

A Conversation with ALEX GRECIAN Author of THE YARD

There has been much written about Jack the Ripper—both fact and fiction—but your debut novel, *THE YARD*, actually begins after the failed investigation of those grisly murders by Scotland Yard has been laid to rest. What is *THE YARD* about?

It's about the men who continued to try to clean up London after they'd already failed with the Ripper murders. During those murders and for some time after they stopped, the people in London were terrified and angry, and they took a lot of those emotions out on their police, whom they felt had failed to keep them safe. There was a lot of thinly veiled contempt for authority.



When *The Yard* begins, a detective has just been murdered. His body's been found folded up in a steamer trunk, his eyes and mouth sewn shut, and the newest detective on the squad, Walter Day, has to solve the crime. He's just arrived in London, has absolutely no confidence, and yet still lands the biggest and hardest case he could possibly get.

It's daunting.

But he's able to turn to the first forensic pathologist in England for help. Dr Bernard Kingsley has some unconventional scientific ideas about how to catch the killer, and Inspector Day is willing to listen to him. They've got to hurry to catch the killer, though, because he hasn't stopped killing. Between this and the Ripper murders, Inspector Day begins to realize Scotland Yard is facing a whole new breed of criminal: men who kill because they

enjoy it.

It's the birth of forensic science and the birth of the serial killer, both happening at once.

You write the graphic novel series, *Proof*, which NPR named one of the best graphic novels of 2009. How different was the experience of writing a narrative that won't be illustrated?

Prose and comics exercise completely different writing muscles. At least that's my experience. When I write a novel I have to describe everything well enough that the reader can see it in her mind. I can't lean on the artist to help me depict things. But when I write comics, I can give my artist research materials, photos, links to Web sites, etc. and depend on him to draw the buildings and people and create a visual atmosphere. I don't have to describe anything very well in a script because I'm only describing it for one person.

When I started in comics I couldn't find anybody to illustrate my stories, so I did it myself and ended up being asked to illustrate stories for other writers too. So it's fairly easy for me to figure out what information an artist is going to need from me in order to draw a graphic novel.

But the advantage to prose, for me, is that I don't have to format it. In a graphic novel every action and every word comes in a little box on the page. When I'm writing dialogue in a novel, I don't have to stop every two lines and indicate that we're starting a new panel. I can get into a rhythm and let the characters talk and I never have to interrupt them.

So there are pros and cons to both ways of telling a story. They're challenging in different ways.

As a graphic artist, do you think visually when you write?

I absolutely do, especially when it comes to visualizing a place. When a character enters a room, it's in my head as a sort of 3-D model and that makes it fairly easy to describe. I literally imagine the room turning this way and that, revolving around an axis. And when I'm writing action, I'm pretending it's happening to me as I write. So I have to get it down on the page as quickly as possible, which means that my action scenes tend to move along pretty fast and be as barebones as possible. I don't want to get bogged down describing the things around my characters while somebody's shooting at them.

It also means that I talk to myself a lot when I write. My neighbors can see into my office through the big picture window in front of me and I'm pretty sure they think I'm nuts.

What drew you to write historical fiction, and in particular, a novel set in England in the late nineteenth century?

I think I'm drawn back to the past and to England specifically because I read voraciously as a child (still do) and most of what I read was set in England. British writers tended to write better children's stories, in my opinion, than American authors did. There was often an undercurrent of

darkness and bitterness in British writing that I didn't see in American books for children and young adults, which tended to be more upbeat and have happier endings. I never believed in happy endings. So after a steady diet of *Sherlock Holmes* and *Tarzan* and Chocolate Factories, rats and moles and lost shadows and rabbit holes, England somehow became, for me, the place where stories happen. Sure, I read the Hardy Boys and Huck Finn and Shel Silverstein and everything else I could get my hands on, wherever it came from. I wasn't consciously paying attention to the origins of the books I read, but there was something more magical and harder-edged over there where wardrobes opened up into dangerous new kingdoms.

