

27. Conn Iggulden

***Winner of Galaxy Best British Book Award.
Named among 'People that Mattered in 2007' by
TIME Magazine.***

My next guest has more excellent ratings on Goodreads.com than many novels have words. His work is so detailed it forms the basis of historical lectures. He is a global bestseller, a veteran, and a master wordsmith in every sense of the word. Conn's first novel, *The Gates of Rome* had its film option snapped up a few years ago.

Whilst Conn Iggulden is perhaps considered to be 'the' U.K. specialist in the Historical Fiction genre, he has also written a successful children's book, *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, which was voted The British Book of the Year at the Galaxy British Book Awards in 2006. He followed that success up with several further books in the same genre. He has also written *Tollins: Explosive Tales for Children* and three subsequent books based upon the *Tollins*, however the reason U.K. bookshops continue to signpost this heavyweight author amongst other greats such as: Peter James, Lee Child and John Grisham, is due to his talent in the genre of historical fiction.

The Word

There are now three major series of books available in historical fiction: *The Emperor series (5)*, *The Conqueror series (5)* and his current series, promoted by Penguin Books, *Wars of the Roses*.

I strongly recommend readers take the time to watch the short video created by Penguin Books UK (at less than a minute – it's a mini epic!) and embedded at the bottom of this preview and then take a further few moments to purchase the current book, *Stormbird* which is available in the stores. *Trinity*, the second in the series, will be arriving later in the year. Keep your eye out for it!

It is my privilege and honour to welcome Mr. Conn Iggulden to *Simon's 10 Q Interviews*:

SD Q1: In 2007, along with your brother, Hal, you won the Best British Book Award for the book *The Dangerous Book for Boys*. You both went on to be named among the elite in Time Magazine's "People That Mattered" feature for that year. If you were to dig deep and think of ways that such an incredible year could be bettered, how could you improve upon it and why would that make it better?

The Word

CI A1: Honestly, I can't think of anything to improve that year. Not only did the book win, but Richard Dawkins came second. That was all icing and no cake. I mean, it would have been nice if it had happened ten years before, when I was slimmer – for the pictures, you know – but I'll take it as it came, even so. When I was a kid, I used to fantasise about writing a book that would be No.1 for months and sell millions around the world. (I also used to fantasise about being a Ninja, but I was too tall and they turned me down, so the book was the only realistic chance.) To have it actually come true was astonishing and wonderful. My second son was also born that year, so I can't imagine anything will ever top it.

***SD Q2:* You appear to be "manufactured" to write. Your great grandfather was a Seannachie, your mother a natural storyteller and your father a teacher. You must have been drawn to writing like a bee to the scent of pollen. Indeed, it seems both your education and teaching career honed you, with the accuracy of modern day satellite navigation systems, directly to the sweet tasting nectar. You simply had to raise your quill, allow the inbred magic to flow, and the rest, as they say, would quickly dissolve into history! Of course nothing in life is really so sweet. Bees have a single sting, the use of which tragically leads to their imminent demise. What in your life is so precious**

The Word

that you would exercise the use of such a sting and what is the closest you have come to such an event in life so far?

CI A2: That's a really interesting question. It has long been my belief that the purpose of life is not to be happy. Cows are happy and I have always aimed higher than cows. As an extreme example, I used to say that I'd exchange all the years of my life for one chance to sit on the moon and watch the earth, even if it meant my death. That's not strictly true, but it serves to illustrate the point, for me. Of course I'd like to write a book that is treasured and loved by the world, long after I'm gone. In my twenties, I might have said I'd exchange my life for writing that book. With age – and particularly, with children – priorities change. I've been lucky enough to be able to write stories that give pleasure and just occasionally mean a great deal to those who read them. I had an email from a man recently who described a very dark time in his life and how finding my books had helped. He finished by saying: "So hopefully one day if you're having a bad day or wonder why you bother with certain things, you could remember this letter and know that in this world you made the difference and changed a complete stranger's life for the better".

I don't ask for more than that. I've already been given more than I could possibly have deserved.

