

[theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

Peter Robinson obituary

Peter Guttridge

5-6 minutes

Peter Robinson was the creator of the immensely popular Inspector Alan Banks crime series, set in Yorkshire – the books sold almost 9m copies in 19 languages and spawned a successful [television series \(DCI Banks, 2010-16\) starring Stephen Tompkinson](#) as Banks.

Robinson, who has died aged 72 after a brief illness, first introduced Banks and the fictional Yorkshire town of Eastvale to the crime-reading world in 1987 with *Gallows View*. The gruff Yorkshire cop, complex as the best crime cops are expected to be, but with a belief in fairness and justice, was an immediate success, with *Gallows View* shortlisted for the best first novel award in Canada and for the UK Crimewriters' Association's John Creasey award.

Although he had not necessarily intended to write a series, Robinson went on to produce a [Banks novel a year](#) – as well as award-winning short stories. He was regularly nominated for and frequently won awards in Canada, the US, France, the UK and Sweden.

A native of Yorkshire, Robinson lived for most of his life in Toronto. He once said he started the Inspector Banks series because he was homesick in his early days in Canada.

He was born in Castleford, West Yorkshire, to Clifford Robinson, a rent collector, and Miriam (nee Jarvis), a cleaner, and grew up in Armley, a working-class suburb of Leeds (also home to fellow writers Alan Bennett and Barbara Taylor Bradford). It is not too much of a stretch to assume that aspects of Inspector Banks's adolescence in the 1960s, as described in *Close to Home* (2003), the 14th novel in the series, mirrored Robinson's own.

He described in one interview how he spent the lively summer of 1965 "with his ear glued to his transistor radio and his eyes on the passing girls". He went to Leeds University to study English literature. While there he wrote poetry and gave public readings around Yorkshire.

In 1974 he moved to Canada, to take an MA in English and creative writing at the University of Windsor, Ontario. One of his tutors was the prolific and highly esteemed American author [Joyce Carol Oates](#), who taught him, among other things, to take his writing seriously.

He then moved to Toronto, to York University, to take a PhD in English. There he organised various poetry events and helped set up a small press with friends, whose publications included a volume of his own poems. He settled in the city after meeting his future wife, Sheila Halladay, a lawyer, there.

Although he continued to write poetry occasionally throughout his life (some of which he placed in one or two of his novels, attributed to various characters) he once explained that things he would previously have put in his poems he now put in his prose.





📷 Stephen Tompkinson as DCI Banks in the eponymous TV series, 2011. Photograph: ITV/Shutterstock

In each Banks novel Robinson explored the character of the policeman a little more, but always keeping him grounded in his sense of decency and justice. Robinson was teaching at different colleges from time to time during this period – including a year as writer in residence at his old university, Windsor.

In 1990 he published a stand-alone novel, *Caedmon's Song*, a psychological thriller in which two young women in different parts of England find their paths crossing in an alarming way.

In 2000 he made a step-change with the 10th Banks novel, *In a Dry Season*, which had a more complex (and haunting) plot, set around secrets long hidden in a village flooded to create a reservoir and revealed when the reservoir dries up. Oddly, his fellow Yorkshireman [Reginald Hill](#), creator of that bluff northern detective Andy Dalziel and his university-educated sidekick, Peter Pascoe, had the same idea of using a flooded village and dried-up reservoir in *On Beulah Height*, published around the same time.

Hill won the US Barry award for *On Beulah Height* in 1999 and Robinson the same award for *In a Dry Season* the year after. In addition it won the Anthony award in the US and the Martin Beck award in Sweden. In 2002 Robinson was awarded the Dagger in the Library by the UK Crime Writers' Association for most popular author of that year, voted for by libraries.

He claimed it got harder as time went on to maintain the high standard he had established for himself in the series, but it was not noticeable in his output. Banks went on through divorce, further success in his career and no let-up in the complexity and sometimes brutality of the cases he investigated.

Robinson visited the UK regularly – he and Sheila had a cottage in Richmond, North Yorkshire – and he was a well-known and welcome presence at crime fiction festivals around the world.

In 2009 the University of Leeds awarded him an honorary doctorate. He and his wife later endowed the Peter Robinson scholarship at Leeds to help students from less advantaged backgrounds study English – preferably students with an interest in creative writing.

The first [episodes](#) of the Inspector Banks TV adaptation came along in 2010, with Tompkinson well received playing the title character. It ran for five series.

Robinson had completed another Banks novel before he died. *Standing in the Shadows* is due to be published next year.

Sheila survives him.