**Feb 2011 - REBECCA STEAD / Books for Keeps**

Rebecca Stead arrived in London in the wake of her debut UK novel, the much-fêted *When You Reach Me*, published here in January by Andersen Press. Part of the reason she came was because her book had been shortlisted for this year’s Waterstone’s Prize, which, who knows why, it did not win. If it had, Rebecca would have been able to add yet another prize doodad to her already impressive collection, *When You Reach Me* having already netted nine US awards, including the Newbery Medal and the New York Times Notable Book Award.

We meet at her publishers, in the MD, Klaus Flugge’s, office – actually more of a gallery of framed elaborate and flamboyantly decorated envelopes, sent through the post to Klaus over the years by his stellar roster of illustrators – to talk, in a roundabout way, about her book, because it would be almost impossible to say much about the story without spoiling it. This is a jigsaw of a novel, where everything, including the title, only falls into place and makes complete sense on the final page.

Before I have a chance to get my first question in, Rebecca asks me if I’d like to see her ‘artefact’, a diary she kept when she lived in Camden Town, north London, for a month when she was eight years old. “My 3rd Grade teacher in New York said I had do it because I was missing a month of school,” she says. “I had to write something every day, and this is the first writing of my own, proof that I was not a born writer! I loved to read but I didn’t like to write, unless I was forced to – it was work, not fun! At the end I wrote ‘THANK GOD I AM DONE WITH THIS DIARY – DO NOT READ TO CLASS!’.

If she describes herself as ‘not a born writer’, when and how did she contract the writing bug? “I think it was a reading bug more than a writing bug, to start with, like a response to reading, really. Some people watch dance or opera and something in them responds and they think ‘that’s what *I* want to do’. I love performance, but I never had that kind of response to it; I had it to books, although it wasn’t something I took seriously.”

Instead of books, Rebecca chose the law because it had, she says, a clearer path. “Writing is not a clear path, there’s a lot of vulnerability and rejection and it feels personal – it *is* personal. I guess I thought it was safer to be a lawyer, there’s a track, a very clear way of knowing if you’re doing well – grades up the wazoo - and you always know exactly where you are. In the law I knew what I was supposed to go for. And I really liked being a lawyer in a lot of ways. I was a Public Defender, I didn’t have a fancy corporate job, and I worked for a judge in a wonderful office and loved it.”

She may well have chosen the law as her day job, but during that time Rebecca also began writing short stories – what she refers to as “Very Serious stories”. After her second son was born Rebecca decided to figure out something else to do, and it was while at home, thinking about what to do next, that an accident occurred that would, in many ways, change the whole course of her life: her then three-year-old son knocked her laptop off the dining table, and everything was gone. Computer trashed and hard disk irretrievably corrupted. “It was like the Universe was saying ‘You know what? You will no longer have access to any of this.’”

Rebecca moved on from this most traumatic of authorial disasters by deciding to do something completely different: write for kids. Going back and attempting to rewrite anything she’d lost was out of the question, far too demoralising, and so she started to re-read books from her childhood; she also went to the book shop and caught up with writers, like David Almond and Jerry Spinelli and Linda Sue Park, who had appeared in the 15 to 20 years since she gave up reading children’s books and whom she’d never come across before. “I got very jazzed,” she says, “and I thought this was juicy, very good stuff, and I was going to try and do this.”

And for her, Rebecca says, writing for children is not really any different to writing for adults. “I don’t ever think about condescending, in terms of language or complexity of sentence - I have a pretty straightforward writing style across the board, I think. And I also don’t condescend when it comes to material. I want a story, ultimately, that satisfies *me*, although of course I think about finding material that’s relevant to the things that children are thinking about, but I don’t try to simplify, because that wouldn’t be really interesting or fun.

“There’s something freeing about imagining a readership of children, for me; it can be kind of stifling to imagine all those snarky adults reading your work – not that kids aren’t critical, they notice everything, but at the same time I think they’re rooting for the story to work. It’s more fun for them if it works. Sometimes, with adults, you’re not sure it’s not more fun for them if it *doesn’t* work.”

Turning the conversation from the general to the specific, I wondered if Rebecca could pinpoint the moment when she had the idea for *When You Reach Me*. “Yes, I do know the moment. It was newspaper article in the *New York Times* - just a short AP, wire piece, not a big feature - about a man in the north west US who had amnesia, and was found wandering around, no identity.

“Under hypnosis he remembered a wife, Penny, and two daughters who’d been killed in a car accident. He was eventually claimed, one of the people who came forward being his fiancée, Penny…they weren’t married yet, no children. And when I read that I went ‘*Woahh!*’, who knows…my mind immediately went to ‘What if?’. It was like a moving thought, with no crystal clear idea of what to do with it, but I knew what I wanted to build.”

