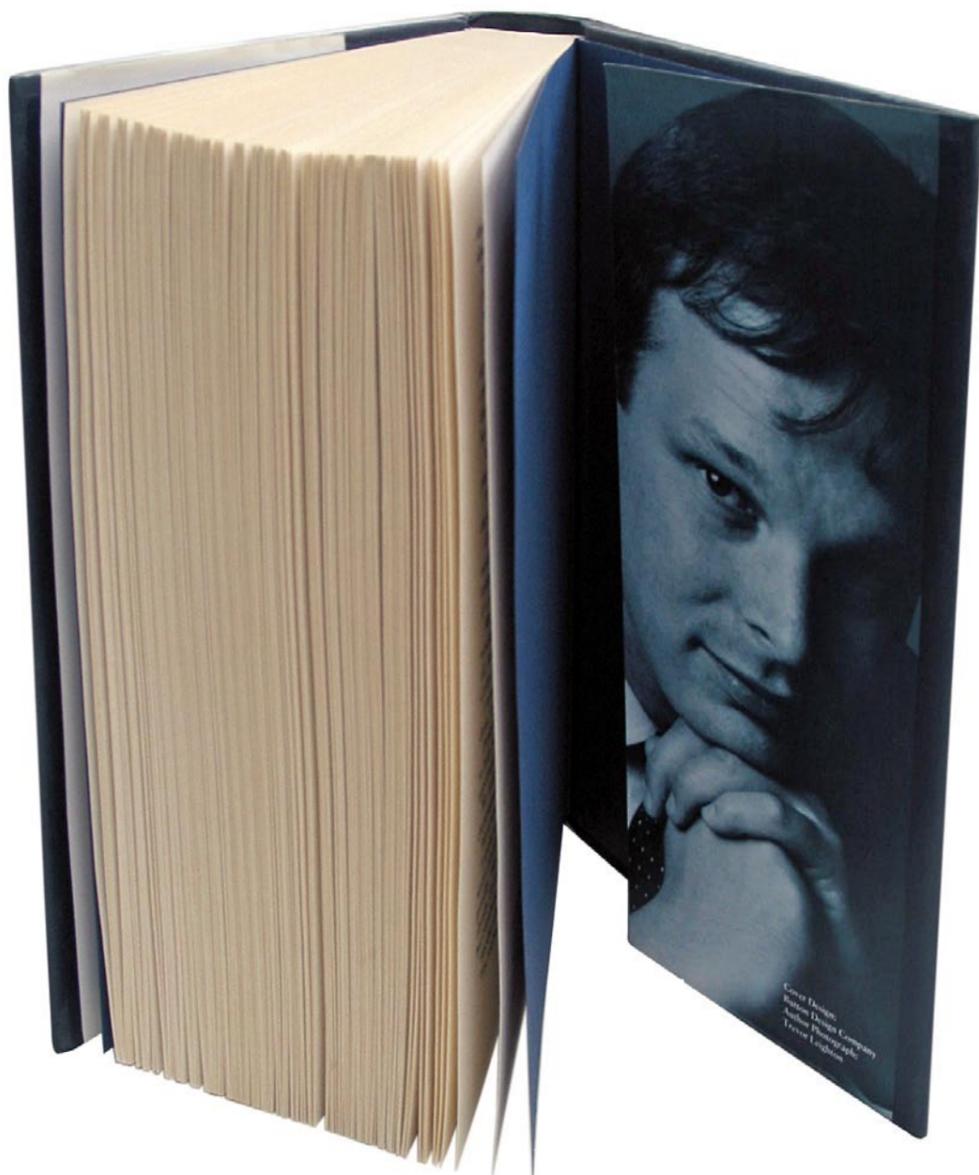


As an avid reader I'd certainly heard of Michael Ridpath – he of the best-selling financial thrillers – but until recently I was unaware that he was a Suburb resident. Then, on meeting Michael and managing to overcome his initial reluctance to be interviewed for Suburb News, I was most surprised to find how modest he is, for a novelist whose books have been translated into 36 languages and have sold millions of copies. I doubt that I would have displayed the same coyness!

