

2000/Feb PHILIP RIDLEY - Publishing News

I think it was the hat that did it for me. A black pork pie number, sitting atop a face with deep set, piercing eyes, that gave the owner a distinctly sinister aura. In publicity shots Philip Ridley does not look like your regular children's author, but then, if you've chanced upon *Mercedes Ice* or *Krindlekrax* you'll know that his métier is fiction from the left-field - playfully dark journeys where poetry, storytelling and psychology mesh in a potent amalgam.

At first sight Philip Ridley is still very much a sombre man of hats, but he's far more animated and open than this initial impression might lead you to expect. And, like many solitary creative types, he has plenty to say for himself. "I've always told stories...I shared a bedroom with my very nervous younger brother and I was always telling him stories to stop him from being scared," he says. "I think I was actually trying to bore him to sleep - something some critics have accused me of still doing to readers!"

Ridley was very sickly as a child, suffering from chronic asthma and often confined to bed. "I spent whole periods of my life alone, not out with a huge crowd of kids," he tells me, "and I developed a very strong interior life populated by characters who were far more real than what was going on around me - I talked to them and could see them at the end of my bed. They weren't really there, but I can still describe them in great detail." Ridley also devoured reading matter, especially comics and most particularly ones featuring the X-Men and Spideman, stories about outsiders and those who don't fit in. It is amazing, he thinks, how many creative people turn out to have an obsession with these ostracised characters.

Ridley's path into the world of publishing was via a short story he wrote while studying painting at St Martin's School of Art. *Leviatan* was a component of a best-selling anthology titled *20 Under 35* published by Hodder, and it got him a literary agent. A year later, as part of his course, and based on the images in his paintings, he wrote a fantasy set in the East End called *Crocodilia*. His tutor sent it to Brilliance Books who thought it was, well, brilliant, and then took four years to publish it. "Which all

worked out OK,” smiles Ridley, “because during that time I then wrote *In the Eyes of Mr Fury*, which Penguin took, and both books appeared pretty close to each other, which made it look like I was really churning them out!”

And then came *Mercedes Ice*, his first children’s book. “I’d gone back to my old school to do a talk and got there early,” explains Ridley. “Right next door I saw this tower block, ironically called Charles Dickens House, which I remember being built when I was a pupil at the school; by the time I went in to do my talk I’d written 15 pages of a story that I never actually meant to be a kid’s book.” There is a gothic, almost Titus Groan feel to *Mercedes Ice*, and I asked if he was a fan of Mervyn Peake’s. “Absolutely,” came the response. “In fact I’ve described it as *Gormenghast* for kids and it has an atmosphere about it that I’ve wanted to get back to since.”

Ridley’s stories are all very much about feelings, but he seems to be constantly in search of new ways to put them across, *Scribbleboy* applying onomatopoeia and repetition to create a very poetic text and with his last book, *ZinderZunder*, using a kind of William Burroughs cut-and-paste approach. “I’ve always tried to push what you can do in a novel,” he says, “and I try to give each character a really individual style of speech so that they can move the plot on at a fantastic pace - kids can do so much more than adults, make the emotional leaps without pages and pages of psychological explanations.”

Following *ZinderZunder* comes the pungently named *Vinegar Street* (illustrated by Stephen Lee and just published by Puffin), and to some extent it is a follow on, or maybe it’s better put as a progression. “I got really excited in *ZinderZunder* by using type in a creative way,” says Ridely. “I did a complete paste-up, which the art department followed exactly. I wanted to create an experience of reading that was different, that fed off other media and picked up on cultural influences.” From that jumping off point, Ridley has taken his ideas on some little way.

Vinegar Street begins quite normally, if you consider the heroine, Poppy Picklesticks, hearing a voice in her head as normal, and for two thirds of the book things are simply odd in the way that they are in Ridely’s work. “The

last third is the most unexpected and took me six months to put together,” he says. “It took time to pluck up the courage to jump off the edge, because in *Vinegar Street* I think I pushed the hyper-concept, psychotic elements as far as I want to go at the moment.”

To try and understand where Ridley is coming from it’s useful to be aware of the complexity of his own character - he’s an author who paints, a screenwriter who directs film and playwright to boot. He writes for adults as well as children, his screenplay for *The Krays* was highly praised and his own movies - 1991’s *The Reflecting Skin* and ‘96’s *The Passion of Darkly Noon*, were critical successes. One of Ridley’s plays for children, *Sparkleshark*, had such a great five-week run last year at the Littleton Theatre it’s scheduled for another slot this summer.

Ridley has been misquoted as saying that he’s concerned with the plight of kids growing up in dysfunctional families “...because you can’t specify what your concerns are, otherwise you’d work to a formula,” he says. “Dysfunction is not at the core of what I do and I don’t have an agenda...I just write about what I know, which is the East End. Writing is like dreaming, you tap into a world and hope other people get it - what I want to do is give kids the kind of books I never had, books that tell you it’s all right to have one parent, that the world isn’t always a perfect place, that there is magic in somewhere like a tower block, just as much as in a primrose-covered hillside.”

Each book kicks him into the new one and, read in sequence, as children do, he says, it’s possible to pick out the seeds of what’s going to appear next. “Even though every book is distinctly me, they’re coming from a different part of my brain,” Ridley goes on, “and the book I’m writing now feels like it’s much more straightforward... but who knows, I’m only in the initial stages, getting to know the characters so I can make them come alive on the page.”

Ridley is a man whose past seems to haunt him, but it’s a spirit that infuses his work in a very positive way, giving it what critics have described as a gothic, extravagant beauty. He vividly remembers being three years old and outside a toyshop when a man in a black suit gave his Mum a £5 note

and said “Get the kid what he wants.” It was, as it happens Ronnie Kray.
Spooky.