

June 2010 - DAVID YELLAND / Just Imagine

Born in Harrogate, David Yelland studied Economics at Coventry and in 1981 was one of the founding members of the Social Democratic Party. Yelland is probably best known as the Editor of *The Sun* newspaper, which he joined in 1992; it was a post he was to hold from 1998 until 2003. In 2005 he checked himself into a rehab clinic to combat his alcoholism, and since 2006 he has been a partner in the Brunswick Group, an international corporate communications company. Here he talks about his debut novel, *The Truth About Leo*, which is published by Puffin.

Have you always thought of yourself as a writer?

I have always written - I was adopted at birth, but I did discover that my natural mother was a children's writer, although I never met her - and I've written a *lot* of poetry, most of it absolute rubbish, as well as starting so many novels, like so many journalists, but never finishing them. This [*The Truth About Leo*] is the first novel I've ever finished.

Where did the idea for the book come from?

I wouldn't say I had the idea when I was in rehab, because it didn't come as quickly and easily as that, but while I was there I began to realise I was, without any sense of ego, in a unique position. I knew how things - the country and the media - worked but I was with people who knew much more than I did, who were very wise and who had absolutely nothing; it threw into relief the unimportance of what I'd been doing for most of my life.

What did come to me first was the idea about camomile, which is a theme which flows through the book [symbolising the dead mother] and which has been missed by just about everyone who's written about it - and that's fine as it wasn't written for them but for children.

A lot of what happens in the book has happened to you and your family: your wife died four years ago and you yourself have had problems with

alcohol. Did you want readers to directly identify you with Leo's father Tom Rake?

Children *hate* the father figure, they don't like him at all...in fact they want him to die, particularly the boys. When I talk to kids about the book that's been quite shocking to me because he *is* slightly like me and do I want them to say that they see 'in the long term' he's going to turn round. I want them to think there's going to be a happy ending.

I found the first part of the novel really quite disturbing to read, which made me wonder why you thought of writing this as a kids' book.

Well, the honest answer to that is I didn't write it for anybody in particular; I did want it to be accessible to children, but I was always very well aware, during the early stages of the publishing process, that it might fall between two stools: is it for children or is it for adults? The answer is that I wanted it to be for both. Children won't read it in the mass market until adults decide to put it in front of them....but once they do read it they get hooked into it, although the decision to allow them to read it has to be taken by an adult because it's a book about alcohol. Many, many friends who've read the book and enjoyed it have then pondered before giving it to their children.

Given all that, what was the reaction when it was first pitched?

It was not easy to sell. My agent [Peter Cox] and I went to one publisher who said that we would never get a book about alcoholism in the kids' section of Waterstone's, but that's exactly what we have done. And to me that's kind of job done, really.

There were many times when I thought this book would never get published, even though I did have a certain media profile; I'd had constant offers to write about my time at *The Sun*, but I didn't want to do that. I think I was a very difficult customer for Peter, but I wanted to write this book for a number of reasons, one being that I do think I'd have gone in to recovery ten, twenty years earlier if I'd known more about the condition.

So is this a book about compulsion or one about addiction?

I firmly believe I was born an alcoholic, I wasn't made one by anything that happened to me. I would have been one whatever my childhood had been like, or at least addicted to something. In 1979 I wasn't in a world where there were many drugs around, so I was never exposed to them, which was lucky. And to answer your previous question, this is clearly a children's book which is being read by adults.

How did you find the writing process after your years as a journalist - did an extended narrative scare you?

It was utterly different to anything else I've ever done, a massive undertaking. There's a fantastic essay that George Orwell wrote called *Why I Write*, and he had four reasons, one of which was 'sheer egotism and wanting to be remembered when you're dead'; even if a book only sells one copy you will be remembered by your family, which is incredibly important...but you need to be motivated to sit down every day to write, and it is very, very tough - and the reason it's tough as a journalist is that journalism and the media, I'm afraid, is too much about ego and an easy hit. You write a leader, bash out five hundred words, and it's in the paper that night and at *The Sun* you could feel it being printed by the presses below you. Very egotistical, particularly if it's then picked up by Radio 4 the next morning.

Writing a novel is like sailing across the Atlantic, as opposed to a pond - you never know when you're going to get to the other side and you worry about being marooned in the middle with the whole book finished and no deal. That was me, as I didn't know if was going to get published or not. And the actual process of writing is *completely* different - I don't want to be too critical about my former colleagues in the Press, but writing fiction is, ironically, about truth. You have to completely serve yourself up...as

someone at Puffin said to me, writers open themselves up, we take their wares and stick them on shelves.

Journalism, on the other hand, is not honest. You're pedalling a line for somebody else and you might not necessarily believe it...you're media, which means you're between the politicians, or whoever, and the general public. When you're writing a novel it's a singular thing. The reason why art of *any* kind is the most important human activity is it's one person's statement about the human condition.

Do you feel different now you've written a book and had it published?

