

Constable on the Go!

Ex village bobby Peter Walker tells GO LOCAL! what makes him tick

I remember, many years ago, my father-in-law talking about a bobby from Oswaldkirk who wrote books about a country policeman. Since moving to this area I'd often seen Peter Walker taking his morning constitutional on the road above Ampleforth. So when someone told me that he and Nicholas Rhea were one and the same I rather nervously asked him if he'd grant me an interview for the magazine. Peter instantly put me at my ease and said he'd be delighted.

What made you start writing? Is it something you thought you'd always do?

I think it must be. When I was still at school I remember being taken to church. There was an old gentleman in the seat in front of me and I asked my mother who he was. "Oh, that's Major Fairfax-Blakeborough, he's an author". I suppose that triggered off my interest because I asked "What does an author do?" and she said "He writes articles for papers, writes books and things". Later, I looked in my weekly paper, which was the Whitby Gazette and he had a piece in there. Jumping ahead by about 40-odd years, I inherited his column. So I think he might have been the man that started me off.

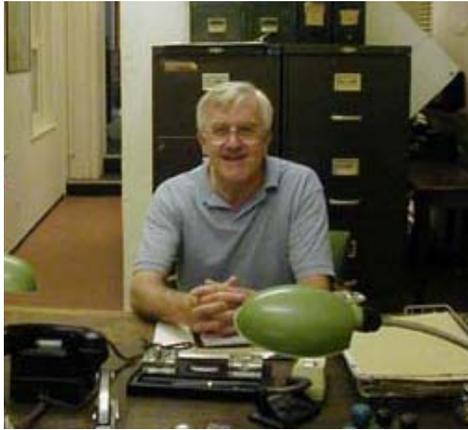
People may be surprised to find that you have written around 120 books. I've written more than that, but 120 published.

How do you manage to be so prolific? Where do you get all your ideas from? They're all around actually. Everything I do, everywhere I go, everything I see is potential material. I hear a snatch of conversation at a bus-stop, in the pub or in the shop and that might just trigger something off. The

art of the writer is to take ordinary everyday events and make them into something.

Where did your pen-name come from?

While I was still a serving policeman I got the chance to write a weekly countryman's diary so I thought I'd better have a pen-name. I used my grandfather's surname, which was Rhea and took Nicholas from the name of a local saint where I came from, Nicholas Postgate, and put the two together to make Nicholas Rhea. When I started writing about a country policeman I used that country name.



Peter on the set of Heartbeat

You were in the police force from cadet to retirement, so you obviously enjoyed it. Was there anything else you might have wanted to do?

Where I was brought up, in Glaisdale, it was a very remote village and there was really no work around. I did think at the time I might like to be a newspaper reporter and I remember approaching the Whitby Gazette, but there weren't any vacancies. I always fancied working in the open air and also, in my early teens I'd started to read crime novels, especially John Creasey. He of course painted a really glamorous picture of the police force and I thought "This is the life!" Not a bit like it in real life of course! So for those reasons and because I was the right height I became a police cadet at the age of 16.

So, you're quite well known around here as "him that wrote t'Constable books". Has Heartbeat changed your life? Does it intrude?

It doesn't intrude, fortunately, although it did with a neighbour of mine, Mr Herriot, from Thirsk! He had a tough time. A lot of

people in the area don't actually associate me with Heartbeat. I'm not the man that writes them Heartbeat books, I'm the man that writes for t'Gazette, you know! Heartbeat is sufficiently distant from me not be a part of my life. I am the police advisor for the series, which means attending meetings. I go on location sometimes, I read all the scripts and of course I'm still writing the books they're based on, although they're a million miles away from the Heartbeat programme. It has made a difference because it's made us more comfortably off than we might otherwise have been. Fortunately, I don't get bothered by fans, but you notice I don't have my name outside the house!

Did you ever think it would take off as it did?

Nobody did, not even the television people themselves.

What about the residents of Gothland. How do they feel about it?

There was only one man I heard who actually objected. The rest of them actually welcomed it and it's helped the businesses there. People get paid as extras, the hotels are doing a roaring trade. And they're used to it now and proud of it, actually.

When Heartbeat was first being cast, who would you have liked to have seen as the character of Nicholas Rhea?

Actually, I don't think they could have picked anyone better than Nick Berry. I thought he looked the part of a 1960's policeman and I thought he played the constable very well indeed.

Claude Jeremiah Greengrass is a name to conjure with. Was he based on anyone in particular?

I've got people right round England trying to work out who he really is! A lot of them think they know him. But if you read the books, Greengrass isn't a bit like he is on screen. He's very thin and he's not very pleasant. I know that when the cast auditioned for the parts, Derek Fowlds, who plays Blaketon, thought he was going to be Greengrass and Bill Maynard thought he was going to be the sergeant, because of their sizes.

Are you happy with the way the characters have been developed?

Yes, I am. I was very pleased right from the word go. When I first saw the finished product I was quite knocked out by the way the characters were portrayed. I was quite moved by the realism that they were showing, for the 1960's.

I believe there's another Constable book on the way?

Yes. The series took the original books and converted those into the drama but their storylines aren't in the books anymore, so I'm still writing them. I've still got Greengrass in the books, for example. The next book will be out in November, "Constable on the Coast".

And I gather there's another new book, featuring a detective with the unlikely sounding name of Montague Pluke?

Well, I've got a book featuring him coming out later this month and it's called "Prize Murder". Published, would you believe, by Constable! I wanted to create a detective who was totally different from what people might expect. I made him highly superstitious and I wanted him to have a country flavour so I made him an expert on horse troughs. Then I had to dress him. One day I was on York Station and this man came and stood right in front of me. He wore a long pink and yellow overcoat down to his ankles. His trousers were the same colour and he had pink socks, spats and brogue shoes, a blue panama hat and thick



specs and I thought "That's Montaque Pluke!"

You belong to the Yorkshire Dialect Society. Is "Yorkshire" as a language still alive and kicking?

It is, surprisingly, and a lot of that is thanks to the Yorkshire Dialect Society, who produce books and tape recordings and they do try to talk to existing dialect speakers. There are two arguments about dialect. One is that it develops with time and changes and the other is that it doesn't change and the old dialect is the "true" way of speaking, so there's a difference of opinion and I'm not sure what I think, really. I write poems, but only in the Yorkshire Dialect and these tend to be humorous poems set in a past era where people are trying to cope with new technology and modern developments, like the telephone! Yes, dialect is alive and I think it's important that we try and keep it alive.



What advice can you give to writers who are just starting out?

You've got to decide what you want to write about. You don't write for yourself, you write for your readers. That's very important if you want to sell stuff. And the trick is, to use your own experience, all the time. Take your own self, find out what your problems are, what you'd like and address your writing through that.

So, here you are with all these books behind you, any plans to just sit back and relax or will you just continue writing?

I think that's my way of relaxing really! I'm well past retirement age and I think it would be nice to do nothing for a while, but then I think what would I do with myself! So as long as I've still got my health I'll carry on and maybe just wind it down gradually.

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