

**LOST DETECTIVES PODCAST
EPISODE 5**

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INTERVIEW WITH VAL MCDERMID, CLAIRE WHITEHEAD AND CAROL ADLAM

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Claire Whitehead [CW]: Welcome everybody to Episode 5 of our 'Lost Detectives: Adapting Old Texts for New Media' podcast series, kindly sponsored by the University of St Andrews. My name is Dr Claire Whitehead from the Russian department at St Andrews and I'm joined virtually from Nottingham by my friend and collaborator, the author and illustrator, Carol Adlam. And I'm really thrilled to say that our guest for today's episode is the author Val McDermid. Val, hello!

Val McDermid [VM]: Hello, it's nice to be here.

CW: Thank you very much. So, as many of the people listening will know, Val is the best-selling author of numerous crime novels beginning with *Report for Murder*, I think, back in 1987. And with her latest novel published last year, in 2020, *Still Life*. And we could, of course, spend this episode of the podcast and undoubtedly more talking about the contents of those novels, and the characters and the plots. But given the focus of our podcast series, what we thought we'd do, is ask Val to talk to us today about her various experiences of adaptation, primarily in the field of crime fiction, but not only related to your working crime fiction if that's okay with you. So, we thought we'd start with some questions about adaptations of your crime writing, then a little bit later, Carol will jump in and ask a little bit more about visual adaptation and your own work as an adapter as well of texts.

So, I imagine that most of our listeners will know you best from your various crime novels and series but you're an author whose work has been adapted on very many occasions. So, I wonder... just a very first question, if you can remember what was the very first of your works, crime or otherwise, that was subject to adaptation? Can you tell us a little bit about how that started?

VM: Well, in a funny kind of way my career as a professional writer started off with adaptation. When I'd left university, I was determined that I was going to be a writer and I thought I was going to write the great English novel. And so, I spent a couple of years labouring in my spare time over this novel all about tortured human relationships and angst, and the kind of thing where somebody has to try and kill themselves in the second-to-last chapter. And the one thing I can say about it really is that I finished it and I sent it off to lots of publishers who promptly sent it back more or less by return of post. And I was not entirely daunted by this; I set about writing a second novel. But in the meantime, I showed it to a friend of mine who was an actor and she said, 'I don't know much about novels, but I think this would make a really good play'.

And I thought, 'Right? Well, a play. How do I do that? Well, I just cross out the descriptions and leave in the speaky bits, and it's a play'. And effectively, that's what I did. I wrote some extra dialogue to cover the bits that I'd crossed out. And I wrote this play. And I took it off to the local theatre, I was working in Plymouth at the time as a young journalist and the director of the local theatre said, 'This is perfect. I'm doing a season of new plays in the studio theatre and I'd love to do this'. So my novel had become a theatrical adaptation and then on the back of that, I got an agent and I adapted it further for BBC Radio. So, I thought this is it, I'm going to be a playwright. I had no idea what I'd done right and that was the big problem because I couldn't

replicate it. And suffice to say my fledgling career as a playwright didn't last very long because I was completely rubbish at it. And eventually, my agent fired me and I thought I'd better do something different if I was going to be a writer and that's when I turned my hand to crime fiction.

CW: So adaptation right from the outset?

VM: Accidental adaptation, really. It wasn't part of the plan at all insofar as I had a plan. Yeah. But yeah. And I suppose the one thing I did learn from it is that different forms require different ways of telling stories. And that something that works on the page doesn't necessarily work on the stage.

And the next bit of adaptation I really had was when I started writing the Kate Brannigan novels which I started publishing in 1992 and a friend who is a radio producer suggested that I adapt them for radio. And the one that I started with was *Clean Break*, which is the fourth Kate Brannigan novel, I think, and the producer I was working with at the time said, 'the problem we have with this is that you have two plots running through the book and it's impossible to do both of them justice in a 45-minute drama'. So, we ended up splitting it into two plays, two radio adaptations, which I really enjoyed because, apart from having to sort of strip the two plots apart from each other and make them stand on their own two feet, what I realized really at that point was how radio as a medium is all about the words still, in a way that when you're writing a novel or something, it's all about the words because that has to make the characters come alive. And in the radio, again, the focus is the language. The actors make it come off the page, but if the words aren't there in the first place, there's nothing the actors can do about it really.

So that was... I had a subsequent adaptation of *A Distant Echo* for radio which I didn't do, Bert Coules did that adaptation because I looked at it and I did not see how I could turn that into a radio adaptation. It just seemed to me to be too complicated a job for me, for my abilities. I've always thought I have a very strong sense of where my abilities end and where other people's skills need to come to the fore.

