

2004/July RODMAN PHILBRICK - Publishing News

Life can be full of surprises. Eleven years after it was first published in the US - seven years after it was made into a movie starring Sharon Stone, Gillian Anderson and James Gandolfini - Rodman Philbrick's novel *Freak the Mighty* finally gets to see the light of day here in the UK as a launch title in the new Usborne fiction imprint. How a gem like this could have been missed for such a long time is a mystery, so well spotted Ed. Dir. Megan Larkin.

"I've often wondered why it was never published in England," says Philbrick, talking from his home in the southern part of Maine. "It was never a bestseller here, but it was translated into lots of different languages and I just assumed Scholastic [the US publisher] would distribute their own books in the UK; I did wonder, though, why I never got any letters from British schoolkids. I just thought there was something about the story that didn't appeal, and only recently discovered the rights had never actually sold to England."

Philbrick's story is about two 12 year-old boys - Kevin, aka Freak, a hyper intelligent kid who has a rare genetic condition which means he doesn't grow, and Maxwell, a frighteningly large child with anger management problems. Separately they're both oddballs and social outcasts. Together, with Kevin riding high on Maxwell's broad shoulders, they are Freak the Mighty and the worlds Kevin imagines are theirs to conquer. Together they live a life neither could ever have hoped for apart and, fantastic though it may sound, this book is based on real-life characters.

"It's a fictional story, but I would never have had the idea had I not known a kid very much like Kevin," says Philbrick, who, until *Freak*, was an award-winning crime and sci-fi writer with 20 novels under his belt. "In 1992 I was asked by an editor to write a kid's mystery; I said no, especially knowing how much they were willing to pay, which was almost nothing, plus the fact that I knew nothing about kids; but on the way home I had the idea for *Freak the Mighty*, even stopping the car to write the first couple of paragraphs, and I

suddenly realised that this story had been in my back yard for more than ten years.”

As he started the book, going back in his head to his own childhood, he began to appreciate how comfortable he felt speaking in the voice of a 12 year-old boy. “My wife,” he says, “wasn’t at all surprised, but I was! I didn’t realise all the emotional stuff was still there, all the stuff about not having a best friend or two, which could be just terrible.” There is, Philbrick says, an element of cruelty at that age, as we sort ourselves out, which he remembers all too well.

“This second career as a children’s author has been an accidental one, and I love it,” he continues. “The response I get from kids is so much clearer - the ones I get from adults, mostly, tell me I’ve used the wrong calibre gun or can I put them in touch with my publisher because they write so much better than me - but the kids, some of them have never read a book before and [mine] may be the first one they’ve *really* read, and for an author that’s a kick, a real charge. There are so many kids out there who don’t read, and I get so much out of writing stories read by kid’s who don’t read a lot of books.”

Usborne’s Megan Larkin has enough faith in Philbrick’s work to have committed to two more of his books so far: his latest, titled *The Young Man and the Sea* in the US, scheduled for March next year, and *The Fire Pony* which will publish eight months later. Philbrick is delighted. “Great choices,” he says, “*The Fire Pony* has been out of print [in the US] for the last two years and, I’m blowing my own horn here, but it was one of those books that got lost in the wilderness and I think it contains some of my best writing. This will give it a chance to find a new audience.” Something of a fairytale ending, then.