60s with … John McDermid



John is Professor of Software Engineering and previous Head of the Department of Computer Science at the University of York. John has published many books and about 440 papers in high integrity computer systems, especially in the areas of safety and security. He currently directs the Assuring Autonomy International Programme funded by the Lloyd's Register Foundation. His work has influenced industrial practice both directly and via standards and he has taught extensively at post-graduate level, including on safety courses for industry.

What first attracted you to working in the field of System Safety?

Two things at more or less the same time – investigating the failure of a syringe pump which killed two people, and doing static code analysis on some safety-critical software.

What aspect of your career are you most proud of?

Helping others to achieve their best and to overcome obstacles – I hope some of my former PhD students will recognise this …

What advice would you give to yourself age 12?

Trust your own judgement.

What worries you the most about the future of System Safety?

Possible failure to "grapple" with AI/ML – to be effective we need a cultural shift where the AI/ML and safety people work effectively together, and I don't see this happening although I hope the work I am leading through the Assuring Autonomy International Programme will help …

What's your most favourite quote or motto?

The University of York's motto is "in limine sapientiae" – on the threshold of wisdom – so I live in hope …

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If you could learn to do anything, what would it be?

Play a musical instrument – it would probably have to be the drums, as I have a sense of rhythm but no sense of pitch …

If you could be any fictional character, who would you choose?

It would have to be a detective – maybe Inspector Chen Cao from Qiu Xiaolong's series of books, who is sometimes referred to as the "Morse of the Far East", and this would mean I could also write poetry, so it gets me a second answer to the previous question!

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

"Don't attribute to malice what can be explained adequately by incompetence" – from a former boss and this has helped me preserve my equanimity on many occasions.

Which book title best sums up your experiences with Covid-19?

1Q84 by Haruki Murakami – the book is set in 1984 but strange things happen, so it doesn't seem like 1984 anymore, hence the Q in the title – so 2Q20 now – oh, and it's a very, very long book …