

2006/Dec SCOTT WESTERFELD - Publishing News

YA writer Scott Westerfeld is, to use his own description, bi-summeral; he lives in New York until the leaves and the mercury start to drop, and then, with his wife, Australian author Justine Larbalestier, he decamps to Sydney to escape the winter (Larbalestier's novel, *Magic or Madness*, features a house whose front door opens in Sydney and the back door in NYC...fiction, almost, creates fact). He has worked as a ghost writer, written five adult science fiction novels, including the Philip K Dick Award-nominated *Evolution's Darling*, and is from what the movie world would call the 'high concept' school.

The ideas and motive forces behind his stories are clever, real and slightly left field; they are sometimes set in the future and often comment sharply and with an unnerving accuracy on the mores of the present day. So why did he switch from adult to YA? "It was the idea behind the *Midnighters* trilogy - the dark world revealed to five teenagers who were born on the stroke of midnight, when time freezes - that did it. I co-developed the books with Alloy Entertainment [the US editorial packagers, similar to Working Partners] and I enjoyed doing it so much that I stuck around and now just write for YA and middle graders because they're more interesting, linguistically, than adults - they write more poetry, use more slang, are more inventive and are still acquiring language."

Westerfeld is here in the UK now because he has a whole shelf of books to promote, including the trilogy of *Uglies*, *Pretties* and *Specials* for Simon and Schuster, set in a future where, when you become 16, everyone has to have cosmetic surgery to ensure they're beautiful, plus *Midnighters*, *Parasite Positive* and *Last Days* for Atom, the Little, Brown YA imprint. He is, anyway, a fairly prolific writer, but the embarrassment of riches is all down to the fact that the UK is somewhat behind the US publishing schedule.

When you enter Westerfeld's world you find yourself in a potent blend of science, hypotheses, theories and plot. Take, as a 'for instance', *Parasite Positive*, due to publish in the UK next year. It's US title, *Peeps*, makes it sound as if it might possibly be a biography Harry Enfield's Stavros character

when in fact it's a vampire story. "The 'V' word isn't used very often because these characters are real, in a scientific sense; basically what I'm trying to do is configure all the vampire myths in terms of evolutionary biology - what would be the evolutionary advantage, for a human being, be in being nocturnal, for example.

"In the book the disease associated with legends of vampirism is caused by a parasite, which takes every switch in your brain that's set to love and changes it to hate and fear - not a very big operation, as those of us who've broken up with people understand. So, you fear your neighbours and everything familiar and what you have to imagine is that while a medieval person with this parasite would have had cruciphobia, one today would hate and fear, say, the Apple logo, or some other brand. The idea for all this came from a non-fiction book, *Parasite Rex* by Carl Zimmer, which has all this weird stuff about parasites, like *Toxoplasma gondii*, which cats have and they can give to humans, who can then undergo personality changes. Figures suggest over half the population worldwide is infected...the parasites are meta-predators, they're the ones doing the driving."

You get the picture. Complex ideas intricately woven into neat, shiny-bright plots that have cool and want-factor like an iPod has cool and want-factor. Westerfeld, it's fairly obvious, is just pretending to be a grown-up and still has a solid connection to his teen years. "I have an inner 17 year-old, that's true, but my inner 17 year-old is still from the 70s."

Still, this connection is operating very well for Westerfeld, particularly in the US where the retail market and the libraries have both worked out how to attract a strong YA audience. How do they do that, what's their secret? "In America there's a whole army of teen librarians getting behind the books and pushing them - and the American Library Association is incredibly powerful. Also, the teen sections of libraries are different; the one I recently went to in Seattle was loud, a sound-proofed fish bowl with lots of Manga."

And the job of teen librarian, it seems, has become a hipster career choice. "Justine and I met this gang of trainee teen librarians at ALA in New Orleans and they all had great haircuts and were 22, and if you think about

it, 15 year-olds and 25 year-olds have a lot more in common culturally than they used to. Everyone watches *Veronica Mars*, but the wizened 25 year-old teen librarian can pull out the *Buffy* DVD and say ‘Ah, but let me show you the source material!’. These guys are cool and really connect with their kids...we do school events, bookshop events and libraries, and in a funny way it’s the library events that are the most intense because the kids are self-selecting and the librarians are much less overwhelmed than teachers, and they feel they’re there simply to convey the love of reading - which a teacher also does, plus ten billion other things.”

With two homes, multiple publishers and a seemingly rock’n’roll tour schedule, Westerfeld himself has had a lot on his plate, so much that this year has been about recharging his batteries, not writing. But there is a new book. “It’s called *Leviathan*, and it’s an alternate reality, biotechnology story set around the time of World War 1. History changed in this time continuum in 1815 when Darwin when to the Galapagos, where he discovered a different secret of life and biotech turned out to be easy to do with Victorian science; Britain became a super power through using it and the *Leviathan* of the title is, in fact, a huge living airship.” It’s that potent blend again...