

Feb 2010 - ALEX SCARROW / Just Imagine

Alex Scarrow is an ex-rock musician, ex-computer games designer, who finally turned his hand to authorship; he's written a number of adult novels for Orion, including *A Thousand Suns*, *Last Light*, *Afterlight* and *October Skies*. His debut children's novel, *TimeRiders*, is published this month by Puffin and is the first of a series of timeslip adventures.

First of all, just a question about your rather heroic-sounding surname - it's not made up, is it?

No! My grandfather did some research and I think he worked it out that the name was originally French - I believe there's a Gallic stream somewhere called Scarrow...and it's more of a baddy's than a hero's name, really!

You had a quite well-travelled, peripatetic childhood; do you think this has affected you as a writer?

My parents were ex-pats, so it tended to be term-time in England and holidays somewhere abroad, wherever my parents were based...although, to be fair, *most* of my secondary school years were spent in England. But if you're not based in a home town where you grow up and develop a crowd of friends, you become a more insular, transient being who spends more time observing and less socialising. And I suppose, in a way, it's never a bad thing to have had that kind of childhood, if you're a writer, as you end up gathering data about the world and people. I'm very much a watcher of people, rather than a participator in social interactions, but whether that's the childhood or the genetic make-up, who knows. It's that 'Nurture versus Nature' thing. I'm still trying to work out which it is...I look at my lad Jacob, who's 11, and I see a lot of myself in him, but I also realise that I'm making subconscious demands on him, like why isn't he writing like I was at his age.

So when did you start writing?

I was about seven; I remember an exercise given by my primary school teacher...she got a picture out of the *National Geographic*, a man with some husky dogs in a snowy tundra, and our homework was to write a story about it. That was on a Friday and I came back to school on the Monday and I'd filled up two exercise books as the picture had obviously grabbed me. But then of course the teenage age years came along, and so did girls and rock music and being in bands...

Your previous professions are down as 'Rock musician, graphic artist and computer games designer'...

Very kind of you to call them professions - the music was certainly more of an aspiration!

Were you in a band?

Oh yes, a number of bands...gigging around and looking for the record deal that never happened. We never got one, so you can't log on and download anything by us, which I'm pretty glad about as I'm sure I'd be cringing if you could. I hit my mid twenties and realised that that was my window and it would be sad if I carried on much longer; but luckily I had quite a good portfolio of artwork - another passion of mine - and I also had a disc of digital work. I hit the games business with that lot and got a job shortly after as an animator, working my way up over the years to lead designer.

I think I've been incredibly jammy, actually, as most of us get the opportunity to pursue one dream, and if it all goes tits-up then we go and get a proper job. But then I got a second bite at the cherry with the computer games, and that was a career that quite honestly I didn't deserve to get; I should've been driving taxis, as I'd wasted all those years as a rock musician getting nowhere. And then I get this third bite as a writer. As I said, jammy.

Did your time in graphics and computer games bring much to the party, in terms of your writing?

Definitely, definitely...*TimeRiders* was born very much out of the frustration I felt in the computer games business. I can't tell you how many fully fleshed-out design documents I wrote for games that either never went into production or, if they did, the plug was pulled soon after for one reason or another, and every time that happened all those ideas were consigned to some dusty shelf, basically mothballed. When I came out of the computer business and got into writing thrillers, I looked at the ideas and I realised that not only were they cool, but they had been quietly gestating into something joined-up and *TimeRiders* was presented to me like that. The seeds for the book were sown as games designs that *could've* been in the shops, but never were.

Would you say that the best computer games have a very strong storyline running underneath them?

I'm of the opinion that if game-play design is strong enough it doesn't need a narrative - for me, brilliantly designed games, like Tetris, don't need it, but a lot of the business wants to be Hollywood, they want to make *big, glossy, interactive* movies and - ooh, yeah, there's got to be some gameplay on top of that. Those are the games that end up costing \$20 million to make and can ruin a company like Electronic Arts, if they have too many of them in one year. The games that are real genius are the likes of *Pacman*, with *Spore* and *Axis* being the modern equivalents, and there's absolutely no narrative there at all. As a designer I found I enjoyed the narrative, thinking up storylines and characters, and by the end of my career as a designer I realised I was enjoying the narrative much more than the gameplay.

