

2003/April JONATHAN STROUD - Publishing News

If there's one thing Jonathan Stroud was fully aware of, when he left fulltime employment to start life as a writer, it was exactly what he was letting himself in for. The job he abandoned, for the pleasures and pain of authorship, was that of a non-fiction editor at Kingfisher Books, where, during evenings and at weekends, he'd written his first two novels.

But well received though both *Buried Fire* and *The Leap* were, nothing could have prepared him for the reaction to his new offering: *The Amulet of Samarkand*, Book I in *The Bartimaeus Trilogy*. Subject to a frenzied auction, the project was snapped up, in a six-figure worldwide deal, by his incumbent publisher Random House and while the auction was happening, Miramax came through with a film deal. The stuff of the kind of books Stroud writes so well.

And he is at Bologna meeting and greeting the dozen publishers who have so far bought into his cracking fantasy. The whole thing began when Stroud's agent, Laura Cecil, said she wanted to "present the idea in an irresistible fashion". Stroud goes on to explain that he and his wife Gina, who used to work at Macmillan as a designer, devised and made a mock up of the novel in the form of a 20-page booklet, complete with cover. "Laura sent it out to five publishers, and then the auction started. It took a month, by the end of which Random House pulled the iron out of the fire when it came back with a marketing plan done in the voice the *djinni* Bartimaeus, the book's main character." Ah, the power of packaging.

And how did the book come about in the first place? It just happened, says Stroud. "I started writing with no story in mind, just to see what occurred. It all came out in a flurry, pretty much fully formed, including the footnotes." The book, or at least the 130-page sampler which is all that's presently available, is peppered with what could be described as 'voice-over' comments from the *djinni*. "I really like footnotes; always enjoyed them at university when I was doing English Literature...they're

a great place to put all sorts of extraneous information that, if it was in the text, would slow it up, and it's also a great way to add extra gags. The reader can always ignore them.”

This has, he says, been a different way of writing for him. “In a sense it burst out and the first four chapters - which have hardly been altered since I wrote them - contain all the key characters for the trilogy. The structure came later and, luckily for me, by the time the mock-up was sent out I'd done a synopsis of the three books and felt confident I had the skeleton of the whole story.”

Which really was lucky as all hell broke loose soon afterwards. Things happened so fast, Stroud admits, that he and his wife wandered round slack-jawed, hardly able to believe what was going on. “It would be easy to go over the moon, particularly if I'd actually written the thing,” he says. “But I still have two more books to do and so I'm really quite pragmatic about it all.”

This year Stroud will have two books out, both under the Doubleday imprint. In April comes his third novel, *The Last Siege*, and then in the autumn *The Amulet of Samarkand* publishes. “*The Last Siege* is much more low-key and character-driven, much less fantastical,” Stroud tells me. “The relationships between the two boys and the girl [in that book] drive the story and the experience of writing it was very helpful when it came to *Samarkand*.”

“I needed to give *Samarkand* a depth and consistency of interest...I had to give it weight because of the moral ambiguity that exists between the two lead characters. Both are ambivalent and the aim is that the reader won't be able to identify with either of them all the time, or consider either wholly the hero.”

There's to be a massive outdoor ad campaign at launch that will, says Random House's Clare Hall-Craggs, take Stroud “from relative obscurity to a household name”. Nothing's ever the same after lightning strikes.