

Phil the Shelf Q & A

Last updated: 29 April 2008

Phil Rickman presents the Radio Wales book programme Phil the Shelf but he is also a successful author in his own right. Here he discusses the trials and tribulations of being a writer in Mid Wales.



When and why did you start writing?

When I was about seven I used to write complete novels (with as many as 20 pages!) which I then stapled together and forced my aunties to read. It's no wonder I didn't get anywhere for nearly 30 years - aunties tend not to point out the flaws.

How many books have you written?

Fifteen, including one for older children - *Marco's Pendulum*, to be published next March under the name Thom Madley. The latest adult novel, just out in hardback, is *The Smile of a Ghost*.

What kinds of themes do your books deal with?

I keep being told I've invented a new sub-genre: contemporary crime mysteries with a cautious element of the paranormal. My central character is Merrily Watkins, a woman vicar who is also Deliverance Consultant for the Diocese of Hereford, which includes a slice of Mid Wales. Deliverance is the Church's new word for exorcism, and every diocese has at least one minister specialising in paranormal investigation. Many people don't believe this, but it's true, and I often contact a particular Deliverance minister in Powys for technical advice. I like to think the series is highly authentic.

Do you draw inspiration for your writing from your locality?

Every time. All the novels are set in real locations and use local history and folklore. For instance, *A Crown of Lights* deals with murder and religious extremism in the Radnor Valley, where five churches are - a fact - mysteriously dedicated to the archangel Michael. And *The Prayer of the Night Shepherd* has a new take on the old argument over whether Sir Arthur Conan Doyle based *The Hound of the Baskervilles* on a Welsh Border legend.

When was your first book published?

I didn't manage to get a novel published until the 1990s, and it might have taken a lot longer than that if I hadn't gone to interview the novelist Alice Thomas Ellis at her home in Pennant Melangell, for Radio Wales. I happened to mention to her that my latest idea had been rejected by one publisher as too Welsh. As fiction editor for Duckworth (I didn't know this at the time) she asked to have a look at it... and so Duckworth commissioned the book, *Candlelight*, set in the

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Aberystwyth/Devil's Bridge area. And it's still in print.

Is it difficult making a living as a writer?

...and getting more difficult all the time. These days major publishers are ruled by their accountants, and if you don't make it by the third book you're likely to be dumped without a second thought.

Do you have any advice for the budding writers of Mid Wales?

Don't give up your regular job until you're making twice as much out of writing.

your comments

Helen Shipley from Sussex, England

I hope it isn't too much of a conceit to say that Phil speaks to the Celtic bit of my soul. I have lived, almost my entire life, in Sussex, where my maternal ancestors go back many many centuries but my father's forebears were a mix of Welsh and English - he was born in Llaneshen and 3 of his grandparents were MORGAN, EVANS and MATHIAS- so quite Welsh! Still trying to research them - with mixed success, except for MATHIAS - thanks largely to the invaluable assistance of a distant cousin. Anyway, that is boring for most people and far from the point - which is, (at last)- how much I love Phil's books. Have been reading them since his first were published and his work was an instant hit with me. My sister loves them too and we both introduce others as much as possible. Ten writing is a delight, the history comes alive with resonance and relevance and the mystery is always apparent and intriguing. Wonderful characters, many now seem like old friends - or enemies, as the case may be and the interweaving of past and present is, well, masterly. Thank you for the books Phil and for your kindness too.

Sun Apr 18 21:00:25 2010

Paul Kay, Adelaide, Australia

Love your work Phil, have read all the pre-Merrily books (loved them) and most of the Merrily Watkins ones (these are great as well), although some are a bit hard to find over here. Vibrant writing that brings your countryside alive, feels like being there.

Mon Feb 15 09:42:04 2010

Gina Peschl Wisconsin USA

I just listened to my second Merrily Watkins book and I am hooked. So many interesting characters and mysticism along with religion I love it! I felt I was there with Betty and Merrily in Radnor. I am very excited to read the entire series and more. Keep writing!

Mon Oct 26 10:02:20 2009

Shirley Bailey, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

On Fabric of Sin... why do find it necessary to write as the average teen-age kid speaks. Like etc. etc. I go... etc. etc. It's bad enough listening to them with their poor grammar and idiotic speech but to read it in a novel by a so-called "author" who has been many times awarded with this and that... I couldn't get past the first 18 pages. So sorry. That type of writing leaves me cold.

Thu Oct 8 10:06:17 2009

amanda from somerset

Phil's novels have rescued me from a long-term reading stagnation - Remains of an Altar, Chalice, Man in the Moss are my favourites so far about to read The lamp of the Wicked. ps. Phil's portrayal of Glastonbury streetscape, surrounding landscape was impressive.