CW: It was interesting, I was just... I think perhaps because of something that you had retweeted last week, I just went and listened to *Clean Break* because BBC Radio 4 Extra, it's available again on their website and I thought what an amazing job Charlotte Coleman, the late great Charlotte Coleman, had made in that performance, that she really did, as you say, bring that character absolutely to life, I thought wonderfully.

VM: Yeah. It's... I must say I've been well served in my adaptations by the actors I've had to work with. It's been really... it's been a pleasure to work with people who bring their own imaginative scope to the work and that gives an added dimension that you can never be sure you're going to get when you adapt something.

CW: Yeah. And I was wanting to ask as well... I mean, we've talked there about adaptations as plays and radio plays. I suppose, being honest, the first kind of knowledge I had of your work being adapted was actually the ITV series *Wire in the Blood* that I think began in 2002 and ran for about six series, up through 2009, with Robson Green playing Dr Tony Hill, and I think in the first few series Hermione Norris, as Detective Inspector Carol Jordan, and then later Simone Lahbib playing a sort of subsequent version of a Detective Inspector Alex Fielding. A huge ratings success, syndicated in lots of different countries to lots of different TV production companies. Could you just tell us a little bit about how that process works, and maybe differences between TV adaptation and radio adaptation as well?

VM: Yeah, it was an extraordinary success, I think, with *Wire in the Blood* and I think the reason for that was the way that Coastal Productions approached it from the start. I'd had approaches before about adapting the Tony Hill and Carol Jordans. And also previously, a television adaptation had been suggested for Kate Brannigan, but I kind of made myself a promise when I stopped being a newspaper journalist that never again was I going to work with people I didn't like or didn't trust. And I think, I vividly remember one conversation with a producer on the Kate Brannigan and he said 'the thing about Kate Brannigan is she's got balls' and I thought, we're possibly not going to be able to work together very harmoniously here. So, as I said, we've had previous approaches about the Tony Hills and Carol Jordans and I had just felt that the people concerned didn't get what I was doing. And so I said, no, which was quite a hard thing to do at that point in my career because I wasn't rolling in money at that point, you know and, but I said no. And then Robson and Sandra Jobling, his producer colleague, came along and asked for a meeting, and I was intrigued because I thought Robson was a good actor, and I also felt some level of consolation because he looks very like the Tony Hill in my head. So, I thought, right from the start, I'm not going to have to leap that wall to someone who doesn't look like Tony at all. And we had a meeting and we, the three of us just hit it off and it was quite clear talking to Sandra and Robson that they got it, they understood what the books were about. And we talked about it, we spent a couple of days once we'd agreed that we would go ahead with this, took a couple days just talking about the characters and the books and the ambience of that world and narrowing down the key elements that were sort of written in stone. Because I understand that the demands of television are very different from the demands of the page, you know. I can write five pages setting a scene full of atmosphere and ambience and beautiful writing and that's like a 10-second shot the camera pans across. So, the grammar of the storytelling is fundamentally different and you have to acknowledge that... you have to step away from that. It's not about saying, 'well, that's not what I wrote'. You have to concentrate, I think, on those elements that make it distinctive, that make it particular.

So we talked about the character of Tony Hill, the character of Carol Jordan, the nature of the relationship, the intelligence of the storytelling, the ambience of the world. And after that, after those couple of days, I essentially said to them, 'go away and make the best television you can'. I was a consultant on the series and that meant they took it seriously. I've heard other colleagues have had very different experiences but with Coastline I was taken very seriously as a collaborator. I saw every draft of every script and I was expected to give notes that just went into the same pot as everybody else. And those notes were all presented from the script editor.

So, the writers of the episodes, crucially, didn't know what were my notes or what were the producer's notes, what were the script editor's notes. They just got the notes together and much of what I suggested was acted on, much of it wasn't, some of it for very, very good, dramatic reasons. And some of it for just... that's not going to work. Where I did get paid most attention to was when I said, 'this is a Carol thing not a Tony thing', or, you know, 'this is a way of doing it but a better way of doing it is this'. And so, in general, it was a pretty harmonious experience all round, I think.

The series did really well, as you said, ran to six series and a special filmed in Texas of all places and it was very successful in the ratings, it got awards and it still runs today. I mean, it's always on some place, it's always on some channel or another, which is very gratifying, not just because it's good telly and stands up all these years later but because it always brings new people to the books which, I think, is the fundamental reason why anybody ever agrees to have anything adapted. If you're a writer, you want people to read your work and you want to reach out to the biggest audience you can find and a good television adaptation will do that for you. And a bad television adaptation will probably have the reverse effect and it can have a catastrophic effect. My colleague, Liza Cody had her work adapted, the Anna Lee mysteries and it was such a diabolical travesty of her character and her work that she couldn't write Anna Lee any longer. She said, 'I can't write Anna Lee, I can't see her in my head anymore. All I can see is the television image of her and it's destroyed it for me'. So, you know, it can have... I've been very fortunate in that respect.

