

## 2004/July ANTHONY HOROWITZ - Publishing News

It's the kind of subject that normally gets discussed only after a certain amount of alcohol has been consumed; inflamed debate normally continues until no one can remember what they're actually arguing about, the subject is then discarded and forgotten about because there is no satisfactory answer to the question: where *do* jokes come from?

In *The Killing Joke*, Anthony Horowitz's first (published) adult novel, this is not only the question resting actor Guy Fletcher asks himself, it's the one he decides - as he has time on his hands - to find the answer to. In days of yore Guy would have been Sir Guy and his would have been a quest, but that was then. Horowitz, who, depending on your tastes and age, is either best known as the creator of the wildly successful Alex Rider series of children's books or as the man behind - to choose one from many - the much-lauded TV series *Foyle's War*, is not averse to the odd quest himself.

In the book we pretty soon discover that Guy is the kind of person who obsesses about ideas, especially when he's bored, which, considering his profession, is fairly often. One of his previous obsessions had been the shrinking amount of orange jelly on top of a Jaffa cake, and prior to that it was trying to uncover the great Premium Bond conspiracy.

"About 15 years ago it occurred to me that Premium Bonds could be a racket," says Horowitz, "I mean there are unanswered questions about them - what happens to the money that isn't claimed - where does it go? What is the money invested in the bonds used for - arms, or medical research?" Horowitz sits forward, "...and how many bonds are there that have just gone missing? What has happened to all that money?

"I was quite tempted, like Guy Fletcher, to take out an ad and do a documentary or something about Premium Bonds...because it is very weird that no one I've ever known has known anyone in this country who has won a million pounds on a Premium Bond. You'd think that knowledge would've come though, where are all the winners? In the original version of *The Killing Joke*

the person who had this idea was immediately murdered, so if I go under a bus, one of those with an Alex Rider poster on it, then you'll know there's something in [the conspiracy theory].”

The idea for the book had been around for some years, continues Horowitz, and was, if his memory serves, originally intended as a TV film but subsequently forgotten about - he has, he says, a lot of ideas and some are destined to float around forever in idea hell. This one, though, was re-animated after 9/11. “It was when I heard that joke - ‘what’s the world’s favourite airline? American, because it flies you straight to your office’ - *two days* after it happened, that I suddenly remembered this thing about where do jokes come from. It was *so* fast and I wondered what sick mind would take this unbelievable event and turn it into a bad joke.”

At this juncture in his career he'd written three adult novels, none of which had ever been published, and he felt it was the moment to have another go. What was so different this time? “I think the success of the Alex Rider books made me more attractive to publishers, but my first meeting with Orion was very odd...they actually didn't much like the book, and I think, in the normal scheme of things, they wouldn't have published it.

“Over lunch they were demurring to say the least, and I asked them what their problems were with the book as it stood, and they made three or four pretty big comments about things that weren't working, and I said fine, I'll rewrite it. My impression was they were completely taken aback at the notion that this wasn't The Great Novel, written in gold leaf, that had to be published with every last word intact or the author was walking.” This is the scriptwriter talking, here, the man for whom rewriting is a reality of the job and artistic collaboration a way of life. *The Killing Joke* is, he says, a much better book because of that lunch.

“I think the interesting difference here between a children's publisher and an adult one is that an adult publisher will get a manuscript and they either love it and publish it or they don't love it and don't publish it...my limited experience

suggests that they don't have the mindset that says 'this book is halfway there, with help it could be fantastic'."

His new novel is, in many ways, like a board game, very *Snakes and Ladders*, with the hero throwing dice, making moves and suddenly finding himself back where he started. "Guy Fletcher [in the story] compares his situation to the movie *La Ronde*, and it is a very lateral book in that sense; in the second half it becomes, dare I say it, quite political, quite dark, but it does have a happy resolution...I hate overclaiming for books, but it is slightly into the world of Kafka by the end, and less John Buchan, which was always the intention. The book is supposed to be about similar things that I touch on in my children's books, the way we're all being manipulated and lied to and told how to think by increasingly authoritarian governments."

Horowitz has a two-book deal with Orion and is, he says, already working on the second novel in his head. "It's a murder mystery, but like nothing that's been done before...it's another idea I've had for some time, it's a big, long book, more complicated than *The Killing Joke*, to do with writing murder mystery and the British love of whodunits. A question I get asked a lot because of my involvement with *Poirot*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Foyle's War*, all the TV work I do, is why do we like whodunits? So I'm going to explore it a little further in the book."