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Ken Follett

Biography & bibliography

Ken Follett: A storyteller – born or bred?

Ken Follett, author of more than a dozen best-selling novels, is often hailed as a born story-teller, but looking at his early life it may be more accurate to say he was bred as one.

KEN was born in Cardiff, Wales on 5 June 1949, the first of Martin and Veenie Follett's three children. In post-war Britain, not only were toys a scarcity for the Follett children, but their devoutly religious parents did not permit them to watch television, go to the cinema or even listen to the radio. The young Ken's sources of entertainment were the many stories told to him by his mother -- and the fantasy and adventure he created in his own imagination. He began reading at an early age; books became his greatest pleasure and the local library his favourite place.

"I didn't have many books of my own and I've always been grateful for the public library. Without free books I would not have become a voracious reader, and if you are not a reader you are not a writer."

When he was ten his family moved to London, where he completed his schooling. He then studied philosophy at University College; a seemingly surprising choice for the son of a tax inspector, but an obvious one for Ken given his religious upbringing and the many questions he had as a result. He believes the choice shaped his future as a writer.

"There is a real connection between philosophy and fiction. In philosophy you deal with questions like: We're sitting at this table, but is the table real?' A daft question, but in studying philosophy, you need to take that sort of thing seriously and have an off-the-wall imagination. Writing fiction is the same."

Questioning what was real within a lecture hall was one thing; quite another reality for Ken was becoming a husband and father. When his girlfriend Mary fell pregnant, the young couple married at the end of Ken's first term at university and their son, Emanuele, was born in July 1968.

"It's not the kind of thing that you plan to do when you are 18 but once it had happened it was very thrilling. I felt doubly rich because I was having a great time at university and it was also tremendously exciting to have a little baby and take care of him. We loved him and he was very endearing. He still is."

It was also at university, in the heady atmosphere of the late 60s when the war with Vietnam was underway, that Ken began developing a passion for politics: "Politics was discussed all the time. It seemed as if student protest was a world-wide movement. Although we were young and had the arrogance of youth, nevertheless when you look at the issues that we fought over, I think by and large we were right."

Starting out

In September 1970, fresh out of university, a three-month graduate journalism course set him on a writer's path. He began as a reporter for the *South Wales Echo* in Cardiff, and then, following the birth of daughter Marie-Claire in 1973, as a columnist for the *Evening News* in London. When he did not "make the grade as the hot-shot investigative reporter" he'd imagined he might be, Ken started writing fiction at night and on weekends. In 1974 he left newspapers and joined a small London publisher, Everest Books.



As a schoolboy in Wales



Student life ...



The write stuff

His after-hours writing led to the publication of several books, none of which sold very well, but throughout those years he was encouraged and advised by an American literary agent, Al Zuckerman. Then came the time when they both knew that Ken had a winner and Zuckerman said: "This novel is going to be huge, and you are going to have tax problems".

The Big Time

It was *Eye of the Needle* that catapulted Ken to best-seller status. Published in 1978, it won the Edgar award, and has sold more than 10 million copies. The book's success enabled Ken to quit his day job, rent a villa in the South of France and devote himself full-time to writing his next novel, *Triple*.

"I was very worried that I might not be able to do it again. It happens to quite a lot of writers. They write one terrific book and then the next one is not so good and doesn't sell quite so well, the third one is not very good and they never write a fourth. I was conscious that might easily happen to me, and so I worked very hard on *Triple* to try to make it as exciting as *Eye of the Needle*."

The Folletts returned to England three years later because Ken missed the films and theatre and all the stimulation that London offered, and he wanted to vote. They settled in Surrey where Ken became involved with fundraising and campaigning for the Labour Party. It was then that he met and fell in love with the Party's local branch secretary, Barbara Broer, whom he married in 1985.

The couple now live in Hertfordshire in an old rectory, which is also home-from-home for Ken's son and daughter, Barbara's son and two daughters and their partners and children.

Barbara is Member of Parliament for Stevenage – a seat she won in 1997 and to which she was returned in the 2001 and 2005 elections – and is now Minister for Equality in Gordon Brown's government. Ken helps her campaign and works with her on other Party activities. In spite of his political commitment, Ken has never allowed politics to take precedence over writing. He begins writing after breakfast and continues until about 4 pm: "I am a morning person. As soon as I'm up, I want to get to my desk. In the evening I want to relax and eat and drink and do all that sort of low-tension stuff."

On the racks

Ken has written 16 novels in the past 25 years: the first five best-sellers were spy thrillers: *Eye of the Needle* (1978), *Triple* (1979), *The Key to Rebecca* (1980), *The Man from St Petersburg* (1982) and *Lie Down with Lions* (1986).