We then went on with Coastal to do an adaptation of *A Place of Execution*, which I think was a much bigger ask in many ways, because it's a complex, structured novel in the sense that it moves between two different time frames and has quite a complicated premise. And I thought they did that really well. And again, we had a great cast... Juliet Stevenson, Greg Wise, Lee Ingleby. Terrific performances... It was filmed in Northumberland and it just looked great as well. I mean, it worked really well... Looked great. And I was very happy with what they'd done with a very complicated story. Patrick Harbinson, who did the adaptation, I think, did a brilliant job of conveying what is quite complex story with a lot of hidden truths, if you like, in the book that were hard not to reveal in the television. So that was, as I said, a very fruitful relationship with them.

CW: Yeah... I was going to just ask, going back to *Wire in the Blood* just briefly... with the number of episodes that they ended up producing, I think around about 30 different episodes over those series, maybe more. To what extent were all of those derived from your own work and novels or was it sort of that your novels were the catalyst for that series being developed and then, you know, more original screenplays came in or were they all adaptations?

VM: No they weren't because they ran out of books very quickly. At the time they started, I'd only published, I think, three Tony Hill and Carol Jordan novels and the third of those annoyingly for Coastal was set in mainland Europe which was too expensive to do really. So, I think they ended up adapting four and a half of the novels but they had to start writing their own storylines very quickly. And again, that was where my consultation came in as well because

the outlines... they ran the outlines past me to see whether I thought they would work and if I thought they were in keeping. And so, again I felt that I could... I had input, I had a say and was valuable and was listened to. And so we ended up with something that was coherent across the series, I think.

CW: Yeah. I was going to say your involvement, I think, also stretches on a couple of occasions to appearances in that series. Is that right? I think it's the case that you act briefly in a couple of the episodes and then a series that I'm going to ask you about in a bit, *Traces*, that was on much more recently, you make a brief appearance in that as well. So, are these acting appearances a way of you just, you know, flexing your thespian muscles or is it a secret way of keeping an eye on proceedings on set as the adaptation is filmed?

VM: It's just a bit of fun really, you know, the sort of that Hitchcockian thing of, you know. I mean Colin Dexter appears in almost every episode of *Morse*. So it's just a wee bit of fun. And the first one... In the adaptation of *Mermaids Singing*, I get to be a journalist.

CW: A stretch for you!

VM: Oh yeah, a big stretch... yeah. And, in the final series, I get to be a journalist again although my line is separate from my visual appearance. So, in one scene, you get me saying, 'Good morning, Dr Hill' and the next thing you see me in the scrum of journalists. And that was just a little bit of fun. But then in *Traces*, which we'll come on to talk about a little bit more, I again appear as a journalist and I'm worried that I'm getting typecast.

CW: Yeah, you maybe need to extend your range.

VM: Yeah, I'd like to think that I could play something different, you know. But you know, it's clear that the directors don't think that that's within my grasp.

CW: We've mentioned *Traces* there... So, for listeners maybe who don't perhaps know or haven't yet seen it. So, this is a TV series that I think was commissioned by the channel Alibi, which is a TV channel that shows predominantly crime series, if not only crime series, and then was so successful on there, that it was picked up and shown on BBC1 during 2020. And that's based on an original idea by you, but that's one of the questions I want to ask you. So, this is a series set in Dundee... I have to say so nice to see a sunny Dundee depicted on the television.

VM: That was so funny... They filmed in Dundee for 10 days and it rained once and all the crew who'd come up from Manchester were all going, 'but it's lovely up here... we all want to move to Dundee'. And I'm thinking 'really? come in February'!

CW: It's totally unrepresentative of Dundee weather but it follows this character Emma Hedges, played by Molly Windsor, who's a lab technician at the Scottish Institute of Forensic Science at the fictitious University of Tayside and... sort of the mystery surrounding the death of her mother ends up kind of dovetailing with an investigation that that lab is conducting into a fatal

nightclub fire. And it has, once again really, I think, an amazing cast: Molly Windsor, as I've mentioned, but Laura Fraser, Martin Compston, John Gordon Sinclair makes an extended appearance as well. So, first of all, I mean, can you explain a little bit what 'based on an original idea' means, I suppose, and then also, following on from that, to what extent you're involved in the writing of that series? Amelia Bulmore is credited as well as one of the writers. So, and that series is actually filming its second series now, I think, that's right.

