

'Writing is just like being pursued by a shark. You move forward or you die.'

Passion, envy, jealousy and obsession. Best-selling novelist Val McDermid's first collection of short stories draws on love's darkest consequences. She discusses her delicately-crafted tales of death with **Tamzin Lewis**.

Famous for her crime fiction, Val McDermid's currency is in corpses. Poisoned, electrocuted, bludgeoned, and stabbed; Val's bodies stack up like bullion in the bank. Short story collection *Stranded* rewards readers with murder in bite-sized chunks. But these killings are in no sense gratuitous. *Stranded*'s stories are deeply emotional.

Val says: "Death and murder are part of our lives. And we should inevitably have an emotional response. Responding to murderers with distaste and distance doesn't take us further forward as human beings or as social beings."

"It is easy and lazy to dismiss people who commit criminal acts or terrible emotional acts as evil monsters. The attitude of 'we can't do anything about it' lets us all of the hook. I am interested in writing about humanity and compassion. I try and understand why people do the things they do."

In *Stranded*, often the reason people do the things they do is for love. The stories embrace sexual betrayal, violence in relationships, lesbian, straight and cyber-sex. Val, who lives in Alnmouth, says: "Any powerful emotion has the potential to be both positive and negative. As the most powerful emotion, love can be transformed into hate, violence, envy, jealousy. These are the perverted states of love. Much of the harm we do to one another has a starting point in love."

This collection draws together stories previously published online, in magazines or written for radio. The standout story is *The Road and the Miles to Dundee*, a new commission for *New Writing North*. Intensely personal, it is the first time Val has ever directly written about her father and her roots.

"The commission was liberating as I could do whatever I wanted, outside of what people would normally expect. I had written about my relationship with my father in other contexts, translating and transforming it, so it would never be obvious," Val explains. "I read the story at an event and people told me how they had read my books for years, but they had never noticed my prose style before, because they were so excited about the story and characters. I take no less care over sentences in the novels as with the

prose in the short story. So I was left thinking, 'all these bloody years I have crafted these sentences and no bugger has noticed'."

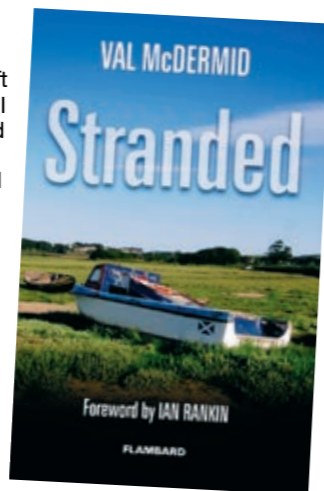
Like many crime novelists, Val feels that her prose style is often overlooked, as her books are classed by the literary establishment as "genre fiction". She jokes that rather than dividing books into sci-fi, horror, romance and crime, novels should be classed as "good" or "bad".

She says: "Because of the nature of the crime novel, people don't read them for the prose. It is a case of the artist concealing the art. This is true of a lot of crime fiction authors; you tend not to notice the prose as you are drawn into the story."

Stranded's foreword is written by fellow Scottish crime-writer and good friend Ian Rankin, who notes that the short story form suits Val, "allowing her to pick apart relationships with a furious skill, highlighting flaws and jealousies". It does suit her, but short story writing has not come easily, which makes this collection a one-off. For one book of stories, she has written 19 novels and a non-fiction work over a career spanning 18 years.

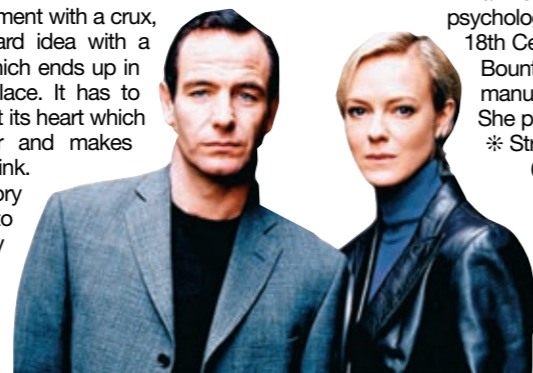
Val says: "When I started with fiction, it was the novel that I wanted to write, and it took me a long time to get there with short stories. I could sense whether a story was good or not. But from the writing point of view, I couldn't really figure out how to make a short story work. Possible short stories ended up being sub-plots in books. It took me a while before I realised I had got it, but it may just have been practice."

Val cites favourite short story writers as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Ruth Rendell, Katherine Mansfield, Flannery O'Connor, Anton Chekhov and O. Henry. She argues that the short story is usually one of two breeds. "It is either a snapshot of a moment with a crux, or a straightforward idea with a twist in the tail which ends up in an unexpected place. It has to have something at its heart which grabs the reader and makes them stop and think. The short story requires a writer to tell it as concisely as possible. It is



Love bites: Val McDermid's collection of short stories shows us the darker sides of passion.

Hard wired: Robson Green and Hermione Norris in *Wire in the Blood*.



the one-liner as opposed to a stand-up comic routine."

Short stories provide ways for Val to exercise different voices. The *Writing on the Wall* is told through conversations scrawled on a toilet wall. Keeping on the Right Side of the Law is written in the vernacular of a Manchester criminal.

"Some narrators couldn't sustain a novel. Others, you wouldn't want in your head for the length of time it takes to write a novel. Some are quite unpleasant characters."

And while her stories may not stem from real-life anecdotes, Val's voices are inspired by the way in which people structure narrative, use expressions or explain themselves.

She says: "These voices form an orderly queue in the back of my head waiting for a story to tell. There is a constant flood of stories in the back of my head for novel-length fiction, but short stories are a more difficult gift for me to come by."

