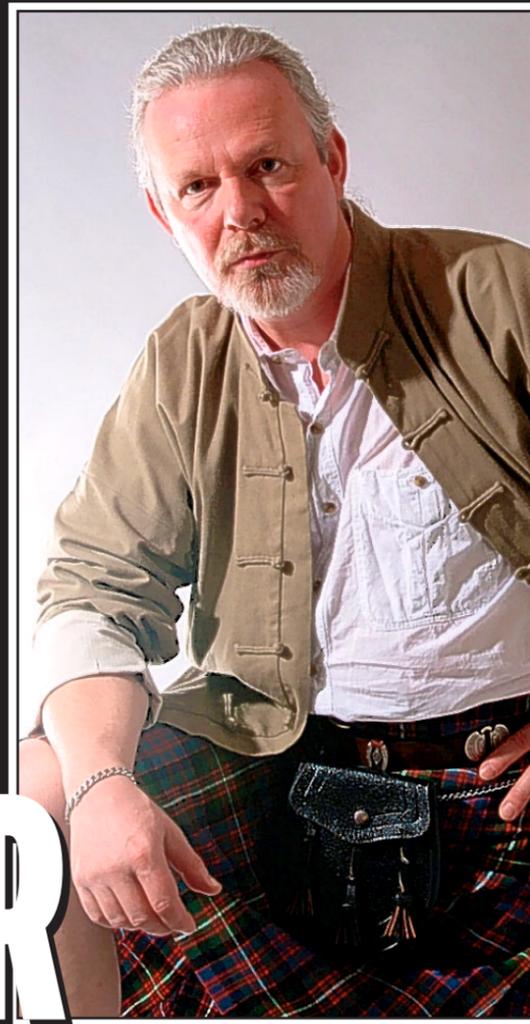


He left a career in television to live in France and write novels. But who is this Scot who has won global acclaim but is unknown at home?

THE SECRET BEST-SELLER



Accomplished: Glasgow novelist Peter May

THE winter sun is streaming through the ornate windows of an old French farmhouse burdened by delusions of grandeur. In the 'room with the tower' – a somewhat presumptuous architectural feature dating from the 1940s – Peter May has just written his daily complement of 3,000 words. Another best-seller nears completion.

His reward is a glass of fine wine and a few moments to reflect on the good life – and his role as one of the most successful Scottish-born writers in the world today.

Bizarrely, household-name status eludes the Glasgow novelist – who once put words into the mouth of the television icon that is Mrs Mack in *Take the High Road* – in spite of 14 books translated into a dozen languages. Sales have run into the millions in the U.S. and Europe, where his star shines brightest.

His latest novel, *The Black House*, set on the Isle of Lewis, will be published in two weeks – in French. 'It is surreal: a Scottish author, writing a book in English about a Gaelic-speaking community, which comes out in French,' he says.

The idea for the thriller was born years ago during his television days, when he was producing BBC's *Machair*, a subtitled Gaelic soap that achieved top-ten ratings.

And as three more of his books come out in the U.S., including his first, *The Reporter*, based on another well-loved BBC series, *The Standard*, he suggests his anonymity may be the result of not falling into expat traps.

'Maybe it's because I've been away for a while,' says the author who professes an allergy to tartan carpets and the hypocrisy of pretending all he ever wants is to return home.

After 12 years in France, May, 57, is unrepentantly happy to be living in the south-west wine region, where he can indulge in a fondness for cold, crisp winters, hot summers and the area's inimitable produce.

'I am integrated socially and administratively and I so love a glass of wine,' adds the former journalist, scriptwriter and producer, who presided over 500 episodes of *Take the High Road*, the most successful Scottish series in television history.

He added: 'I don't do two things. I don't pretend to long for home. I don't whine about the French – but I do speak French.'

Now, in another international twist, filming is about to start on a major movie adaptation of *The Firemaker*, one of his six 'China' thrillers based on a Chinese pathologist and a police detective in Beijing.

