



My writing day

CHRIS SIMMS

Meticulous research leads to some nasty scrapes, Chris Simms tells **Lynne Hackles**

For crimewriter Chris Simms, the day begins early. 'Normally around 6.30am,' he says, 'when the terrible-toddler-twins decide to wake up and come racing out of their bedroom. They had their third birthday at the end of January and, when their six-year-old brother and nine-year-old sister also emerge, I'm sure the neighbours resort to earplugs!

'I live with my wife, the tribe of little people and five white mountain minnows. It's been a long-held wish of mine to get a dog, but that's not a realistic option unless I'm writing full time. Currently, to make ends meet, I work three days each week as a freelance copywriter for a Manchester-based advertising agency. We live in a small town called Marple. It's twenty minutes on the train in one direction to Manchester, twenty minutes in the other to the heart of the Peak District.

'I started attempting short stories in my twenties, but just in order to scare friends and family. (They were mainly ghost-stories in the tradition of MR James.) My first novel, *Outside the White Lines*, was embarked upon just after reaching thirty. Not much more than a novella, it was a good way to make the step from short stories to novels. Although it was classed as a crime novel by my publisher, I thought of it as a psychological study into strange minds, like John Fowles' *The Collector* or Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*.

'I've now written seven novels – *The Edge* came out at the end of April last year. The last novels have formed a series with DI Spicer – a rugby-playing police detective with anger-management issues – as the protagonist.

'*The Edge* follows DI Spicer as he desperately tries to find those responsible for hacking his younger brother up and stuffing the pieces into three bin-bags. It has the shout line, 'Find the truth or lose his mind'. Although my earlier books contained a lot of violent scenes, I think I've mellowed a bit and the nasty stuff tends to be dealt with 'off-screen'. Having said that, the books will never fall into the category of cosy crime. I'm now about halfway through writing the sequel to *The Edge*. It touches on issues of shipping freight by sea, asylum-seekers and the wash-back of our Government's foreign policy in Iraq. The provisional title is *Cut Adrift*.

'I write from about 9am to 1.30pm, non-stop. Once I've broken for lunch, I'm only good for plotting the next chapter. I begin a book by slowly knitting together various plot strands, themes and events. I scribble on an A3 pad and the sheets end up like the rantings of a madman. The original idea for each book can pop up anywhere

– newspaper reports, comments in TV documentaries, things glimpsed from a train window... All this goes down in long-hand, in pencil, onto a lined A4 pad – only writing on one side, so later additions can be jotted down on the opposite page. I also leave ten pages at the end of each pad for longer editorial changes. A laborious way of doing things, but there's something very constrictive about writing direct to a computer. Plus, my ability to construct a sentence falls apart.

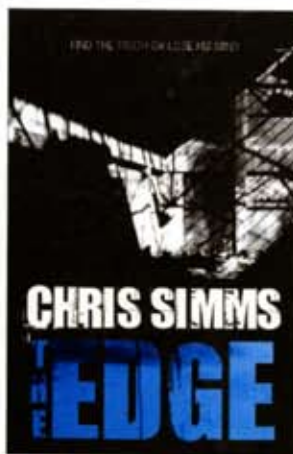
'Research gets me out, sometimes into fascinating situations – skulking uninvited around battery farms, wandering Saddleworth Moor at night or driving into car parks used as dogging rendezvous, for instance. The time at the battery farm was to research *Pecking Order*. The owner – along with a very aggressive Alsatian dog – found me. Luckily, I came up with a story about researching a report about the impact of the supermarkets on small-scale egg producers. He ranted delightedly at me for ages, while giving me a guided tour of his squalid chicken sheds.

'I keep a notebook by my bed because thoughts always seem to strike just after 3am, much to my wife's annoyance. It might be the actual things a character needs to say or it might be the idea for a neat plot twist.

'My ideal writing day would be to blitz about 3,500 words before lunch, go for a run and, on arriving home, discover that all four kids are going to the grandparent's house for the night: at which point I retire to the pub. (It's never happened.)

The better the day goes, the more vacant I am when having to snap back into reality. My wife is now able to spot this gormless look and knows half my mind is still in the realms of the scene I've been writing.

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Writing Place

I'm very monastic with my writing place; a glorified brick-shed in the garden. No computer, no internet, no phone, no music. I sit at a bare table with a blank wall in front of me and the bubbles of the aquarium behind me. Sometimes that gets turned off too, though the minnows get most disconcerted when I do this.

When it comes to typing up my long-hand, I use a laptop loaded only with Word. Everything is saved onto a memory stick, then transferred to the computer in the house which has internet access. Having nothing to disturb me in the shed has increased my daily word-output by about a third.

BUY THE BOOK

To order *The Edge* (Orion, £10.99pb, p&p £1.95) call Writers' Bookshelf on freephone 0800 0150554. Please have your credit card ready.