Did she, I asked, know how the story was going to end, or was she as surprised as I was when I got there? Yes, and then again, no, is the pretty instantaneous reply. “I knew the mechanics of the ending. I didn’t know all the identities. I use about twelve notebooks at the same time – which is stupid, because you can never find what you’re looking for - and I have looked back and seen notes to myself where I’m working out some complex theory that involves generations and ancestors, and then I’ve thought, no, that solution isn’t elegant enough. So once I figured it out, *that* was a happy moment, and I got to have fun with the idea. But there were moments where it felt like the whole thing might not hold, and I thought ‘Uh-oh…is this all crumbling?’ and I had to shore it up.”

I had read the book before reading up about its writer and had come away with the impression that it was a very autobiographical work, which turned out to be correct. “I used *so* much [of my life]!” admits Rebecca. “The great struggle for me is material, it’s just so hard to know what it is that you want to create in terms of material.”

This ‘my-life-as-material’ approach is more often found in an author’s first book, and while *When You Reach Me* might be a debut novel here in the UK, Rebecca’s true debut was *First Light*, which is very, very different, being a fantasy with a hidden world of ice and dogs.

“My first book was driven by my childhood reading and what I loved in books, and the second was driven by my childhood itself, which is one reason why they’re so different. I stole all kinds of things, which was great because it’s free stuff in your brain and no one can yell at you for taking it and it’s the best.” In that case, the obvious question is: is Miranda, the lead character, Rebecca? “I don’t know if she’s the person I’d say I wish I was, but she’s some version of my childhood self. Not entirely in terms of behaviour, but in terms of her thinking and awareness; there’s something about her that’s standing apart and looking, analysing; we all have that at that age. At 12 there’s a lot of suddenly seeing yourself and saying ‘Who am I? What’s happening here?’. I remember that phase of my life.”

What you have here, then, is very much a New York story, with the city playing its own part. Not just a backdrop against which events are played out, but a character in its own right. As a born and bred New Yorker, how big a part did the city play in making Rebecca who she is? “A lot. A huge role. I was sometime a little bit scared as a kid, very self-conscious, very vulnerable. And the rules Miranda has in the book are the rules I had, and there was a store where I would go and wait after school if I’d forgotten my key.”

The book is set not now, but in the early 70s, because, Rebecca says, it got her out of what she describes as “the current parent culture” and gave her a lot of freedom. “No cell phones, no people constantly checking up on you, needing to know where you were,” she says. “Even when I was at college there was a bigger separation between parent-world and child-world; now there’s so much more parental input, and I didn’t want to have to deal with it. And it also gave me freer access to my own memories.”

Rebecca’s memories are of an only-child, kind of single-parent world - her parents were divorced, and while she has a brother, he’s 15 years younger (and she left for college when she was 17 and never went back home) - and she admits to an only-child identity, again, like Miranda, and a number of other characters in the book. Also like Miranda, she had a fertile imagination and relied on books a lot. It is, she says, lonely not to have a sibling, especially when your parents don’t live together. It didn’t make her childhood miserable, but she did spend a lot of time in her head.

There is much about *When You Reach Me* that is quite ‘grown up’, in that it’s about relationships and their complexity, and also, I put it to Rebecca, the importance of point of view. “That’s an interesting way of putting it. I had thought of it more as categories, it’s about putting people in categories and making a certain set of assumptions about them. We can’t help it, we have to do it and it’s not like we can cure ourselves, but it’s something we can be aware of.

“Miranda makes assumptions about *lots* of people in the book and a lot of them are wrong, a lot of them are exploded. That’s something I like about life, that things are not what they seem and that this is happening on so many levels for all of us. I think that’s the kind of thing kids are thinking about and struggling with. I remember being a kid in New York and thinking ‘Who am I afraid of, and why am I afraid?’ and really wondering what I could do about it. These I don’t think of as adult topics.” Rebecca is, she says, much more connected to her 12-year-old self than she is to the teenager she became. “I know a lot of teen writers, and that’s where they are connected. I can’t do that, but this time in life I can and I think it helps a lot. You cannot underestimate your audience.”

In many ways Rebecca is extremely fortunate that *When You Reach Me* isn’t her introduction to the world of publishing, that she’s seen it, with *First Light*, as it more often is. Though it must still be quite a daunting task to follow a book that has earned so many plaudits, she’s taking it in her stride. “I’m writing another novel for the same age group, and I have finally finished the first draft. It’s not like either of the first two books, it’s a realistic, contemporary city story, and I gave it to my editor, Wendy Lamb, just before I flew to the UK. I’m waiting for her to read it, and there’s definitely work ahead!”