I love to write stories set in Modern-day America too. In fact, those stories are easier to write because there's so much less research to do. But I think that setting *The Yard* in a far-away time, where the place becomes automatically a little bit alien, even if you live in London now, makes it easier to dive in and wrap the story around you and (hopefully) enjoy it on a different level than you would a modern thriller. It's the level that was created by all those books you read, or had read to you, as a child. That level, that place, is still there, waiting for you to return to it.

THE YARD expertly captures Victorian London, yet rumor has it you have never visited the city. How do you write so convincingly of that time, place, and culture?

I love research. I'm sure I probably got something wrong in *The Yard*, and I'm sure somebody will write in to point out my mistakes, but I worked hard to achieve a sense of verisimilitude. I immersed myself in old books and glossaries and maps and historical Web sites while writing this book and its sequel, *The Black Country*.

I also love history. But I hated history class. It's the rare history teacher who doesn't just parade a series of dates and places in front of his students. I had to discover on my own that every date and place was "right now" for the people who lived there. And all those people had full lives, loved and hated and stole and lied and helped others and hurt others and eventually died. Every story you can imagine, except the ones with genies, happened to someone, somewhere. That's what makes history interesting.

Victorian England is fascinating for a lot of us readers and discoverers. Nobody still living has actually been there, so there's lots of room to make things up, but that era was also incredibly rich with invention and innovation. Science was beginning to come into its own, but the people still believed in magic too. Anything was possible.

What is the "Murder Squad" at the center of your story? Are these men based on real-life figures?

Yes. There was and is a real Murder Squad. They're the equivalent of the Homicide Division of a major American city. But they've got a little bit of our FBI mystique mixed in. And in the Victorian era the Murder Squad really was ridiculously small and overworked, especially when you consider the sheer numbers of murder and grift going on around them. They were almost deliberately set up to fail, but somehow they didn't.

Except in their most famous case. They didn't catch Saucy Jack. (Or, if they did, they kept it a secret.)

I fudged the Scotland Yard timeline a bit here and there in *The Yard* because this is a novel, not a history textbook. And I wanted the best and most famous detectives in London's history to be working together all at once, even if they were actually there years apart from each other. So I changed a lot of names and dates in order to have the best possible sandbox to play in.

The main character in *The Yard* is Inspector Walter Day. I based him loosely on the real life detective Walter Dew, who solved several famous cases. His mentor in this book, Inspector Adrian March, is sort of an amalgam of the famous detectives Frederick Aberline and Dick Tanner. It's a Scotland Yard mash-up.

What other characters in the novel have a basis in historical fact?

Colonel Sir Edward Bradford, the commissioner of police in *The Yard*, was a real person. He came along a couple of years later than I say he did in this book, but there was no way I could fictionalize him. He was a bigger-than-life character already, just an amazing person. I couldn't resist the urge to pluck him out of history and put him down in my version of the Murder Squad.

While serving in the British Army during the Indian Mutiny he somehow found himself fighting a tiger with his bare hands. The tiger chewed his arm up so badly that it had to be amputated, but Sir Edward refused any anesthetic during the operation. He finished his duty to The Queen and sailed back home and eventually became Commissioner of Police. I've even read that his boat was shipwrecked on the way home and he lost everything, but I haven't been able to confirm that. Whether it happened or not, he was a remarkable man and lived a remarkable life.

But I gave him a beard (which he didn't have in real life), so he belongs to me now.

The other major character in *The Yard* who was based on a historical figure is Dr Bernard Kingsley. In the book he becomes the first forensics pathologist in England, pushing the science of crime forward. His real life counterpart was Dr Bernard Spilsbury, a brilliant pathologist and expert witness for the police. Among his many (many) successes, he helped solve the famous Crippen case. He pioneered the field of forensic pathology, but he came along a few years later than I needed him to for the book and was a considerably darker person than I had in mind for this character. In real life Dr Spilsbury eventually committed suicide, but this was a character I wanted to be able to keep writing about so I fictionalized him a little bit.