SD Q3: On your website you are quoted as liking "just about anything by David Gemmell, or Peter F. Hamilton or Wilbur Smith", stories that hold you spellbound include: *Hornblower* and *Tai-Pan*, *Flashman*, *Sharpe* and *Jack Aubrey*. Who are your favourite artists and what attracts you to their work?

CI A3: I used to know an actor who had trouble watching films because he kept seeing the process and not the result. He saw the 'blocking' (where the actors stand) and the lighting, and the scene cuts – and was unable to lose himself in the story as a result. I used to worry that the same thing might happen to me with books, that through writing them, I'd see too much of the mechanics behind the story and lose one of the greatest pleasures of my life as a result. So far, thank God, that hasn't happened. I read all the time and I can be gripped by a character, or a fast plot, racing through just to 'see what will happen'. It's the key to all fiction, of course: people are interested in people. I love books like *Tai-Pan*, with such a powerful lead character that it doesn't feel manufactured at all. It feels like I'm reading a real life and his struggles, triumphs and disasters are real. For me, that's good writing.

I am aware, of course, of the sort of books where the reader is meant to wade through tortuous paragraphs to some sort of personal realisation. With a few exceptions,

The Word

they can all take a long trip off a short pier. I find beauty in being alive and in those I meet and know. A book must never allow the style to overcome the story and the characters, in my opinion. It is possible to deal with great truths of the human condition in fiction, obviously. It has been the joy of my career that writing about Caesar and Genghis, for example, has allowed me to explore fatherhood, family, honour, courage and a hundred other themes. Yet the story has to be there – if the reader isn't interested in 'what comes next', I would have failed, I think.

Like millions of others, I'm attracted to the Me+ hero books. In the old saw about there being 'seven stories in the world', one of them has to be 'The boy with power' – Sherlock Holmes or Harry Potter being two good examples. They have something that sets them apart. Our world is filtered through our own senses and it's an obvious truth that people do feel as if they are the centre of the universe. We have no real awareness of it existing before and after us, so we look for validation of that 'special' feeling. Book characters often play to that. Kurt Vonnegut defined fiction in this way: 'There's this guy, right? And he's a pretty decent kind of guy. And then something bad happens to him.' He might have added: 'He's a guy a bit like you, but he has a talent for

The Word

something, a talent you can admire. For just a while, you'll feel like him when you read the book.'

Also with those millions of others, I enjoy reading about people who resemble me, but also those who can do things I can't. Me+. I don't think that's any great revelation, but it is a great truth of fiction.

***SD Q4:* You clearly relish engaging with your readership. Your website has its own forum, currently home to over 7,300 topics and 145,000 posts and a membership stretching into the thousands. I am limited to writing a few interviews per week and sometimes struggle to keep up the pace! Do you continue to be directly involved in writing responses and what is the most awkward question posted that didn't quite make the "banned" list and how did you or the administrators reply to it?**

CI A4: As a general rule, I don't interfere with inflammatory topics or posts. I believe in Free Speech, with the usual caveat about not shouting 'fire' in a crowded theatre. It makes for more interesting discussions and those who do troll are usually taken on by others on the forum. That can be an educational experience for them! I've had to ban only two people in about eight years: one who was some kind of neo-Nazi nutter and the other

The Word

who was a Muslim nutter. I'd like to think we could have kept both, but at the end of the day, it's a family forum and I feel responsible for the things posted on it.

I do relish the contact, I admit. Writing is a solitary thing, for the most part. I enjoy going to literary festivals when I can and also in the emails and responses I get. Some are from those with expert knowledge who point out errors. I don't mind those and I've made changes in the past as a result, if they're right. Others are just those readers kind enough to let me know they enjoy the books. I love those.

