

**This is a download from [www.louisewelsh.com](http://www.louisewelsh.com)  
An interview for the Canadian edition of *Tamburlaine Must Die***

**Q: One of the most striking things about *Tamburlaine Must Die* is the narrative voice: compelling, harried, intense, mixing a contemporary feel with Elizabethan language. How did you approach the voice of the novel?**

LW: Voice is central to any creative writing. You can have the themes, the story and location but if the voice isn't right there isn't any real integrity to the work.

I initially decided to write *Tamburlaine Must Die* in the third person, for purely practical reasons, the reader knows that the timeframe of the book covers Marlowe's final days. But for some reason the voice just wasn't clicking, so I went back and rewrote it in the first person with the intention of getting closer to the character and then taking it back into third person again. But once I started writing in Marlowe's voice I was hooked.

My main source was always Marlowe's own work but as well as reading histories of the period I also turned towards Marlowe's contemporaries. People like Thomas Nashe, William Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd. I wanted to become familiar with the vocabulary and rhythms of the age. I also used historical dictionaries, making myself vocabulary lists, like a child learning a new language. The book is not written in authentic Elizabethan prose, but I endeavored to avoid words and phrases that were too associated with another age, or simply too modern.

On the whole I treated the language of the period, as I would personally write a dialect. How to express dialects is part of an ongoing literary discussion in Scotland. We have a long tradition of writing as we speak – check out James Hogg's *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* for a classic example. Cultural imperialism has however meant that the person in the street is in danger of rarely seeing people who talk in the way that they do represented on screen or in literature. Some authors such as Irvine Welsh, James Kelman and Tom Leonard have successfully represented the speech of their hometowns phonetically. I tapped into my experience of reading and thinking about Scottish dialects and tried to give a flavor of Elizabethan speech without reproducing it exactly.

**Q: Another remarkable quality is the book's pace: there seems to be something happening in every scene.**

LW: The length of the book dictated its pace. It's short - a novelette, which makes a relentless pace possible. I thought of John Buchan's *The Thirty Nine Steps* – a pretty racist book on rereading, though I don't remember noticing that as a child - Richard Hannay is on the run from page three, and we the reader are on the run with him. I wanted to so create something with the same level of excitement that that book inspired in me when I read it a very long time ago.

**Q: Is that pacing theatrical? The kind of action-packed scenes Marlowe would write?**

LW: I wouldn't claim to write as well as Marlowe. In *Tamburlaine Must Die* his of reference is definitely theatrical. He thinks about things in theatrical terms, in the same way that a carpenter looking for a metaphor might choose something to do with building a table. I did want to get him on stage towards the denouement; I wanted us to see him in his element.

There's a quality to some theatre people that I find I respond to. In order to perform actors have to tap into their own vulnerabilities. It's fascinating being with actors after a show. Sometimes they're emotionally raw when they come off stage. As a member of the audience you might feel that you've been transported by a brilliant performance but the actors often don't seem to know whether it was okay or not: "Did you see what I did with my hand in the second act?"

So I drew on my knowledge and experience of the theatre, actor friends and so on. *The Cutting Room* was very well adapted for theatre by Tam Deane Burn and I've also written drama for radio and the stage. I'm in the process of helping to develop a new play for The National Theatre of Scotland, so I guess this is a long-term interest that's grown, and some of that went into *Tamburlaine Must Die*.

The world of writing is notoriously a solitary one. The world of the theatre is seductive partly because you're working with people, collaborating. And then you get to go away.

**Q: Does the relationship between Marlowe and his creation Tamburlaine echo yours with your own characters?**

LW: A couple of reviewers conjectured that I'd turned to the 16<sup>th</sup> century to escape the success of Rilke the protagonist in *The Cutting Room* but no, I don't think so. I certainly don't feel pursued. I think characters can seem real though. I occasionally get a strange feeling that they're wandering about somewhere. Perhaps I'm still attached to my characters because so far I've only ever done one book featuring each of them. Arthur Conan Doyle tried to kill Sherlock Holmes off. Holmes was so popular that even Doyle's mother begged him to give the detective a reprieve. Poor Conan Doyle was desperately tired of Holmes.

