

June 2011 / DON CALAME - Books for Keeps

'Three boys, one summertime goal: to see a real-live naked girl' read the tag line to Don Calame's debut novel *Swim the Fly*, which did the trick and grabbed my eye when I first saw it on Templar's stand at the Federation of Children's Book Groups conference back in April.

It's a great come-on, and I picked the book up, turning it over to find the *New York Times* reviewer had said 'Boys will probably love it. This one did' - high praise indeed - and that the story contained, amongst other things, 'strong language and explosive laxative use'. But would the book deliver on its promises? I hoped so, as I was soon going to be interviewing its author.

I needn't have worried. While I rarely find myself actually ROFLing, I am known to LOL a lot, and this tale of three friends and their summer vacation quest had me laughing out loud *a lot*. There was, at times, also some gagging and eee-*eu*-ing, it's that kind of book. And as I read it I found myself right back in those mid teen years where to be male was to be in a heightened state of constant confusion, frustration and lust. So glad it was only a visit.

It was during Don's visit to the UK to promote *Swim the Fly* that we met up and kicked off the conversation with me wondering why a Hollywood screenwriter would want to start writing kid's books. Was it that there was less re-writing involved? "No! I was working on a lot of scripts and getting paid OK money, but things weren't getting made. The process was getting quite frustrating, but I was still doing it.

"So I was working on a script and my wife, who's also a writer, had been out on a tour and came back saying that she'd heard from librarians and teachers all the time that there were no books for teenage boys. And she said that / should write a Young Adult novel from a teenage boy perspective; she'd seen how I interacted with her teenage boys, how we'd joke and the jokes would go over her head, and she told me that I had a really sophomoric sense of humour, which I took as a compliment! But I was working on something else and didn't want to do it."

Don's wife (on the one hand being Meg Tilly, the author - *Porcupine*, *Gemma*, *Singing Songs* - and on the other Meg Tilly, the actress - *The Big Chill* and *Agnes of God*) wasn't giving up that easily. She came back the next day, telling him he really should write the YA novel for boys; he fobbed her off, promising he'd get to it as soon as he could. "Then a few days later she said, 'Look, I know I'm annoying you, but I've had one of those strong feelings I get sometimes and I really see that you're going to write a really good book and it's going to get published, and you're going to get a New York agent and I *bet* you're going to get a movie deal out of it.' And I'm like, Oh yeah, *right*...but the only thing is that when my wife says she's had one of those 'strong feelings', you have to listen because inevitably it turns out to be true."

His wife's persistence paid off and he finally gave in and wrote the first couple of chapters. To his great surprise Don found that he was having a lot of fun being back in the teen years, and he decided that if he was going to write this book he was going to write it how *he* remembered being fifteen years old, which he says, can tend towards the raunchy and rude side occasionally. "I thought that I'd do it realistically and I'd have a blast because no one would ever publish it, no one would *ever* pick this book up."

One thing he didn't do was any research, jumping straight in with no knowledge at all of what else was out there, and never having read any YA novels. Eventually he did go and have a look, just to see how much he could get away with, and when he read Melvin Burgess's *Doing It* he realised he could get away with pretty much anything. And as it turned out, he tells me, he got not one but two really good publishers - Candlewick in the States and Templar in the UK - he did get a New York agent and Paramount optioned the rights to the book. "There you go - the moral of the story is to listen to your wife!"

With Don's background it's no real surprise that *Swim the Fly* reads like a movie, with great set-ups, a cracking pace and pin-sharp dialogue. It did surprise me that he hadn't simply written it as a screenplay, but it turns out that secretly he'd always wanted to write a novel. "You're a writer, thinking 'Some day I'm going to write my novel!'. I didn't think it was going

to be *this* novel, I thought it was going to be the Great American Adult Novel that nobody would read.” How wrong he was. *Swim the Fly* is a Great American YA Novel that’s being read everywhere.

The book employs a lot of techniques he picked up writing screenplays, most particularly his plotting skills, which he uses to great effect. “I have a super-short attention span, so for me, if I was going to write a novel, I had to break it down into short chunks. The first note I got back from my editor said ‘OK, really funny, really great, we really like it, but this isn’t a movie. Now spend a little bit more time with the characters and flesh out some of the secondary characters...you have a lot more time in a book to meander - stay on-plot, but expand’.

“And that was the really fun and freeing part, because in a movie you have ninety to 110 minutes to tell your story, you don’t have any time to waste and there’s an incredibly tight structure.”