VM: Well, I realized with the work that I did with the people on *Wire in the Blood* it made me understand what I had suspected after doing the radio scripts, which is that I don't have the skills to write television scripts. It's a different skill set and it's not one that I possess. I might see things kind of cinematically when I'm writing, but actually writing for the screen, as I say, is a very different skill and I don't think it's mine. So, I have a lot of friends over the years among forensic scientists because I've used... I've plumbed their knowledge and experience many times in my work, but I've also heard them complain on so many occasions about the way that they're represented on screen. You know, the miraculous forensics of *CSI* or *Silent Witness* or *Waking the Dead* where, you know, one forensic scientist covers all the disciplines and does everything in 10 minutes and, you know, it's just makes real forensic scientists very cross. And I did a nonfiction book about forensics in 2014 which meant I spent a lot of time talking to them and they all said the same thing about 'why can't they just show what we actually do?'. And I agreed with them completely because, you know, frankly there's enough 'wow' moments in the actual science without having to sex it up.

And so, I thought it would be a good idea to have a series where the forensic science and the forensic scientist were the focus of the drama. And so, I went off to talk to Nicola Shindler at Red Productions and said, you know, like 'what do you think about doing something like this?' And she said, 'let me see an outline'. So I did an outline for a six-part drama and went back to Nicola and they liked it and they commissioned it and I was absolutely thrilled right at the start when they said that Amelia would write it because I was familiar with the work that she'd done on *Scott and Bailey* and also her radio work before that with Maxine Peake on *Craven* and I thought I was I dead lucky to have Amelia on it, and so it proved. I mean, her scripts are brilliant. She's so meticulous. She researches everything so carefully and, honestly, it's an absolute joy to work with her.

So, we work together, we talk about the... we work out the storyline and I make suggestions about possible forensic avenues to go down and Amelia goes and researches further and we talk some more and then she goes away and writes the scripts. And I see the drafts of the scripts and off we go. I am less hands-on in some ways than I was with *Wire in the Blood* but that's because it's not my baby in the same sense. But I'm kind of there in the background as the person who can sometimes dig us out of a storyline hole, or whatever, or come up with a new suggestion as to how best we can do something. But you know, all credit to Amelia who I think is just a stunning scriptwriter. You know, I read her scripts with such joy because there's so little to criticize in them. It's fantastic. It's, I mean, working with a prod that you really respect is an absolute Joy. So off we go again... we're about halfway, not halfway, we're a bit of the way through filming Series 2 of *Traces*. We're back in Dundee in a few weeks time...

CW: I see this morning that you've been causing trouble in Bolton by filming a scene there that had clearly fake emergency service vehicles out and causing some consternation amongst the people of Bolton.

VM: We're blowing up Bolton this morning, I think.

CW: Excellent!

VM: Well, some people might consider that was a social service. But, anyway, as I say, yeah, we're filming the second series of that. And, you know, some terrific cast members as you said. And unfortunately, we won't have John Gordon Sinclair in the second series as his character is not part of the storyline.

CW: No, that's a shame.

VM: As he described it himself: 'I was the eye candy'!

CW: Absolutely. Well, some of us might disagree.

VM: I wasn't going to disagree with that either.

CW: I really very much enjoyed... I sort of binge-watched it on Alibi when it was on last year and was so glad to see it picked up by the BBC so it would reach, you know, a broader audience. And I thought it was amazing.

VM: And we got a great audience on the BBC. We were over six million, we were nearly 7 million which these days is a really strong audience number. I think *Line of Duty* only got 9 million on Sunday. You know, we're not that far behind.

CW: Brilliant. I'm going to pass over to Carol now who's been sitting very patiently listening to us. So Carol's going to continue the interrogation, if that's okay.

Carol Adlam [CA]: Yeah, great. Okay, thank you. Listening with great interest and I just wanted to ask you about the visual side of things because I know you've got a graphic novel coming out called *Resistance* in May this year, is that right?

VM: That's right - yeah.

CA: And this is adapted from your original radio play that was broadcast on the BBC in 2017. And I just wondered if you could tell us a little bit about that, and I'm interested in, from my own point of view as an artist who's working on adaptations as well, so just a bit about what your involvement in that was. And, and also, how you came to work with Kathryn Briggs, the artist and what that process has involved?