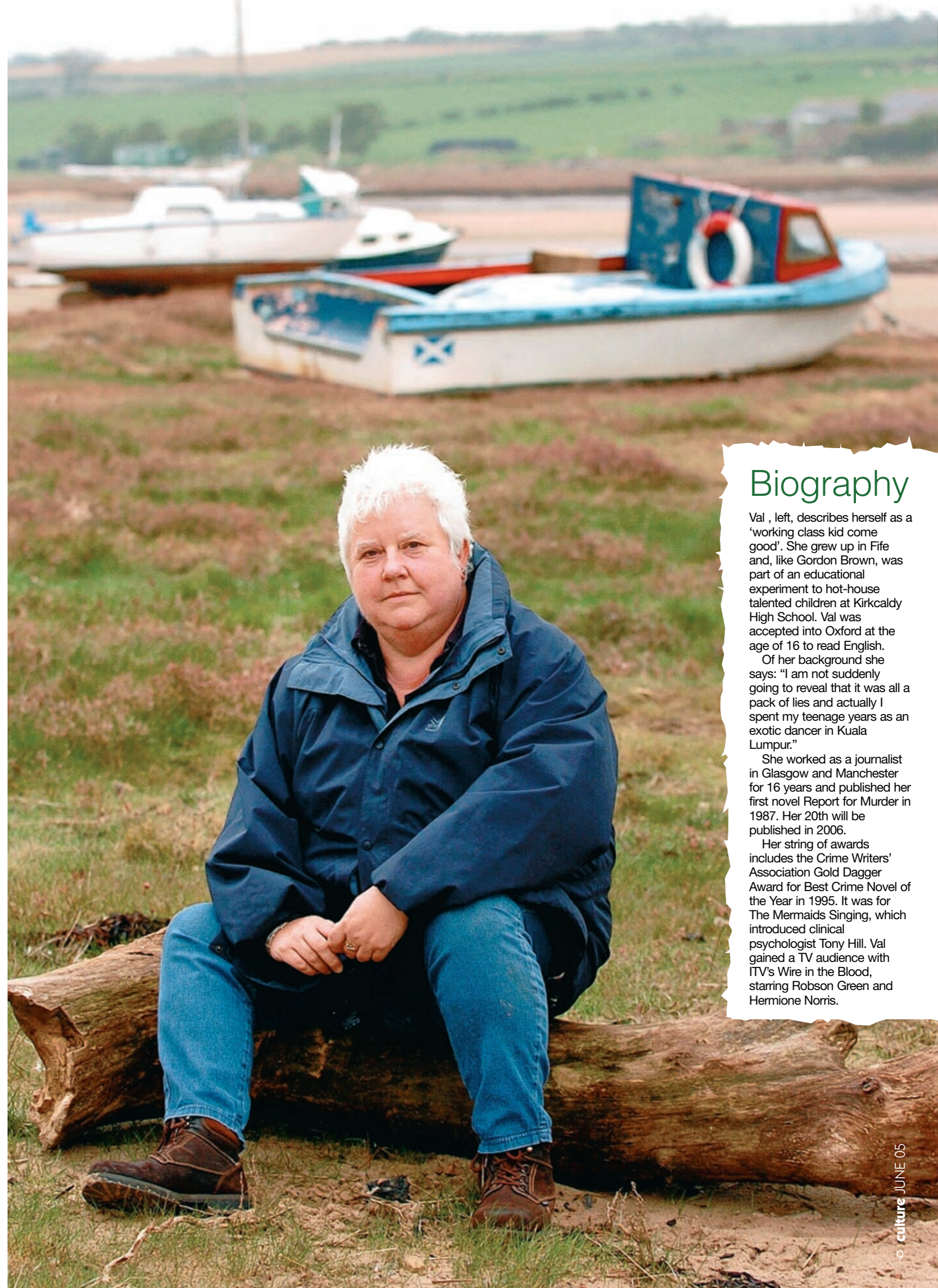
Val also feels that she learns more from writing novels than short stories. "For each novel I come away thinking I have learnt something about the process of narrative and the way I develop character. The novel is constantly a process of trying to make each book better, based on the mistakes of the last one. I feel less that way about the short story," she says. "The challenge of trying to make it better is what makes me carry on writing."

"Writing is just like being pursued by a shark. You move forward or you die. I have seen a lot of writers with great energy get bogged down and write the same book again and again."

Manchester PI Kate Brannigan, who appears in six of Val's crime novels, also crops up in a *Stranded* story. "It is great working with a character you know so well as the story is shaped by how they talk, how they act, how they are."

Val is writing her 20th novel, a psychological thriller with its roots in the 18th Century, linking the mutiny on *The Bounty* with an undiscovered manuscript by William Wordsworth. She promises bodies: old and new.

* *Stranded* is launched on June 9 at 6pm at Newcastle's Literary and Philosophical Society. It is published by Northumberland's Flambard Press, £7.99. www.flambardpress.co.uk



Biography

Val, left, describes herself as a 'working class kid come good'. She grew up in Fife and, like Gordon Brown, was part of an educational experiment to hot-house talented children at Kirkcaldy High School. Val was accepted into Oxford at the age of 16 to read English.

Of her background she says: "I am not suddenly going to reveal that it was all a pack of lies and actually I spent my teenage years as an exotic dancer in Kuala Lumpur."

She worked as a journalist in Glasgow and Manchester for 16 years and published her first novel *Report for Murder* in 1987. Her 20th will be published in 2006.

Her string of awards includes the Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger Award for Best Crime Novel of the Year in 1995. It was for *The Mermaids Singing*, which introduced clinical psychologist Tony Hill. Val gained a TV audience with ITV's *Wire in the Blood*, starring Robson Green and Hermione Norris.