



## TLC SHOWCASE

TIM STRETTON

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## Introduction to *Catfish Alley*

*Catfish Alley* is the archetypal lockdown novel. Although I'd already written six fantasy novels and been published by Macmillan New Writing, something about the enforced isolation of 2020-21 made me decide I was going to try a new genre—crime—set in a place I'd never visited—Barcelona.

The chance to inhabit somewhere warm, vibrant, and exotic, even if only in my imagination, was more important than ever when real life was confined to four walls and an hour's exercise a day. And so the story of Tommy Chisholm, a washed-up Scottish writer in Barcelona, began to take shape.

Tommy is running out of money, his writing career has stalled, and he's close to calling time on his expat lifestyle, when he's recruited to help steal a collection of Surrealist paintings from an exhibition. He has no scruples about taking part in what seems to him a victimless crime, until he falls in love with Beatriz, the woman he is trying to con. By the time he realises how deeply he's entangled, it's too late to get out. *Catfish Alley* is rooted in a love of film noir and 1950s Hitchcock. If the amount of fun I had writing it is any guide, readers are going to enjoy it too.

I've worked with TLC over many years, including a wonderful manuscript assessment on one of my fantasy novels. What I've valued most, though, is the time I've spent at their Literary Adventures each September in the Alpujarra mountains in Spain. This is a chance for me to recharge my creative energies, learn from brilliant tutors and make new writing friends. I always return full of motivation and ideas. The Alpujarras even make a cameo appearance in *Catfish Alley*.

Once lockdown ended, I took the chance to spend some time in the real-world Barcelona, which sparked another two crime novels set in the city. *Catfish Alley* was published by SpellBound Books in June.

## Extract from *Catfish Alley* by Tim Stretton

I've been in the underheated waiting room for nearly two hours. Standard institutional chic—puke-coloured lino, plastic wood chairs bolted to the floor, posters curling away from tatty pinboards, and a vending machine I can't use because the change in my pocket comes to less than a euro. A smell of plastic and overcooked vegetables coming through the vents, and a sub-audible electrical drone that I can feel rather than hear. Who'd have thought it? Thirty-two years old, a background like mine, and this is my first time in a police station.

The woman before me, a snooty English tourist who'd spent the previous half-hour indulging in lazy denunciations of the Spanish, has been in the interview room for longer than I'd expected. I thought she'd be out with a flea in her ear by now, but no such luck.

Eventually the door opens. She stalks out, heels clacking on the lino, throwing a "thanks for nothing" over her shoulder.

She's followed by a young female cop in a dark blue local police uniform, who puts her head round the door.

"Senyor Chisholm?"

I'm the only man left in the waiting room so she doesn't need to be a detective to work out that's me. I get up and follow her in. She looks tetchy and tired as she sits behind a desk with a computer terminal and a pad of paper. I can't imagine the previous interview has put her in a better mood.

She indicates a plastic chair in front of her desk and I sit down. She clicks a leaky ballpoint and I see the ink stains on her fingers. Her badge says '12226'.

"I'd like to report a robbery," I say in Catalan. "My wallet was stolen on Rambla de Santa Mònica. Pickpockets."

She's surprised into a smile at my accent, which she quickly suppresses.

"I speak English," she says. Two years, and although my Spanish is good, I haven't cracked Catalan yet. "I'm sorry. The computers are down, so we will need to use paper."

"OK," I say. "I'm not in a hurry, take your time." With no cash it's not as if I have much else to do today.

“Your full name?” she says, pen poised.

“Thomas William Chisholm.” I spell the surname, which has baffled locals ever since I moved to Barcelona.

“Your profession?”

“Writer.” It sounds better than *bum*, which would be more accurate.

“You are a tourist?” she asks as she writes it down.

I shake my head. “No, I’m Scottish—British—but I live in Gràcia.”

She looks up at me from her paperwork. Her deep brown eyes have a flicker of interest.

“Residents are usually more careful. It’s normally tourists who get robbed.”

“Like the woman before me.”

She sighs and purses her lips. I grin at her.

“I’m not going to give you a hard time. Not all of us are like her,” I say. “This is my own fault.”

She spins the ballpoint in her fingers. “I have to fill in a form, give you a crime number. How did it happen?”

I shake my head ruefully. “You know the shell games on the street? Which cup is the ball under? I was watching that, a kid bumped into me. Two minutes later and I realise my wallet’s gone.”

She gives me a sympathetic smile. It’s a sign of how much all this has fucked me off that I’ve only just realised how pretty she is. I’m getting old.

“The Ramblas are the worst place for it,” she says. “It’s the oldest trick on the street.”

“I know. I should have been paying attention. Look, I’m sorry my stupidity has given you all this paperwork.”

She shrugs but her eyes are friendly.

“And what was in the wallet?”

“My Banco Santander card, my metro T-10 ticket, eighty euros in cash.” Actually sixty euros—my last sixty until I get paid—but it looks better to bump it up a bit.