One of the most absorbing aspects of your story involves the evolution of forensic science as used in police investigations. What key forensic technique, then in its infancy, plays an essential role in the novel and how?

Fingerprints were just beginning to come into use to identify both criminals and victims in Australia and in some parts of Europe back in 1889 when *The Yard* takes place. It made sense that Dr Kingsley would have paid attention to the research going on and would be anxious to field test the technology. His “finger marks,” play a crucial part in solving the mystery and catching the killer, even though there’s a fair amount of skepticism from the police. There was no proof yet that everybody has unique fingerprints and it didn’t make a lot of sense to most people that the ridges of a person’s skin would help identify him. It took a visionary like Kingsley (and his real-life counterparts) in order to put into practice a technique we take for granted today.

You quit your day job at an ad agency and became a stay-at-home dad in order to write. How long did you work on THE YARD? Was it difficult juggling full-time fatherhood and writing?

Depending on how you want to look at it, it took a couple of years between putting together the proposal for *The Yard* and finishing the writing of it. But there was a lot of downtime between those steps and so the actual writing eventually took somewhere between seven and ten months.

I originally thought I’d write this book as a graphic novel series and it took some persuasion from my agent for me to take a chance on writing it as prose. Prose was a much bigger gamble than comics because I already had a comic book publisher. I didn’t have a book publisher and didn’t know how to find one. But I listened to my agent and decided that it really would be a more rewarding story as a novel. I took the risk and I’m glad I did.

I got up at three every morning to write and then stopped to get my son ready for school and take him. I’d come back home, eat breakfast and shower, then get back to work researching and writing. I’d quit for the day when it was time to pick him back up from school. From that point on, my time was (and is) family time.

When you were younger you wrote an unpublished novel that pitted two unlikely literary icons against one another. Who were they and what was the book about?

Yes, when I was in high school I wrote my first novel. It pitted an ancient, but well-preserved Sherlock Holmes against Dracula. It took place in slightly more modern England than *The Yard* does and I remember putting a lot of time into researching early cars. I also remember that the book ended up being pretty awful. I imagine it’s gathering mildew in a box in my father’s basement.

Given our culture’s current obsession with all things vampire, have you considered resurrecting that manuscript—or at least the idea?

I think vampires have probably reached their saturation point. Actually, I think that happened a long time ago. I’d much rather concentrate on my own characters for now. Walter Day, Nevil

Hammersmith, Dr Kingsley, and other characters I've got waiting in the wings are enough to keep me busy. I love rereading Conan Doyle's Holmes stories (and I like the recent movies, which are pretty far removed from Conan Doyle, but still a lot of fun) and I love Stoker's Dracula and I hope they'll posthumously forgive me for mangling their creations.

Are you writing a second book involving the “Murder Squad”? Anything you can divulge about it at this stage?

I'm writing a sequel, called *The Black Country*. In *The Black Country*, three of the characters from *The Yard* travel to the Midlands (an area of England called “The Black Country” by its residents) to investigate the disappearance of a family from a small coal-mining village. A human eyeball has been found in a bird's nest, which seems to be a clue that someone's been murdered, but there are no bodies.

Of course, once the detectives arrive in the village, they gradually discover that there's a lot more going on than just the murders. And they may not be allowed to leave.

With this second book I feel a bit like I'm writing an old Hammer Horror movie. (Hammer Studios were responsible for my favorite lurid British horror films when I was a kid. My friends and I would watch them at the second-run movie theater when they ran Saturday double-features. That's if we were lucky enough to get an adult to drive us there.) With *The Black Country* I get to write about bizarre rituals in the snow, grisly murders, and houses sinking into coalmines. I'm having a blast!

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