VM: Yeah, it goes back to... the story goes back to early 2017 when the Wellcome Trust do an annual symposium thing where they bring together writers of radio drama, radio drama producers and scientists. And every year they have a theme and so a writer turns up with their producer and is assigned a scientist. And you have a day of briefings about the theme in general, then you can sit down with the scientist and ask your questions about detail and how things work out. And the year that I was asked to do this the theme was antimicrobial resistance and the first person we had talking to us was Sally Davies who at the time was the Chief Medical Officer of England. And she was talking about the fact that the drugs don't work anymore, that that against microbial diseases... antibiotics just have been... the resistance levels that we have to antibiotics are such that a plague is coming and we won't have the drugs to deal with it. And the picture she painted of what was coming at us down the line was so terrifying to me that I went away and the only thing I could think of doing was to write an apocalypse.

So, I wrote this three-part radio drama about an infection that gets out of control and becomes a sort of universal plague, a pandemic. And it starts at a music festival in Northumberland and ends up ripping through the world's population until there's not very many people left. And this went out as a three-part drama on Radio 4 in 2017 and it was very, very well received. At that point, of course, none of us had the notion that a pandemic was heading for us at quite the speed that it engulfed us. But, at the time, Wellcome were so pleased with it, and the reception it had, that they asked me to turn it into a novel. And I just kind of rolled back my eyes and said, 'oh, why would I want to do that? I've written it once. Why would I want to write it again?' And I was talking about this with my partner and saying I just don't want to do this and she said, she's a smart woman, she said 'what about a graphic novel?'. And I said, 'well, that's pretty stupid... I can't even draw a straight line'. And she's like, 'don't be stupid, you wouldn't draw the straight line'. And my son got very excited. He said, 'you get a whole different demographic mum'. And so, I went back to the people at Profile, who do the publishing for the Wellcome trust, who had suggested the novelization in the first place and said, 'how do you feel about a graphic novel?' And so, sharp intake of breath, and they said 'we've never done one of those. Let's do one'.

So, that was the point where we went forward with that and they... between them and me, we drew up a short list of possible artists, looking really at people whose style we quite liked or people who were suggested to us. And Kathryn was one of the people whose name came up in this. And we looked at her work. She'd done some short comic work but not a full-length graphic novel at that point. But we liked her style and we liked her range. She was in Dundee at the time, she was in studying at Dundee, she's American and she'd been studying at Dundee. And so, I went off to meet her in Dundee... There's a thread running through this: the significance of Dundee in my writing, perhaps do a paper on that! And we got on really well and she liked the idea and I liked her work and so that was that. And she went off and did some sample pages for us and we were all really impressed with those sample pages. And then, visa ran out and she had to go back to America. So, we've done it at distance, really? But essentially because it was a radio drama, and radio drama is all about dialogue, there wasn't very much

work for me to do at that point because, as far as I was concerned, the script for the graphic novel, as it were, was there already. And she went away and she again showed me some more sample pages of things, different ideas that she had for... different visual languages for different things and we were just blown away by it. And the end result, I think, is just amazing. It's different styles. I think she's really captured the flavour of the drama and that sense of excitement and terror and that sort of awful impending doom that runs through it. So, that's how we did it.

CA: Great. I've just seen a few pages online, you know, the teaser pages. And I can't, I can't wait to see, you know, the full thing when it comes out. It looks fantastic. And, I mean, you mentioned earlier on... you said about Robson Green that he looked quite like your idea of Tony Hill. So, I just wondered about whether you have a visual imagination yourself and whether, when Kathryn was doing the work, did you already have a preconceived idea in your head of what it would look like? Or what certain characters might look like? Or were you kind of open to what she was doing?

VM: I had some sort of images in my head of what the characters would look like because, in a way, when I'm writing something I almost run it like a film in my head and then describe what I'm seeing or write the dialogue of what I'm seeing. So, I had quite sort of fuzzy images in my head of what these characters would look like. But I didn't say any of that to Kathryn because I thought it was important that she brought her vision to it. And I'm very happy with how those characters have been realized on the page. Mostly they don't look anything like I'd imagined, but they look right.

CA: Ah well, that's most important bit, yeah. Great.

VM: And I think the... I think she's captured something quite powerful in the way that she's drawn the characters, the different characters from the different social ranges. And I... yeah, I mean it's something that continues to amaze me is what an artist can do. Because, you know, the standing joke in our house is 'you can't even draw a horse with the legs going the right way'. That's true. I can't draw anything. I'm terrible... hopeless at it. So I've got huge respect for someone who can bring pictures to life in that way. And, you know, for me as, I mean, throughout my childhood, I've read a lot of comics and you know everything from *The Topper* and *The Beano* and *The Bunt* and those classic comics where you used to get, you know, a classic novel told in picture form. And so, the idea of relating a story in that way, it's something that feels very natural to me, you know, and everything from *The Broons* onwards, you know.