Your first foray into writing was producing film scripts, and your first novel *A Thousand Suns*, came from that time. How did that work?

When I was coming to the end of my tether as a games designer it was film scripts that I focussed on as they're more like the creative writing you do for games than novels are. I wrote several screenplays, one of which was called *Medusa*, which was about the Germans developing an atom bomb before the Americans and using it as leverage during the last days of the war; the idea was that they managed to find a bomber, with enough range to get across the Atlantic, and drop it on New York and show the US they had the technology and make them swing around behind them against the Russians.

It was received quite well by my agent over there and she was showing it around Hollywood - this was August/September 2001. She rang me on September 11th and said 'You've probably heard what's happened...a story about a plane dropping a bomb on New York is just *not* going to float for many, many years...we should forget about it as a screenplay'. I was gutted...

How many scripts did you write before you decided it was time for a change?

Medusa was the last of probably about five; a couple of others were optioned, but never went anywhere. After 9/11 I started a sixth script, which my brother [historical novelist Simon Scarrow] read and said that it would make a really good book, in the vein of Jack Higgins. He harangued and bullied me into writing it, because I didn't want the hassle and emotional effort, until I did...first novel, first publisher, got a deal. It shouldn't be that easy, but like I said: jammy.

There has to be more detail to that story...

Not a lot, actually. What happened was that my brother sent the first draft of *A Thousand Suns* to his agent, without my knowledge, and then I got a phone call from him saying that he'd just finished the manuscript and liked it, that it was of publishable quality. We had a conversation about him

repping me, then he sent it out and John Wood at Orion came right back. I hadn't even had a chance to think about looking for an agent myself it all happened so quickly, which I know is going to sound very annoying and very wrong - like you've got to have a brother or a contact to get on in this business - but that's how it happened.

Would you go back to screenwriting?

I think I would...I'm going to be a difficult author, if I sell the film rights to *TimeRiders*. I'm going to be one of those really *irritating* authors who wants to be on set, poking around, and have a say in the casting because I have a fascination with the business and a passion for films; I'd hate for it to be knocked out cheaply with the wrong cast!

As well as films, I gather you're also a bit of a comics nut as well - did you ever think of doing a graphic novel?

Well, I wouldn't say I was a comics nut...I used to be a big fan of *2000AD*, but you won't see me hanging around *Forbidden Planet* these days. Strangely, I've never thought of doing a graphic novel, which really is a natural fit - that seems very stupid of me! Although it is a very tough business to make a living in - I think if you're anything less than premier league, like Brian Bolland, you probably face life as a pauper.

Having started out as the author of high-concept adult novels, what turned your attention to writing for children?

Frustration, really, at all those cool game ideas that weren't being used. And then there was also frustration with seeing, in the wake of Harry Potter, 10 and 11-year-old boys drifting back to their Playstations and X-Boxes and losing the book habit. I think if I'd had a mission statement for *TimeRiders* it would have been to write something that was cocaine-addictive, with references to games and films they might have seen, things

that would make it easy for them to digest this book and then get back into reading other books as well.

Did you have any preconceptions about writing for children before you started?

I read quite a lot of advice on that, and all of it I stupidly ignored and wrote for adults, again. I didn't change *anything* about my writing, other than tone down the swearing...if you do write 'for kids' I think you run the risk of being patronising, talking down to them and being really quite naff; if you write 'for adults', and assume that, OK, there will be bits they don't get or the occasional word they'll have to look up, *they* will feel smarter having walked away from a book like that. It was an experiment that worked, but it's easy to say that once you've done it...really all I did is write the way I know how to write, thinking that in the edit there may be bits I'd have to take out. But I didn't have to, kids are smarter than they're often given credit for.

What was it, then, that made *TimeRiders* a children's and not an adult novel?

Just the age of the protagonists, really. I could've written it for adults, with a few changes...a harsher vocabulary.

