

Stranger no more

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The discovery of mystery writer Robert Wilson

By MICHAEL GILTZ

The British seem to breed terrific mystery and thriller writers with astonishing ease — think of everyone from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to Agatha Christie, to John Le Carré and P.D. James.

The latest import about to catch fire in the U.S.? Robert Wilson.

"He's gathering a following here, definitely," declares Susan Hanson, the manager of Manhattan's specialty bookstore Partners in Crime. "His last book [last year's] 'A Small Death in Lisbon,' was really highly regarded as one of the best thrillers that many people had read in a long time."

Now, with the release of "The Company of Strangers," Wilson looks poised to hit the best-seller list thanks to strong early reviews and a hefty first printing.

"Company" is a complex, entertaining thriller that begins in Lisbon during World War II and climaxes in England in the late '80s. Wilson nimbly creates his first female protagonist — a

headstrong spy with an able mathematical mind — and the most sweeping tale of his career.

In the midst of his first U.S. book tour — Wilson did take a "low-life" tour of the States via Greyhound when he was younger — the 44-year-old author took some time to discuss the delights of seeing a publisher gear up to turn him into a household name.

Wilson, who now lives in Portugal, had enjoyed critical acclaim in England for his first four books — noir-ish thrillers set in

West Africa that owed a happy debt to Raymond Chandler.

"I loved writing those books," says Wilson of the crime novels featuring the "fixer" Bruce Medway. "The reason I stopped was that nobody was interested in them. It's as simple as that."

Even his own U.K. publisher wasn't wholly sold on his breakout potential.

"The marketing director didn't even read one of my books until number four," says Wilson, who knew not to expect much income from writing at the beginning.



"My agent said, 'It's going to take a long time before you have any cash flow,'" recalls Wilson, a Brit sensation who hit the big time with "The Company of Strangers" (left).

"My agent said to me, 'It's going to take a long time before you have any cash flow at all.' That's all he said, 'a long time.' A long time to me was a couple of years. Three years, maybe. But it was something like six years before I made any sort of reasonable money whereby I could just write! That was

when I got the contract to do 'A Small Death in Lisbon.'"

A clever, classically shaped thriller, "Small Death" garnered rave reviews and the Gold Dagger Award as Best Crime Novel from Britain's Crime Writer's Association.

But Wilson doesn't re-

peat himself with "The Company of Strangers," even though it, too, is set in Lisbon. His new book is as much about the loves and betrayals of his heroine, Andrea Aspinall, as it is about the numerous puzzles that come her way while trying to uncover Nazi spies who are desperately trying to get information and material to aid in the building of an atomic bomb.

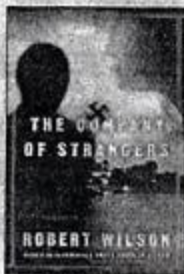
Wilson, who studied English at Oxford University, took on a series of jobs — ship contractor, advertising executive — before finally knocking down to the hard work of learning the craft he wanted to pursue all along. He and his wife decided to live in a very isolated farmhouse in Portugal where they could survive quite cheaply while he got better and better at his work.

Now, Wilson gets up at five in the morning, reads a few pages of a book — currently he's finishing Michael Ondaatje, and before that he read Nabokov — and then plunges into his work, confident he can tackle the task at hand.

"Before, when I wasn't writing, I was off making money," says Wilson, who didn't have a break for six years.

Now he can finally afford to turn down advertising work, though he's still too cautious to be cheeky about it.

"I never managed to say 'no' with any arrogance," says Wilson, laughing. "I always sort of said, 'I don't need to do that just yet. But don't cross me off your list.'"



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