



a journey back in time. But one of the virtues of *Jack the Ripper: Live and Uncut* is that author Matt Leyshon has taken the familiar time machine idea and done something special with it, fashioning a story that is fresh and exciting, dangerous and full of dark thrills.

Chicago-based investigative journalist Carl Axford is recruited by a clandestine organisation known as Limbo. They are a crime investigation bureau using time travel technology to solve cold cases. Agents are projected back in Time in an incorporeal state that allows them to witness historical crimes in situ without being observed themselves. For his first assignment, Axford is given perhaps the most famous cold case of them all – the Jack the Ripper murders.

Ironically, the time travel machinery used by Limbo seems rather antiquated, consisting of wearable ‘tin can’ communication devices that transmit text messages between the past and the present, and a dome-shaped Epoch Projector that wobbles like a jelly when it is switched on and shoots agents out of a chimney into the air. But I liked it! After considerable prep work and briefing, Axford finally arrives outside the Ten Bells in the early evening of 29 August 1888.

Matt Leyshon’s sense of period and place is convincing. Life in the East End is portrayed as short and brutish, beset with violence. Axford’s bodiless presence allows him immense freedom to explore in intimate detail the lives of the victims and the suspects. He is a sort of flâneur, detached from the East End throng rather than a participant: he stands over Mary Kelly and watches as she sleeps in Miller’s Court; he steps unseen into George Chapman’s dingy barber shop. Most horribly, he eavesdrops in a very creepy and macabre manner on the actual homicides. Axford has a list of possible suspects and as the novel progresses he whittles them down. But of course, things aren’t always what they seem. Axford discovers that another agent (operating in Interactive Mode) has already been sent into Whitechapel with a very different mission agenda – to conceal or obfuscate the identity of the Ripper rather than to solve the mystery. To make the cold case colder. What is going on?

Jack the Ripper: Live and Uncut can be enjoyed simply as a crime adventure yarn set in Victorian London, but the originality and the consistent ingenuity of the storytelling make this a deeply rewarding and sublime book on many levels. Time travel is integral to the plot, and the novel

intelligently explores the ramifications of this technology on the Ripper mystery. Appropriately, in an era of fake news, the author presents a multi-veiled tale full of deceits and forged documents and cryptic games. The book is filled with engaging characters whose passions drive them to acts of great evil and bravery, sacrifice and love. To survive they must not only battle their own demons, they must fight each other and face up to the ceaselessly hostile world of Jack the Ripper’s London.

Matt Leyshon has crafted an exciting thriller that combines 21st century time travel with the Jack the Ripper mystery. Impressively, it doesn’t just delve into the dark tenements and courtyards of Victorian London’s East End – it offers a moving story about loss and human evil that spans the centuries. *Jack the Ripper: Live and Uncut* is a cut above most Jack the Ripper crime and horror fiction.



IN THE NEXT ISSUE we review Sam Gafford’s *Whitechapel*, plus all the latest Ripper fiction.



A CONVERSATION WITH MATT LEYSHON

Matt Leyshon’s debut novel, *Jack the Ripper: Live and Uncut*, came out a few days ago (see review above). We caught up with the author and asked him a few questions about his book and Ripper studies in general. Interview conducted by email on 24 November 2017.

Q1. First off, can you tell us something about yourself and your background?

I was born and raised in Australia, where I lived for 32 years. I moved to Tampa, Florida in the US and have lived here since. I had an early affinity with the Jack the Ripper case and have been interested in it since my teens.

Q2. Have you always wanted to be a writer, or is it something that has crept up on you in recent years?

I was told by my first grade teacher to “write more stories” so you could say it started there. I guess she was fond of my tale of visiting a haunted house and eating chicken sandwiches. Throughout my life I have loved writing, harbouring an early ambition to be a journalist, and have received steady encouragement to write.

I’ve written a lot of poetry and made one other incredibly unsuccessful attempt at a novel before.

The catalyst for doing something serious about it came after I completed an online tutorial about writing conducted by James Patterson. It was the kick in the rear I needed! I realised that there were no excuses, a writer always finds time to write and that got me going on this

book. There was also priceless knowledge to be gained from somebody so successful.



Q3. Your debut novel, *Jack the Ripper: Live and Uncut*, came out a few days ago. How's it been received so far?

So far so good. I have provided various people with pre release drafts to read, encompassing a variety of demographics. I sent it to people who love reading thrillers, but know very little about Jack, and then to people with a lot more knowledge on the subject. The reviews have been extremely positive thus far and that is why I am now going to fight through the submission jungle to try and land an agent to represent it. I wanted feedback on writing style as well as the Ripper related details and I think the book fared very well on both counts.

Q4. In essence, your novel explores time travel technology and how it might be used to send agents back into the past to solve cold cases, in this instance the Whitechapel murders. I suppose some readers might label it a science fiction adventure tale, but how do you characterize the story? Is it horror, urban fantasy, crime mystery, or what?

It's a difficult one to pigeonhole, that's for sure. If I were to describe it, I would say it's a thriller/suspense, wrapped around historical events with sci-fi and horror elements mixed in. I recently described the story to somebody as a braid. It is all interwoven to form one story.

Q5. Can you remember what the inspiration was for this story, or what first prompted you to write it?

That's an easy one. After completing Patterson's Masterclass he held a competition. Authors needed to submit a hook, brief description and sample chapter for a story they wanted to write. The winner won the opportunity to write their novel with James Patterson. This book was one of three submission ideas I had put together. I had to narrow my entry down to one though. I made the decision to not send this one in for two reasons. One; Patterson does not typically have non-fiction events or real people in his stories and two; I wanted this one for me. If I didn't win I would start immediately.

