking chair.

Which writers do you admire?

One thing that happens to you as a professional writer is that you start reading in a different way. When you are reading, you always notice things about structure or pacing or characters that are interesting, so even if you don't like the book that much, there are still things to learn from it.

Of thriller writers, I admire John Buchan, Eric Ambler, Alistair MacLean, Len Deighton, Frederick Forsyth, and Michael Crichton. Of military writers I think Sven Hassel was outstanding – he wrote incredibly vivid portraits of World War Two, and you sympathise with his characters even though they are Germans. I like to think my own books exist in that tradition, although admittedly I may be flattering myself.

Of writers in general, I guess Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Kurt Vonnegut, and Joseph Heller are my all-time favourites.

Do you have any tips for any of our readers who would like to get their own writing published?

First, concentrate on structure. The hardest thing to learn when writing a book is structure, but it's actually the most important thing to get right. Without a solid structure, your book isn't going to be much good. Choose a writer that you admire, and read and re-read one of their books until you understand the structure completely. Think of it as taking apart a car engine, then re-assembling it. If you do that several times, you'll have a pretty good idea how to build a car. Same with a book. Take it apart and re-assemble it, and you'll learn how it is done.

Next, think about the market for your book. Can you boil its theme or subject to a couple of sentences? Before I start work on a book, I always try and write the three lines on the back of the paperback that will sell it to people in the book shop. If you can't think of three snappy lines that sell your book, then you should probably think of a different story.

Get those two things right and you'll have a fantastic manuscript – which is the first thing a publisher is looking for. After that, get an agent, and acquire a very thick skin. This isn't a business for people who can't handle rejection.

We always ask writers their feelings about the increasing development of digital books via the iPad and Kindle, etc. How do you view these developments?

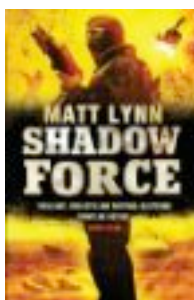
I'm a digital fan. I think the worst thing writers can do is get wedded to any particularly technological form, which is all a book is. Basically, we are story-tellers, and stories come in many different forms. Films and drama and opera are just as good as books. So are iPads and Kindle.

I don't think e-books are actually much of a change. Whether you look at words on paper or a screen isn't a big deal. There's a lot of nervousness because the music industry got the transition to digital music so spectacularly wrong it destroyed itself. But the publishing business isn't making the same mistakes, so I think e-books will just expand the market.

Actually the biggest technological challenge comes from games. I think that video games have some of the most interesting narrative structures around at the moment. It's a really vivid way of telling a story, and there are new ways of experimenting with characters and plots. I think fiction writers need to rise to that challenge.

Thank you, Matt!

www.mattlynn.co.uk



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Matt Lynn

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