CA: So you're used to that idea of visual language and working with things visually having had that long acquaintance with comics and I wanted to ask you about your own experience adapting other people's work rather than having your own adapted. I know that as an adapter myself my approach has been to put the original text aside altogether sometimes and kind of dream up something new. Although of course, my authors are all dead so I haven't had any comeback. Anyway, I was wondering about your adaptation of Jane Austen.

VM: Well, yes, I did a contemporary reworking of *Northanger Abbey* which was fascinating because the brief I was given was that I had to stick to the same basic storyline and the same characters. So I had to find a language for that in the 21st century which was really interesting and challenging but also great fun because I had that template... I had Jane Austen's template to work from but I had the freedom to colour it in differently, to give a different palette, if you like, to give it a different verbal style, which was the exciting thing to do with that and to see indeed if it could be done, if that story could be translated into a modern idiom. And it's quite interesting because it was part of a wider project and I felt that one or two of the other adapters had not really done the same thing that I had done. They'd done something quite different with the story or they done something quite different with the characters. And I thought, 'God, I did it the really hard way here'. But it was also very satisfying to me.

And I think you're right about that thing about sometimes you have to put the original text to one side and what matters is the authenticity of your approach. That's what's important is it's taking the spirit, the essence of the original, into the adapted form I think is the most important aspect of it. Inevitably, the storytelling becomes different in places because different forms have different demands on the way you tell the story, which I don't have to tell you, that's telling you to suck eggs but as long as it has that authentic feel, that people feel it's a continuum between the two things, the original and the adaptation. If it's a continuum, then they don't feel... They can be challenged in different ways, but they don't feel that they're in an alien environment, there's none of that sort of 'well, that's nothing like it'.

CA: And it's addressing that 21st-century audience... that's what I found to be really important in the adaptations, you know, not alienating them completely, not plunging them into a distant world that bears no relation to the world that they're in as viewers, or as readers of a graphic novel. Yeah, so that's definitely an approach that I share as well. I was going to ask you, Val, whether you think that crime fiction is a genre that lends itself particularly well to adaptation in any way, or are there any other forms that would do just as well?

VM: I think it works really well in terms of television adaptation because the nature of the crime novel is invariably an element of suspense and that lends itself to end-of-episode cliffhangers in a way that doesn't work quite as well with other generic forms, I think. It's difficult to do with historical drama because kind of everybody knows what happens at the end, you know. We all know that Thomas Cromwell is going to die, you know. So the nature of the tension comes in a different place. But with the crime novel that works really well for that. And I think there's sort of a great tradition going back to the pulp era of visual representations of the crime novel. So you've got a lot of existing tropes to work with and existing images to work with. So, in some ways, I suppose that makes it easier. But in other ways, that makes it more difficult to do something fresh and exciting. And one of the things that I've always been interested in, I was a great fan of the *Batman* for a long time and the way that different artists have reinterpreted and reinvigorated the Batman, it kind of reminds me of the way that the writers have reinvigorated the form of the crime novel over the last 40, 50 years and made it do different things that you would never have imagined reading the early crime novels that it was possible to do. So, yeah, I think it does lend itself very well to adaptation.

CA: These are forms that are resistant or rather that can take all of these different views and different interpretations. And, yeah, new things can come out of them.

VM: And sometimes, you know, the act of adaptation makes you look at it differently as well. There's a resilience to the form but there's also a fertilization that you get from working with people in a different form that they'll sometimes just say something that makes you think, 'Oh yeah' and make you go away and think about what you're doing in a slightly different light. It's funny, people think that, you know, being a writer is all about sitting in a room by yourself, which mostly it is, but the process of collaboration, I've done a lot more collaboration in the last five years or so in different forms and I've really enjoyed the stimulation that's come from that. Everything from television and radio to doing the installation I did back in Edinburgh, *Messages from the Skies*, back a few years ago, working with multimedia and working with artists and musicians. It's, it's just, it's stimulating and it's exciting. I mean, I've been doing this now for more than half my life, I think, being a professional writer and what I crave is the challenge of something fresh and something that will stimulate me to new ideas and new horizons. Otherwise, why bother?

CA: Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, yeah, collaboration is fantastic. And I also, you know, it takes me to places that I wouldn't otherwise have gone to on my own certainly. So yeah, I agree with you on that.

VM: What's the biggest challenge for you as a translator, if you like, into visual images of story.