***SD Q5: Wars of the Roses* is your latest series of historical novels, *Stormbird* is the latest book, promoted by Penguin and backed up with some tense, and highly theatrical, promotional, film shorts. In 2008 there were rumours of films based upon your Emperor series of novels being planned. Sadly, those hopes were thwarted back in 2012. Given the years of effort in getting the film under the noses of Hollywood "players" you must have been devastated to see such effort go to waste! Did that put you off going down the film route and at present, where do your books stand with those in the world of the big screen, what is the first Conn Iggulden book we are likely to see on the big screen and, given the choice, who would you choose for the lead roles?**

The Word

CI A5: If you'd asked that question six months ago, the truthful answer would have been none of them. Film deals had fallen apart, left, right and centre. The Emperor series is back on for a film, to my intense pleasure. I had a long conversation with a new director and script-writer a couple of months ago, so keep fingers crossed for that one. More recently, I was in contact with Bryan Cranston (Of *Breaking Bad*) about turning the *Dangerous Book for Boys* into a TV series with him in it. As a fan of *Breaking Bad* (and *Malcolm in the Middle!*) that was incredibly exciting. Believe it or not, there is also a film deal for the Genghis books in the works. I've seen enough of them crash and burn over the years not to get too excited, but there are three irons in the fire.

When I was still starting out, the Emperor books were picked up for the first time by a film studio and I was understandably thrilled. I met Philippa Gregory in Ireland, on the same promotional trip. She advised me then not to get my hopes up, as film options come and go all the time. They do, but as you'll note of her, sometimes they get made as well. I remain an optimist – a grave half-full sort of person, me.

As for actors, I'd like to see Michael Chiklis in something. I enjoyed *'The Shield'* series very much. Bryan Cranston as well, obviously!

The Word

SD Q6: I don't know if you are aware, but I have a Time Machine tucked away, hidden from those evil-doers that would use it for sinister means. I regularly allow my 10 Q interviewees the exclusive privilege of taking limited journeys in it (I also used to see pink elephants fly over my house each morning...ah, no, I am being corrected, apparently they were RAF Red Arrows). Sadly, I must limit you to three trips as I am hoping to keep the machine in good working order until I've sent Dan Brown on a trip in it. Past, present or future, which three places would you go; in what time period, and what would be your purpose having arrived at each destination?

CI A6:

Trip One (Past, Present, or Future): Raising Lazarus

First Destination and Time: Jerusalem, around 32AD

Purpose: Twofold. To confirm with my own eyes whether Jesus raised someone from the dead – which seems to me to be *the* miracle, the most impressive one that would prove the basis of Christianity beyond all doubt. The second part would be to try and have a conversation with

The Word

the man himself, so I could come back and read this in the New Testament.

“And Lo, a man walked from the local town, dressed in strange raiment. He spoke no Aramaic and grew quite testy when the disciples questioned him. They watched as he examined the body of Lazarus, holding its wrist and pressing his head against the chest of Lazarus, until he finally nodded and spoke strange words. Only then did Jesus approach, though he was quite red in the face by then and muttered about sightseers and people who would not believe if it stared them right in the face.”

Matthew 6: 6-12

Trip Two (Past, Present, or Future): King John

Second Destination and Time: The Wash, Norfolk. October, 1216

Purpose: To see where the king dropped the Crown Jewels and Royal Great Seal. I would need diving gear and a small boat. It would, in short, be the greatest recovery of a thing lost in history and I'd love to be the one who found it all again.

The Word

Trip Three (Past, Present, or Future): WW2

Third Destination and Time: September 1944

Purpose: To see my father as a young man, possibly to buy him a drink before he took off towards Arnhem. He didn't have me until he was forty-seven, so I didn't know him until he was a man in his fifties. I am still not yet as old as he was when I was born, a fact that astonishes me. I'd like to have the chance to meet the man when he was still a very young pilot, with seventy years still ahead of him. Of course, it goes without saying that I would probably say the wrong thing, muck up my own future and pop out of existen...

SD Q7: You wake up one morning to find yourself, mind, body and soul propelled back to your pre-teen self. Armed only with the book which you had been reminiscing over the previous evening, *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, you decide to go on an adventure based upon the information in the book. Where do you go, what do you do, and shouldn't you have known better from attempting it the first time around?

The Word

CI A7: I was fascinated by old tobacco tins back then, just the whole concept of a 'survival' tin filled with needle and thread, a compass, a knife, matches, all sorts of things. Looking back with an adult perspective, I might say that it was an attempt to reduce the wide world to something I could control and put in a pocket, but it might be just that I liked tins.

