



M. R. Hall is a screenwriter, producer and former criminal barrister. Educated at Hereford Cathedral School and Worcester College, Oxford, he lives in Monmouthshire with his wife and two sons. Aside from writing, his main passion is the preservation and planting of woodland. In his spare moments, he is mostly to be found amongst trees.

The Disappeared is the second gripping novel from M.R. Hall and follows the huge success of *The Coroner*, which was CWA Shortlisted and was *the* crime fiction debut of 2009 – selling nearly 50,000 copies in paperback. *The Coroner* stayed top 50 hardback charts for six weeks.

In *The Disappeared*, two young British students, Nazim Jamal and Rafi Hassan vanish without a trace. The police tell their parents that the boys had been under surveillance, that it was likely they left the country to pursue their dangerous new ideals. Seven years later, Nazim's grief-stricken mother is still unconvinced. Jenny Cooper is her last hope. Jenny is finally beginning to settle into her role as Coroner for the Severn Valley; the ghosts of her past that threatened to topple her, banished to the sidelines once more. But as the inquest into Nazim's disappearance gets underway, the stink of corruption and conspiracy becomes clear . . . As the pressure from above increases, a code of silence is imposed on the inquest and events begin to spiral out of all control, pushing Jenny to breaking point. For how could she have known that by unravelling the mysteries of the disappeared, she would begin to unearth her own buried secrets?

Cyprus Well is hugely grateful to Amy Lines at Pan Macmillan for the chance to put questions to the writer putting Bristol firmly on the crime fiction map ...

Could you tell us a bit about your usual writing environment and approaches? Do you have a set place where you write, do you write a set number of words a day, for example?

I moved to Monmouthshire about seven years ago from London and love the quiet. Our house is on the site of an old Georgian paper mill and I use one of the stone sheds as an office. I'm always in there between eight and nine in the morning and leave no earlier than six in the evening allowing for lunch and the odd coffee break. Having begun my working life as a barrister (a seven day a week, often into the small hours job), I always felt very guilty about the stay-at-home life of a writer, so I try to at least match office hours.

How much planning do you do before you begin a novel, in terms of the plot and the

connections between events earlier in the books, and the eventual untangling?

Writing thrillers, it's essential to plan meticulously. I learned the craft of storytelling as a TV screenwriter and use very similar techniques from writing novels. The first two to three months is spent researching and plotting. First I spend a few weeks perfecting an outline of the story, then I break it down into twenty five to thirty chapters, each of which has three or four scenes, or story points. That gives me the scaffolding for the book, and when I write the prose I invariably feel that knowing where the story is going gives me freedom to play with the characters and the dialogue in between times.

Holding the reader's attention is my primary goal. I feel that as a writer it's your duty to put your reader's experience ahead of any desire you may have to indulge yourself!

What drew you in particular to crime fiction?

I would classify my books as legal thrillers rather than crime stories in the traditional British sense. My stories are always about a struggle to achieve justice rather than the mind of a criminal or the gory details of a murder. It's an area to which I've instinctively been drawn since I was a child - I don't know why. I studied law at university and practised as a criminal barrister for a few years, and I've drawn heavily on my experiences in my books.

Are there other crime writers you particularly admire?

Elmore Leonard is the best and has been for three decades. What amazes me about him is that his best novels, many of which have been made into terrific Hollywood films - *Get Shorty*, *Be Cool*, *Jackie Brown* - were all written in his 60s and 70s. He's also a master of dialogue, a much neglected area of writing in British novels, I always think. There is nothing original about Quentin Tarantino's movie dialogue - his style was lifted straight from the pages of Leonard. While I admire PD James and Colin Dexter, they're a little bit old school for my tastes. I feel crime is a contemporary genre and it has to reflect current realities - despite his age, Leonard never slips a cog in this regard.

Do you have any tips for writers in the South West who want to see their work published?

You don't have to be an accomplished prose writer to get published, but you do need to be a good story teller. Jeffrey Archer and Dan Brown are not literary masters, they are story-telling masters and I greatly admire them for it. Read books on screen writing and story structure to understand the eternal fundamentals of dramatic structure. Robert McKee's *Story* is among the best. If you are uncertain about your prose style, just tell your story in as few words as you can. Forget complex language and aim for directness and simplicity. Anyone can load a sense with adjectives; very few people can convey the meaning with one or none.

We keep a close eye here at CW on the revolution that seems to be happening in the world of digital books, the Kindle, iPad, etc. What are your thoughts on this new development and where it is headed?

Some people will adopt the new technology, others won't. I see it as complementary, not as a threat. That said, nothing would persuade me to read books on a Kindle or other such device, especially after spending a working day looking at a screen. There's no joy in it, no tactile sensation, no emotional connection with the feel, smell or folds of a particular book.

OCT/NOV M.R. HALL

An e-reader is a lonely, sterile thing - the literary equivalent of eating cardboard. What about the pleasure of handing a well-thumbed copy of a much loved book to a friend or relative to share? Gradually, I'm prepared to bet that enough people will have stories of dropping them in the bath or getting them fouled up with sand on the beach that they won't appear quite as cool as they do now.

Do you have a favourite writing exercise you'd like to share with our readers?

I've never really done writing exercises, but over a twelve year career in writing TV drama I did learn the technique of telling things in as few words as possible and reducing dialogue to the minimum necessary to convey meaning. For anyone getting tangled up in how to write prose, I would advise getting hold of some of the screenplays of your favourite movies (most are available free online) and study the economy of language. Erich Segal's *Love Story* was an unproduced screen play for many years, then in frustration he filled it in with a little prose and produced a 115 page book which sold over 50 million copies He had a great story and needed only a few words to tell it.

Many thanks!