

Questions for M.R. Hall

- 1 Your background is in screenwriting. What made you want to move on to writing novels?

I have always wanted to write books, but I was lucky to get an early break in television writing episodes of Kavanagh QC when I was in my late 20s. Television work provided a steady income with which to provide for a young family, but when my wife got ill with ME and the pressures piled on us, the dream of spending months speculatively writing a book proved ever more elusive. It was only when we had moved out of London and the clouds started to break a little that I could finally contemplate the big risk of writing a book on spec. Fortunately it paid off.

- 2 Why did you decide to make your main character a woman, and do you think the story would have been different had she been a man?

Jenny Cooper's character was conceived over a number of years. Originally my coroner was to be a man and my intention was to develop the idea for television. But once I realised that the essence of the character was that of an outsider with huge internal struggles, Jenny somehow materialised from her home in the woods to fill the role. There is something about the feminine aspect of the psyche which is far more to do with the subconscious and inner worlds: a female character can move in these realms and still retain sympathy, whereas male characters are far more about external action. I simply couldn't have gone as inwards as I wanted with a man.

- 3 Jenny finds herself under great pressure when she takes on the role of coroner. Was this your experience of the legal system, when you were a barrister?

The pressures facing lawyers, especially young ones starting out are immense. Suddenly peoples' lives and liberty are in your inexperienced hands, and if you are at all of a sensitive disposition it can be very harrowing. I experienced a lot of the psychological symptoms – but not the drug addiction – I have given to Jenny Cooper. A lot of lawyers do, I understand, but they don't talk about it.

- 4 Are there many coroners like Jenny, who get involved in investigations?

I have researched with a few coroners and found that some investigate more than others. The interesting thing is that they have such wide-ranging powers that they could chose to use them in a far more radical way if they dared. In reality, many would feel constrained by convention and the desire not to be seen as a troublemaker. Jenny is an idealised coroner who doesn't care what people think of her – the kind I would like to be!

- 5 Jenny has anxiety disorder and is addicted to tranquilisers, yet feels the need to hide this from her colleagues. Do you think we need to reassess our attitude towards mental health?

Mental health problems are rife, affect more than one in four of us at some time and can be truly terrifying. It's only now, two decades later later, that I can bring myself to admit that I suffered acute panic attacks from the age of 19 and struggled to deal with them almost entirely in secret for many years. I was also profoundly affected by the tragic suicide of a close friend of mine who, looking back, was suffering from untreated depression. There's still a great taboo around the issue. Could someone be elected be Prime Minister with a history of mental illness? Probably not. I hope that Jenny's struggles with symptoms that many will recognise might help to open the issue up a little.

- 6 Are you inspired by other crime writers, and if so, which ones?

Elmore Leonard is my all-time crime writing hero. Here is a man who didn't really get going in novels until his 50s and who is now in his 80s with numerous books and short stories being turned into major movies: *Jackie Brown*, *3:10 to Yuman*, *Get Shorty*, *Be Cool*, *Freaky Deaky*. He simply takes some odd-ball characters and tells an unembellished story, never describing anything other than through action – a screen writing technique. Years ago I read an article in which he gave his ten rules of writing. I stick doggedly to at least eight of them.

- 7 Would you like to see the books adapted into a TV series or film?

Of course I'd love to see an adaptation, but I've had very mixed experiences in television: good scripts are no guarantee of a good production. A number of things would have to feel right, including finding the perfect Jenny – next to the story, casting is the most important thing of all. Dalziel and Pascoe, a series I've had the privilege to write for, is a good example of adaptation working extremely well. Warren Clark was made for the role of Dalziel. We'd have to find an equivalent fit for Jenny, someone who can convey inner suffering without appearing weak or fragile. But for now having a book published is excitement enough – it really is a long-held dream come true.