

2007/July WILLIAM NICHOLSON - Publishing News

It's not often that a PN interviewee tells you that he's just come from a script meeting for a new movie, or that said interviewee has won two BAFTAs, a Tony Award for his play *Shadowlands* and has twice been nominated for an Oscar, the second time for the script for *Gladiator*. But then William Nicholson has, as they say, been there and done that in more ways than one. At eight years old he was baptised in a Nigerian leper colony, he was educated by Benedictine monks, and is an alumnus of Christ's College, Cambridge, he started his working life as a documentary filmmaker at the BBC and his debut novel, *The Wind Singer*, won the Nestlé Children's Book Prize in 2000.

"I pay the bills by writing movies and I'm in the middle of one that starts shooting in September," explains Nicholson. "It's called *Hippie Hippie Shake* and is about the Oz trials...it's really about Richard Neville and his girlfriend, and how do you have a love affair at a time of free love?" If none of the previous sentence makes any kind of sense, you either have a bad memory or are too young to have lived through the 60s; either way you will, I'm afraid, have to go to Google or Wikipedia if you want to know more.

The *Wind on Fire* trilogy was an epic fantasy quest that began life as something of a polemic against modern education, one book which turned into something much bigger, with a story arc that has its own cosmology. "I chose fantasy mainly because I was coming out of movie writing and movie writing is very prescriptive, you're told all the time what's wanted - such-and-such a star acts a certain way, the budget requires it, it's what the producer wants - and because the producers are the paymasters of course you do what you're asked."

In order to gain more control over his writing he became a writer/director and made a period romance called *Firelight*, a film which he's still very proud of even though it didn't get noticed and wasn't a success. Feeling that that particular avenue was now blocked to him, and wanting to speak with his own voice, he went looking for another area of endeavour where he would have the maximum amount of freedom. "I went not just to books but

all the way into fantasy books where I could literally do anything; this was my playground. I wasn't even consciously writing for children when I sat down to start *The Wind Singer*, to be honest."

This was not the first time Nicholson had turned to the novel form, having already written eight unpublished books, all of which he stuck away in a drawer as soon as they were rejected. Stamina fuelled by obsession kept him going, he says, and he eventually took the hint and moved into screenwriting, desperate to get anybody to pay him to write.

The Wind Singer, with a certain amount of reverse engineering, grew into a three-book sequence, finishing in 2002; three years later came *Seeker*, the first of the *Noble Warriors* trilogy. "As soon as I saw the *Wind on Fire* launched it was a marvellous feeling to know that I had a platform and a real readership, and it was exciting to think 'What would I do now?'" The only thing he really knew was that the next idea had to be a big one and something he was interested in.

"*The Noble Warriors* is all about religion. I was brought up a Catholic, and was a very strong believer until I was 19; I was taught very intelligently by monks - not the James Joyce monks, these were clever people with a very subtle understanding of life who would still to this day completely understand my take on everything. They said 'pursue the truth' and they were confident enough that their religion was right that they weren't afraid to send me forth. But this was the 60s and that was the mood, so of course I got the best of both worlds: a tremendous grounding in mystery, ritual and spiritual life, but with the permission to seek."

Soon after arriving at Cambridge the actual structure of the Catholic religion began to fall away for him and Nicholson started to realise that this was just one of many cultural forms. "I didn't think to myself that it was poisonous rubbish...it had some merits, but it wasn't *true*, not *true*," Nicholson raps the table with his knuckles, "in the sense that this is a piece of wood, and I felt permitted to take that line." From then on, he says, he's been absorbing himself in religious attitudes trying to see what makes sense of everything, searching for answers, and this has been one of the driving interests of his life.

Nicholson is a writer of great scenery, a creator of vast word pictures where ideas and vistas merge into one on the page and you can't help but think that his cinematic training ground has to be responsible for the way he works. Nicholson himself is not quite so sure. "I do work very visually, but on the other hand I come out of a completely word-based culture, and you may say movies are the big picture, but read Dickens, the ultimate visual writer from a time when there were no movies. And I love writing visual moments."

Here then is a writer who is at ease with and successful in the two great story mediums. He is, he says, now more inclined to be opinionated in script meetings because of the confidence his success as a novelist had brought him, but conversely the fact he's sometimes told that the whole first half of his script just isn't working keeps on his toes and humble. "When I go back into book after that I'm not assuming I can do it and that I don't need editing."