

of different expressions from distilleries in the same year and these guys want them all. It's very much a male thing. There's a competitive edge to it."

In *Smokeheads*, Johnstone links the aggressive male behaviour that lands his heroes in such terrible trouble with the risks bankers took that broke the economy, personified by anti-hero Roddy. "If you go for a drink in the City of London, you'll encounter an insane level of macho behaviour. I knew men when I was at university who were studying economics and law who even then, aged 18, were into one-upmanship. It's as good an argument for diversity in the workplace as I can think of. The worst of what you hear goes on wouldn't happen, I think, if more women worked in the City."

I meet Johnstone in the Scottish Storytelling Centre Café on Edinburgh's High Street. He talks pretty much like he writes: directly, unillusioned, friendly, with not much taste for pretension. He was born in 1970 in Arbroath, the child of two teachers. He had a happy childhood, but didn't imagine he'd stay in Arbroath for the rest of his days. Given that he later went on to play in a band, Northern Alliance (four albums so far), and write books, was he an arty teenager?

"I would never use a term like 'arty' as I would have been battered. But I was a swot."

Johnstone's swotting won him a place at the University of Edinburgh studying physics, followed by a PhD in experimental nuclear physics. Aged 25, he left further education to work for Marconi Avionics as a systems engineer designing radar and missile weapons systems. Did he have qualms about his job?

"I didn't have any when I began but they grew as time passed. Britain wasn't actually at war at the time, which would I think have made a difference for me. You might say it doesn't matter if we were at peace or war, I was still helping to design a missile guidance system. But what I was doing was air-to-air, so it would have been used to kill someone else in a plane as opposed to air-to-ground, which is very different. So, yeah, I had some qualms, but

that's not why I left. I left because I ended up hating the job."

After work, Johnstone was playing in bands and contributing reviews to fanzines and newspapers. He wanted to write fiction but feared he would never find the time to finish a book if he continued as a systems engineer. His first novel, *Tombstoning*, was inspired by thrill-seekers who jump off cliffs into the sea for an adrenaline rush. Doug committed the career equivalent and quit his job.

"I went to Napier to do a diploma in journalism. I was older by 10 years than anyone else in the class, who'd all just come out of doing their first degree. I had given up a job and I took it very seriously. I was out hustling for freelance work whenever I wasn't in class. My classmates were still in student mode, but I had to earn a living."

His truffling for work repaid the effort. A decade after he finished the journalism course, Johnstone is the author of three novels, freelances for several national newspapers and recently took up a post as writer in residence at the University of Strathclyde. "I am generally positive. I try not to be, being Scottish. I'm happily married with two young kids and I just about earn a living doing something I love."

Johnstone is so well adjusted, you wonder where the darkness in his books comes from. While *Tombstoning* and the rock'n'roll confessional *The Ossians* ended with their protagonists in better places than where they started the book, *Smokeheads* has a lingering sense of melancholy – as well as some brutal scenes. The two moods, sadness and savagery, meet in a plot that swiftly hooks the reader. It's measured out in short chapters, which, like a good nip, go down fast and deliver a jolt.

Johnstone laughs when I make the comparison before delivering what might just be his credo: "I want to write the meanest, fastest, nastiest books I can."

Smokeheads is published by Faber, £12.99. Doug Johnstone will be taking part in Gutter Magazine Showcase at the Aye Write! festival, on March 8 at 7.30pm

WIN BOOKS AND MALT WHISKY

We are offering three readers a free copy of Doug Johnstone's novel *Smokeheads* and a bottle of Smokehead single malt to keep them company while they read. Answer the following question and send your reply, along with your name, address and phone number, to Rosemary Goring, Literary Editor, The Herald and Sunday Herald, 200 Renfield Street, Glasgow, G2 3QB, or to books@theherald.co.uk, by Friday, March 4.

What high-profile poet wrote a recent paeon to whisky, including the verse:

Under the table
she drank him, my grandmother,
Irish to his Scotch.

Go to www.smokehead.com for more information about the whisky. Smokehead encourages responsible drinking.

