

THE MAN WHO BUILT JACK

In an exclusive interview, Lee Child says he wants to see the world through the eyes of his creation, Jack Reacher. By **Jennifer Platt**

Lee Child mirrors his creation Jack Reacher, or is it the other way around? Besides being charmingly droll, he is also charmingly laconic – he likes to politely get to the point of the matter, evident in our phone interview.

And like Reacher, he is peripatetic. He doesn't stay long in the towns that he writes about. "A lot of them I just pass through. In the same way that Reacher is going to. I think it would ring false if Reacher had a super detailed knowledge of a particular place because how would he? He only ever passes by. I rely on an awful lot of first impressions and a feel of the place because I want to see it through Reacher's transitory eyes."

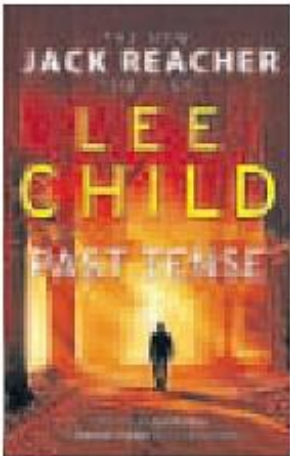
Like Reacher, Child doesn't like having much with him while wandering around and people watching, not even a notebook. "I don't like carrying anything. I have a sort of mental system where I say if I don't remember it, it's not worth remembering."

Part of the charm of the Reacher series is that every book is set in a new town or city in America and the latest book *Past Tense* is in Laconia, New Hampshire. Here, there are two storylines. Reacher is in Maine and wants to head to the West Coast for the winter but he doesn't get far. He thumbs a ride with a trucker and is dropped near a fork in the road. Instead of heading to Portsmouth where he will likely catch a lift to take him south, he decides to take the road to the small town of Laconia as this is where his father was born. It seems that Reacher has a flickering need to find out more about him and his family. But of course, along the way he pisses off a few of the not-so-nice townsfolk and some clownish mafiosi. There are plenty of fisticuffs.

The other storyline is about Canadian couple Patty and Shorty, who are trying to get to New York to sell their mystery treasure in a heavy suitcase and make a new life for themselves. Their old beaten-up Honda Civic breaks down along the way and they are



Lee Child, author of the Jack Reacher series. Picture: David Levenson/Getty Images



Past Tense ★★★★★
Lee Child,
Bantam Press,
R290

stranded in the middle of the woods near Laconia. Close by they find a remodelled motel where the owners are incongruous – slick city men pretending to be down-to-earth, woodsy types, including a disingenuous desk clerk named Mark Reacher (dun dun dun). Their evil agendas simply leap off the page.

In the last chapters, the storylines eventually converge in the woods. Reacher doles out his sense of justice with more

fisticuffs and deaths.

There's a deep menace to these motel owners. A smug Trumpian attitude that their privilege, money, skin colour and gender will let them get away with murder.

"All my books try to reflect what's happening in the world. [In this book] it's an attitude that money buys you anything, including horrific things. There's an arrogance that some people are worth less than others. With Mark Reacher I wanted to provide a bit of moral colour for Jack. That this is his relative, albeit a distant relative. If you start looking into your family you might not like what you find."

You might find out your family supports Trump. "That happens in reality. I know someone whose sister is a Trump voter and they can't believe it, but it's true."

Like Reacher, Child doesn't have a master plan or outline when he starts out. He just begins writing a new book. *Past Tense* could or could not be the beginning of a series where readers learn more about Reacher's past and family.

"It's always an option," says Child when asked if his next

Reacher would reveal more about the army major. "It's also a choice you've got to make because Reacher is interested in what is happening now, and he is not particularly interested in the past. But of course everyone is sort of interested in their family. Maybe he will find out more. Maybe he won't. Like I said I don't make a plan, so I don't know."

We know Tom Cruise will no longer play Jack Reacher in the films. "We are going to ... do a streaming TV series with a new actor, I think that will be better." Child says he doesn't have anyone in mind as the star but he pictures Reacher as "a second-row forward rugby player – a big ugly guy". So for all those who said Cruise was not a good fit to play the man with dinner-plate hands and fists as large as turkeys, they have got their wish. 📧

@Jenniferdplatt

Memory and consequences that rhyme with the past

Everything Under ★★★★★
Daisy Johnson, Vintage, R290

Gretel, a lexicographer, has finally found the mother she's been searching for for decades. Sarah is not the "awful, wonderful, terrifying mother" of her childhood, the woman who abandoned her as a teenager, but an old woman with dementia. And neither is Gretel the "wild and beautiful" girl her mother remembers from their isolated life on a houseboat on the rivers and canals of the English countryside, when the two spoke a private language and were stalked by the Bonak, the canal thief, a monster that represented "what we are afraid of".

