Fearless, free and feminist: the enduring appeal of Jack Reacher

From Kate Atkinson to Haruki Murakami, the fast-paced Jack Reacher books have a host of obsessive fans. As a new thriller (Blue Moon, published by Bantam on 29 October 2019) is released, we investigate the magnetism of Lee Child's antihero.

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This month, Lee Child's latest novel – his 24th thriller featuring Jack Reacher, a 6ft 5in, 250lb former US army military policeman – will be at, or near, the top of the bestseller charts. The books have been a publishing phenomenon, a huge commercial fiction brand, since the Coventry-born author (real name Jim Grant) wrote the first, *Killing Floor*, in 1997, when he heard he was getting laid off from his job as a TV executive. The stories are, essentially, westerns. Reacher is a loner, a wanderer. He has never settled into a "normal" life after leaving the army. He travels the US, hitching or taking the bus: it's a way of life he began as a means to explore the country, but by now, it's a compulsion. He carries only a toothbrush. He buys new clothes when he needs them, junks the old ones. He doesn't look for trouble, but trouble finds him. In each new town he solves the mystery, gets the bad guys and doles out rough justice. There's a lot of violence: guns, or scrappy hand-to-hand fighting. Kicks in the groin, punches to the head, elbows scything ferociously into flanks.

For stories to be as successful as these, they need to be read by people who don't generally read. But what makes Reacher so fascinating is the books' appeal not only outside, but within the rarefied circles of the literati – unlike, say, the work of Dan Brown or EL James. Their success with the grandes dames of literature is especially striking. Antonia Fraser is a fan. Kate Atkinson is a fan. Margaret Drabble, asked earlier this year by the Guardian what book she wished she'd written, answered: "Anything by Lee Child. What page turners, what prose, what landscapes, what motorways and motels, what mythic dimensions! I read, awestruck, waiting impatiently for the next."

Then there are the academics. Margaret MacMillan, the great authority on the first world war and a recent Reith lecturer, absolutely loves Child's books. Jenny Davidson, professor of comparative literature at Columbia in New York, calls herself "an obsessive fan". She regards them as the absolute apogee of light

reading: they are, she says, like the exquisite versions of fast food prepared by Michelin-starred chefs.

I am no grande dame, but I love them too. I've read all 24. When finding a title for my last book (a non-fiction work about mazes and labyrinths) I thought to myself, "What would Lee Child do?" I called it *Red Thread*, which seemed to me to have a properly Reacher-esque pithiness. The new Lee Child, I am pleased to note, is called *Blue Moon*.

What is it about Jack Reacher and literary women? Part of the draw is purely formal. Take this passage from *Blue Moon*, selected more or less at random:

> *His limbs were slow because they were heavy, and they were heavy because they were not only thick but also long. In the case of his legs, very long. He drove hard off his left foot and kicked out with his right, stretching low, a huge vicious wingspan, aiming at anything, any part of the guy, any part of the swoop, any window of time, whatever came along.*

Simple words, strung together with a real mastery of rhythm. Nothing fancy. Think of the simplicity of a Shakespeare sonnet, its preference for one- and two-syllable words ("Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May"). The repetition of "heavy" and "long". The way the final sentence coils and stretches out, heavy and long itself, ready to deliver its killer kick. Child is a stickler for grammar. So is Reacher.

Then there are the landscapes that Child conjures: the dusty nowhere-towns of the American flyover states; their diners and pawnshops and hardware stores. All of this is summoned up with extreme economy, helped along by particularly resonant recurring words and phrases: "blacktop" (asphalt), "backhoe" (a digger), "cloverleaf" (a road-junction design). The place names themselves are resonant. Last year's story, Past Tense, was set in Laconia, New Hampshire. The original Laconia was the territory in Greece occupied by the ancient Spartans, famously ruthless warriors, like Reacher. From Laconia we derive the word laconic, a reference to their severe, economic and sometimes dryly witty way with words – Reacher's own verbal mode to a tee.

There is a mythic heft to all this. "Reacher is the archetypal hero – the stranger who walks into town and avenges its wrongs – the classic trope identified by Auden in 'The Guilty Vicarage', his essay on detective fiction," says novelist

Amanda Craig, another big fan. She calls him a "modern knight errant". In myths and fairytales, we expect certain patterns. So it is with Reacher stories. Guardian writer Steven Poole once asked novelist Haruki Murakami why he liked the books. "Everything's the same!" answered Murakami.

Of course, everything is not quite the same: Davidson points out how adept Child is at ringing the changes, writing flashback novels that deal with Reacher's army career, or switching between first-person and third-person stories. But it's true, on some fundamental level, that everything is the same. We know, more often than not, there will be a minor dust-up in the first 10 pages or so. We know that there will be a careful drip-feed of plot points and minor resolutions leading up to a climactic chapter of ferocious violence, where the bad guys will be dispatched. Resolution will come, and Reacher will ride out of town once more, taking absolutely nothing with him. The body count, 24 books in, is into the hundreds. Crime novelist Val McDermid writes a funny scene in her latest book, *How the Dead Speak*. Her character Carol Jordan, now an ex-cop herself, and suffering from PTSD, is on a stake out. She listens to a Lee Child on audiobook to help with the boredom. "Carol thought that if his hero was real, after what he'd been through in twenty-odd books, he'd be in dire need of [trauma therapist] Melissa Rintoul's services." He would. But the mythic, formulaic elements of Reacher books are crucial to their enjoyment, and mustn't be tarnished with too much realism. No trauma therapy for Reacher.

Which brings me to the violence itself. What makes it palatable is its extreme stylisation. The fight scenes in Reacher novels remind me of arming and battle scenes in the *Iliad*, with their recurrent shapes and turns of phrase. This stylisation is rendered partly through a radical deceleration of pace. In Andy Martin's book *Reacher Said Nothing* – for which Martin sat at Child's elbow through the composition of the novel *Make Me* – Child said that he had one rule. "You should write the fast stuff slow and the slow stuff fast." In *Blue Moon*, there are some prime examples. In one fight, eight blows in total are delivered by Reacher and his assailants – this takes four whole pages to describe, and is punctuated by a chapter break. Only very occasionally does Reacher fight women, and this is when the violence arguably tips over from enjoyably stylised to something more gratuitous. Gone Tomorrow, with its graphic account of a woman's "flawless face" being "ruined" before her throat is cut "ear to ear" is pretty dreadful (I'll spare you the details). But on the whole, he avoids the trope of exoticising or eroticising violence against women.

Reacher will often team up with an ally in his adventures. That ally will frequently be an attractive, competent woman employed in some branch of law enforcement, with whom he may have a brief, consensual, mutually satisfying affair. Which brings me to another fundamental part of the stories' appeal to women, notwithstanding the example above: their understated feminism. Reacher respects and likes women. Finds them delightful, and sexy. But not in a creepy way. The female characters are invariably self-sufficient, neither needy nor tortured; it is surprisingly difficult to find such women in popular fiction written by men.

In some ways, *Blue Moon* might be read as a post-#MeToo story. One of the injustices righted in this story turns on male aggression towards women, and sexual exploitation. It has an especially grim denouement, bloody even by Child's standards. It is hard not to read it – on one level, at least – as female revenge drama.

There's that. But do women fancy Jack Reacher? Do female readers fantasise about him? Well, some clearly do. That said, he is "a big ugly guy" built like "a brick outhouse". Not my type. I think the real point is that women want to be him. That's the fantasy: to abandon all responsibilities, to walk through the world with nothing. To be physically invincible. To be justifiably fearless.