

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM BENJAMIN. CRIME FICTION AND TRANSNATIONALITY

Anna Baldini, Tom Benjamin

Born in London, Tom Benjamin worked as a journalist before becoming an internationally renowned writer of crime fiction. His debut novel, *A Quiet Death in Italy* (2019), is set in Bologna and features a detective of English origin – Daniel Leicester – working together with his Italian in-laws. *The Hunting Season* followed in 2020, while *Requiem in La Rossa* – the third volume of what is quickly becoming a saga – is due to appear at the end of 2021. Anna Baldini met the author in Bologna, where he currently lives with his Italian wife, on a sunny afternoon of mid July. The two of them investigate the crucial role played by transnational mobility for the author's writing process, how it has been crucial to better understand and cope with cultural differences existing between his two realities.

Keywords

Transnationality, Crime fiction, Interview, Cultural diversity, Mobility.

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When did you arrive in Bologna?

We moved here about 13 years ago, but for the first three I commuted between London and Bologna every week, so I didn't learn any Italian whatsoever. I started about ten years ago and I went to a language school for about three months. And it was OK, but at the end, when you go in the street and you're confronted by an Italian or you're just going out I couldn't understand a thing. So I got a job, a voluntary job, working at the door at the homeless canteen of Antoniano. I did that for about nine months principally to learn the language. And that really helped me.

Was it a shock, a cultural one, coming here? It was a very different way of life probably...

A shock... Well it was a real shock at the beginning, particularly when I was commuting week in, week out, because there is a real contrast between the two cultures. At the beginning, I had this kind of culture shock because, you know, it was quite substantial. And I would come from, you know, the heat and the cicadas of Bologna and then I would get in a plane and I would land in London where it was another season. That's quite disorienting and quite tiring. Once I settled here, the more I got to know the culture the more I got to recognize that the differences were more than skin deep. One of the things that did strike me very strongly was the beauty of Italy compared to the lack of aestheticism in the UK. That was quite a bit

disorienting because you forget that, really, Italy is a very beautiful country, but the further you drill down on the ground you realize that some basic underlying assumptions, about the way that life is, are very different between the two countries and cultures. It is probably more between northern and southern European countries, that is something you come to appreciate the longer that you're in the country.

I was wondering – how much awareness of your public did you have while writing? You are talking about a foreign culture to your audience. For you, was it more about describing an exotic location, or about your love for this country, which you wanted to transmit?

Well, it wasn't love. I was never an Italophile, I had no interest in Italy seriously. I came here once, before I met my wife. I was always more interested in northern European cultures. When we were discussing going to Italy, which I suppose would have been 13, 14 years ago, I knew nothing about Bologna. I just imagined the sort of industrial city somewhere in the north of Italy. I had no kind of preconceptions. I came here and my experience of Bologna, after I'd finished commuting, was a very, very different kind of experience to the one of those foreigners that want to come to Italy for their love of it. They want to live the good life. I was living in an apartment in Bologna and being a bouncer on the door of a homeless canteen. I was thrilled. I was seeing a very different side of Italy, and I thought, “well, this would be an interesting subject to write about”. I was thinking then very much about the sort of audience over the in UK, that this is a different Italy to the Italy they're used to.

I came across a book, *Naples '44*, by Norman Lewis, which basically gave me the key to the series. He was a guy writing a diary about his experiences as an intelligence officer in Naples in 1944, at the time the Allies arrived. I thought, “oh, this could be a way for me to explore or write about my experiences in Bologna and my perception of Bologna”. But I didn't, if you like, have a commercial narrative, you know, a crime story.

The question arises: why crime?

Well, there are two things: there are writers, obviously the big ones, a lot of Anglo-Saxon writers, who have crime stories with an Italian Commissario. I didn't want to have an Italian narrator. What was so fascinating about this book by Normal Lewis was the very fact that he *was* a British policeman who was quite sensitive to the Italians. He was not very judgmental. He was just describing what he found, but he was seeing it as an outsider. So this outsider/insider perspective, I think, really appealed to me. Ironically, I felt that it hadn't been done in the crime genre. So, I thought that I would do it. And, you know, I chose crime principally because it's a great source of stories. If you're going to write novels and you can think of it as commercial considerations, a series is far more appealing.

