

## 2005/Dec CHRIS WOODING - Publishing News

Chris Wooding is a very young-looking 28. He got a literary agent ten years ago, had his first novel, *Crashing*, published 12 months later by Scholastic and has, since then, written 18 novels, one of which, *The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray*, won the Silver Smarties Award in 2001. Not all of Wooding's prodigious creative output is for children, though - Gollancz publish his adult SF and fantasy, like the *Braided Path* trilogy - he writes film and TV scripts and he also plays guitar in his own band, Remainder Four.

Quietly unstoppable would be one way to describe Wooding, who, along with being hugely productive is also very cool and altogether quite laid back about his seemingly rocket-powered career. He has a long-running fascination with all things oriental and a passion for manga - the driving force behind his *Broken Sky* series, which he began in 1999. "My interest in manga and anime [Japanese animation] came about because they treat them far more as art forms than we do, especially the cartoons. You can have 22-episode story arcs and can get some really epic stuff in there, and that's what appeals to me - the really wild fantasy that's from a different source to ours...that doesn't have all the Christian morals and ethics, and has a different folklore." It is, he says, a lot less light and frothy, and, along with great stories, you get some gravitas, and you get tragedy.

Epic stuff is what Wooding specialises in. He is the master of his universes, all of which he rules with what appears to be a careless fatalism (major characters have a habit of dying off in Wooding's stories). *Storm Thief* is his latest offering and the island of Orokos, the canvas on which the story is played out, is the sole rocky outcrop in the middle of a vast ocean. A unique, complex, intricately constructed world, in many ways it is a microcosm of our own.

Where *Poison* had a warped medieval feel to it, *Storm Thief* is more futuristic, but no less complete in its structures. So how long does it take him to build a new world? "World building is always the best fun I have with a book, the actual telling of the story is the real work...lots of my books tend to riff off the world they're set in and the story is about solving the world,

which is completely true of *Storm Thief*, it's very tied into the background. One of the strengths of fantasy that very few authors use - apart from Clive Barker and China Mieville, who do it all the time - is that you don't *have* start off with a set of already established rules. You don't have to use Tolkien and goblins and wizards, because there's an absolutely endless canvas and it seems to be daft to not start on a blank one and make up as much as you want."

With *Storm Thief*, Wooding says, he wanted to write a story set in a closed environment, with its own rules, and he was a big fan of the movies *Cube* and *Spirited Away*, both of which have similar themes of small spaces. "I want to do a book, at some point, just set in one room...one of my favourite books ever is Stephen King's *Gerald's Game*, which no one ever seems to have heard of, where the entire book is set in a cabin in the middle of nowhere. It's the scariest book he's ever written, but appears to have gone straight below the radar."

But what came first, the island setting for this novel, or the characters? "The setting, which is the same with most of my books. With this one it was the [plot device of the] Probability Storms which started it all as the story is about randomness, order versus chaos. It came out of the feeling that you can plan the best life in the world, and no matter how good the plan is someone, something, can come along and screw it up. That's what happens. Everything else about the world of Orokos came naturally from that."

There is nothing particular in this storyline, or in the book itself for that matter, which marks it out as a 'children's' or a 'YA' title, and Wooding has said elsewhere that he feels most YA novels could sit quite happily on adult shelves and no one would know the difference, unless they were told. What makes the difference to him? "I think it's because it's, peripherally, about adolescence, which is, I guess, when you feel the most uncertain in your entire life, with your own hormonal probability storms. And the other thing was that I'd just finished writing the *Braided Path* trilogy for Gollancz - the same story for three years - and I wanted to write something for kids. They're a lot less cynical and they really *live* books, get swallowed by them. All the children's books I write do have adult themes underneath as I like to

give the reader something to chew on, and I like people to be able to peel away subtexts, if they feel the need to. Although they can be read just as a ‘rip-roaring adventure’ and you don’t really have to think about what it means underneath.”

Along with all the novels, and the music, Wooding also has a cartoon series in development with Nelvana, who originally bought the rights to *Broken Sky*. This was a project which looked brilliant and got as far as having the trailers made, but which got blown out of the water, he says, when action cartoons went out of favour. A pilot episode for the new series has been written, but experience has taught him that the TV and film businesses have their own version of probability storms. Nothing is certain. What is certain is that he has to finish a book called *Half Light* for Gollancz “...and then,” he says with a wry smile, “ it’s on to the next book for Scholastic.”