

2007/April PHILIP REEVE - Publishing News

Where do you go after writing the *Hungry City Chronicles*, four best-selling books set in a darkly futuristic world where Municipal Darwinism, with its all-consuming traction cities, fights for global dominance with the Green Storm? That question was answered last year when Philip Reeve published *Larklight* (Bloomsbury) and took a step backwards into a fantastically re-imagined era of Victorian space travel.

And now, with *Here Lies Arthur* (Scholastic), Reeve has gone even further back in time and put his story in the dark ages of post-Roman Britain, because the titular Arthur is none other than the man who would be king. What had sent him back quite so far to find a story? “I’ve had the idea for over twenty five years, ever since I went to see John Boorman’s film of *Excalibur* in 1981, which was the beginning of my whole artistic life, in many ways, as it got me interested in film, in a deeper way than I had been before, as well as the Arthurian legends.”

The idea, he says, then lay fallow while he finished school, went to art college and then on to become a successful cartoonist (he illustrated Kjartan Poskitt’s *Murderous Maths* series, and subsequently made Poskitt a god in the *Hungry City* quartet). “I always knew I wanted to revisit the idea, but when I did I found there have been so many re-tellings of the magic, medieval and romantic Arthur that that side of things has pretty much been wrapped up for this generation. There was no point in doing another one of them, so that sent me off in another, more historical direction.”

But instead of following in the footsteps of the likes of Rosemary Sutcliffe he thinks he’s taken a more revisionist route. “Everyone else, no matter how historically accurate they’re trying to be, pretends that he’s someone quite impressive who achieves great things. My Arthur is Tony Soprano, but not that sympathetic...he’s a gangster, really, and this is a gangster story.”

This twist occurred to Reeve around the time he was finishing the early drafts of *Mortal Engines*, when he was thinking about what he might write next, little knowing he was at the start of a four-book epic. He began researching, rereading Mary Renault and, oddly enough, Thomas Berger’s

Little Big Man, where, he says, he found similarities with the Wild West and the Arthurian story in the way they'd both transferred into national myths. "But because of my great interest in the subject back in my younger days I already knew a lot of the background and the theories, and when started looking again I realised that nobody knows anything and there's no written history from that time. It's all guesswork."

Once he'd realised the fact that there were no facts, Reeve was free to let his imagination off the leash. The result, a second twist in this tale of life in a Britain under siege from Saxon invaders. Myrddin - the original Romano-Celtic name for the character of Merlin, changed by French-speaking writers because it sounded like 'merde' - has become far more than simply a travelling bard. He is, if you like, Alistair Campbell's progenitor, the first spin doctor.

"Because I'd decided that Arthur, as a character, was a gangster, I then began to wonder what that would make Myrddin - why does Arthur need him, and why is he so special? And then I realised he was a spin doctor, *he's* the reason we remember Arthur when the names of all the other eccentric gangsters of the time have been long forgotten, because my story is basically about Myrddin creating the Arthur story." So how likely is that? "Highly *unlikely!* I think over hundreds of years that's what *probably* occurred, but I don't think one person sat down and decided to do it. Stories accumulated around Arthur, he's like a magnet for them, like Elvis and Che Guevera."

This tale of myth creation and reputation building is seen through the eyes of Gwyna, a girl-child Myrddin finds and takes under his wing as a servant; it is a complex relationship in which, through sleight of hand, misdirection and deception, Gwyna's new master turns her into a water nymph, a boy and an undercover agent. "I told this story in the first person, as I was also involved with the *Mortal Engines* quartet at the same time and needed a device so *I* would know I was working on something different; I needed to separate them off. Her voice and personality just appeared."

This is, in many ways, a very modern story, with unmistakable echoes from the future. Reeve strongly believes that the one core thing about

politics is that it doesn't change, but the book wasn't written as an allegory. "It didn't occur to me to do that, and it wasn't until I was about three-quarters of the way through that I suddenly realised that it was my Tony Blair book, about how people don't live up to the hopes you invest in them. It's about how, once people get power, all they do with it is get more; they don't use it for anything, they probably *can't* use it for anything, they just want to hang onto to it for as long as possible."

In that way, says Reeve, *Here Lies Arthur*, with its subtly spun title, may well be reflective of the crashing disillusionment of the whole New Labour experience, but all he actually did was set out to write a story about a reputation based on lies. Is he surprised how it turned out? "Intrigued is probably a more accurate description, I hadn't realised quite how un-heroic Arthur was going to be."