You have found a nice character, a storyline, to bond the series together.

It sort of lends itself to a series and you know, I wanted to be published, I had written lots of things in the past, but I hadn't found an agent and I hadn't been published. This time I thought, "this is a good idea. It's an interesting idea. And it deserves to reach a wider audience". That's how I came to choose the genre and framed it.

How many cultural stereotypes do you believe to have put in the book and how many of these stereotypes may be linked to what the audience you were publishing for was expecting from you?

Well, I suppose the family situation, the set-up is structured in a way to facilitate the series. So, you know, if you look at it like this, I needed to have an English detective in Italy, and so that is immediately a problem because what was an English detective doing in Italy? I needed a reason for him to be in Italy, which, of course, was his wife, who was dead, which is a trope, but he couldn't be completely independent because, again, I needed for him to sort of have a sounding board and someone like a father figure to steer him through Italian society and to act as a counterbalance. So, there you have the Comandante.

I'm deliberately not writing straight *gialli*, straight detective novels because, well, for starter that isn't my fundamental objective. What really interests me, as much as

the main mystery, is the mystery of Italy itself. And so that's very much the role of my detective. He's trying to understand his environment, the world around him and that's also for the reader. Because of the nature of the genre, I am obliged to focus on crime readers, but not all of the readers like me, but it's ok, because I'm really looking for people who are interested in Italy.

From what I can understand what you write is more of a commentary on Italy and its culture rather than canonical crime fiction.

Yeah, and it stands on the structure, the skeleton of crime fiction, but I'm more interested in Italy, at least in the first three books. I'm writing the fourth right now. I see the first three books as a sort of trilogy introducing Bologna to my audience. Then the next three books I see them far more like *gialli*. I want to write better and better crime stories. I have fun with that and sort of dig deeper also into the Italian culture by doing so.

Tell me more about the first book.

Well, one of the things that really struck me when I first arrived here, when I knew nothing about the political traditions of Bologna, was the tension between Labas and police. They had the squatting movement and so there was some sort of movie-like vibe moving around the streets. And that really fascinated me. And so I was just sort of describing that in the book.

What kind of research did you do about that period?

I did quite a lot of research. I read a lot and found out about the various squatting movements and things like that. But, you know, I began in life as a reporter, and then I went to the police and then I spent 10 years in international development, I sort of knew the kind of people I was talking about as far as the characters were concerned that wasn't an issue. It was the history of politics that needed further research. But let me come back to your earlier question about stereotypes. Well, there is the Comandante, who is my hero's father in law, and that's a family set up, which

is an Italian stereotype. But again, it's a stereotype because it's true. That's how it is. It made sense to me to do that. I think that is also something that appeals to Anglo-Saxon readers because they don't really have that. And, you know, one of the things that really struck me was the place in Italian culture for resistance. You have resistant structures: the family, the locality, the profession, because Italy was colonized for most of its history. The people tend to see the State and the apparatus of the State as being from a foreign power and being imposed upon them. And that means that they create a kind of alternative structures like family, or like finding the right profession and so on as an alternative source of identity and strength. That's what I was trying to reflect with the family setting.

And do you find that these are characteristics that you don't have in Britain?

I think there is this perception certainly in the UK and elsewhere in the world that Italy is behind the times, that it's very old-fashioned society, but politically, if you look at Italy, it's more like a laboratory. You got fascism first, then you got a separation between the political class and the people. Then you got Berlusconi, who was like pre-runner of Trump's populism. And now *we* have got full on populism, there was a government for a short period run by proper populist politics. And now, look at Britain: Brexit, Trump, all of this has followed Italy. If I came here and I was just interested in recording how old fashioned the State is, how charming Italy is... I wouldn't want to write. I mean, what I'm interested in is the living society rather than the dead one. And this is what really interested me about the first novel – the squatting movement and the process of gentrification.

It was interesting reading about borders in a broad sense. We both know that there are more than the national ones. In this book we can see those that divide society, and I believe that working in a homeless canteen has influenced your perception of it and how you've reported it back in your book.

Yes, in many ways, the first novel was me trying to capture some of that and I'm sure it has many shortcomings, but it presents an Italy that 99 percent of readers

about Italy wouldn't be expecting. I got some people who really appreciated it, while others, reading about politics and squatting movements and so on, said "this isn't Italy".