With just such a tin in hand, I'd probably go to Wales. I've always loved the Brecon Beacons and the highest point, Pen Y Fan, is a place you can walk up in a day, with views to steal the breath when you sit on the top. I'd certainly go alone, which says a great deal about me at 12. It's one of the most beautiful places in the world and fitting in a trip that early would be a good thing. I don't think my first trip was actually until I was around seventeen.

***SD Q8:* You are soon to launch your new book, *Trinity* in the *Wars of the Roses* series, published under the Penguin Books label. How will the series appeal more to your existing fan base than the *Emperor* or *Conqueror* series, and what can you say about the *Wars of the Roses* to entice new readers into the already vast Conn Iggulden following?**

CI A8: I look for good stories and good characters, regardless of where they are set or which century. I spent a

The Word

lot of time roughing out King Arthur and came very close to doing it before putting it aside. *Wars of the Roses* was just an extraordinary story, with men and women who are not very well known, but ran the whole gauntlet of human experience: love, betrayal, courage in war, madness, murder, everything. I couldn't have asked for a better background, in fact. I was a little wary of simply choosing another historical figure and following their life from birth to death, as I did with Genghis. This series is about the two main houses, of course: York and Lancaster and everything that allowed the Tudors to rise. It has England's most famous villain in Richard III, though we'll have to see how I handle him in the third book. I could not have dreamed that they would find his body while I was writing the first book about his father!

I hope those who have enjoyed the previous books will love these ones as much. All I ask is that they trust me to tell the story. It's there – I just have to do it justice. As for new readers, it's my hope that those who might have considered Genghis a bit brutal will take a risk on these ones. All I ever ask is that someone picks one up and reads twenty pages. In the book shop, even. If you don't like it, if it doesn't catch your interest, put it back on the shelf! What could be simpler? In fact, if I had a fantasy, it would be for the entire world to read just twenty pages of say *The Gates of Rome* or *Wolf of the Plains* or *Stormbird*. It is

The Word

frustrating knowing that there are millions out there who would love them, but have never picked one up. Those people must be reached. They must be saved.

SD Q9: If you were to find yourself marooned on a desert island and granted a wish to call three authors to come and live alongside you for the rest of your days, who would you nominate, why, and once they have forgiven you for nominating them, what would you do to ensure you didn't recreate a *Lord of the Flies* scenario, albeit amongst adults!

CI A9: When I think how I'd react if someone summoned me in such a way, it becomes clear that I'd better choose very small and physically weak authors. Hemingway would kill me, the moment he'd worked out what I'd done, so he's out. Look, if it's going to be for the rest of my days, I'm going to pick female authors, I'm sorry – and I'm going to pick attractive ones. That might seem shallow, but hanging out with three guys when I could have an island harem as the only turkey in the shop? No chance. That said, I think I'd get some pretty irritated responses if I listed three female authors by how physically attractive they are, so I'm not going to do that either. Did Marilyn Monroe write anything? The question is a good one, but I'm going to have to draw a discreet veil over my answers.

SD Q10: I have now reached the moment of regret, that time when I wish I had another ten questions to ask! Alas, it's *Simon's 10 Q Interview* and we are at number ten. My last scenario has you sitting at your desk pondering. You have been asked to interview an author for *Simon's 10 Q Interviews*. You reach into the top draw of your desk and withdraw your little black book brimming with telephone numbers and the names of authors from across the globe. Who is the first you would call and what is the burning question you have for them that leads you into making that decision?

CI A10: If I had a free choice, I'd really like to interview Harper Lee. As far as I know, she has never given an interview and I'd love to ask her about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The characters in that: Jem, Scout, and Atticus in particular are incredible and I'd love to know how she wrote them and what experiences in her life led to their creation. I once used the jailhouse scene from the book to bring hundreds of kids back in to school, when they were sort of rioting and refusing to come in. As Scout had done, I named the boys one by one. In doing so, they stopped being part of a mob and became individuals again. There's a lot of wisdom in that book and I'd like to speak to the one who wrote it.

The Word

Thank you – those were fascinating questions. I hope the answers were half as good.

Conn Iggulden.