

## 2002/April KEVIN BROOKS - Publishing News

While *Martyn Pig*, by Kevin Brooks, seems unlikely to produce the level of sales that Barry Cunningham's legendary 'Potter pick from the pile' has generated, Cunningham may well have done it again in terms of plucking a rejected manuscript out of slush obscurity and creating a new star of its author.

*Martyn Pig* is the kind of *noir* thriller Jim Thompson would have written, had he written for a teen market. Imagine, you're 15 years old, living with your dysfunctional drunk of a Dad; it's Christmas, but that means nothing in your house, and one night your dad gets drunk and then he gets mean. What happens next is an accident, really it is, but who'd believe you? Anyway, the end result is, your Dad's dead.

This last is a very rough synopsis of what happens in Chapter 1 of the story - all that Brooks had sent in - and it was enough to make Cunningham buy the book after reading it. "I took it home one evening and I really liked it," he says, "Then I thought I'd better read it again as I might just have liked it because it didn't have any unicorns in it." Convinced he'd been right the first time, Cunningham signed Brooks to Chicken House for *Martyn Pig*, plus two more novels, a move that has since been vindicated by great pre-publication reviews, W H Smith choosing it as a Book of the Month - even though it's a hardback and a first-time author - and good overseas interest.

And how is the author taking all this? Pretty much in his stride, as it happens. Brooks has been around the block a few times, spending 10 years not getting anywhere in the pop biz and then achieving a similar lack of success in the art world. When, I asked him, did he start writing? "I've always been doing it in some form or other," he replies, "lyrics, short stories, poems, but I didn't get structured or commercial till five years ago...I'd always wanted to knuckle down and do it, I had the ideas but I didn't have the discipline."

He'd grown up loving crime fiction, especially American crime fiction, but realised he couldn't simply transplant the genre from its US habitat to a small English town. "I tend to have an idea and let it mull around in the

back of my head till I know it's worth doing." He ended up setting the book in an anonymous, medium-sized English provincial town, a dull, grey, characterless place with a chain-store High Street that's the perfect breeding ground for disaffected youth. He finished it three years ago and then set about trying to get it published.

"I don't have an agent, so I just sent it out," says Brooks. "But no one liked it, so I worked on it every time it came back. Then, when I'd just about given up, I came across The Chicken House and sent the manuscript off to Barry on the off-chance. It was my last go, and everything that's happened has been fantastic." And though it's becoming slightly less unusual for children's books to create noise in the business, it would be a foolish writer to expect it - especially with a book with a plot like *Martyn Pig*.

"I was half expecting disapproving voices, because of the subject matter, but it hasn't happened. Maybe that's because I skirt round violence and sex - hinting works so much better - and I've been as non-offensive as possible about quite black subjects...provocative, but not offensive." Alex, Martyn's 17-year old neighbour in the book, is a real Chandler woman, and, like Marlowe, Martyn doesn't know if he likes her too much or shouldn't like her at all. It makes for fascinating reading, with a killer twist in the tail.

I wondered if Brooks, who recently won the Canongate Prize for New Writing for an adult short story, was going to stick with writing for children. "I have adult stuff that's finished, but I'm going to leave it...I want to keep writing for that [Young Adult] age group and get better at it," he says. "I actually don't think of it as writing for children as there's not much difference from writing for adults - apart from a few limitations. Writing for kids means you have to concentrate on the story, it's the main thing...you can't drift and indulge yourself in niceties, like you can writing for adults."

With Chicken House publishing simultaneously in the States, the ALA [American Libraries Association] nominating the novel for a 'Notable Book' award pre-publication and Hachette beating Gallimard in the title's first overseas bidding war, the future does look bright. "I hope we've done it

again,” says Cunningham. “It’s really exciting to work with someone so genuinely talented who’s come out of nowhere.”