

2005/April MARTIN WADDELL - Publishing News

Martin Waddell's name is synonymous with both picture books and Walker Books. He is the king of the small, but perfectly-formed text, although he started out as a thriller writer. "My first book was called *Otley*, and it was published by Hodder & Stoughton in 1966. Tom Courtney starred in the film, which was written by Ian le Frenais and Dick Clement," he says. "The film was much, much better than the book, but the virtue of the book was that it made me lots of money and got me home to Ireland."

Waddell had come to England to make his fortune by playing football for Fulham. Unfortunately this plan didn't work out and, after being chucked off their books, he found himself trapped in a bedsit with no educational qualifications and nowhere to go. "I worked for WHSmith and Hutchinson, but I wanted to write and I kept writing books about being at home. They didn't work, and Jonathan Clowes, my agent, said to me that while I had him in stitches with my jokes, I kept on giving him dismal books. He gave me a copy of Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File* and told me to go away and write him something funny. So *Otley* is really the illegitimate grand cousin of Deighton's."

Five novels later he wrote a book called *In a Blue Velvet Dress*, for Faber & Faber, under the pseudonym of Catherine Sefton. It's now known as *The Ghost in a Blue Velvet Dress*, by Martin Waddell, and it's been in print ever since. "It was my first children's book and it was the first time I felt I was doing what I should do." He survived being accidentally blown up by an Ulster Defence Association bomb in 1972, but it was six years before he was able to write again. "I couldn't work after that and ended up being the housefather to a two, a four and a five year-old. And you don't write very many teenage novels when you're doing that, it's too exhausting. It's why I wrote *Can't You Sleep Little Bear*, though...that was about me trying to write teenage novels."

He came into Walker's orbit, he continues, in at a presentation of the Other Awards, which he'd won for *Starry Night* (Hamish Hamilton) and the rest is history. His debut title for them was *Little Dracula's First Bite*,

illustrated by Joe Wright. “I went in to talk about another book completely, but I also had the vampire idea in my head. I came out with a cheque from Sebastian [Walker] for £10,000 to do the vampire idea.”

Now, almost 20 years later, he’s still writing, still working away at ideas which, when you see them finally in print, look so simple yet can take him years to hone to perfection. And he’s nothing if not a perfectionist. This year, with his latest book *Sleep Tight, Little Bear*, is the last time he’ll be going on tour. “It might also be the last Little Bear book, but who knows?” says Waddell. “I don’t organise it, I just write what comes, and what comes frequently surprises me.”