MARK ELLIS

CREATOR OF WORLD WAR II DETECTIVE, FRANK MERLIN

Jenny White, The Western Mail

BOOKS

AUTHOR'S NOTES

A wartime murder mystery

Welsh writer Mark Ellis' latest detective book is a vivid and often surprising portrayal of wartime London, writes Jenny White...

SWANSEA-RAISED former barrister Mark Ellis regularly appears in the Kindle bestseller charts with his gripping and atmospheric crime stories. His new book, A Death in Mayfair, is the latest in a series featuring DCI Frank Merlin, an Anglo-Spanish police detective operating in World War Two London.

It's set in December 1941: Japanese planes swoop down and attack Pearl Harbour, America enters the war and Britain no longer stands alone against Hitler. Merlin is diverted from his tenacious campaign against London's organised criminal gangs by the violent deaths of two young women in the centre of the city. As he investigates, he encounters fraudulent film moguls, dissipated movie stars, mad Satanists, and brutal gangsters.

The book paints a vivid portrait of London during the war and is informed by Ellis' youth growing up under the shadow of his parents' wartime experiences. His father served in the wartime navy and his mother told him stories of watching the heavy bombardment of Swansea, and of attending tea dances in wartime London under the bombs and doodlebugs.

Ellis has always been fascinated by the fact that while the nation was engaged in a heroic endeavour, crime flourished. Murder, robbery, theft and rape were rife and the Blitz provided scope for widespread looting. This intriguing, cruel world is the world of DCI Frank Merlin.

Here, the London-based author explains more about the background to the books, and his enduring links to Wales.

Tell us a bit about your background growing up in Swansea

"I grew up in lovely Langland Bay in the Gower, living less than half a mile from the beach. My father's family were originally from Cardiganshire but moved to Swansea when my grandfather became railway station master at Morriston.

"My mother was from Llanelli and met my father when they were both working for the Great Western Railway.

"I loved reading and wanted to be a writer from an early age, inspired partly by the fact that Swansea was the birthplace of that literary giant Dylan Thomas. At 11 I went away to school at Llandovery College, where I was encouraged in my writing. Then I went to Cambridge to read law, and wrote when I could. Unfortunately, when I moved to London to work, I found the pressures of a full-time job made it impossible to continue.

"However, throughout a long professional career I always retained my literary ambitions. Eventually, some 35 years later, after the sale of the computer company I'd co-founded, I took up my writing pen again."

What is the appeal of writing crime?

"I have always been a big fan of crime fiction and when I started to write again, the idea of creating complex crime plots, detectives and villains was very appealing. Crime is also now the biggest fiction genre and thus offers the biggest potential audience."

Why did you choose to set your books during World War II?

"My father was in the navy in World War II. While serving in West Africa, he contracted the wasting lung disease which ultimately killed him in 1960, when I was seven. This tragic event meant that WW2 always loomed large in my life.

"My mother was a teenager in the war and told stories of watching the German bombing of Swansea from her hill-top garden in Llanelli. As a railway worker she'd benefited from free travel passes, and had tales of wartime weekend clubbing trips to London, made in defiance of the murderous doodlebug attacks then plaguing the capital.

"Through these and other stories, I developed a strong interest in the nature of ordinary wartime life on the Home Front. While the nation was in terrible peril, people still tried to live normal lives."

What research did you have to do for these books?

"My books are set in specific months of the war. The first three Merlin books are set in January 1940, September 1940 and June 1941 respectively. The latest, A Death In Mayfair, is set in December 1941. I try to portray life and the progress of the war in these specific periods as accurately as I can.

"This naturally requires a good deal of research. I frequently consult the numerous excellent history books about life on the Home Front. Other sources include contemporaneous diaries, wartime fiction, newspapers, magazines and specialist libraries. The internet is, of course, a fantastic resource. It was less so when I started the Merlin series, but it is invaluable now.

"If I want to find out the London weather on a particular day in 1941, I can do so online. If I want to know what plays were showing in the West End in the summer of 1941, I can find out online. And so on.

"In my research, I have discovered and continue to discover many interesting and surprising facts. Perhaps the biggest surprise, which I learned before I started the Merlin novels, is that crime boomed during the war. Many people think that criminals took a break between 1939 and 1945, in some kind of crooks' solidarity with Churchill and the country. Far from it.

"Taking advantage of things like the blackout, the chaos caused by German bombing, police shortages and the booming black market caused by rationing, criminals had a field day. Reported crime rose by almost 60 per cent over the war years. More recently, when I was researching my new book, I found out that there were as many as 15 film studios in and around London at the beginning of the war.

"This seemed a large number and I researched more, eventually deciding to use the wartime film industry as the main background to my story."

Has your background as a barrister helped you as a crime writer?

"I practised at the bar briefly before going into business. The legal knowledge I acquired is helpful when writing about criminal and procedural matters in the books. My business experience has also prompted ideas for characterisation and plot."

Do your links with Wales remain strong?

"I am a standard sports-loving Welshman. Welsh rugby, cricket and football are very important to me and I enjoy going to matches with my son. I am proud of our great culture. London is not so far away and I get home to Wales quite often.

Welsh author Mark Ellis

"My most recent visit was in October, when I was a panellist at the Crickhowell Literary Festival. My other half is Welsh too and has family in Monmouth. I am a proud member of Crime Cymru, a collective of Welsh crime writers.

"The aim of Crime Cymru is to promote Wales, Welsh culture and crime writing in particular to the wider world. There are some wonderful writers involved."

What do you hope readers will get from your new book?

"The plot of A Death In Mayfair revolves around the deaths of two young women, one a film star who falls from her Mayfair penthouse terra other an unknown teenager found in the r a bombed-out building.

"One thing which may surprise readers i recent sexual abuse allegations against pe Harvey Weinstein could just as easily have made against powerful film figures of the 1 There is nothing new under the sun!

"On a more general note, I naturally hop readers find the book gripping and enterta and want to come back for more Frank Me

■ **A Death In Mayfair is out now, publish Accent Press**