**Q: The Elizabethan world that you describe-with its xenophobia, religious intolerance, use of torture-seems strangely topical: was that one of the things you were aiming at?**

LW: Yes it was, absolutely. It's something that preoccupies me a great deal – it's the 21st century and we're still affected by racist social policies. I thought by now we'd be walking around dressed in tinfoil and eating little pills, I certainly didn't think that we'd be throwing people out of the country because they have a different religion or a different coloured skin. For me, someone who's an economic migrant is absolutely legitimate, but in Britain it's not an acceptable reason to enter our country. In Scotland I'm involved with the campaign to try to get asylum seekers out of Dungavel, which is called an asylum centre but is just a prison, with guards, barbed wire, lock-ups. I think Scotland is a great country but it's impossible to be proud of a place that locks up men, women and children like this.

There have always been people willing to uproot themselves, adventure seekers, people looking for a better life and those who have been encouraged or even coerced into going to a different country. There have been people of colour in Britain since forever. The world's not come crumbling down because of it. Indeed the county is better for it.

Scotland was less multicultural in the past. We've had less immigration; it was a place that people left because of social and economic deprivation. You wouldn't move to Scotland for work in the way that you would to London or a mill town. But that's changing now: there's a large Asian community, and more asylum seekers.

It's hard not to be political sometimes in Scotland: we're a country where a tiny percentage of the population commands a massive percentage of the land and wealth. And in the west coast of Scotland where I stay there's a huge sectarian problem.

I feel there's no point in writing historical fiction unless it does somehow relate to our own times. Sometimes we see our own period more strongly through the mirror of history. The past gives us different ways of looking at the present. I don't think *Tamburlaine* is a message book but it contains elements of my political concerns.

**Q: You seem drawn to characters who are outsiders: people who in a conventional mystery would be the prime suspect. But are you doing something a bit different with them?**

LW: I guess everybody in the world feels like an outsider, which is one reason why the genre appeals. Even the squarest guy in a suit in an office nine to five might feel like an outsider. But when it comes to sexuality there's a huge amount of prejudice: in genre fiction a gay or transgendered person is often seen as the natural villain. It's quite instructive to go through modern crime fiction and see how often the person who is the mad killer is someone who the author obviously considers a sexual pervert. And it really irritates me.

**Q: What are your influences? What do you read?**

LW: In *The Cutting Room* I was drawing a lot from gothic and from horror-even the simple presence of big old house is a gothic staple. It's a pleasure to tap into these conventions when they come naturally. Gothic is at once very heightened and very natural - it's understandable to fear the dark, the wind, strange noises, we all do. It's fascinating that a genre which began in the 1700s is pretty much unaltered in the 2000s, we're still referencing it in films, DVDs: the technology changes but our fears stay the same.

I read all the time. Constantly; it's like an illness. I read a lot of Scottish poets, like John Burnside, Don Paterson, Kathleen Jamie, Frank Kuppner. I would prefer to be a poet. But my poetry is just too shit. It's just really bad.

I read crime and detective fiction a lot. I like some of the old school detective writers, like P.D. James, Margery Allingham, Raymond Chandler. I think Sarah Waters, Pat Barker and Colm Toibin are all incredible writers. I also read a lot of non-fiction too, a lot of history. I'm currently reading a collection of essays by Gitta Sereny *The German Trauma: Experiences and Reflections 1938-2001*. I also like memoirs. I love social history and personal accounts, Samuel Pepys' Diaries and the *Mass Observation Diaries*. A history of the everyday is sometimes as absorbing and revealing of their time as the history of remarkable events.

**Q: Could you say something about your next book?**

LW: It's called *The Bullet Trick*. It's a contemporary, full-length novel starring a first person narrator, William Wilson - if you've read Poe you'll recognize the name. He's a conjuror and the book is set between London, Berlin and Glasgow. It has two timelines: William's writing now, looking it back on events from a year before, but in the meantime things are also happening in the present. Towards the end of the book the two timelines converge into an explosive finale.

It covers some familiar themes sexuality and sexual exploitation but is also exploring performance. More happens onstage than in Tamburlaine: William performs! It's hard to show a performance and make it interesting; it can be like describing a dream or a drug trip - great when you're there (hopefully), but who wants to hear about someone else's trip? So the writing had its own particular challenges.