

## Jan 2011 - PHIL EARLE / Just Imagine

With a day job as the sales director at Simon and Schuster Children's Books, and a young family, Phil Earle is the multi-tasking debut author of *Being Billy*, a tough and uncompromising YA novel and the story of one boy's life in the care system. Here he talks about life on both sides of the fence...

### Where did all this start?

Hull. I really thought that I'd never live anywhere else apart from there, where I was born, in 1974...and I didn't move away until I was 23. I grew up there, did my 'A' Levels there and out of necessity that's also where I went to university to do English and Drama. Hull effects everything I do, really, and it's still a massive part of me - it's an awful cliché, but I'm like a stick of rock, cut me in half it would say 'Hull'. And *Being Billy* is set in a fictionalised Hull, but full of references I put in there just for me.

I didn't engage at all with English at university. I was supposed to read 33 novels in the first year and ended up reading three, and one of those was a play. Victorian literature didn't turn me on, and it sounds ridiculous, but I wasn't really a reader until my mid-20s when I started bookselling; I desperately wanted to do straight drama, but dad wouldn't let me, he's quite traditional and wanted me to have 'qualifications'.

### So what happened when you left university?

My first job was at a kid's home, 200 yards from the university.

**Why there?** It seems to me that that was a bit like an extreme school and it would have been easier to have been a teacher, which could have been a way for you to go.

I've no idea why I went there, but I had fallen into doing charitable stuff during university...I wasn't doing any work and I liked meeting the kids. You'd go round and pick them up for play schemes and their mum and dad would have the drug-weighing scales up on the wall in the living room. They weren't being obvious about it, but we were students, we weren't stupid and we knew what all that paraphernalia was.

It got under my skin very quickly, and I had a friend working at the home. And as I say, it was 200 yards from the uni, I just kind of fell into it - especially as I didn't know what else to do. I did graduate, a 2.1...I bluffed English and worked really hard at Drama, and I owe that course a lot as it taught me about storytelling and the importance of character progression.

**Did you have any training for the job at the kid's home?**

No - I'd run a play scheme, that was it! I was only three years older than some of the oldest residents, and in some ways I suppose you could be a good role model to them, someone they could feel more akin to.

**Did the kids know how old you were?**

Yeah! These kids were as sharp as a tack, you couldn't pull the wool over *any* of them. They were born survivors, and this was something I wanted to get across in the book, that they had a terrible disadvantage to start, but they had a resilience and a spirit - they'd been kicked around all their lives, *all* their lives, and it taught them very early how you get on. For some of the kids the home was all they'd known.

**What prompted the journey from 'the frozen north', as you put it in the book, to Gypsy Hill in London?**

My good lady, really. She went off to work in Dublin, I then decided, at the age of 23, that I wanted to train as a drama therapist - *stupid*, too young,

not enough life experience! Didn't have a clue what I was getting myself into - had to go and have therapy three times a week, and I didn't need therapy, there was nothing wrong with me. And it doesn't do you any favours, because you start unpicking things, over-analysing. It felt like a natural progression, but it was too much. Way too much.

Within six months of moving down south and working with 15 to 21 year olds, all of whom had been sexually abused, I had to stop. All the girls were self-harmers, all the boys had been treated appallingly by either fathers, step-dads or priests - it's not a cliché, it's true. I had to stop, otherwise I would've lost the plot. And at that point I stepped *right* back, even though I didn't know what I was going to do next.

**So, you stepped out of three or four years in a very intense world, quite unlike three or four years anywhere else...was bookselling the next stop?**

It was. But I took nine months to get my head together, because by this point I wasn't in any shape to do anything.

**Did you need therapy?**

I did, and I had it, I had to. I moved home for nine months, back to my safety net in Hull, and had *really* intense cognitive behavioural therapy. But there was only one psychologist in Hull and I had to wait for about three months to see him, and he basically completely and utterly sorted me out and saved me, because I was not in a good place at all.

But the hardest thing, moving on, was thinking that I wasn't going to do that job any more, because I did love it. But I realised very quickly that I wasn't good enough - the best carers, ironically, are the ones who don't care that much. They can go home at the end of the day, thinking 'I've done my shift, I've done what I can and I'm going to go home and chill out with my family'. I was going home and having to drink five bottles of beer just to get to sleep because I couldn't leave it there, and that's not good.

**And bookselling? Where and when did that come in?**

Back down in London, at WH Smith in Putney. It was a job, a Christmas temp job for three days a week, a first step back to functioning again, and I stayed there nine months or so. And then my then-girlfriend, now wife, saw an ad in Ottakar's shop window for a bookseller, and I said 'Yes!'. So in 2001 I moved to Ottakar's, shelving erotica, sci-fi and fantasy for the first three months, and then a job came up in the children's department which no one else wanted and that was it.