On *Wings of Eagles* (1983), was the true story of how two of Ross Perot's employees were rescued from Iran during the revolution of 1979.

He then surprised readers by radically changing course with *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989), a novel about building a cathedral in the Middle Ages. It received rave reviews and was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 18 weeks. It also topped best-seller lists in Canada, Britain and Italy, and was on the German best-seller list for six years. The next three novels, *Night Over Water* (1991), *A Dangerous Fortune* (1993) and *A Place Called Freedom* (1995) were more suspense than thriller, but he returned to the thriller genre with *The Third Twin* (1996) which in the *Publishing Trends* annual survey of international fiction best-sellers for 1997 was ranked No. 2 worldwide, after John



The first best-seller



Barbara Follett MP



An accomplished novelist

Grisham's *The Partner*. His next work, *The Hammer of Eden* (1998) was another contemporary suspense story followed by a Cold War thriller, *Code to Zero* (2000).

Ken returned to the WWII era with his next two novels: *Jackdaws* (2001), a World War II thriller about a group of women parachuted into France to destroy a vital telephone exchange – which won the Corine Prize for 2003 – and *Hornet Flight* (2002), about a daring young Danish couple who escape to Britain from occupied Denmark in a rebuilt Hornet Moth biplane with vital information about German radar.

Whiteout (2004), is a contemporary thriller about the theft of a deadly virus from a research lab. Set in the remote Scottish Highlands over a stormy, snow-bound Christmas, *Whiteout* crackles with jealousies, distrust, sexual attraction, rivalries, hidden traitors and unexpected heroes.

His latest novel, *World Without End* (2007) is the long-awaited sequel to the hugely-popular *The Pillars of the Earth*. The new book returns to Kingsbridge two hundred years later, and features the descendants of the characters in 'Pillars'. Broad in sweep, and massive in scope, it focuses on the destinies of a handful of people as their lives are devastated by the Black Death, the plague that inundated Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century.

Visual delights

Eye of the Needle was made into a film and four novels have been made into television mini-series: *The Key to Rebecca*, *Lie Down with Lions*, *On Wings of Eagles* and *The Third Twin* – the rights for which were sold to CBS for \$1,400,000, a record price at the time.

Wine, woman and song

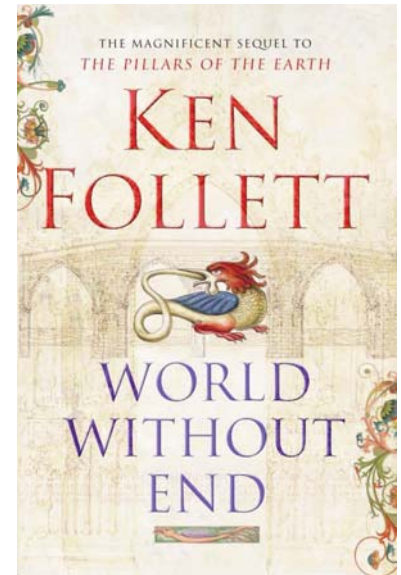
The great pleasures in Ken's life, other than the people he loves, are good food and wine, Shakespearian drama and even more importantly, music. Music has always featured largely in his life – both his parents play the piano. Ken plays bass guitar in a band called "Damn right I've got the Blues" and has recorded on the "Don't Quit Your Day Job" label – appropriate for a man who makes no exaggerated claims about his musical talents:

"I've always played the guitar quite badly. I think it's quite important to have something that you do badly, especially if you are the over-achiever type of personality. Playing in a band is very sensory and writing is completely cerebral. My books are closely plotted, like all popular fiction, so I am always thinking about the mechanics of the story. Playing in a band is completely sensory. There's a connection from the ears to the fingertips that does not pass through the conscious brain."

Time to give

In a busy life focused on work, family and politics, Ken also manages to find time for involvement in his community. He is President of Dyslexia Action, a Trustee of the National Literacy Trust, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a Governor of Roebuck Primary School and Nursery, Patron of Stevenage Home-Start and Chair of Stevenage Community Trust. He holds an honorary D. Litt. degree (Doctor of Literature) from the University of Glamorgan in his native Wales.

