

Anthony Horowitz interviews Alan Conway

Reprinted from the Spectator magazine

When I met Alan Conway at the Ivy Club in London, it struck me that we actually had a great deal in common. At least, that was what I thought at the start.

He and I both write detective fiction although in different ways. He is the author of the phenomenally successful Atticus Pünd series while I've spent many years writing crime drama for television: *Midsomer Murders*, *Foyle's War* and *Agatha Christie's Poirot*. We're now both published by Orion Books. We also have a Suffolk connection. Alan lives in a Victorian folly just outside Framlingham while I have a small house in Orford, just the other side of the A12. Finally, for what it's worth, we're both members of the Ivy Club although it was he who chose to meet here, not me.

A week before the publication of his seventh novel, *Red Roses for Atticus*, I was asked to interview him by the *Spectator* and I was looking forward to it. I'm a fan of the books. I actually spent a couple of months working on *Atticus Pünd Investigates*, the first in the series, adapting it for the BBC. That didn't end well. The production company – Red Herring Productions – abruptly fired me and the last I heard, Alan was adapting the book himself.

To mention this to him was probably a mistake – but his reaction was, to say the least, surprising. 'Yes. I told them I wanted to take it over. To be honest, I was never a big fan of *Midsomer Murders*. It always struck me as very lightweight and silly. I thought there was an opportunity, with the screenplay of my book, maybe to do something more subtle.'

An unspoken contract usually exists between writers promoting a book and the journalists – or whoever – interviewing them. The writer will be pleasant and cooperative. And even if the journalist hates the book, he or she will be polite. It's why you'll never read bad reviews before a book is published. So I was puzzled why Conway should be so carelessly insulting and I suppose, in return, I should have a sly dig at his work.

But I can't because the truth is that *Red Roses for Atticus* is one of the best in the series. It's the first book that's set outside the UK, mainly in the south of France, and initially that worried me. I've always thought Atticus Pünd works

best in the English countryside. *No Rest for the Wicked* and *Gin & Cyanide*, which both have a London setting, were somehow less comfortable reads for me. That said, Conway conjures up a very real image of the Côte d'Azur in the late fifties. You can almost smell the bougainvillea.

Also, it's the first story to include a fully fledged love affair. Atticus falls for Lydia Ford, the sister of a famous artist, and is forced to investigate when she is arrested for the murder of a local dealer called Jon Subaru. As the evidence mounts up, it seems certain that she must be guilty and there's a brilliantly unpleasant French detective, Inspector Renault, who adds to the tension. The ending certainly fooled me and I suspect it will fool you too – although, as usual, Conway plays completely fair.

So I begin by suggesting that it's unusual to have a detective who falls in love. He is quick to disagree. 'That's rubbish. What about Holmes and Irene Adler? And Hercule Poirot fell for a Russian countess, Vera Rossakoff ...' Actually, I knew that. She appears in a story called *The Double Clue* which I adapted for ITV. But before I can suggest that these are the briefest of brief encounters, he continues, seemingly contradicting himself. 'The trouble is that most detectives are too single-minded. They have no *cojones*. They don't even have character, really. They just have mannerisms.' He smiles to himself. 'When a woman tells a detective he's only interested in one thing, she's not talking about sex. He probably just wants to arrest her.'

That's not true of Atticus Pünd, I say. A character turns up in the new book; Otto Daimler, who was with Pünd at the Sobibór concentration camp – and this adds a very personal, quite moving dimension to the story. Conway disagrees, his language on the edge of offensive. 'People don't read my books because they're interested in Pünd or what happened to him at the hands of the Nazis. They read them to find out who did it.' But surely you have to believe in the detective as a human being? 'Not really. He has a function and that's what counts. Look at Holmes! Even Doyle admits that he has no interest in literature, philosophy or politics. He doesn't have friends. He has acquaintances.'

And yet Holmes is one of the most loved characters in popular fiction. Pünd himself was supposedly based on an English teacher, Stephen Pound, who taught Conway in St Albans. (Pound, who is still teaching, did not return my calls). Is he really nothing more than a cypher? 'Of course he's a cypher. And the killer in *Red Roses for Atticus* is, in a way, neutral. The two of them are a sort of calculation, an equation. You read the book only for the equals sign.'

Really? To listen to Conway talk, you might think he has a certain disdain for

his own work – if not for the wealth it has brought him. He has turned up for the interview – forty-five minutes late, incidentally – in jeans, white shirt and jacket, brand new and expensive. While I drink tea, he orders champagne. He fidgets with a gold ring on his fourth finger, twisting it as I speak as if it's some sort of volume control. The more I speak, the faster the ring turns. If I began the interview thinking how similar we were, it soon strikes me that we are complete opposites.

During our conversation, he has been glancing at his watch and just thirty minutes in, a young man appears and introduces himself as James Taylor, Conway's PA. The car is outside. The interview is over. Conway goes to the bar to pay for the drinks and Taylor – who is actually his partner – confides in me. 'I hope he hasn't been too stroppy with you. He doesn't like doing interviews.' Then why did he agree? 'Well, obviously, the publishers made him. We did Edinburgh a few weeks ago and he absolutely hated it. He always says writers shouldn't talk about their books, they should just write them.'

Here I disagree. Writing is such a solitary business that I've always loved literary festivals and it's a pleasure to talk to people who've read my books. There was a story that Conway once reduced a female interviewer to tears at Hay-on-Wye. After meeting him, I'm inclined to believe it.

Eventually, he returns from the bar. 'I hope you got what you wanted. Did you actually read the book?' I tell him, of course I did and he gives me the thinnest of smiles. 'You know, when we were talking, I slipped in the name of the killer. I hope nobody reads your piece. It might spoil the ending.'

It's his parting shot. I'm left wondering quite what motivates Alan Conway who is without any question one of the most disconcerting authors I have ever come across. What exactly did he mean by those final words? I have recorded our conversation and play it back several times before I write this article but I certainly can't find the name of the killer. Is it really there or was he just taunting me?

Sad though it is to say it, there's one name that has rather killed my pleasure in his books. I'm rather afraid it's his.

September 2014