I feel very, very different...I'm only just beginning to realise what it means, really. It's an old-fashioned, slow process, it takes time and a *huge* amount of effort, for me three years or more. [When you've finished] it's there forever, even if it goes out of print, but I hope [*The Truth About Leo*] is the kind of book where there'll be one copy in most bookshops for many years.

Has the book been sold abroad?

I have to say that I didn't write this book for commercial reasons, although it looks like it might have commercial impact in the US, but I didn't write it for that reason. Interestingly, in Ireland the book has been very successful and had huge media interest, a lot more than here, in a market where they don't talk about my *Sun* editorship. The book is seen for what it is.

As someone who grew up in the agenda-driven, big headline environment of newspapers, what kind of writer are you - a plotter and planner, or do you just dive in and see where the idea took you?

Going back to my Atlantic analogy, to begin with I went off in entirely the wrong direction. Whatever my second book is, it'll be written a *lot* quicker than the first, mainly because there was already a second book in *The Truth About Leo* that had to be taken out. What actually turns me on about

writing is writing itself, and one of the things I have slight misgivings about is the way the book is perceived; I don't think some people have quite understood that I wrote it because I'm a writer, not the ex-editor of *The Sun*.

Did the *Sun*'s succinct, synoptic style help with writing the book?

It did, in the end. But to start with I wanted to be a 'writer' and I wanted readers to say, as every writer does, that they loved the writing; there are parts of this book that I'm immensely proud of and parts where I had to be more simplistic than I would have liked, and I had to be dragged back to what probably I have a natural ability for. The thing that drove me to the top of journalism, is that I could write. I was very shy, didn't speak much and certainly did not impress on first meeting. But the one thing I could do was write and write very persuasively.

This is quite an ambitious project, in that it tries, and for the most part succeeds in pulling together a pretty visceral start and a somewhat fairytale ending. Was it always planned to be like that?

Insofar as there was any planning, in the original version of the book the 'fairytale' played a much bigger part, and there was some magic in it. My genuine experience of both dealing with a child who's bereaved, who's mother had died, and of being in recovery, is that there *are* real-life fairy tales. And there's a very spiritual nature to the book, which is something I've never talked about in any interview because you never get asked about spirituality and faith in British newspapers. They aren't acceptable subjects normally talked about...

Do you think that it's easier to talk about your alcoholism than your faith?

I absolutely do. I don't have a conventional religious faith, but recovery is extremely spiritually-based...I think children have a natural spirituality, and there's no fairytale in this book that I haven't observed in real life.

How did someone with your background, used to having control over what you did, take to being edited?

Good question! There were one or two editors whom I met along the way that I just couldn't have worked with, but I found Sarah Hughes brilliant... Sarah's obviously extremely experienced and I hardly disagreed with her, truth be known, which is a little bit of a miracle. If ever there were disagreements it was over style, me pushing to be 'a writer' and her saying 'these are children you're talking to'. Without Sarah it might not have happened, but I did want to be edited, I knew I had to be and it was question of finding the right person. If you asked her, I think she'd probably say she was surprised how easy I was to work with*. I know I don't know it all...I was very bad at seeing the whole thing.

[* *"He was lovely," says Puffin's Fiction Publishing Director, Sarah Hughes, "extremely passionate about the book and very clear about what he wanted to say. I thoroughly enjoyed working with him."*]

You obviously enjoyed this whole experience immensely - are you planning on doing it again?

Yes...I've got three ideas and I don't know which one to do first, so I think I'm just going to let it sit for a couple of months before I decide...one's for kid's, one's for adults and one's non-fiction, and there is a second Leo book in my head.

Apart from having an alcoholic dad, Leo's school experiences are pretty terrible as well - are they based on personal experience?

One reviewer said Mr Manders [Leo's teacher] was unbelievable. Manders existed, and not only did he exist he was also called Manders and he taught me at a school in Cleethorpes. He's long since died...but I was caned when I was ten years old by Mr Manders for something I shouldn't have been caned for, but then I don't think *any* child of ten deserves to be caned for anything. My hair had just begun to fall out [David Yelland suffers from alopecia], I'd just been told I was adopted; I was very mixed-up but I wasn't rebellious, and I got caned for messing about and I haven't forgotten it. I do describe Manders quite accurately, and I know from what my son says that teachers like him still exist.

Has your son read the book?

Oh yes, and he loves it. He's proud of it...but he doesn't see himself as Leo, and he's never seen me drink, but he knows all about me and he likes the fact that his mother is in some way preserved in the book. I'm sure as he gets older he'll get sick of the thing.

Was there an element of therapy for you in writing this book?

I don't think there's as much therapy as people assume there is. It was too hard, by which I mean hard work, not emotionally, to be therapy and so I think it was more cathartic than therapeutic. We were talking about journalism earlier...journalism isn't hard work compared to this. That's my personal experience. I got to the stage when I couldn't go into Waterstone's because so many people I knew had written books...it was a real pressure because *everyone* wants to write a book!