



AUTHOR PHOTOGRAPH BY OLIVIER FAYRE

# KEN FOLLETT

BIOGRAPHY & BIBLIOGRAPHY

# KEN FOLLETT: A STORYTELLER – BORN OR BRED?

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

**K**en 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. He married Mary at the end of his 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 worldwide 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.

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 con-



*As a schoolboy in Wales*



*Student life ...*



*The write stuff*

scious 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 (née Hubbard), whom he married in 1985.

They 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 was Member of Parliament for Stevenage – a seat she won in 1997 and to which she was returned in the 2001 and 2005 elections – and was Minister for Equality in Gordon Brown’s government in 2007. She retired from active politics in 2010. Ken helped her campaign and worked 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 before breakfast and continues until about 5 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 31 books in the past 43 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. It has sold 23 million copies so far.

The next three novels, *Night Over Water* (1991), *A Dangerous Fortune* (1993) and *A Place Called Freedom* (1995) were more historical 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 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.

*World Without End*, published in 2007, was the long-awaited sequel to the hugely-popular *The Pillars of the Earth*. The 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 swept Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century.

The Kingsbridge saga continues with Ken’s latest novel, *A Column of Fire*. Beginning in 1558, it charts the star-crossed romance between Ned Willard and Margery Fitzgerald over half a century, against the backdrop of the rule of Queen Elizabeth, the many plots to dethrone her, and the birth of a secret service to protect her.

### The ‘Century’ trilogy

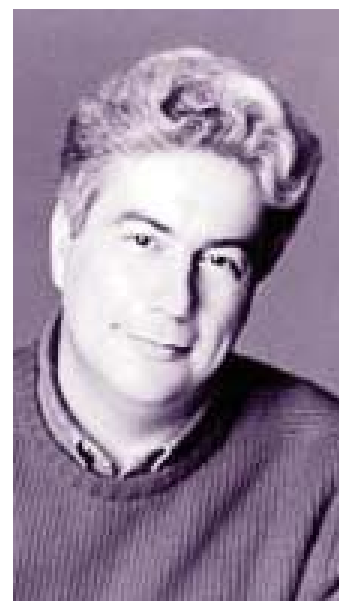
The master of the epic’s next three novels embrace five generations on three continents, in the Century Trilogy. *Fall of Giants* (2010) followed the fates of five interrelated families – American, German, Russian, English and Welsh – as they moved through the world-



The first best-seller



Barbara Follett



An accomplished novelist

shaking dramas of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the struggle for women's suffrage. *Fall of Giants*, published simultaneously in 14 countries, was an international sensation and topped several best-seller lists.

*Winter of the World* (2012) picks up where the first book left off, as its five interrelated families enter a time of enormous social, political, and economic turmoil, beginning with the rise of the Third Reich, through the Spanish Civil War and the great dramas of World War II, to the explosions of the American and Soviet atomic bombs and the beginning of the long Cold War.

The final novel in the 'Century' trilogy, *Edge of Eternity*, follows those families through one of the most tumultuous eras of all: the 1960s through the 1980s, from civil rights, assassinations, mass political movements, and Vietnam to the Berlin Wall, the Cuban Missile Crisis, presidential impeachment, revolution – and rock and roll. It was published in 2014.

### Visual delights

*Eye of the Needle* was made into an acclaimed film, starring Donald Sutherland, and six novels have been made into television mini-series: *The Key to Rebecca*, *Lie Down with Lions*, *On Wings of Eagles*, *The Third Twin* – the rights for which were sold to CBS for \$1 400 000, a record price at the time – and *The Pillars of the Earth* and *World Without End*. These last two have been screened in several languages in many countries. Ken also realised a lifetime dream with a cameo role as the valet in *The Third Twin* – and later as a merchant in *The Pillars of the Earth* – but is not about to give up his day job.