Michael was born in Devon but grew up in a small village at the foot of the Yorkshire dales. He read history at Oxford and says, "like many of my contemporaries I was seduced into the City by promises of exotic travel and 'early responsibility', whatever that might mean." He joined Saudi International Bank for the excellent reason that they would send him to New York for six months of his first year in the bank. He worked there for eight years and to his own surprise he enjoyed it. He then became a bond trader and, when subsequently worried that that he had become 'completely divorced from the real world', joined a venture capital firm.

While working at the bank Michael spent three years, at night and over weekends, writing his first book, 'Free to Trade' – a thriller about a young bond trader in the City, which he describes as 'pure escapism'. This was published in 1994 and was on the Sunday Times bestseller list for over three months. Since then he has written seven further extremely successful novels, all of them financial thrillers. His most recent book is 'See No Evil' which came out in April 2007. (May I just add here that Michael did not proffer the information about his own achievements – I found the details on a booktrade website.)



Michael and his wife, she works in Canary Wharf, have lived on the Suburb for nearly twenty years. They have three children who go to school in Highgate. They had a small flat in Hampstead and wanted to buy a house there but could not afford it. Although the Suburb was only a couple of miles away they had not visited it – nor even heard of it. "I was brought up in a tiny village and was always rather suspicious of the concept of a suburb. Either you lived in the country or in the middle of the city, a suburb was for the middle-aged middle-classes, people like my parents, perhaps."

Michael adds that he rather likes the suburban life now, or at least life in Hampstead Garden Suburb. "There are enough green spaces to mean that we don't have to flee London every weekend. In theory, of course, it is close to the City; in practise it always rather irritated me that people are able to get to the City quicker from places like Harpenden and Sevenoaks than Central Square. I blame the Northern Line."

I asked Michael about where he writes; "When I first started writing I can remember the feeling of freedom of being able to wander around between 9am and 5pm on a week day. Who were all these people who didn't have jobs to go to? Well, I have become one of them. For the first few years I rented an office at a couple of small firms run by friends of mine. It was nice to have other people around to gossip with and the discipline of showing up there at nine every morning would mean that a book would be written eventually. Now I have no problem with discipline, the difficulty is finding the time I want to write. So I now write from home at North Square. I have a view of the Square itself, so every fifteen minutes I get to watch the H2 trying to negotiate the corner with Erskine Hill. An interesting study in drivers' behaviour each time. However, the bane of my life during working hours is garden machinery. It turns out that all that green stuff everywhere grows, and needs to be constantly cut back by petrol-driven equipment. Particularly irritating is the junior gardener who chases a single leaf around the lawn with a leaf-blower when his boss isn't looking. I know from previous 'Rants' in Suburb News that many residents also find this noise level intrusive and anti-social." (Ed's note: maybe the answer is a silencer – for the machinery or if all else fails, the operator!)

I then asked Michael about his writing schedule, he says: "Writing schedules are important. I have an elaborate array of them, depending on where I am in the process of writing a book. The basic rules are a minimum of three hours writing every day, preferably in the morning, and a minimum of 1,000 words per day – I also set myself a maximum of 2,500. I find that if I get carried away and do much more than that, I run the risk of being stale the next day and writing rubbish. I am naturally self-disciplined. It turns out that despite the image of the tortured genius, many writers have the discipline of the chartered accountant. It takes quite a lot of determination to type out 100,000 words and then retype most of them. And then, of course, you have to put them in the right order. I find walks help a lot, especially walks round the suburb. I try to walk at least an hour a day in the afternoon, and I find a brief walk in the middle of the morning helps me think about what I have just written or what I am about to write. It also helps me to keep fit. It seems to take me about 18 months to write a book. This breaks down into 6 months planning and researching, 6 months on the first draft and 6 months rewriting. I wish I could write faster, publishers would love a book a year, but I can't."

