

2006/July MAL PEET - Publishing News

Mal Peet has written, according to his own guesstimation, hundreds of books, only three of which have been novels. But his first, *Keeper*, won the 2004 Branford Boase Award, his second, the critically-acclaimed *Tamar*, has just won this year's Carnegie Medal, and *Penalty*, which Walker publishes this coming October, is being given the kind of star treatment only bestowed upon books by authors who have arrived.

Penalty is a title that's going to be very hard to miss this festive season, with a marketing and publicity programme which Alison Morrison, Walker's UK Marketing Director, says aims to "go beyond book publication timing, generate publicity, stimulate sales, build profile...and capitalise on the exposure given by the Carnegie win". You have been warned.

Reading Peet's work, it does seem like he's been around, in the world of fiction, a lot longer than in reality he has. So what were those hundreds of other books about? "The back story is that my wife Elspeth [Graham] and I wrote primary education books for fifteen years for Oxford University Press, Scholastic, Dorling Kindersley, Collins, Macmillan - everybody. We've been round the block, with literacy schemes and books that were only eight pages long, some of them even illustrated by me."

As a young man, Peet doodled a lot in his spare time. "Actually, back then, all my time was spare. I used to draw cartoons during my walkabout years, and then, later, Elspeth and I got our first commissions doing non-fiction double page spreads for Walker's *Snap!* magazine. It was our first break. We researched them together, Elspeth wrote them and I drew them, and then, after the magazine folded, we recycled the spreads in book form for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. All a long time ago."

Along the way, Peet started to write himself, producing, amongst much else, 'A' Level text books - one of which, he says, has been in print "it seems like for ever" and is still generating royalties "of about £2 a year". Now, though, he no longer illustrates, having laid his pens down some five years ago after becoming fed up with reading schemes, and what he calls "the culture of producing literacy snacks". But that, as he says, is another

conversation entirely. Peet discovered he had a talent to enthrall, rather than just inform, through a completely chance remark.

“We were at Walker, the one publisher we’d failed to do any non-fiction with - every time we came up with what we thought were wizard ideas, they’d decide *not* to publish non-fiction any more - and were talking to an editor called Sally Christy about what kind of things she was looking for. She said they would be interested in some unusual stuff about football and something sensitive about death; so I said, jokingly, that I’d do her a book about a dead footballer, to cover all the bases. Ha-ha-ha. But I went away thinking ‘I could do that’, and when I got home I kind of melted down all my early reading of the *Hotspur* and the *Wizard* and all that boy’s fiction, and turned it into a football ghost story, set in South America.”

He does, he says, like to mess around with genres, taking things which appear to be incompatible and, to use his phrase, “nailing them together with a lump hammer”. The end result of this literary DIY was *Keeper*, a story that was part Arthurian legend, he says, part football story, part supernatural thriller, as well as having an ecological and environmentalist element. And then he confounded everyone by writing *Tamar*, which is set in Holland, during the Second World War.

“It *was* a natural progression...” Peet raises his eyebrows, shakes his head and laughs. “Walker were quite keen on me doing another book like *Keeper*, because, after all, it won the Branford Boase and the Nestlé - but I said no, I don’t want to be the guy who writes wacky football stories, thank you. So I wrote *Tamar* instead, which turned out to have a life of its own, as stories so often do...they’re frisky little buggers.” One of the many technical problems he set himself with the book was to write an historical novel about an aspect of World War II - the Dutch resistance - that nobody knew much about. “But because it chimed with my childhood comic book reading - secret agents, war-time, evil, wicked Nazis and heroic skulduggery - it really appealed to me. When I finished *Tamar* I knew it was quite a good book, but I had no idea it would get on the Carnegie shortlist, let alone win it.”

And now, here he is with *Penalty*, a second book set in South America (which also has sports reporter Paul Faustino, the lead character from his

debut novel, in it *and* a strong football theme) that he claims is definitely not a follow-up or sequel to *Keeper*. He also doesn't think it's just a children's book. "It's all about the story and I don't ask myself 'would a 14-year-old understand this?', because that would stop me writing; there are lots of presumptions and premises about YA, teen, whatever you call it, fiction, that are wrong - mainly that I don't think you have to have teenagers in it. My favourite reading as a kid was Biggles, books about hard-bitten fighter pilots and not a kid in sight. I use kids in my stories as a device to foist real books on teenagers."

What's coming next, somewhat surprisingly, is a final story about Paul Faustino. This does not, he's at pains to make clear, mean he's writing a trilogy. And how come three books about the same character isn't a trilogy? "Because they don't join together, that's why, and I'm doing it because I really like Faustino as a vehicle; he's a very shadowy character quite enigmatic - bumbling, yet suave, but actually inept. And South America interest me, a lot - as does football, a universal subject, the *only* universal event, and I love it. And it been good to me..."