There seem to be quite a few echoes and memes that connect *TimeRiders* to your adult books, particularly *A Thousand Suns* and the *Last Light* and *Afterlight* sequence, a 'destrucionist' style. True?

There are definitely some themes coming through, and I do love my doom! There is quite a lot of it in *TimeRiders* and when my editor, Shannon Park, asked me if I wanted to go that dark in a children's book, I told her I didn't want to write a novel that said 'There, there, everything's going to be

OK...go back to your computer games and watching *Big Brother...*'. We dropped the ball and *their* generation's going to have to pick up the pieces.

Apart from the doom, there's an obvious love of history in *TimeRiders*, have you always had that?

I've always liked it as a subject, as a recreational thing, and some of my favourite movies are historical, too. I'm particularly fascinated by the 1840s, 1850s, when the American people blossomed out of the eastern coast to fill the country...the whole idea of the Oregon Trail, setting off into God's own wilderness and it's completely unpoliced, 1,500 miles of wildness. The scale of the task ahead, that level of fear and trepidation, the modern equivalent would be jumping into a spaceship and terraforming Mars. This was the idea behind my book *October Skies*, when you're completely isolated and things start to go wrong.

You have been quoted as saying that you thought your first book defined your genre for the rest of your career. Do you still stand by that?

That's the way it works, isn't it...unless you get lucky. My first book was a thriller, and there was some degree of pressure, then, to write *another* sort of World War II thriller, in the same sort of mould, and I thought I can't sustain that, because, if I wrote another one, then that *increases* the pressure to do a third. *Last Light* was a conscious effort not to be straitjacketed too early, an attempt to create wiggle room, and *October Skies* again has given me more room to manoeuvre. The downside is that what I *haven't* done is create a hardcore niche of Alex Scarrow WW2 thrillers, and you can diffuse your market by doing that, and I shall have to wait and see if that has a negative effect or not; but as a writer I certainly have more flexibility, which I like.

Do you think that by writing for children you'll be able to take readers with you into the adult market?

I'm hoping I'll be able to carry them with me...there will, I suppose, be a *TimeRiders* brand that develops from this as I've mapped out nine books - and that was news to Puffin when I said it in a meeting! The look on Shannon's face was 'I didn't know that!'. Nothing past Book 2 has been agreed yet, though.

Now you're on to Book 2, how are you feeling about the story arc and the characters, are things going exactly the way you thought, or are you having to make any changes?

I have found myself being pulled off piste by the storyline and having to bend something to fit it back in, to bolt things down so everything works; and of course with time travel you've got a lot of logic and rules that have to be created - which I did in the first book and which works great for that story, but I may live to have regrets. So far, I haven't written myself into any dead ends, and I have recently reviewed the nine-book arc and I can see that, luckily, I've done enough that's ambiguous at this stage that I haven't pinned myself to the floor with problems...I can see ways round the decisions I've made in the first book.

You have a very complex plotline - how are you coping with it?

Fine, because, I suppose, it's a bit like gameplay, as I do have quite a convoluted narrative and I do have to make sure everything joins up in the end...I have to look for bugs in the code, in a manner of speaking. There is a diagram, a couple of pieces of graph paper stuck together. In a way, *TimeRiders* would have made the perfect interactive, choose-your-own-adventure novel, except that it has too much story.

Everyone has their own way of working, and yours appears to be a very public, coffee-fuelled one: at a table in Starbucks. Why?

I got so damn lonely writing at home and I missed that whole water-cooler thing and it got to the point where I was trying to keep sales callers on the phone longer. I had a laptop and thought, let's get out...it's just a case of finding a nice quiet, comfy corner, plug socket, free wi-fi, putting the iPod on and blocking out the conversations - and you see people, you feel like you're in the world. And I don't go home until I've done my 1,500 words. I wrote about 375,000 words last year like that.

I used to go to the Starbucks in the Norwich Borders, and they soon worked out I was an author and asked what I'd written and I said *A Thousand Suns*; I got free coffee and bagels for a week until they realised I hadn't written *A Thousand Splendid Suns*...