He says: 'It is being made by China's top film director and will be produced by a leading French film company and shot in English for the international market. It will premiere at Cannes next year. It's a tough life but I suppose I'll have to go.'

In the meantime, he has just completed the fourth novel in the *Enzo Files*.

ENZO Macleod is a Scottish, fiftysomething forensic expert living in France, who helps the gendarmerie solve cold cases. May says: 'Honestly, he is nothing like me – apart from his ethnicity, his physical appearance, his love of France and fondness for fine wine. He is also a womaniser and that is where I am happy to differ from him.'

May and his wife, the scriptwriter and playwright Janice Hally, are perfectly happy in their rural idyll. The writer, who left television in 1996 to move to France, lives in a 200-year-old farmhouse north of Cahors. 'As I



by Jim McBeth

look out the window, there is not a cloud in the sky. We are perfectly happy in this house, even though a previous owner had delusions of grandeur and added a tower.'

It is a far cry from Scottish winters, filming *High Road* on Loch Lomond and *Machair* on Lewis.

May moved to television from journalism and used his experience to good effect in *The Standard*, a series set in the newsroom of a national newspaper. When *The Standard* concluded, he stayed in the business with *High Road*.

'I'm very proud of *High Road*,' he says and adds: 'There were 104 episodes a year. It was the number one show in Scotland and attracted six million afternoon viewers in England.'

'I was writer, story editor and then script editor. I adored writing for characters like Mrs Mack and Big Morag.'

But the task of sustaining the soap's success, in the face of poor decision-making by STV chiefs, persuaded him to defect to the BBC and *Machair*.

May says: 'I quit in 1988 and watched with dismay as the show went downhill. Doing *High Road* had been a ball and it attracted huge audiences. But younger and more earnest writers came in and changed the style.'

'The bosses were obsessed with the 16 to 24 age group. Nothing I could say would persuade them that 16 to 24-year-olds would not watch *High Road*. By aiming the story at that age group, it killed the show.'

May was then commissioned to create *Machair*, a bold initiative to bring Gaelic to a mainstream audience. He says: 'It was a challenge. We had to find writers and actors to make a professional show in Gaelic that would appeal to an English-speaking audience on prime-time television.'

'After the first series, I concentrated on producing, leading a cast and crew of 60 on location to Lewis for five months a year. It was very rewarding.'

'We took a subtitled drama into the top ten in Scotland, with a

33 per cent audience share. At the time, Channel 4's *Brookside* had less than half that.'

Away from television, May's head was buzzing with ideas for a unique series of thrillers set in Beijing. He says: 'I was fascinated by China and I thought I could make it work. I received tremendous co-operation from the authorities as the first Westerner to be allowed inside the judicial system.'

IN terms of cultural thought processes, China was so different. Chinese detectives form an elite and their approach to murder is very different. Our police look first for motive, which they believe will identify the killer.

'The Chinese have no concept of that. They build layer upon layer of evidence, the weight of which they believe will eventually fall on the perpetrator. They also do not concede a suspect's right to silence. In their culture, silence equals guilt.'

There have been six books in the China series and May is contemplating a seventh. He adds: 'I'm inundated with emails, asking for another instalment. At the moment, the third and fourth *Enzo* are due to come out and three more are scheduled. That's concentrating my mind but I'm very tempted to go back to the China series soon.'

His desire to revisit the franchise has been enhanced by the fact that one of the books, *Snakehead*, has just won the Prix Intramuros, one of France's most prestigious, if bizarre, literary awards.

He says: 'It's a huge award in France. Crime thrillers are short-listed and then the books are sent out to a panel of experts who choose the winner. The twist is that the 'experts' are murderers, rapists and other criminals serving sentences in the French penal system.'

'I'm immensely proud of the award. Could there be any greater seal of approval on crime writing? I really should have another glass of wine, to celebrate.'

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