Mon Aug 24 09:25:48 2009

Louise, Uppsala Sweden

I have read (or listened to) all of the Merrilly Watkins novels and love them all. I encountered Phil Rickman when I first read December and Chalice...fantastic books!

Mon Jul 27 08:53:07 2009

Geoff Whitehead, Tenby, West Wales

For the last decade of my working life, I earned my crust visiting small companies all around Phil's bailiwick, from Leamington Spa in the East to Presteigne in the West, and from the Wrekin in the North to the Forest of Dean in the South. Phil's 'spirit of place' is spot on. I have to convince myself that, a few years back, I didn't park up in Ledwardine, buy a sandwich in Eight til Late and wander down to the river to eat my lunch! I really have visisted a small, run down, company deep in the Forest of Dean, with a power pylon in the yard! Yes, scarey! Thanks Phil, keep 'em coming.

Sun May 10 20:26:00 2009

Anna, Thame

Just finished Marco's Pendulum - a brilliant read - I'm a mum and told the story to my 5 year old, edited of course! Just about to start Marco & The Blade of the Night - read without realising it was for children as love Glastonbury - didn't realise it was a pseudonym either!! Fantastic to have come across you. Keep up the good work.

Mon Apr 20 09:47:36 2009

Jenni , Brighton

One of the only writers who really seems to be able to write from a young person's viewpoint and create a super-pensioner in the same series! Jane is a brilliantly realised character, as is Gomer.

Thu Dec 18 11:10:30 2008

Lucy Fishwife, London

A great author, weirdly less famous than he deserves. I love Gomer Parry more than words can say. Why is "December" out of print??

Tue Dec 2 12:50:56 2008

Mary Moretti from Kalamazoo, MI US

I've read pretty much all of Rickman's novels, and loved all of them. If pressed to select a favorite or two, I'd say The Chalice and Midwinter of the Spirit. Haven't read Dream of the Dead as yet, but I'm looking forward to it.

Fri Nov 21 09:38:01 2008

Fiona Raw from Victoria, Australia

Great books that resonate within me, problem is I can't get anything else done when I've got one on the go.

Fri Nov 14 09:55:54 2008

Mandie Hart, Essex

Please do a third of the Marco's pendulum, as i am totally hooked, there brilliant, i am bout to start on Marco and the blade of knight...

Sun Oct 12 16:57:31 2008

Sheila Mackay from Metchosin, British Columbia

I discovered Phil last year. The name "Rickman" (like the actor Alan Rickman) caught my eye in a local second hand shop. I bought it for my Welsh husband. Well, we got hooked and immediately scoured the used book shelves at the charity shops. They got us through the dark, wet, coastal BC winter. For my holiday this summer, I took the plunge and ordered everthing I could find on Amazon and Alibris. It's lovely wondering what the characters are up to while I'm out in the garden. He graciously replied to an email question I had about the out of print "December. I especially relate to the theme of newcomers with money settling in a rural area, giving rise to issues in common with the community where I live. Thanks, Phil, for all the super hours inside your stories.

Thu Jul 31 10:10:23 2008

Bob Holt, East Yorkshire

I have just "discovered" the Merrily series I drive a lot for my work, so I am listening on audio books. Sometimes a customer just has to wait,while I find out if the character is real or not. What a great series, has anyone mentioned a tv series? But please write quicker Phil, I only have two more to read.

Wed Jul 9 14:48:32 2008

Rachel from Brisbane

I bought a remaindered copy of The Wine of Angels and was convinced that the book had been written especially for me - I loved everything about it...the themes, characters, writing - he has a skill for narrating different "voices" through dialogue and description. Initially hard to find in Australia, I now notice them in Angus & Robertson regularly. It has become something I look forward to each year - my Christmas holidays generally coincide with a new Merrily Watkins book. To top it off, I have been lucky enough to have had a few very gracious and friendly replies to email the odd email comment I have sent to Phil over the years. I recommend to everyone!

Mon Jun 9 09:15:34 2008

pete bibby sheffield

I started with Crybbe and have since read everything of his I can get my hands on - never disappointed.I'm just wondering what Merrily's child will be called and how Jane will take it

Thu May 1 16:17:06 2008

Alan Yelvington from Washington, DC

Phil is a Welsh treasure and a constant source of therapy for me...I've read them all and wait anxiously for the next one. Thanks Phil!

Fri Mar 28 09:52:50 2008

Janet Elaine Fruish-Ross

I love Mr Rickman,s books. He sings to my soul and I,d love one of his characters to have my name one day. His books remind me why I love to get lost in a novel. Time suspends, his reality is my own and the way he builds tension in the last chapters - the way the pace builds and the cadence increases tells me he is genius. I weaned myself on King and reached maturity on Rickman.