What about "Britishness" abroad, especially after Brexit?

Well, I was one of the few people who expected it, and in fact I applied for Italian citizenship before the vote. So I'm actually an Italian author, by the way. Because of my background I knew a bit about human behavior. Add to this that everyone in my family, apart from my mother, I think, was going to vote for it, and I come from, if you like, a working class, lower-middle class background. It was such a... it was such a no brainer. The European Union was such a positive thing. If you look at the British polls about Brexit, they're still pretty much split because once people make a decision they stick to it and don't look for evidence to contradict it. I think that there's no way that the European Union would allow the British back in anyway. I think it's done, it's gone.

What I would like to focus on now is transnationality. How is it that it has become such a relatable topic in literature?

Well, one of the key things about the protagonist, Daniel, is that he is stuck in Bologna. One of my problems – and this is why I gave him a daughter – was that I needed for him to have something because, you know, when the shit hits the fan, people could ask "why didn't you just go home?" I needed to have him in Bologna. I belong to this group of authors, called the D20 authors, who were published during lockdown, and we will publish a collection of short stories. I wrote this sort of foundational short story about him. He's walking across Piazza Maggiore and he's called over and it's this guy from his past, from London. You know, the story goes into his background, why he's in Bologna and why he doesn't really want to go back. But that's quite an important thing. And, you know, again, in the novels I give him this tradition to listen to Radio Four on BBC and it's something that he does on the weekends. He says he needs it because otherwise he'd be so immersed in Italian

culture, but he listens to it and it's kind of “what? What is this place?” Because he feels quite detached from it. But at the same time, he's very English, but hopefully not in a cliché. I didn't want to make him kind of like Sherlock Holmes, you know. At the beginning of *The Hunting Season* he says “I don't usually dress like the Englishmen abroad”, but deep down he's still very, very much an Englishman. And at the moment I do feel a bit of disenchantment with what England is becoming, but I mean, I'm still very much attached to the pre 2016 England. In the first book I talk about the English detective in Bologna leading to the idea that you get a lot of advantages because the Italians have this certain idea that you're going to be very kind and sober and honest.

It plays well with crime fiction in general since the genre developed in England and then moved to America with the hardboiled.

Exactly. I mean, funnily enough, I'm more interested in foreign detective fiction than in English, or British, detective fiction. I'm thinking of writers such as James Ellroy. Well, for book four I'm reading quite a lot of Raymond Chandler, who, of course, was an English who moved to the US and he, along with Dashiell Hammett, basically invented the hardboiled genre. He created Philip Marlowe and wrote *The Long Goodbye*, *Farewell, my Lovely*, *The Big Sleep*... And Raymond Chandler is like the artist of it.

I think that Bologna is a very noir city. Obviously, it's famous for *gialli*, you know, with the porticos, its narrow streets, so I'm trying to make the fourth novel more noir and hardboiled, with Raymond Chandler in mind. And Raymond Chandler, of course, was an Englishman who wrote about an American detective. Think of the Beatles, the Stones... The English are very good at taking American genres and then reinventing them and re-doing them. They re-package American culture.

Your detective, Daniel Leicester, is he a little bit biographical or do you share just a background in journalism?

He's not very biographical. I mean, certainly his family set up isn't and obviously neither the job. When you're writing an *I*, it's always quite difficult. I had in mind Norman Lewis when I was writing down Daniel. So I brought a kind of updated Norman Lewis to Bologna and set him here. I wanted Daniel to be a cipher, I didn't want to give him too much personality. I was following Raymond Chandler's rules about the detective: he had to be kind of honest, you know, quite straight, uncorruptible. These things are important. I was very interested in all these tropes by Raymond Chandler, because previously I wasn't really a crime writer. I hadn't written crime before. I currently have on submission to publishers a post Brexit novel *Canaries*, for example, and before that I wrote more dystopian fiction, a novel set in Africa... so I've written all sorts of different things. Therefore, I was very interested and remain very interested in the crime genre and trying to master it. It's about me always trying to improve in that respect, but because I was conscious of my audience, who is interested in Italy, I wanted them to basically walk in my detective's shoes, making sure that while he discovers Italy, so are they. For that reason, I didn't want to give him like one leg, I didn't want to make him an alcoholic. You know, I didn't want to alienate the readers. I didn't want to make him too hardboiled, but more average really. I wanted him to be a cipher for the reader, so they just forget he was there, you know, sort of being moved through the story. I don't want to have them to be too distracted because Bologna is the main character in my books.