CA: I was just looking at Claire there for a moment to say, well, maybe working with Claire!.. But in the best possible way. Yeah, you're welcome. In a way, actually, it has been moving stuff from the 19th century and trying to, I suppose, convey the complexity of that 19th-century world while really trying to say something different about it and say something fresh about it in a way that Claire, my academic collaborator, doesn't object to as well. But I'm, you know, many times when I've taken things to Claire and really pushed it, you know, said, 'no, no, I think we need to do this and change this what now seems to be in a retrograde storyline about, you know, a woman who kills her best friend because she's jealous, that sort of thing.' So, you know, all of that has gone out the window as far as I'm concerned. So, yeah, that's been one of the challenges, but a really good challenge. I mean, you know, I've benefited a great deal from the collaboration and it's also taken me into different forms so audio drama as well. So, yeah, we've just got one of the plays is being looked at by Radio 3 at the moment, so that's been so exciting. So, we're just, you know, it's been a thrill as well as a challenge, but it's taken me into sort of, out of the graphic novel, as well and into, yeah, audio drama. But there are similarities, as you say, with that interiority. Sorry, go on...

VM: No, no. I was just going to say that for me it's been actually the greatest privilege of being successful is that it's meant people have come to me with a much wider range of projects involving collaboration and adaptation and that's for me it has been really exciting and in many ways it's kind of reinvigorated my own practice.

CA: Yeah. Yeah, and I guess it snowballs as well in a way. I mean I found that in a much smaller way with my own practice as an illustrator, but for you, I imagine, you know, things just, I imagine they must proliferate and you get all sorts of exciting offers.

VM: Yeah, some of which you have to say no to.

CA: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I was going to ask you actually one final question, if I may, which is just whether Flash Gordon might ever appear in any kind of adaptation, Lindsay Gordon, your very early creation who I loved in back in the 90s when you were writing her?

VM: They've actually recently been optioned for television. I mean, who knows what will come of that. But the thing that cracked me up was the first novel was published in '87 and when we did the option deal, they were saying, of course, 1987, that's period drama! I thought oh, my life?

CA: Yeah, exactly.

VM: So, it's a possibility, is the short answer to that. I hope something comes of it. I think the '80s is back on trend again I think at the moment, so it might just be that we can get that away.

CA: All sorts of possibilities before the mobile phone...

VM: Yeah, well my novel this year is called 1979 because it's set in 1979. That's just like nothing in technology. Nothing. It's all 10ps and phone boxes, you know?

CA: Yeah, fantastic.

VM: Yeah, I've got this project of a quintet of novels set at 10-year intervals. Five novels... '79, '89, '99, 2009, 2019, with the same protagonist, but not necessarily doing the same things. So that's interesting to see. There's also a lot of social change as well as the march of technology.

CA: Are they crime novels?

VM: Yes.

CA: How wonderful! Well, we'll look forward to that. I'll look forward to all of these very much. I'll hand back to Claire now.

CW: Yeah, I was going to come back in because one of the things, talking about new developments, you've mentioned the, you know, the optioning of the Lindsay Gordon novels. But I know it's at a very early stage of development, but I think my favourite, as for many people, is Karen Pirie, the investigator in the Historic Cases Unit in Scotland. And I think it's right

that that series of novels is just at the very early stages of being adapted for television. I realized that you might not have too much to say, but can you give us a taster?

VM: Yeah, it's quite a long way down the track now. We're at the stage of production scripts and we should start filming at the very end of May, beginning of June. So that will be... yeah, , they're doing the first, the first Karen Pirie film in 3 2-hour episodes, which will be the *Distant Echo* adaptation. And I'm very pleased that they're giving it the space to breathe. The story gets space to breathe, so you can develop characters properly. And that's been quite a challenge for the team who are making it, that's World TV are making it, the people who make *Line of Duty* because the first Karen Pirie novel doesn't have that much Karen Pirie in it. So there's a certain amount of work that had to be done to bring Karen much more to the fore. But I think it's going to make really good television and that will be filmed... In fact, you might bump into them in St Andrews because they're filming there.

CW: I've heard you speak previously about how much you appreciate the sense of space or place that other novelists create in their work. But that's something I think is such a strength of your writing. I've mentioned *Still Life* which I'm about one third of the way through and you mention so many places that are sort of a stone's throw away from where I'm sitting now and where you're sitting now, in fact. And I absolutely loved the first Karen Pirie novel, you know, as an academic at St Andrews being able to pick out all of those places and actually discover new ones because that's also the lovely thing as well is that I've never been to certain of these places. So, there will be a film crew appearing in Fife soon, is that right?

VM: Yeah. The producer has been off with the location manager scouting out around East Fife, rather, and in the East Neuk. I keep getting little texts saying 'I'm in Cellardyke today'. And I'm like 'I hate you'. Because we've been stuck in Edinburgh. This is the first week we've been over here back in the Neuk.

CW: Well, he needs to be out now because it's one of those sort of *Traces Dundee* days where the sun is shining again, which doesn't always happen here.

