

2003/July MICHAEL LAWRENCE - Publishing News

Michael Lawrence - who gave the world Jiggy McCue and such titles as *The Killer Underpants* and *The Toilet of Doom* and is about to follow them with a 'trilogy of ideas' commissioned by Orchard - is one Nature's great enthusiasts and a natural storyteller. He can't help it. Ask him a question, any question, and the answer invariably comes back at you as a story.

All I asked was: had he always wanted to be a writer? "I do remember, when I was about 10, wanting to be an archaeologist or an astronomer, but I probably wasn't bright enough, so I went to art school instead, where I studied everything and nothing in particular," Lawrence replies. "After that I got a job as a trainee graphic designer, which is where I discovered an aptitude for photography. I very quickly went freelance and got work from the

Financial Times, *News of the World* and advertising agencies - plus commissions to photograph pop groups such as The Moody Blues and Wayne Fontana and the Mindbenders."

You see what I mean.

When, I wondered, did he make the change from photographer to writer? "I started wanting to write in my late teens, at a time when I was reading so much that I couldn't stop. After a while I decided that I'd like to do that, too," says Lawrence. "Worst move I ever made! If I could go back, I'd tell myself 'don't buy that @*&!\$% typewriter', because it took me 30 years to get published! In one year alone I had more than 50 rejections for various books, plays, TV sitcoms and stories. You name it, I had it turned down. The good thing about all the trials and errors, though, is that I can now switch between styles with ease. A useful facility."

Everything changed when, having gone through the *Writers & Artists Yearbook* from A to Z, he then proceeded to go through it again. Backwards. He was on the verge of giving up when he reached Andersen Press, "...and they accepted *When the Snow Falls*, which came out in 1995. I hadn't intended to be a children's writer, but the first book I had published was a children's book so it seemed the way to go. Fairly recently I fished out three

stories I wrote 30 years ago in a café in Ramsgate and they've all been published. So it's often a case of the timing being right."

In 1999 he introduced Jiggy McCue in *The Poltergoose*. It was Lawrence's first comic novel and the fifth title in the series is published later this year. "Everything I do has to be different as I get bored very easily," he admits, and it must be said that his new novel, *A Crack in the Line*, the first volume of the alternate reality trilogy *The Aldous Lexicon*, is about as different as you can get from anything he's so far done for Orchard. "*A Crack in the Line* is based on *When the Snow Falls* as I felt that the idea had more mileage, that my first attempt was just the beginning of something."

The story opens on 'Day Seven' by introducing us to two teenagers, Alaric and Naia 'as alike as any two people of the opposite sex can be', and works its way through the characters' intertwined realities to Day One. It's a journey full of emotion, mystery and arcane theories about how it has become possible for these two characters to meet and where, on the timeline, it all started. Lawrence himself says he doesn't necessarily believe in alternate realities, but manages to write about them in such a way that you come away thinking he may know more than he's actually telling.

Lawrence appears to crave variety like a kid craves sugar and, having written two Jiggy books in a row - something he says he won't do again with any project - he worked at *A Crack in the Line* with gusto. Did he, I wondered, have a favourite style to write in? "Only as many as possible. I'm on the point of finishing a comic novel for adults called *Areola Scratz*, set mainly in the US, and have just about about completed *Milking the Novelty*, a memoir about people I knew in a particular year in the Sixties, a time when I went from photographer to down-and-out in Paris, to Butlin's holiday camp photographer in Pwllheli, where I shared a chalet with Christine Keeler's father. What a character!" Well, I'm thinking, takes one to know one.

Back to the book in question, or rather books. Has he got all three planned out completely? Unsurprisingly, no. "I have a general plotline only. I don't want to think about the other books until I'm ready to start on them. I need to surprise myself if I'm to surprise the reader. I have possible endings

for the last book and I might choose one of or use all three, it remains seen.” With all these ideas round in his head, does he have to be a fast writer to get them on paper before he loses them? “*A Crack in the Line* took nine months, longer than I expected, as I had to get rid of its first incarnation - on paper and in my head - and I wanted it to be darker and more involving; I’ll have to pull some stops out with the second volume, *Small Eternities*, as I have a publishing date to meet!”

He does, he says, prefer to write one book at a time, but Fate has rarely let the main publishers now and they're very enthusiastic and encouraging and I like that. He commissioned *The Aldous Lexicon* on such a vague synopsis because it doesn't fit the moment. It's not a fantasy, for one thing, though all fiction is fantasy to a degree. It's a terrible train crash - and looks at the multiple possibilities that could happen as a result of things, and by the end of the trilogy I'll have pushed them a very, very long way.

Was it better, or simply different, writing for an older age group? "It's quite a different experience. There are limitations with younger audiences and I've often been told to take it easy when writing. *A Crack in the Line* could be read as an adult book because I haven't put a rating on the story." The main thing that makes it a children's book, he says, apart from the fact that the characters are 16 years old as it opens. And I certainly don't think Orchard will have to put *Line* for the adult readers this book may well find itself attracting.