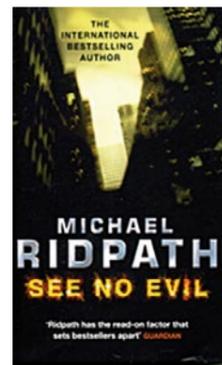
I wondered how Michael comes up with his intricate plots: "I really enjoy devising plots, although the process, at least for me, takes several months and can be agonising. I do plan extensively before I write, both plot and character. I start out with a simple outline, less than a page, and fill in details, twists, confrontations and setbacks, all the time thinking about how to give the reader just as much information as they need to keep them gripped. It is hard to invent a fully formed character out of thin air. I often start with a stereotype and then add and subtract to make them more interesting, more unexpected. I frequently use aspects of real people's character, but never the whole thing – so my neighbours need not be too worried!"

Whenever I have been to a book signing, it has always felt to me that the author is putting on a brave face in difficult circumstances, I asked Michael whether this is true and where book promotions had taken him in the world. "I have been all over the place to promote my books, from Iceland to Australia. The experiences range from the humiliating – a book reading session in Virginia where the only member of the audience turned out to be the bookshop manager's husband, to the bizarre – hundreds of German bankers rolling in the aisles at my jokes, which I promise you are not that good. I was once interviewed for Polish Playboy magazine, who spent 2 hours afterwards photographing me on the roof of the casino in Warsaw. I'm not quite sure why. I assumed that people read Polish Playboy for the articles, but having received a copy a couple of months later, I can assure you they don't." Incidentally, Michael assures me that he was fully clothed at the time!

Michael is currently working on a new book which is a change from the financial world. "It is set in Berlin in 1938 and is about a young Englishman involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler that year. It required plenty of research, lots of reading biographies and memoirs, but has been great fun to write." When not writing he says that, "I'm driving children around. Isn't everyone else?"

My last question to our Suburb best seller was: if you had a frustrating day or trouble with writer's block, where on the Suburb would you go for therapy? Michael answered, "The best thing after a frustrating day is to walk through the Heath Extension up to Heath and on to the Old White Bear in Hampstead, where a pint of beer will invariably put the problem into perspective. But sadly the only real cure for writer's block is to sit down and write."

Michael Ridpath has published 8 novels, including 'Free to Trade', 'Predator' and 'Fatal Error'. His most recent books 'On the Edge' and 'See No Evil', both feature the character of Alex Calder. 'See No Evil' was published earlier this year, and I must say is a great read.



THE DAME HENRIETTA BARNETT FUND

Her legacy 70 years on 1937-2007

Dame Henrietta is well known as the founder of the Suburb, but her other less well known legacy is the charity, the Dame Henrietta Barnett Fund.

The charity was created in 1937 through her will and a bequest to perpetuate her lifelong work with education and poverty. It provides an important link between the Suburb and Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel.



"... little did I know that it would change my life... now I've got a great job with the bank."



"It turned my life around... I am truly happy for the first time in my life."

Today the charity continues her work helping young people out of poverty through education

The fund supports young people's involvement in a wealth of educational and cultural activities whether it is by supporting field trips, by providing opportunities to experience the excitement of completing a Duke of Edinburgh expedition or by helping young people to access academic opportunities otherwise closed to them.

For some this help can lead to work or a university place and for all it makes a real difference to their experience of education - broadening their cultural horizons, providing leadership opportunities, developing self awareness and awareness of others and allowing them to explore and develop interests that can help shape their future aspirations and which can even become lifelong passions.

During this Centenary year you can help to support Dame Henrietta's legacy

- A bequest to the Dame Henrietta Barnett Fund would help to secure the long term funding of the charity. We can provide appropriate wording for your will.
- £60 a month gives a student the chance to join a Foundation course which should gain entry to university.
- £40 a month gives a young person with learning difficulties the chance to benefit from a specialist course which will help in gaining the skills they need to communicate.
- Other regular or one-off donations will help to fund field trips, short courses and other learning and development experiences for young people.

To make a donation or for more information

Please see www.dhbf.org.uk e-mail info@dhbf.org.uk

or write to The Dame Henrietta Barnett Fund
c/o Peter Johnson, Alexander JLO Solicitors, 11 Lanark Square London E14 9RE.