VM: My office here looks... I've got a straight shot across the Forth to Berwick Law.

CW: Wonderful.

VM: Very lucky.

CW: Just before we round up today, just because we're working on this project, which is, you know, adapting Russian crime fiction from the 19th century into as Carol has mentioned, graphic novels, hopefully radio plays that will reach a different audience, I just wanted to kind of slightly branch off adaptation and just ask you more generally whether there are foreign crime writers that you particularly enjoy reading in translation or sort of historic crime novels maybe in English as well that are particular favourites of yours? I know I've heard you speak

about your love of Agatha Christie you know back in the day. But are there foreign writers that you value and read?

VM: Yes, there are indeed. I like some of the Icelandic writers, Arnaldur Indridason and Yrsa Sigurdardottir are particular favourites of mine. And at the opposite end of the continent Andrea Camilleri's novels, Inspector Montalbano. And I do go back sometimes to old favourites like Montalban and his novels set in Barcelona are captivating. And of course Sjöwall and Wahlöö, the originators of the European police procedural or the Martin Beck novels. But there's also a lot of contemporary Scandinavian writers also that I enjoy and that's the point of course though that my brain goes completely blank and I can't think of people's names. Just terrible... I am so bad at names and titles. But, yeah, and French writers, Bernard Minier I like and of course Fred Vargas whose novels are strangely weird and nevertheless absolutely fascinating. So, there's so much out there as well. There's so much stuff coming out here from so many parts of the world, you know, from the African continent, from the subcontinent, Australia, New Zealand. And also in Far East Asia and Japan and China. There's just an incredible richness of stuff that's been produced at the moment and, you know, we can't leave the country but, you know, via crime fiction, you can go pretty much anywhere in the world at the moment.

CW: Yeah, and I think it's very interesting to see to what extent British television has actually embraced adaptations of foreign-language crime writing as well and, you know, whilst it may be the case that people might not pick up translated versions of the novels or read them in the original, but people seemingly in very large numbers are very happy to watch subtitled crime fiction or sort of co-productions. I very much enjoyed *Giri Haji* that was on a couple of years ago, the co-production between Japan and the UK.

VM: That was brilliant.

CW: And there is a real audience there, I think, that are very keen to look beyond the anglophone kind of domination I suppose of this genre to some extent.

VM: Yeah, we enjoyed many of the Nordic box sets during lockdown, like *Bordertown*, for example, we thought was really interesting. *Arctic Murders*. Yeah, just lots that we wasted our lives watching. Not wasted our life, but spent an inordinate amount of time watching particularly in the dark winter months.

CW: Well, Val, thank you so so much for your time. It's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you and really fascinating. And I think we'll have provided our listeners with some really insightful remarks about the role that adaptation has played in your career. And the way in which it's informed some of your practice or, as you say, sort of made you alive to other possibilities and the role that collaboration has played in your career as well. I certainly think the collaboration that Carol and I are currently involved in on this project has, you know, just been so rewarding for each of us in very, very unexpected ways. But we're both incredibly grateful to you for joining us all the way from St Monans! If people can imagine that this is all done virtually, Val is

literally sitting two miles away from here! So I hope that we'll run into each other perhaps on the coastal path soon as they fish another body out of the Forth, perhaps.

VM: Well, you can always come along to St Monans and enjoy our newly refurbished open air swimming pool because they've not finished your refurbishment yet, have they?

CW: No, we can have an outdoor swimming pool face-off, if you like, this summer. I'll see you the St Monans pool and raise you the Pittenweem one. But thank you very, very much indeed for your time, I really appreciate it.

CA: Thank you.

VM: It's been a pleasure. It's been a great conversation and I'm really looking forward to seeing more work from you both and I hope the radio play takes off because that would be great fun.

CA: Thanks very much.

CW: Thanks so much. Thanks once again to our guest for this episode, Val Mcdermid, for giving us such a stimulating account of her various experiences of, and attitudes towards, adaptation. We hope that you all enjoyed our conversation as much as we did. We'll be back with you all soon for another episode of 'Lost Detectives: Adapting Old Texts for New Media'. In the meantime, Carol's continuing to work on the graphic novel adaptation of Semyon Panov's *Three Courts, or Murder During the Ball* and, as Carol mentioned, we're really pleased that one of her plays, *Today in 1864*, based on Nikolai Timofeev's *Notes of an Investigator*, will be going into a commissioning round for BBC Radio. Of course, nothing's guaranteed, but we're excited that the BBC is interested in the idea and in her work and we'll keep you updated with developments on that front. Do join us again soon for more adventures in the adaptation of 19th-century Russian crime fiction. Thanks very much from both of us for listening today.