**Do you think you were attracted to the job because of your previous work with kids?**

I think it's definitely linked, but it's also because of the book reading/bookselling culture they had [at Ottakar's] that doesn't exist now. All of a sudden, from not having a genre or type of book I loved or that turned me on as a reader, the children's thing happened, and it sounds really dramatic, but it was like flicking on a switch and oh-my-goodness...

**What were the best and worst parts of being a bookseller?**

The worst part was the pay, undoubtedly, and the best part was being taught how to run events by Lesley Preston - who now works for Bounce Marketing. She was brilliant, because as soon as you get a half-decent reputation for running events, people like Adele Minchin at Puffin, Alyx Price at Macmillan [now at Scholastic], they started bringing us *good* authors...Julia Donaldson was coming down, Brian Jacques, who was huge at the time, was coming down...anyone who was worth having we were getting, and I was devouring everything, YA particularly. I read and read and read.

Without Ottakar's I definitely wouldn't be writing. I can remember the moment when I decided I wanted to write; we had Celia Rees doing a talk in the shop on *Witch Child* for 60 kids, and I had an idea - it wasn't a

particularly good idea, but a friend gave me a knackered old laptop and I started spending lunch hours downstairs in the cellar trying to write.

**Did you jump across to publishing, or were you spotted and tempted?**

I got lucky, really. I was working at the Ottakar's in Clapham, looking after about a dozen children's sections in the south-east, which I loved, and the Transworld rep told me about a job going there, repping. I went for the interview, got the job and *very* nearly turned it down.

**Why go for the job if you loved what you were doing?**

I couldn't go on, earning what I was earning. And I also realised I didn't want to be a book shop manager as it would take me away from the kid's books. I just wanted to work with kid's books, and I nearly didn't take the job was because it said 'Adult', as well as 'Random House Children's'; over the weekend I saw that it would be ridiculous not to take it as the job was the natural next step for me - yes, it took me away from working on children's solely, but I was still selling Terry Pratchett, Jackie Wilson and Keith Grey, people whose writing I really respected.

**When you moved across, what kind of perspective did having been a bookseller give you?**

Bookselling was the best grounding, because I read so much, because the fundamental thing is recommendation. If you're selling books, whether it's to a ten year-old and his mum in the shop, or Waterstone's or Asda's head office, there's got to be passion for the books. If there isn't and you sell them any old crap you don't believe in, or sell them the wrong book, they won't trust you. It was that...it's just hand-selling in a different way, not to the end consumer but to the person in the middle. I can't intellectualise it more than that.

**Do you think knowing a lot about the business of publishing put you off writing? Do you think you'd have started earlier if you'd had a different job?**

No, I think I started writing because of where I was working. What stopped me a little bit was worrying about asking my contacts to read my stuff, I was terrified of that. I thought [what I was doing] was OK, what worried me was the thing of humiliating yourself by saying 'Would you mind reading this?', and inevitably some people didn't get back to me. It's learning that if they don't get back to you, it's probably best not to ask again.

But some people, editors like Charlie Sheppard, gave me a lot of advice; she told me I could write, and that was enough. I worked on the idea for two or three years, didn't get anywhere and then stopped writing. I carried on reading, a lot, but not writing; nothing for about four years.

**What was it about *Being Billy* that the story demanded to be told?**

It was the seed of an idea about an angry 12-13-14 year old boy who'd been abandoned twice - abandoned by his birth mother, who was a drinker, and abandoned by the people who'd adopted him because they couldn't cope with his behaviour. That was the genesis, that was all it was for a long time in my head, and I just never managed to let go of it. How do you see the world, how do you see yourself when you're that age and you've been told twice that you're not good enough, you're not quite what we want? It's difficult enough being a neurotic teenager with a 'normal' upbringing, but how do you do it when every single adult in your life has been transient - promised a lot but never delivered. It wasn't dramatic, like this voice that *had* to be heard, but I never let go of how that must've felt, and I thought I'd like to write about that.

**Did you feel guilty about leaving the children's home?**

Yeah, definitely, for a long time. News would occasionally feed through about kids ending up in prison, kids committing suicide, and it was devastating. For quite a while I thought a lot about where they were. I had an awful sense of anticipation or foreboding, because they did have such terrible beginnings and it's hard to break the cycle, to turn yourself around when *all* you've experienced is violence.

**Was there an element of therapy in writing the book?**

Oh certainly there is! Everyone talks about writing as catharsis, and it is - and getting it published is the ultimate validation, and wonderful - but just getting it drafted in a way that made me proud that I'd been honest to those kids [was good]. I didn't want to write a fictionalised, syrupy thing about children in care, because that *isn't* their lives, that *isn't* their experience. I wanted it to be as true as I possibly could, while still retaining a sense of hope as well. So yes, it was great therapy.

