



HOMELAND

Award-winning crime novelist Val McDermid shares her memories of growing up in Fife and her favourite places to gather her thoughts

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Kirkcaldy in Fife and spent a lot of time in nearby East Wemyss, a small mining village with the biggest pit in Scotland, with my grandparents. Both places were very much a part of the industrial landscape then – Kirkcaldy was once the world centre of linoleum.

What do you remember most vividly from this time?

What people don't always know about this area is that it's sandwiched between the countryside and coast. When the weather was good, I was always outdoors, and when it wasn't, I was indoors reading. I'd walk along the beach through Ravenscraig Park to Dysart. There are lots of parks, which were great communities for us as kids.

Where do you remember most fondly?

I spent the summer before I went to university exploring the northwest of Scotland around Lochinver, Achmelvich and Loch Assynt. I was drawn there by Norman MacCaig's poetry, because he writes so passionately about the landscape. There are mountains all over Scotland but they're mostly part

of mountain ranges. Here there are individual peaks instead – Ben More Assynt, Stac Pollaidh and Quinag – that rise dramatically into the sky.

Where do you live now?

I live in Edinburgh and we also have a cottage near St Andrews, where my partner is a professor. I love to be by the sea so I can walk by the water, exploring rocky inlets and beautiful beaches. It helps me think clearly and makes me feel grounded.

How do you find living in the city?

As my first city was Edinburgh and my second was Oxford, the rest were a bit of a disappointment after that. Edinburgh is the kind of place that you can easily hold in your head – it doesn't have a sprawling centre like some cities – and it's very walkable. For those that live here, it's Janus-faced too, swelling with tourists at Christmas, Hogmanay and during the summer festivals.

What do you miss about Scotland when you are away?

I've always said it's the landscapes, but because I've just been in New Zealand for a few months, where some areas are mirror images of Scotland, I've been thinking about what it is that I really miss – the people. Scottish people are always taking the mickey out of each other. You never get the chance to get

above yourself in Scotland. As soon as you do, your bubble is pricked.

Where would you recommend visitors go?

Part of me doesn't want to tell people where to go because I want it to remain in the same pristine state that I found it. Ullapool is great though – for its scenery and particularly because it has two bookshops. It's a good jumping off point for the northwest Highlands and you can get a ferry from there to Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis.

Do you have a preferred island?

Jura really surprised me with its emptiness and openness, which is probably why I found it so appealing. It's completely unspoilt. That said, we were there for a 10-day family holiday once, and in that time there were two cèilidhs and a regatta – it was more lively than my social life at home.

Where in Scotland would you like to explore further?

I've been to Orkney once or twice for book events but only managed a superficial whizz around. I want to go back to immerse myself properly in the history and communities there. **S**

Val McDermid's latest book, *How The Dead Speak* (Little, Brown, £8.99), is out in paperback on 6 February 2020.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Val McDermid;
the Paps of Jura
at sunset