This mother-daughter relationship forms the centre of this intriguing novel which pieces



together their story, and that of Marcus, the strange transgender boy who appeared from nowhere and lived with them for a time. The story switches between Gretel's search for her mother, her past and present, and Marcus's story from his point of view. It can be a little

tricky to keep track of initially, but it's easier as the tale unravels.

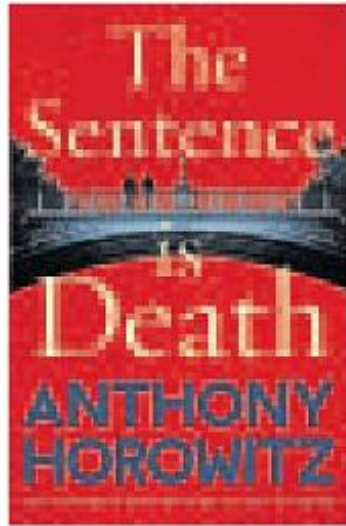
What roots the shifting realities is a powerful sense of place. Daisy Johnson, pictured, who was just 28 when this book was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize – has a vital, poetic voice. She writes sensuously and unsentimentally about the river and the landscape: the forest floor "itched with woodlice", and, "You chased me with the hose until the ground was so sodden with mud that we fell, were coated as if bulbs just born."

Johnson is drawn to myth and fairy tale, and the oedipal themes of incest, cross-dressing and gender-swapping are central to the book. This is not a straight "retelling" of the myth of Oedipus Rex, but a rather complex story that explores gender roles and gender fluidity, as it explores memory, and consequences, and how the past reverberates, inevitably and powerfully, in the present. 📧

Kate Sidley @KateSidley

Book Bites

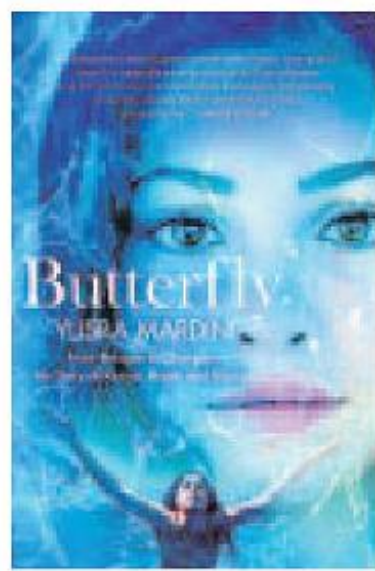
The Sentence is Death ★★★★★
Anthony Horowitz, Century, R290



Horowitz is, without a doubt, a crime fiction master. Every page of his novels, has an unexpected twist. Such is the case of the murder of Richard Price — a celeb-divorce

lawyer who is found dead in his swanky bachelor pad. He'd been killed by someone using an expensive bottle of booze and the numbers 189 are painted on the wall next to his corpse. It's a murder mystery that is captivating until the last page. As long as Horowitz keeps writing, we'll keep reading. 📧 Jessica Levitt @jesslevitt

Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian, My Story of Rescue, Hope and Triumph ★★★★★
Yusra Mardini, Pan Macmillan, R310



Throughout her memoir, Olympian swimmer Mardini grapples with the word "refugee". How does one word describe the horrors she witnessed as a child in Syria: watching

neighbours disappear, buildings collapse and bombs drop in the swimming pool? How does one word become her entire identity — the only thing that people can see about her? And then, after so many narrow escapes from death, how do you deal with the survivor guilt and get on with a normal life once you're safe? Searing, fast-paced and action-packed, *Butterfly* is a necessary addition to literature on what it means to be displaced from your homeland. 📧 Anna Stroud @annawriter_

The French Exception: Emmanuel Macron ★★★★★
Adam Plowright, Icon, R290



Europe's main issues — populism, immigration, climate change and structural unemployment — have international resonance. And at the heart of Europe is France, an eternal

counterbalance to its historical rival, Germany. This first biography of the man in English documents the extraordinary rise of Emmanuel Macron from being virtually unknown even in France, to become, at 39, his country's youngest president since Napoleon. It's a fascinating peek behind the façade of an intensely private, assured man who, along with his wife, Brigitte, 24 years his senior, in just a year assembled from seemingly nowhere the team, network and finances to win the presidency. 📧 William Saunderson-Meyer @TheJaundicedEye