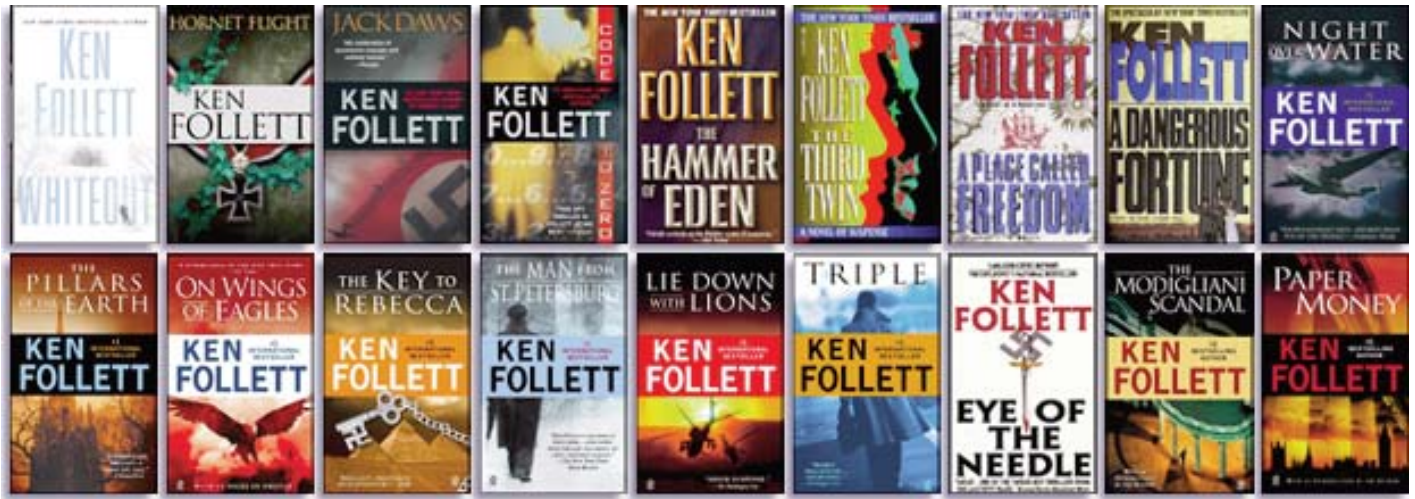
- Revised in September 2007. This document is available at www.ken-follett.com/media
For more information, e-mail Ken at ken@ken-follett.com



Ken Follett's latest novel, *World Without End*, is the long-awaited sequel to *The Pillars of the Earth*.

Best-sellers

- *The Modigliani Scandal* (1976)
- *Paper Money* (1977)
- *Eye of the Needle* (1978)
- *Triple* (1979)
- *The Key to Rebecca* (1980)
- *The Man from St Petersburg* (1982)
- *On Wings of Eagles* (1983)
- *Lie Down with Lions* (1986)
- *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989)
- *Night Over Water* (1991)
- *A Dangerous Fortune* (1993)
- *A Place called Freedom* (1995)
- *The Third Twin* (1996)
- *The Hammer of Eden* (1998)
- *Code to Zero* (2000)
- *Jackdaws* (2001)
- *Hornet Flight* (2002)
- *Whiteout* (2004)



Chronology and bibliography

- 1949 – Born on 5th June in Cardiff, Wales, to Martin and Veenie Follet
- 1967 – Completed 'A' levels and entered university
- 1968 – Marriage to Mary and birth of son, Emanuele
- 1970 – Graduated from University College, London with B.A. in Philosophy
- 1971 – General reporter on South Wales Echo
- 1973 – Birth of daughter, Marie-Claire. Columnist on Evening News in London
- 1974 – Began working at Everest Books, London. First two novels published: *The Big Needle* and *The Big Black* under pseudonym 'Symon Myles'
- 1975 – *The Big Hit* by 'Symon Myles' and *The Shakeout* by Ken Follet
- 1976 – *The Modigliani Scandal* by 'Zachary Stone'; *The Mystery Hideout* by Ken Follet; *The Power Twins* by 'Martin Martinsen' and *Amok: King of Legend* by 'Bernard L Ross'
- 1977 – *Paper Money* by 'Zachary Stone'
- 1978 – *Capricorn One* by 'Bernard L. Ross' and *Eye of the Needle* by Ken Follett
- 1979 – *Triple*. Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America for *Eye of the Needle* (Best Novel)
- 1980 – *The Key to Rebecca*
- 1982 – *The Man from St. Petersburg*
- 1983 – *On Wings of Eagles*
- 1985 – Marriage to Barbara Broer
- 1986 – *Lie Down with Lions*
- 1989 – *The Pillars of the Earth*
- 1991 – *Night Over Water*
- 1993 – *A Dangerous Fortune*
- 1995 – *A Place Called Freedom*
- 1996 – *The Third Twin*
- 1998 – *The Hammer of Eden*
- 2000 – *Code to Zero*
- 2001 – *Jackdaws*
- 2002 – *Hornet Flight*
- 2003 – Corine Award (Germany) for *Jackdaws* (Readers' Prize)
- 2004 – *Whiteout*
- 2007 – *World Without End*