“I will be honest,” she says. “Unless you are very lucky, you will never see the wallet

again. Phone your bank, cancel the card. The cash and the metro ticket will be used already. I'm sorry."

"I thought as much. I just need the crime number for the bank."

"Nothing of sentimental value in the wallet? Family photographs? Personal documents?"

"I'm not the sentimental type," I say.

Her mouth twitches as if she thinks I'm flirting with her. If I'd known today was going to turn out like this, I'd have shaved this morning.

She finishes writing, tears off the carbon copy and hands it to me. "That has your crime number," she says with a smile. "I'm sorry I can't be more help."

"*Gràcies* anyway," I say.

"*De res*. You're welcome."

Is there a flicker of attraction there? If I hadn't just split up with Carmen I might be tempted to find out—that and the fact that I now have no money at all until I get paid. I'm in no hurry to try and find a new girlfriend and I'm not sure I'd want to go out with a cop anyway. Call me old-fashioned, but I like to keep the law at arm's length.

We shake hands—hers is warm and dry—and hope that I've left her with a better impression of the British than her previous case.

Out on the street, it's started to rain a cold February Barcelona drizzle. Without my metro ticket, I turn up my jacket collar and set off for the hike to Gràcia.

Back at the flat, I'm cold and damp, and things are no better. The laptop battery has gone flat despite being plugged in overnight, and I jiggle the lead until I get a green light. I find the bank's website and of course I can't report the theft of my bank card online, which means probably an hour in a queue on their telephone 'hotline'. I also have two unread emails which promise nothing good.

I peer through the cracked laptop screen. The first is from my landlord, pointing out that I'm two months behind with my rent. This is hardly news, and perhaps I can stall him a bit longer with a sob story about my stolen wallet. The second email is going to be harder to fob off.

From: Polly Hunter <pollyhunter@stmarysagency.co.uk>

To: Tommy Chisholm <kilmarnocktom@gmail.com>

Subject: Progress/Advance

Hi Tommy

Sorry to contact you by email but your phone is disconnected. Have you changed your number? A couple of things – firstly I need you to sign some paperwork for US tax filing.

Are you still at:

Baixada del Silur, 27  
08024 Barcelona?

Also I wanted to touch base with you on progress with the second novel. You'll remember that the contract with Kilpatrick & Robinson stipulated delivery of the first draft by 31 August last year? I have stalled them so far but they are now talking about repayment of the first instalment of the advance. I'm sure we can extend the deadline if we can sell a realistic delivery plan, but at the moment I can't tell them anything because I don't know anything.

I'm doing my best to fight your corner but I have to say this continued silence on your part is unprofessional. It's normal to have problems with a book, and I know second novels are especially difficult, but I can't help you if you won't talk to me.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards

Polly

Fuck. Not a great day so far. It's not Polly's fault, she's only doing her job, and this has always been going to happen, but I'd hoped not quite yet. The manuscript isn't even six months late. Am I going to have to speak to Polly about it? Don't get me wrong, I like her and I've heard plenty of stories from writers with worse agents, but I don't fancy telling her that I've already spent the advance, written not a single word of the new

book, and still have no real ideas to work with. She obviously didn't get the hint when I changed my number.

I go to the fridge and get a beer. Better make it last, there's only three left and until my new bank card comes through there won't be any more. I look out of the dirty window into the shady alleyway below. Things are getting serious now: even when I get my bank card back, the account is almost empty, I've only done eleven hours for the language school this month, I owe a thousand euros in rent, and potentially now eight thousand quid of advance to pay back.

I once had a girlfriend back in Scotland, Lorna, who was into astrology, karma, healing crystals and all that shite. She always said the universe had a way of knowing when you needed something and providing for you. In my experience, what it generally provides is a kick in the bollocks.

## About the Writer

Tim Stretton has published six novels, and his seventh, ***Catfish Alley***, was published by SpellBound Books in June 2023. He writes fantasy and science fiction as Tim Stretton, and crime as T. M. Stretton.

He has also been published by Macmillan New Writing and Tor. His fantasy novels include the Annals of Mondia trilogy (***Dragonchaser***, ***The Dog of the North*** and ***The Last Free City***) and his most recent series is the steampunk Fractured Empire sequence, ***Bitter Sky*** and ***A Little Poison***.

More recently he has been working on crime fiction. In addition to ***Catfish Alley***, he has recently completed two more novels in the 'Barcelonoir' crime trilogy, ***Casanova Street*** and ***Diamond Boulevard***.

Tim was born and raised on the Isle of Wight, and has lived in West Sussex for most of his adult life. He has a degree in English and American Literature from the University of Kent. He was also a senior editor at the international Vance Integral Edition project. Before concentrating on writing full-time, he was the deputy finance director of a local authority and also worked as a trainer and consultant. His non-fiction has appeared in publications as diverse as the Local Government Chronicle and *Introvert, Dear*.

He is a member of the Crime Writers' Association, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Association, the Society of Authors and the Alliance of Independent Authors.

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