

Local author



Zoë Sharp



Local Author Zoë Sharp talks to @Lancaster about her life from childhood to the present day, what inspired her to start writing and **how she became a published author.**

Tell us about your life from childhood to when you starting writing?

I always loved stories as a child, especially the Beatrix Potter books which I learned off by heart before I could read. I could go through them and turn the pages at the right points, even if I couldn't actually read the words. I was particularly influenced by Anna Sewell's *BLACK BEAUTY* when I was younger, too. The fact anyone could write a story that not only held me enthralled, but influenced a generation and actually brought about change in the law to prevent cruelty to horses.

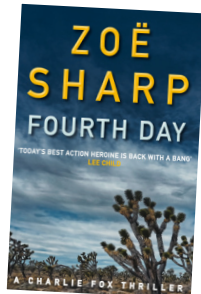
Then my grandmother gave me a copy of *THE MISFORTUNES OF MR TEAL* by Leslie Charteris, featuring Simon Templar, 'The Saint'. And that was it – I was hooked on crime fiction. I still have that very book, looking very faded and delicate now, and it remains one of my favourites.

I tried writing my own horse-related tale when I was fifteen, which met with what are known as 'rave rejections' from publishers. I wrote it all longhand when I was living in Glasson

Dock, and my father, bless him, typed it all up

for me. It never found a publisher but they made very encouraging noises. The old typescript is still in a box in the loft. My father keeps threatening to get it out and sell it on eBay. I just threaten him at this point ...

Having gone off and done a variety of weird and wonderful jobs in my teenage years, including a stint selling advertising for the Lancaster Guardian I became a freelance photojournalist in 1988, based first in Lancaster itself and later in Halton.



It was during this early time that I was putting together a regular column for one of the magazines I worked for, and I started receiving death-threat letters. They were very scary at the time, proper cut-out-of-newspaper like a ransom note. They told me my days were numbered, that they knew where I lived, called me scum – and worse. It was only the fact that the letters were being delivered to the magazine's offices in London and not to my home that stopped me freaking out. As it was, I started taking self-defence courses held

up at Lancaster University, and it got me thinking about a character I'd had in mind for a long time, an ex-army self-defence instructor called Charlotte 'Charlie' Fox. The rest is history. Except to say that the police never caught whoever was sending the letters, so for all I know they're still out there ...

Do you have any connections to Lancaster?

Part of my family still live in the area. We moved onto a catamaran at Glasson Dock when I was about seven. I attended the local village school, then passed my eleven-plus and did one year at Lancaster Girls' Grammar School. Let's just say that some children thrive in a school atmosphere and some don't. I was one of the ones who didn't. At the end of the first year I opted for correspondence courses from home until I was fifteen. Then I went out to work. My work took me all over the place, but I kept coming back to Lancaster, living first in a little terraced house just off the back of St Leonardsgate, and then in Halton after a brief foray to Kendal.

My first two Charlie Fox books, KILLER INSTINCT and RIOT ACT, are set firmly in Lancaster. As are large chunks of book five, ROAD KILL. After that, Charlie's career in close protection takes her further afield, although she makes frequent trips back to the UK, as in THIRD STRIKE (book seven) which sees her revisiting friends in the Lune Valley. Although Charlie is largely based in the States now I've tried very hard to keep her a Brit, with a Brit outlook and mindset. It can cause some funny moments sometimes as we are very much too peoples divided by a common language. At one point in THIRD STRIKE I have Charlie walk into an elevator in New York City and see the maker's name on the plate on the back wall – Schindler. It means nothing to the Americans but she is amused by this because to a Brit that's Schindler's Lift.

I have very fond memories of Lancaster Library, which is where I held my very first event as a published author. I am a very big supporter of the library system and even put one of the Lancaster librarians, Andrew Till, into book four, FIRST DROP, as a character. He plays an FBI agent who is first chasing Charlie, then on her side against the bad guys. It was a way of saying 'thank you' for all their encouragement and support. When I was living on the boat there wasn't much room to keep books, so my weekly trips to the library were a lifeline.

When did you have that first moment “I want to write a book”?

I can't put my finger on exactly when I first knew I wanted to write a book. I think my early attempts were pure escapism. I loved reading and wanted to immerse myself deeper in that world. What better way than to write the world yourself? And then later it was because I loved thrillers but the female characters all seemed to scream and fall down and twist their ankles, waiting to be rescued by the men. I wanted to read about a woman who would do her own rescuing, and when I couldn't seem to find one I decided I was just going to have to write my own.

