

A Doug Holder Interview

Somerville writer *Clea Simon* has written a number of books, ranging from a cat/mystery series, to a book exploring the mental illness of her brother. She has a new novel out "Hold Me Down," that according to the publisher's website is about:



"Gal, a middle-aged musician, is back in Boston to play a memorial for her late drummer/best friend, when she finds herself freezing on stage at the sight of a face in the crowd. The next day, she learns that the man she saw has been killed - beaten to death behind the venue - and her friend's widower is being charged in connection with his death. When the friend refuses to defend himself, Gal wonders why and, as the memories of begin to flood back, she starts her own informal investigation. As she does so, she must reexamine her own wild life, her perception of the past, and an industry that monetizes dysfunction in a dark tale of love, music, and murder."

Simon has had a long career as a journalist, and started out as a rock critic. I had a chance to catch up with her for this interview.

Your new book is a step away from your cat mysteries. What compelled you to write a mystery about a middle-aged rock star?

I've always had a dark side, Doug. Even some of my cat books have been dark ("The Ninth Life," which kicked off my Blackie and Care series, was a dystopian fantasy set in a ruined future.) But HOLD ME DOWN is really revisiting familiar ground for me. The music scene, for sure - I spent most of my 20s as a rock critic, writing for everyone from Boston Rock and Sweet Potato Magazine to the Boston Globe and Rolling Stone. But HOLD ME DOWN also mines my own past, including some trauma and the resulting PTSD that in some ways I've only recently come to terms with.

My 2017 mystery, "World Enough" (a Massachusetts Book Award "must read") also took place in and around the music scene. That book dealt with the fallibility of memory, really - or how as we age we have to reevaluate our nostalgia for our youth. I guess one of my recurring themes is how we need to revisit our visions of the past and grapple with our illusions, if we're going to grow and move on. HOLD ME DOWN certainly involves Gal, my protagonist, taking some hard looks at her past, particularly her time in the clubs leading up to her fame, and finally coming to terms with her own evasions and the half-truths she's convinced herself are the whole story.

I've always enjoyed my cat "cozies," as those gentle mysteries are called, and I plan on writing more. But this is a different side of me, and it needs a slightly different format - psychological suspense rather than tra-

ditional mystery. I still enjoy working within the confines of crime fiction, but a writer needs to stretch.

You started out as a rock critic--can you talk a bit about your stint? Any memorable anecdotes about the clubs, and musicians in the Boston milieu?

Sure, I loved it! The music was visceral and strong, and the scene became my tribe – where I found my people. I could tell you about hanging out with the Butler brothers of the Psychedelic Furs, or the time I got a little lost in my notes while interviewing Johnny (Rotten) Lydon, and he started teasing me, “Earth to Clea!” But what really stays with me are the shows at clubs like Jumpin’ Jack Flash, TT the Bears, the Channel, and the Rat – especially the Rat, which felt like a second home for a few years. I got the Boston Herald to let me write a local music column for a while back then, because I wanted to let the world know what was being done by innovators like the Zulus and Throwing Muses and garage rockers like the Prime Movers, the Blackjacks, and the Outlets. I met several lifelong friends there - fellow music writers like Ted Drozdowski, Brett Milano, and Paul Robicheau, and through them their partners and families – and then through them my husband Jon.

It wasn’t an easy way to earn a living. I had a succession of largely crappy part-time jobs to supplement my writing, which was largely freelance. And so when I started getting full-time journalism jobs, I cut back. Times change, and I didn’t have the energy after a while. But there’s still nothing like live music to get me going.

Is your protagonist Gal, a composite of people you knew on the scene? Was she developed with a particular person in mind?

She’s me and she’s also purely fictional in that I was never an addictive type (for which I’m grateful) and never been involved in a murder. Gal, for example, was a real rock star for a few minutes back there, even though she’s been off the road and out of the spotlight for a few years by the time of the book. I’ve played in bands, but I’ve never gone beyond the club level – and I certainly never enjoyed the stardom (or the craziness) that Gal does. For me, the idea of a performer, the tension between the private and the public self, and the dysfunctional nature of the industry were key – not that this is a book about the music industry, but it gave me a way to explore personal issues that interest me.

As far as the setup – a lot of what Gal goes through I knew just from being around music and covering the industry, radios, record labels, and the like. But to make sure I got the details right I did interview a few friends who were much more successful musicians. They provided some great anecdotes about life on the road as well as certain insights, which inform the book. For example, my buddy Lisa Susser (who sang with Vision Thing) mentioned one day about how you can see so much from the

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stage and so I used that - it becomes a motif, in a way, for what Gal, my protagonist sees or thinks she sees. That was just a coincidence: a fun fact that suddenly unlocked something in my protagonist's psyche - and gave me a way to show it.

“ Hold Me Down” is the title of the book, and also the title of a hit song by the protagonist.. How did you come up with this--how is it related to the theme of the book?

“Hold Me Down” is Gal's big hit but it's also her cri de coeur, her appeal to the universe. Through flashbacks we see her writing that song and learn what it means to her. It came to me like it came to her - in a flash that just felt right. Over time, I came to understand it as, I believe, does Gal.

You moved from Cambridge a few years back to Somerville. How has the writing life been in our city, compared to the Republic?

I adore Somerville! Right away, I loved the availability of city services, but I've also found a real community here. No offense to Cambridge - I still have great friends across Beacon Street and, really, I consider myself a citizen of Greater Camberville. But, for example, Somerville poet (and Pulitzer winning critic) Lloyd Schwartz and I are planning a joint reading event, probably for next spring. Poetry and punk-rock fiction. How cool is that?

****Simon has an event scheduled with Harvard Book Store for Oct. 28 (which will be online).