**Because the book is based on your experiences, and it's a very big slice of realism, did you have to fictionalise a lot?**

There are elements of truth - the smells, the smell of antiseptic cleaner on the floor is *real*, so are the brothers sleeping together for security and comfort...and there were a lot of ex-military people working in the home. Actually, Ronnie, the senior care worker in the home, became a *much* bigger character in the book than I ever envisaged.

**Isn't that weird, when characters you think you're in control of start to take charge?**

It was great, really great! And Ronnie started off as an absolute *git*, which is how I wanted him to be portrayed; I wanted him to be the big thing that

Billy always railed against. But what happened is, as the book went on, what you started to see is that him and Billy are both flip sides of the same coin, both stuck in the home, but for very different reasons. Billy's stuck there because no bugger'll take the chance and take him in because of his behaviour, and Ronnie's there because he's so institutionalised, by the decades he's spent in the military, that the only job he can hold down and feel comfortable with is in a place where he has to instil that same sort of discipline.

**And you didn't realise this truth until you were well into the book?**

Absolutely not. And Ronnie was the one character that I did want to be very careful with, because I didn't want any of the ex-military people I'd worked with to say 'That's me'. I held them all in very high regard, and I wasn't privy to any abuse in that home, which was quite a rare thing...you hear horror stories. The people I worked with were amazingly committed and had done the job for a very long time.

**Did you choose the first person narrative because it made the book more visceral?**

I don't think it was a conscious thing, I just started writing. I did have Billy's voice, and it came very quickly, spewing out! It did feel more visceral, the first person, and what's been really interesting are the reviews that have said that what they love is that Billy is an unreliable narrator - I didn't think about that when I started writing, I just wanted it to be through his eyes, and what's really nice is that he's mistaken and that people really did care...it's about the slow reveal, if that makes sense.

**Do you feel more confident, as a writer, now you're published?**

I was very lucky to have the people around me that I did. They gave me a lot. If I hadn't worked in publishing I'd have been in the unenviable position



that 99% of writers are in, sending things off cold and waiting for a response. I was so lucky I had people to ask for advice along the way, even if I got told what I was doing wasn't good enough, because then they told me what I could do to improve it. I don't feel like a writer at all, I still keep referring to myself as someone who's written a book, not an author; I struggle with that, and I think I'll struggle with it until I've been lucky enough to get a few more books published.

**But knowing what you knew, and you knew *all* the pitfalls, you still went ahead and wrote and wanted to be published.**

Because there is this inherent buzz that I got from very early on when I was bookselling, when a proof came through the post; it's a prickle of excitement. Children's literature *excites* me in a way only cinema, film, and good TV does...things like *The Wire*, stuff by Jimmy McGovern...it's pure storytelling. A lot of adult fiction, you feel there's so much of the author in there, their take on the world, their philosophy on life. What I love is for someone to tell me a story - and that's why David Almond is so amazing, because in 200 pages he's told me more than any adult author ever has in 400, or 600 pages. It's that purity...and maybe it's the challenge of keeping people gripped, I don't know.

**If you could wave a magic wand, is there anything you'd change about the way the business of publishing operates?**

I'd have more influences at floor level. With the loss of Ottakar's and Thins and Hammicks, and now British Bookshops, there are fewer places where you can sell books on the High Street - and sell books as a range. Supermarkets - great at what they do, sell a lot of books - but there's no range, no deep backlist.

Also, what America has is this wonderful network of librarians, which can make or break books and has *real* sway. Now, we have *wonderful* librarians, up and down the length and breadth of the country, who are treated

abysmally, and our culture doesn't embrace their recommendations the way they do in America. And that's what we miss. In this country we get David Cameron talking about his Big Society, talking about not needing librarians and getting volunteers off the street - how demeaning and degrading to be told that, after all your training, you can get any old Tom, Dick or Harry off the street to do the job.

And there's the fact that books are all bought centrally - yes, you *can* create word of mouth, but invariably, if your book isn't selling in the first couple of months, it ain't going to sell, because it'll end up on a list that says 'Return to Publisher'. You can try to turn it around by getting out there and doing events, but it's an uphill battle.

**The reality is that, nowadays, a writer also has to be a performer - how do you feel about that side of things?**

Talking to kids excites me as much as writing the books...it's like going back to what I was doing ten years ago. It feels like I'm going back to do something I really love, and doing it in a way I can control and feel comfortable with. And then there's that thing, when you do a session with a group of however many kids, and you've held them for an hour - that's a powerful feeling and as good as any review, and for me it's a big part of the process.

I get such a buzz doing it, it's the added extra, really. I always loved doing drama, but I wasn't a particularly good actor, and I've always loved talking about books - whether as a bookseller or in sales - and this is just an extension of that. And the best thing is that it's about *my* book, *my* story.