What is the name of your first book?

The first book is called KILLER INSTINCT. It's just come out this summer in e-format for the first time, with a terrific new cover by a very talented graphic designer friend, Jane Hudson at Nu Design. The e-version has a Foreword by Lee Child, who has become a friend and is another big supporter of my books.

KILLER INSTINCT follows Charlie as she attracts the attention of a guy who's attacking local women around the Lancaster and Morecambe area. She's teaching self-defence classes and because of her abilities he sees her as a challenge. But Charlie's been a victim before, and she's determined she's not going to feel like that again ...

What obstacles if any did you have in getting your first book published.

I was a member of a local writing group, the Lune Valley Writers, who met regularly in the tiny library at Caton – now sadly closed. I used to take sections of the book to read out and the others would comment. It was invaluable for encouragement as well as constructive criticism. When the book was finished I went through a copy of the Writers' Handbook, looked under Agents (crime) and started at 'A'. Totally the wrong thing to do. I found an agent quickly, but looking back he was not the right agent for me.

What I'd advise any new authors to do now is spend a long time in the library looking through the Acknowledgements sections of your favourite books. If those authors' agents are good, they'll be name-checked in the Acknowledgements. Write down the names of those you think deal with the same type of book as your own and query them strictly according to their submission guidelines. No end of people are rejected by agents simply because they haven't gone to the trouble of reading the guidelines properly.

After receiving a few of the usual rejections for KILLER INSTINCT I'd already decided to

rewrite it when Piatkus Books made an offer. I rewrote it anyway and they bought the first two books in the series, then the next three before I changed to another agent and another publisher. I've now been published in Norway, Holland, Italy, Denmark and Russia, as well as the States, where I'd say Charlie is better known than she is over here. Last year Twentieth Century Fox TV optioned the TV rights to the series, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed.



How many books have you written?

I'm just writing book ten in the series, plus I have a standalone that I wrote over last winter. I'm probably going to put that out straight to e-book next year. I'm amazed how the e-publishing phenomenon has really taken off in the States – and it will catch up over here soon I think.

I've also done an e-thology of Charlie Fox short stories, FOX FIVE, which came out this summer, and various other shorts which have been published in anthologies and magazines all over the place. One was turned into a short film, and I've been nominated for awards and had my stories used in school text books, too. Amazing what happens once you start to write.

I used to tell people that I had ideas for maybe forty novels, but a few years ago I was advised to stop doing this. "You don't want everyone to think that you're churning them out like some kind of production line," I was told severely. "Every one should be hand-crafted and ripped from your soul."

But they are – trust me on this. Yes, I have a word target each day, calculated from how many words I want to achieve each month, but that doesn't mean I just dash off any old rubbish purely to fill an empty space. I can't work like that.

Tell us about where you write and what you have around you?

I write anywhere. In the car, in doctor's waiting rooms, on planes, wherever. I still like to use a notebook and pencil to scribble down basic ideas or snatches of dialogue. I call it using my 'neck-top' computer. But at home I have a widescreen monitor in the office and an ergonomic keyboard with most of the letters worn off, and I sit there and bash away until the wee small hours.

Around me I have a collection of books, including a very

well-thumbed copy of CHAMBERS DICTIONARY and ROGET'S THESAURUS. What's another name for 'thesaurus', by the way? I also have maps and photographs of the locations I'm writing about, and various fired rounds and empty shell casings from previous trips to the gun range.

And music – can't write without music in the background. Nothing creates mood faster for me. I'm absolutely over the moon at the moment because US singer/songwriter Beth Rudetsky has written two songs for the latest book, FIFTH VICTIM (out March 2011 in the UK and January 2012 in the States) and they brilliantly capture the mood of the book for me.

What do you love to do when you are not writing?

Oh, usually I'm writing ... But on the rare occasions when I'm not, I still enjoy the photography side of things. My husband, Andy, still writes non-fiction of the car magazines and I do all his photography for him. When we're on a photoshoot I seem to spend half my time hanging out of moving cars dragging my elbows on the road surface, which is always fun.

And we both are very into house building. We recently built our own place, on the Cumbria/Lancashire/Yorkshire border, and lately we've been helping friends with their DIY projects, just to keep our hand in. Plus we love to travel, and sail, and drive or ride things that go somewhat faster than the legal speed limit. Ahem, off the public road, of course...



To find out more about Zoë and her books go to www.zoesharp.com