

WRITING the JACK CALLUM MYSTERIES (part one)

Jack Callum came into my life towards the end of 2015. In truth he'd been hovering in the background for about six or seven years, from when our agent at the time suggested that we might want to write a police procedural series set in the 1950's. At that time Mick Sims and I were trying to sell our Department 18 series of supernatural thrillers and were not really interested in writing crime fiction, but gradually as the series progressed I found myself adding more elements of the police procedural to the Department 18 stories and getting quite a taste for it, so something in the agent's advice must have struck a chord with me.

During a break from writing, Jack introduced himself to me in the middle of the night, like so many of my characters had done in the past. He popped into my insomniac thoughts, fully formed and eager to have his story told.

He was a copper, an ordinary policeman, with a wife and family. A chief inspector working for the North Hertfordshire constabulary, a solid type of chap in his mid to late forties, relocated to the area from North London, Tottenham in fact, so inevitably a fan of Tottenham Hotspur football club, his beloved Spurs. He was a keen gardener who liked nothing better during his off duty times, when not digging and planting, potting and pruning, than to listen to music, reading books and spending time with his wife, Annie, and his family.

So what was his kink? the writer inside me asked. What was his THING because all policemen in the modern crime novels I'd read had a THING – a drink or drug problem, a gambling addiction, a propensity for violence, an overactive libido that was way out of control. There had to be something different about him, something that would keep the readers coming back for more.

Jack didn't have a thing THING.

He was a good man with a solid moral compass and an innate sense of right and wrong.

How dull, I thought.

How refreshing, my sub-conscious countered.

Well it would certainly make a change to write about a thoroughly decent chap and make the book interesting.

It would be a challenge.

In fact the more I lived with Jack Callum and learned about his past, the more interesting he became.

When I discovered he was a captain in the army during WWII, I realised I was going to be writing about his life as a police officer in the 1950's.

I was starting to warm to the subject.

I had recently written a novella, *Convalescence*, set in the early 1960's, and knew a lot about the era in question, having been born in 1953 and grown up in an all female household, my father dying when I was five. I had a sister and female cousin, both five years older than me, and another cousin, a girl three years my senior, all living under the one roof, so I was being constantly bombarded by the music and fashions of the time, and they had woven a rich cultural tapestry on which to draw.

The more I plundered my memories the more excited I became.

Suddenly I could see the potential.

I could write about the police, solving crimes without the benefits of DNA testing and modern forensic techniques, without computers and the Internet, the convenience of mobile phone when, if you were out on the street and wanted to contact somebody, you'd have to find a telephone box to dial 999, or were lucky enough to have a police box close by.

I was going to be writing about an almost totally alien environment.

"The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there," LP Hartley said. How right he was.

Not only would I be writing crime fiction, but historical fiction as well. Added to those two, you had the story of Jack and his family, and their lives would be a continuing arc, so a family saga too.

What a challenge. Was I up to it?

Well, there was only one way to find out...

Len Maynard, Letchworth, Oct 2016

WRITING the JACK CALLUM MYSTERIES (part two)

Once Jack had introduced himself to me and I had set the era in which the books were set, I had to find a location for them.

Enfield, a Middlesex town close to Tottenham, in North London was the obvious choice. I was born and spent my formative years there, but I moved from there to Hertfordshire many years ago, to Letchworth Garden City to be precise, stopping off along the way in Hatfield, a few miles up the A1.

What attracted me to Letchworth was its similarity to the Enfield of my childhood. In many ways the place hadn't suffered the urbanization, or London Spread, that was affecting and infecting many of the areas close to the city.

I was more familiar now with Letchworth than I was with my hometown. I could write with ease about such locales as Broadway and Norton Common. I could even take a walk and visit them if I wanted to check anything, but the pull of Enfield was strong. So I decided to combine the two, thus getting the best of both worlds. So Jack has his home in Letchworth and works in Hatfield, but many of the other locations are Enfield with a thin disguise.

I found a photograph online of the old Welwyn and Hatfield police station, and it was so evocative that it became the base of operations for Jack and his colleagues.

The elements were gradually dropping into place.

All I needed now to complete the infrastructure of the series was a cast of characters, both police and civilians, whose lives would be an unending source of plots and sub-plots.

The first people on that list were Jack's family.

I decided there would be a wife, a woman worthy of Jack's love and devotion, someone charming and passionate who could act as his confidante as well as lover, a strong woman, every inch his equal, but a warm, caring mother and homemaker. Annie Callum has all these attributes and I must confess I've slightly fallen in love with her myself.

He has three children.

Joan is the eldest and spent some time away from the family home after eloping with Ivan, a Czech émigré, causing Jack and Annie much pain and soul-searching.

Rosie is the next eldest. Just starting out in the world after leaving school, Rosie has many of her mother's attributes. Strong and fiercely independent she also has a fine singing voice, a gift on which she will come to capitalize as the series progresses.

Finally there's fourteen-year-old Eric who, for better or worse, is the fictional teenage version of myself. Bright, but not at all academic, with a passion for pop music that manifests itself when he buys his first guitar and learns to play.

Three children who will delight and frustrate Jack in equal measure, and represent the march of progress and the way his world is going to change forever.

Foremost among his colleagues are DS Eddie Fuller and WPC Myra Banks who head up Jack's team – each of them with their own stories to tell, and will as the series unfolds.

Other characters will enter Jack's world, each impacting on it in different ways. I've met them over the course of the four books I have written for the series so far and I've found many of them colourful, some of them infuriating, some of them murderous and some downright tragic.

In part three of this blog I'll look at the challenges of researching the background of a historical crime series. There are many, believe me.

Len Maynard

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