### Wine, woman and song

The great pleasures in Ken's life, other than the people he loves, are good food and wine, Shakespeare, and music. Music has always featured largely in his life – both his parents played the piano. Ken plays bass guitar in a band called "Damn Right I 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:

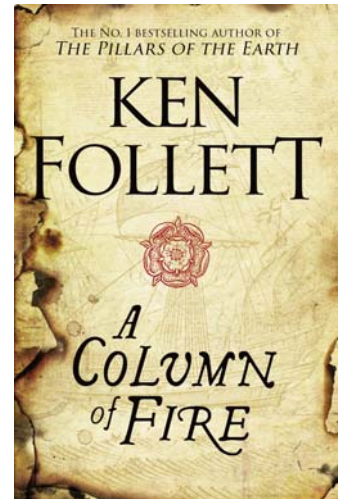
"Playing in a band is very sensory and writing is completely cerebral. My books are closely plotted, like all popular fiction, so I am always thinking about the mechanics of the story. Playing in a band is completely sensory. There's a connection from the ears to the fingertips that does not pass through the conscious brain."

### Time to give

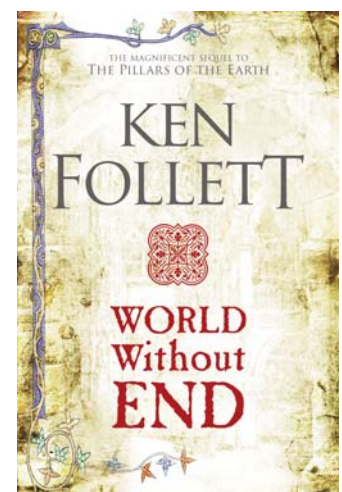
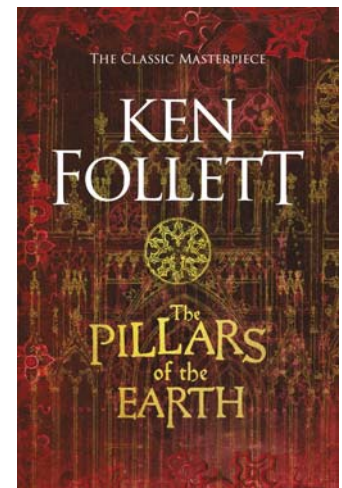
In a busy life focused on work, family and politics, Ken also manages to find time for involvement in his community. He was Chair of the National Year of Reading 1998-99, a British government initiative to raise literacy levels. He was president of the charity Dyslexia Action for ten years. He is a Fellow of The Welsh Academy, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a Fellow of University College, London.

In 2007 he was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Literature (D.Litt.) by the University of Glamorgan, and similar degrees by Saginaw Valley State University, Michigan – where his papers are kept in the Ken Follett Archive – and (in 2008) by the University of Exeter. He is active in numerous Stevenage charities and was a governor of Roebuck Primary School for ten years, serving as Chair of Governors for four of those years.

- Revised in September 2017. This document is available at [www.ken-follett.com/media](http://www.ken-follett.com/media)



Ken's latest novel, *A Column of Fire*, is the third in the 'Kingsbridge' series.



## Chronology and bibliography

- 1949 – Born on 5th June in Cardiff, Wales, to Martin and Veenie Follet
- 1967 – Completed ‘A’ levels and entered university
- 1970 – Graduated from University College, London with B.A. in Philosophy
- 1971 – Becomes a reporter on *The South Wales Echo*
- 1973 – Becomes a reporter on *The Evening News* in London
- 1974 – Becomes Deputy Managing Director 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*
- 2004 – *Whiteout*
- 2008 – *World Without End*
- 2007 – Awarded Honorary Doctorates in Literature by the University of Glamorgan and Saginaw State University
- 2008 – Awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Literature by the University of Exeter
- 2010 – *Fall of Giants*; *Pillars of the Earth* TV mini-series first broadcast
- 2012 – *Winter of the World*; *World Without End* TV mini-series first broadcast
- 2013 – Elected a Grand Master at the Edgar Awards in New York
- 2014 – *Edge of Eternity*
- 2017 – *A Column of Fire*