Mon Feb 25 08:05:10 2008

Sophie Masson, Armidale, Australia

I'm a fellow writer, (I mostly write for children and young adults) and I love Phil's books which I discovered by chance

in a bookshop in Sydney one day. Fantastically clever, richly engaging and with a very very effectively rendered sense of the spiritual and non-mundane..both the benign and the malevolent..as someone who was brought up Catholic, I didn't realise the C of E had a ministry of deliverance--it's been a fascinating eye-opener for me. I also love the settings--my husband comes from the Welsh borders (well northern Worcestershire to be precise) and we've been a lot to all that general area...it is very very well evoked in the novels.

Wed Jan 23 09:27:59 2008

Wendy Knight, Haverhill

I brought Crybbe on a disastrous holiday in Cornwall and it got me through the week for which I will be eternally grateful. I've got all of Phil's books and am yet to be disappointed.

Wed Nov 7 09:26:10 2007

Phil Breach from Fareham

I've been loving Phil's books since 'December'. The sharpest dialogue around, a deep understanding of spirituality, & a dark yet humane energy in his writing make him, for me, one of the very finest authors drawing breath. Bless ya Phil

Sat Oct 20 15:56:35 2007

Nikki Canfield New Zealand

I'm picking up my copy of Remains of an Alter today. It's a bit like meeting old friends again after a long absence. I can't wait to find out what's in store for Merrily, Jayne and Lol this time. I hope these characters have many adventures in the future, but I would dearly love to see more from Will Kingdom as well.

Mon Jul 30 08:40:39 2007

Randy Harms, New York

I've been ready P. Rickman's books since Curfew and have to say I'm mystified that the Merrily Watkins books aren't yet serialized on Mystery! Also, I was annoyed that I went to Dartmoor for hiking in Baskerville land when I could have hit some of Rickman's (and the hound's) sites in Herefordshire and Wales. Did catch Glastonbury though!

Wed Jul 25 09:48:07 2007

Lou Jones North Wales

I have read all Phil's books, each one as good as the other, he is an inspiration to my writing (not published as yet but trying!) I eagerly await the latest instalment from Ledwardine, The fabric of sin.

Wed Jul 4 15:27:01 2007

Amsterdam

I started with Crybbe and went on from there. I've enjoyed them all, being an ex-pat anything that has Wales (even the border) as a subject gets me interested, but I'd like to thank Phil for the music tips in Merrily's books. They've given me so much enjoyment and enriched my collection. He's not disappointed me yet. Keep those coming too Phil.

Fri Apr 20 09:50:33 2007

Richard Butterworth, north London

No-one chronicles as well as Phil Rickman the seething underbelly of the British countryside, early 21stC. By some dark magic he makes the reader care about - and be equally fearful of - the forces ancient and modern that seem locked in perpetual conflict for the rural soul. His stories are also the most perfect combination of genres - crime and the

supernatural - that I have read. Phil's latest, 'The Remains of an Altar', is unquestionably his best to date.

Tue Feb 20 17:00:59 2007

Jo Butlin, Newcastle Emlyn, Wales

Discovered Phil Rickman by accident, when a friend lent me The Wine Of Angels. I was hooked, addicted and have had to buy all of them for myself. Keep them coming, Phil Rickman!

Thu Dec 14 09:27:00 2006

Marilyn Newsham isle-of-wight uk

I have read all books to date fantastic storylines, hooray for merrily and the kid, i have two faves one is man in the moss and crown of lights thanks phil cant wait for the next spellbinder.

Fri Dec 1 09:26:19 2006

Jacqui Minns, Sydney Australia

Have enjoyed everyone of Phil's books to date and also buy from Amazon as they are so slow to arrive in Aus. I have just finished both Will Kingdom books and really hope more are to follow.

Tue Aug 29 11:10:56 2006

Mandy Bradley from Aldinga Beach, SA, Australia.

I love all Phil's books! I found it really hard to locate his books here in SA so bought five in one go from Amazon in America. Just finished A crown of lights and can't wait to start The Cure of Souls.

Thu Aug 10 09:43:38 2006

Randy Ott

I've read: Candlelight, Curfew (Crybbe), December, The Man in the Moss, The Chalice, The Wine of Angels, Midwinter of the Spirit, and am nearly finished with A Crown of Lights. Thanks to Trafalgar Square of Vermont, Americans can now get Rickman's books!

Mon Aug 7 09:52:03 2006

Roxy Chow from Tucson, AZ USA

The Rev. Merrily Watkins series is great! My public library system only has ONE of these books, but I'm visiting my brother on the East Coast and he got 3 more for me to read. I hope the series continues for a long, long time! I'll be requesting that my library purchase ALL of his books!

Sun Jul 23 20:28:31 2006

Tania Tobiano from Brisbane, Australia

I love Phil's books. The Wine of Angels is the first of his books that I picked up. It will forever be my favourite for that reason. I fell in love with it. All of Phil's book are fantastic though.

Thu Jul 13 09:11:39 2006

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