

2007/Feb JUSTIN SOMPER - Publishing News

If things had taken a different course fifteen years ago, author and PR Justin Somper's connection with the world of publishing would be somewhat different. Fresh out of university, his first job was working at Usborne as a freelance writer/editor. A year and a half, and one *Puzzle Book* later, having applied for and failed to get a number of positions in both adult and children's publishing, he decided maybe it was time to take a different route. "I got a place at law school, and articles set up, but I sent my final job application out. It was to Puffin, and I hardly thought it was worth posting." But he got the job, and Intellectual Property law's loss was publishing's gain.

The department that took him on in 1992 was run by Sally Gritten, until very recently MD of HarperCollins Children's Books, and Elaine McQuade, now MD of Scholastic; to prove the point that Puffin is not so much a publishing company, more of a training ground for nascent industry leaders, Somper's first boss was Helen McAleer, the new MD of Walker Books. "I joined as a publicity assistant, thinking I'd do the job for the probationary period, then go off to do my law degree, but I liked it so much I stayed."

His career path was chosen. "I spent four years at Puffin, leaving to go to Random House Children's Books as PR Director; I left there in 1998 to go freelance and start Just So, which I think was the first PR consultancy to seriously address the children's market specifically." Had he, during all this time, thought about going back to writing, or had his experience as a PR put him off? "That's much more of a strategic thought process than I had; I've always wanted to write, needed to write and felt vaguely dissatisfied when I wasn't, and as anyone who has worked with me will know, one of my favourite parts of the job was always the copywriting."

Somper does admit that working with the likes of Anne Fine, Allan Ahlberg and Jon Scieszka did make him wonder if there was any point in writing himself. "Thoughts of 'How could I ever top that?' were quite de-motivating in some ways, although latterly, working particularly with Anthony

[Horowitz] and seeing how he approaches writing and being encouraged by him, was been a big factor in my starting again.”

Somper started writing once more when he had an idea, a ‘eureka!’ moment when the word vampirate sprung to mind. “It was sometime in 2000, about five years before the first book was published, and then there was the long process of working out what the word meant and what the book was going to be.” Quite soon after he’d had the idea he mentioned it in passing to Philippa Milnes-Smith, at the time still running Puffin; she didn’t take it on, but did make encouraging noises. “When she became an agent, and when I had developed the premise further, it made sense to talk to her about taking me on. Which she did.”

To a certain extent there’s an element of ‘and the rest is history’ about what happened next which could obscure the years of work that went before, and the efforts put in by all concerned once the project became a reality. Somper was always driven by the feeling that *Vampirates* was going to work, that it had legs and that once it got to the public they would like it. “There are no givens, but I was always confident; there were your archetypal bleak moments, when it had been sent out to about eight publishers and nothing was happening, when I was tearing my hair out and asking anyone who’d listen - why can’t other people see what’s in this idea?”

But once the idea had found its next champion - Venetia Gosling at Simon & Schuster - things began to move extremely fast. “She was very important to the process because we pitched the idea as one book, a big hardback that could possibly be carried on; Venetia was the one who really got it, saw its potential and suggested doing it as a sequence. I do feel that *Vampirates* has been a real piece of team work from the beginning; Philippa has shaped it, Venetia has guided me, while on the marketing side Penny [Webber] and latterly Elisa [Offord] have been very instrumental in the look and the branding, which has been so important, kids being so into ‘look’ nowadays. The support I got from the independent bookshops, the Federation of Children’s Book Groups, and especially Waterstone’s, was enormously important as well.”

Vampirates: Demons of the Ocean was launched in June 2005, surrounded by an almost tangible buzz of excitement, even before publication. “Word got out about the international deals coming through, and,” Somper says, “this is a circular business so the news created more excitement in the UK.” A pro-active marketing and PR campaign got the book off to a flying start and, two years down the line, Somper is now a bona fide best-selling, award-winning author, the series has sold in 22-plus territories and what was originally intended to be just a four-book run been extended to six here in the UK.

2007 will see Somper join the select band of authors asked to write a World Book Day £1 book, with *Dead Deep* coming out on 1 March, and that will be followed in May by the third volume of vampire and pirate tales, *Blood Captain*. Has having to wear two hats, having two time-consuming, all-consuming jobs, made life difficult? “Undoubtedly the pressure does squeeze your time, but I don’t want to give up a business it’s taken me eight years to build, so I have to juggle and be more disciplined than I’ve ever been. And while I’ve seen this kind of thing happen to other people before, I have to say the biggest surprise is that it’s happening to me!”