I already began researching this book and was the happiest man in the world when I found out I didn't win Patterson's competition and that I could begin writing the book I really wanted to write.

Q6. Your protagonist, Carl Axford, is an investigative journalist. He has a Case Room in his apartment where he does all his research. He seems a little obsessive and meticulous. What are you like as a researcher?

How did you approach researching this book?

I guess Axford and I have a lot in common. He's the lucky one though, I wish I had a Case Room like his. I can't be in a meeting for more than 15 minutes without putting something on a whiteboard. In essence I had all of the content of a Case Room piled onto a desk.

There was definitely a lot of research that went into this. Months, over a year's worth in fact. One thing I also learned was that you could not trust one source alone. You can't blame a bad source if it was the only source you considered truth.

The research varied from purchasing many books to buying and downloading maps, watching movies and TV series (mostly for atmospheric reasons) to seeing YouTube clips of buskers singing in Hulme Hall. You can get information from the strangest sources sometimes but one thing that was consistent was the generosity of people I contacted. It helped and meant a lot.

Q7. I'm guessing you've visited Whitechapel and the crime scenes, or what's left of them. Did you draw anything meaningful from the experience?

I actually haven't been to the murder sites, partially for the reason you mentioned. They are not exactly the same in the present day. Unfortunately having the funds to visit London was not possible in my position, so I had to make up for that with extensive research. Having said this I have had two people who had read my book assume I was from

the London area, which I took as a compliment for the detail and the research behind it.

I have visited Chicago, a city that features in the story, on five occasions. Despite my knowledge of the area, including one location from the book that I have been to twice, the part of the story that takes place in Chicago would have been 90% research.

Of course I want to visit the East End, especially the murder sites, but I didn't see it as a show stopper for the book if I had researched the 1888 version of it well enough. There is no way I could have written this 20 years ago.....thank you internet!!!

Q8. Where does a Ripperologist stand when they pick up this book? Does knowing too much or too little take away from the enjoyment of it?

Finding balance was one of the hardest things. I wanted to offer something to Ripperologists that was enjoyable and not frustrating to read. Ripper fiction does not always represent Jack or Whitechapel 1888 very well and I feel an injustice in that. At the same time I wanted new readers to be able to learn about the mystery, thus raising a more mainstream awareness of the case so it wasn't just a name in history to them. These intentions were also combined with a desire to not have either demographic feel they had an advantage when reading. One reviewer did state that despite all we know there is nothing predictable about the book, which was great.

What was equally satisfying were two readers that know only of Jack the Ripper and nothing further: both said they would not have bought my book, but both gave it 5 stars because it was a story that excited them. They both also wanted to learn more about Jack the Ripper and conduct their own research. That is terrific feedback to receive.

All things considered I would have to say that the more you know about the mystery the more you will enjoy it.

Q9. Your novel revels in anagrams and secret messages, faked documents and false identities. Where does this love of intrigue and subterfuge come from?

Many places. I love stories or movies that contain riddles or puzzles along the way toward solving a greater mystery. Whether it is a Robert Langdon book, or an old Sherlock Holmes mystery (with Rathbone of course), I really enjoy being in a story where a question is posed to you and it is in your head while you keep up with what's going on. Sometimes I also like when a twist or reveal is easy enough to pick but the reward is in the details. Ben Elton's Dead Famous was a great example of that or most Agatha Christie mysteries.

Besides, Ripperologists know a lot of what is coming. I felt the need to include some extra questions to ponder otherwise this reads out like a textbook. Some of those items to ponder do involve familiar aspects of the mystery and I hope they appreciate that.

Q10. Without giving too much away, your novel identifies a well-known suspect as Jack the Ripper. Does this reflect your own view as to who the killer might be?

To be honest, no it doesn't. I had considered putting in an author's note at the end of the book saying so. While my suspect is well known if anything my research convinced me it was not this person. This suspect and theory did however fit in a way that provided a good yarn. I wanted to produce a story that would educate newcomers to the Jack the Ripper mystery and for veteran readers provide a telling of the Ripper folklore that would be entertaining but not frustrating due to inaccuracies. Obviously some liberties needed to be taken in the name of a fictional narrative and my suspect is one of them. I think most people who would be considered experts on the subject are also usually non-committal towards a single suspect. That was the inspiration for this. The only way to truly know is to have been there, to have a front row seat, so I decided to give Carl Axford that chance.

I think the theory in this will raise some eyebrows but I don't see an engaged debate regarding its validity.

Q11. Are you thinking of writing further stories involving the Limbo time travel bureau? What other mysteries or cold cases can you see them investigating? If not, what's next for you as a writer?

As a part of building a decent submission for agents and publishers, I have already outlined my second book involving these ideas. I am extremely excited about this one and am looking forward to getting stuck into it. I also want to take the ideas involving the fictional part of this (Limbo, Axford, investigation through time travel) and expand on them. I think the scope is there to really go places, no pun intended, and have a lot of fun with some of the concepts.

History has presented a lot of famous cold cases or unexplained events. It is a well that can be drawn from many times. Won't say too much about it but what I will say is that when I read the outline back it was like music to my ears.



DAVID GREEN lives in Hampshire, England, where he works as a freelance book indexer. He is currently writing (very slowly) a book about the murder of schoolboy Percy Searle in Hampshire in 1888.