**What's been the most surprising thing, for you, about doing events?**

The volume of questions you get, especially if you've done a decent job and engaged the kids in the forty minutes or whatever that you have with them. The volume and the depth, and the emotional intelligence of the questions

you get - people say that boys have no emotional intelligence, well from what I've seen, that's not true.

**I gather, mainly from your Tweets, that there's a bus, the X68, that's become your *de facto* office; how does that work?**

*Billy* wasn't written on the X68; the way that was written came about as a result of the birth of my second child, Elsie...and I got to write, with my wife's blessing, Monday to Friday, for about an hour after Elsie went to bed. I was just desperate to write, and in four months I'd written the first draft, 500 to a thousand words a day.

The X68 came with Book 2, because we now have *three* children which makes it even *more* difficult to write in the evening, because it just not fair on my wife. So I have a MacBook and I get on at Russell Square, and the X68 doesn't stop between there and West Norwood, so no one can nick my computer and jump off the bus. I'm trapped on it, and writing what is kind of a prequel to *Billy* - not in a *Star Wars* way, there's no Jar Jar Binks - about Daisy, the girl Billy meets.

**Has Book 2 been easier than Book 1?**

No, much harder. Because, with the first one, although you want it to be published you're not writing it for your publisher as there isn't one attached. But I was lucky enough to get a two-book deal, here and in Germany, so there's an expectation and a pressure that the next one has to be better. What with everything, this has taken me three times as long to write the first draft.

**I imagine that you must be a very organised writer.**

No, I'm *really* disorganised; structurally, and in terms of planning, I'm not shambolic, I just have a three-page synopsis and that's it, I go off and write.

Marcus [Sedgwick] showed me this wonderful chart he does, a different one for every book; they're pieces of art, it was brilliant, but I don't even have my synopsis in front of me when I'm writing. I think if I'd committed to something in depth I'd find it difficult to veer off, and for me half the joy of it is finding myself somewhere I didn't expect to be.

If I was an organised writer - particularly as I'm a sales person and the worst at dismissing things if they can't be summarised in two lines - I'd have picked something that was an easier sell than *Billy*.

**Because of your deep background in publishing, can you have had any of the dreams and expectations of an ordinary debut author?**

I'm certainly not cynical, but a lot more aware of the number of books that are put out on a monthly basis that don't get any traction; I'm under no illusions. But you do have to be careful - you just have to enjoy it, there are so many people who'd give their back teeth to be in print with anyone, never mind Puffin. I'm going to get out there, enjoy myself as much as I can, speak to as *many* kids as I can, do as many festivals - without ever being a pain in the arse to anyone. I've worked with some writers who don't have a shut-off valve telling them to stop, and they make themselves a nuisance. As long as I get that balance right, I'm just going to enjoy it. And stop looking at Amazon rankings, cos that way madness lies.

**Is that your best piece of advice, don't look at Amazon rankings?**

Oh yeah - unless you're Stephanie Meyer, and then she probably doesn't need to. The important thing about whatever you write is that you've got to believe in it, because you're going to be spending an awful lot of time on your own - or on a bus - to write something *just* to make it sell. I can't imagine writing a paranormal romance as I have absolutely no pigging interest. If there's no joy in it, why do it? Ask me in a couple of years, when the books aren't selling, and obviously I'll go and write whatever you want, but for the moment I want to write about what I'm really motivated by.

**What's next, after Daisy's story?**

I will continue to write stuff based in reality, I don't think I've got it in me to write a fantasy book, it doesn't turn me on. There are fantasy books that have excited me, like *The Windsinger* trilogy, which I just think is wonderful, but I'm not a lover of fantasy fiction. I think there's such amazing drama in the everyday, in the here and now, and I love the idea that as a teenager, turning 13, that it's the first time in your life that you really start to realise that what you do has a knock-on effect. I think that's really fascinating, and you have to strike a balance when you talk to the reader, not bash them on the head with a moral.

**Do you think the reason you can do this is that you haven't ever lost that connection with childhood?**

Yeah...yeah, I struggle with this whole thing of being an adult, anyway. I've got a lot of adult responsibilities now...and if I stop and think about it it overwhelms me and I break out in hives. I am just a quintessential kid and will run from responsibility as often as I can.

I love getting excited about things, and there's something very childlike about that - I don't think it's *childish*, it's *childlike* - and play was in a lot of what I was doing back in the children's home, so it's full circle, really. One of the *best* days of my whole career [in Hull] was when we had these two kids, seven and nine, who were regarded as undisciplinable; they sat on a bench outside the home with me, one day in the summer, and I read them *The Twits* from start to finish. It's not a long book, but they sat there, with all their serious educational and behavioural difficulties, and they listened to it. As soon as the book was finished they ran off and potted windows, both of them. But for that hour and a half the power of the book held them; and that's what you want with a book, you want it to hold people.