Swim the Fly, Don says, retains some of that tightness in its structure but it has more breadth than a movie would. There is, he continues, no way he could have made a film of the book because it would have been a four-hour movie, and in fact when he sat down to write the screenplay he ended up having to cut out two thirds of the story - all the parts he’d had to put in to make the book work.

As to whether the project was in any way autobiographical, or merely observational, Don will only admit to ‘little bits’ of him being in it. “Matt is how I remember it, and there are tiny little seeds in there that grew into the fictional story - I was in the swim team, but my coaches were nothing like in the book. The bits of truth grounded me in reality, but the rest I made up.” His home town of Hicksville, NY, which is close by both Jericho and Salisbury, as only a place in the US can be, is the model for the suburban geography of the story.

A large part of the reason any story works is the way the characters in it work. A frankly ludicrous plot can be successfully driven by the reality of the people involved; an ingenious plot, with great characters, will go one better and take off. The three main protagonists in *Swim the Fly* - Matt, Coop and Sean - are artfully drawn, living, breathing boys, both funny and

charming, even when they're being gross; Grandpa Arlo, on the other hand, steals every scene he's in. Is he based on anyone particular?

“Not at all. He's one of those characters that you hear writers say ‘This guy just popped into my mind out of the blue’. Seriously, I was writing the scene [at the beginning] where they're going to the neighbour's funeral; I pictured the Mom driving, the two brothers in the back, and I knew they were going to be joking with each other, and then all of a sudden there was this grandpa in the passenger seat. He just started talking and there was all this inappropriate stuff he says and I thought ‘This is fun!’. And the great thing was, my editor asked me to give her more Grandpa Arlo.”

With this being a project that was only partly based on experience, and only a very small part at that, had he felt the need to take the story out for an age-group test drive at all, or had he relied entirely on his own guy gut instinct? The answer was: neither. “I read stuff out loud to my wife, and sometimes she'd laugh, and other times she wouldn't, but say ‘oh yes, I can see why that would be funny’, and I was also part of an online writing group with two of my friends.

“One of guys was a 67 year-old superior court Los Angeles judge who was working on a mystery novel, and another friend from San Francisco, and we'd send each other ten pages a week and get together on Skype at the weekend. That's how the first draft got written.” Don knew that he was on to something when the judge came to stay for a week and, when he read him ‘The Incident’ that happens in the girls' locker room, tears rolled down his cheeks and he was shaking with laughter. “This man, who had to be very serious all day, making judgements on people's lives, he remembered what it was like to be a teenage boy.”

So you have *Swim the Fly*, very much a boy's book, laced as it is with a hefty dose of testosterone, and children's publishing, by and large, run by women. Had he had any problems or arguments with his editors, and was there anything they didn't get? “There really weren't any fights...it's odd, I wrote the book from a very male perspective and I didn't expect the reaction I've had from women librarians, teachers and girls - who all love it...” Don stops for a moment. “Although there was one scene towards the

end where they wanted the language toned down, or almost all cut out. I said I could do that, but then it's not funny any more. If Coop isn't trying to gross Sean out as much he possibly can, then he's not Coop. The kid is who the kid is. I had to fight, but it all stayed in."

We here in the UK are just being introduced to Matt, Coop and Sean; already out in the States, and coming to a bookshop near you in 2012, is the follow-up, *Beat the Band*, in which Coop takes pole position as the narrator. "I'm working on a third book, which comes out in the States next Fall. I've just finished the first draft of what right now is *Call the Shots*...it's actually a film-making kind of thing, where Coop comes up with the idea that they're going to be millionaires, they're going to make a sort of paranormal activity, cheapo horror film and sell it for millions, and it all goes horribly wrong - as it would!"

Is that it for the three friends, or will there be more? "I don't know..." Don sits back. "I think for now it might be, although you never know. I didn't think I was going to write a sequel to *Swim the Fly*, I thought it was going to be a one-off. But then my wife and I got talking about how we really liked books with the same characters in them, because they felt like old friends."

While there may not be any more stories about Matt and his friends, will there be more books from Don Calame? "I was getting really frustrated as a writer, and these books have been a godsend to me; where I am right now, I feel re-inspired and writing's fun again," he says as we finish. "I'm constantly having ideas, which I jot down and put in a drawer somewhere because the temptation is to work on something new and exciting, and what really I want to do get the book [in hand] finished. I find the ideas I usually end up working on are the ones that stick in my head, and I rarely go back to the idea drawer."