Do you believe that your background in journalism affected or influenced your way of writing?

So, I technically finished my university at twenty. I know in Italy it's common to continue to do a master. That wasn't common when I did it. I studied communications and in fact I refer to that in the fourth book, because Dolores, who studied Latin and Greek and ancient civilization is teasing Daniel, you know, saying "your degree was just watching films", which was pretty much what my degree was. I wasn't supposed to do a degree, but I did and then I wrote to my local paper which gave me a job as a junior reporter. And I was indentured, which means that you're like an apprentice. And I had to work as a reporter and on the local paper, like the

Resto del Carlino, and then you have to pass exams as you go along. My point is that the training was old fashioned and really good. So that put me in a very good spot to respect deadlines and write economically and so on. In a sense, though, it was a bit of a disadvantage because it also probably gave me too much confidence. I spent years writing novels that were rejected because I thought, “I’m not going to do a course. I’m not going to ask for any help, because I’m a professional writer”. But writing fiction, writing a novel is a very, very different discipline. And it took me a while to kind of get that, until I got to Bologna, thinking about writing commercial fiction. And then I realized that, you know, the business is so tough, there must be thousands of great novels that never get published, not just my own, you really need to get through that door. And I think it’s really, really, really hard in the UK and in Italy, judging from what my friends say, it’s even harder, because the market is tighter. You’re writing in Italian for an Italian audience, whereas I’m writing in English and, well, there are more people speaking English, so all that said, once I had completed my first draft I sent it to a professional literary consultancy for their opinion and, with their help, amended it before submitting it to literary agents.

Would you like to be translated?

Yeah, I would really like to be translated into Italian, I’d be fascinated to see the reaction. I think that Italians would quite enjoy my books. I really like Beppe Severgnini’s books, which I’ve read in translation, both about Italians and his impressions of Britain as an Italian. I think in general that people are interested in what foreigners think of them. I was very mindful that, you know, I didn’t want to write clichés or at least not too many clichés. Overall, the reception by Italian readers has been very positive – I read one recently on Goodreads congratulating me on my accuracy and adding “take it from me, I’m an Italian” – although sometimes some Italians get offended because, I think, even they expect to read the clichés about Italy. But it’s the same in the UK – British readers have their own expectations of Italy: relentless blue skies, fine wine and beaches, while, in my first book at least, I offer up fog, *punkabestia* and *graffiti*. On the day I got a great review in the UK’s biggest selling

newspaper The Daily Mail saying I had been “promoted to the first division of crime writers”, I also got a review on Amazon for book one titled: “HURLED it across the room”. It was basically from someone who said: “if I want to read about Brexit, I won't buy a crime novel”. It's true, I talk about Brexit a bit, which probably I shouldn't have in the first book because, you know, there's no point in alienating your readers. But at the same time, I thought that it was relevant because how could you now speak about being a Briton living in Italy without referring to Brexit? Because it has changed the dynamics. Honestly what I sought to achieve with the book was for it to be as much about Italy, Bologna, and my observations about Bologna as it was about telling a crime story. If I'd wanted to just write crime stories, I could have written crime stories based in London, but this was about a lot more.

Biographical note

Anna Baldini has graduated in 2015 from the University of Bologna in foreign languages and literature. She is now finishing her Master degree in Italian language and culture for foreigners, once again in Bologna. She is a lover of crime fiction with a strong interest in transnational studies.

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Born in north London, Tom Benjamin moved to Bologna in his forties. Following his degree, he worked as a journalist, before becoming a spokesman for Scotland Yard. He then established an award-winning magazine on international aid - *Developments* - before heading up communications departments for Save the Children and The Fairtrade Foundation. He next moved into public health, running the UK government's campaigns against the abuse of alcohol and drugs. After moving to Bologna, he created the Daniel Leicester series of mystery novels, published in the UK by Little, Brown, a subsidiary of Hachette.

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