

June 2010 - JONNY ZUCKER / Just Imagine

Jonny Zucker is a children's author, born and bred in north London. He went to Manchester University to study Politics and Philosophy ("and more stuff like that"), then went on to Lancashire Polytechnic - now the University of Central Lancashire - to do a course in radio production. This was a career path he decided not to follow, and instead he came back to London where he started teaching; along the way he also qualified as a football coach and did some stand-up comedy. His latest children's novel, *Striker Boy*, is published by Frances Lincoln.

What was happening in London when you came back and began teaching?

I started teaching in the early 90s, the National Curriculum had just been introduced [in 1988], there was a very strong Conservative government and it was an interesting time - schools were falling apart and things were really, really bad. I was teaching Primary...as a man you were normally given the older children and the football team, which is *exactly* what happened to me. Unfortunately in primary education you also have to be a master or mistress of all trades, [which I wasn't]...my favourite things were music, PE and writing, so that's what I mainly did with my children. I'm sure their science suffered.

Would it be true to say that sport is something which runs through your entire life?

Thing is, my dream job would have been to be a professional footballer, but (a) I was nowhere near good enough and (b) one in a million kids makes it, so I suppose I do put some of that yearning into my writing. I often write about boys who discover something about their football skills or get a lucky break and in a way it's my wish-fulfilment.

So when did you make the leap out of teaching and into writing?

With writing you've got to have a modicum of talent, but you've also got to be very pushy and you've got to hustle and have some lucky breaks. I had a couple of those when I was teaching - articles in the Times Educational Supplement - and a small educational publisher, Badger Publishing in Stevenage, saw them and got in touch. I started teaching four days a week, then three, and I had a very supportive Head Teacher at West Acton Primary in Ealing...she said if I wanted to do write I should have a go. I loved it at the school, but if you want to write you can't do it one or two days a week or you'll never get anything finished. I left teaching in the summer of 2002.

What was your first book as a full-time writer?

It was a picture book series about festivals for Frances Lincoln, and then I did a book for Scholastic called *Mystical Magic*, part of the *Knowledge* series, which I wrote with a friend, another teacher who wanted to be a writer as well.

At what point were you able to say that you'd made the right choice in what you were doing?

When a publisher is confident enough in you to give you a series, that has a very profound effect. Quite close together I did a four-book series about a stunt girl called Venus Springs for Piccadilly and the six-book *Max Flash* series for Stripes; once someone said they trusted me to build a character into a series I knew that this was my job...it became real. Real but tough, because if you're not A-list you still have to hustle.

How would you describe yourself as a writer?

I'm always searching for who exactly I am - not in a desperate way, just that I'm interested. I think my favourite kind of writing is probably humour for any ages between 7 to 9, 9 to 11 year olds. It just so happens that *Striker Boy* and the books about Venus are quite serious, but it opens lots of doors

in your mind to try out different things, and variety is the best thing about this job - one day you could be writing a comedy for five year olds, the next day a thriller for eleven year olds, its flexible.

I suppose I've always loved stories and, for me, above everything has to be the narrative...what's so remarkable in quite a lot of TV programmes and books is that the narrative is not clear, and that to me is absolute madness. You can't just have loads and loads of stylish explosions, you have to have a satisfying story that takes you from A to Z, hopefully with a moral that isn't rammed down your throat...it's got to be a *story*. I like telling a story, starting off with a child in an adverse situation and seeing how they cope with it.

How do you feel about the trend nowadays for reality TV shows and computer games that have no distinct storyline?

I think one of the things I try to do, particularly with boys who are reluctant to read and write, is try to explain to them that when you're playing a computer game there is some sort of narrative thing going on as well, but some games are just about killing everyone.

Do you think there's a problem with boys and reading?

I think sometimes it's over-stated and people in the press get hysterical. Boys do seem to learn slower than girls at first, but ultimately most boys do to learn to read; the problem comes with those boys who get so turned off reading at the age of nine or ten that they will leave school unable to read or write. And many more boys do leave school without those skills than girls. It is a question of somehow finding what they'd like to read and giving it to them.

Focussing in the new book, *Striker Boy*, what's the story behind the story?

There are two things, the first is that there have been quite a few books over the years that have taken a child and put them into an adult context, the most famous of which is probably Anthony Horowitz's *Alex Rider*. I absolutely *loved* those books about a teenage spy, so there was a kernel of an idea there - could I use that kind of mechanism and make it about a boy who becomes a footballer. And second there was the wish-fulfilment element because I used to *dream* about playing for Arsenal and England - not just daydream, actually dream and then wake up and find it was all nonsense. So I thought, wouldn't it be great to write a book about a 13 year old boy who actually *does* get to play in the Premier League, gets to experience everything the players experience, but knows he has to keep his age a secret. It's the child-in-an-adult-world scenario married to the football dream factory.

Did you take the idea to Frances Lincoln, or did they come looking for you?

I'd worked with them before and shown them the idea a while back and they'd said to keep it for them. I did and they all read it - not just my editor, Emily Sharratt but the Editorial Director, Maurice Lyon, and the Sales and Marketing people, and they all loved it and got behind it.

***Striker Boy* seems to be as much a thriller and a crime novel as it is a sports novel - do you have a favourite in that genre?**

I love John Grisham and Harlan Coben, that type of writer, and I really like the kind of book that starts with something going wrong - there's a murder and you begin to unpick all the evidence. I know they're often formulaic, and can be hackneyed, but I used the classic thriller plotline as my subplot because I wanted the hero, Nat, to be involved in something other than just football - I suppose it's a bit self-indulgent as I love thrillers and I love football, but why not?

Even though I'm not really into football, reading the book, I could tell you were excited as you wrote about the games and that the matches were incredibly realistic - were they based on games you'd been to?

When you're writing an exciting scene you do get carried away and I know I was typing faster; what I was trying to do was to really put the gameplay in a realistic place, based on games I'd played myself and professional games I'd watched and been to see, and I hope that came across. My Mum said she enjoyed the book, but there was too much football in it...

I know you're a Gunners fan, so is Hatton Rangers (the 'hero' team in the book) a loosely-disguised Arsenal?

Not really. I was originally going to put the team in London, around Kentish Town, but that's far too near all the London clubs, so a friend who's a mad football fan and works in sports commentating said why didn't I put my team out near Heathrow Airport because there's no club based there. There's a place in the area called Hatton Cross, so that's where Hatton Rangers comes from...but the trade off is that as it's not a real club I don't mention any real, contemporary players, so you do lose a teeny bit of authenticity.

Did you get to go behind the scenes at an actual club?

Making everything as plausible as possible was a lot of fun. I did a Premier League Reading Stars event at Tottenham [Hotspur] and got to go through the tunnel and up onto the pitch, and that was an astonishing feeling, and it was amazing to get that insight. When you write a book like this you do have to ask yourself the question 'Could this really happen?' and if it can, fine; but if it can't, the question then is: can you stretch people's credulity, get them to suspend their disbelief and go with you? I think with *Striker Boy* it could really happen, if you had a fantastic teenager who was brilliant and looked older...you do have to stretch the boundaries, though.

Stretching boundaries is what plotting is all about, and you do have a very neatly-worked one in this book.

Thanks for saying that, because the truth is I would describe myself as being almost plot-phobic. I find it very difficult...I really enjoy the actual writing, but plotting is something else and my brain doesn't work like that. I have to sit down and put all the scenes on postcards and move them round till they fit together and the plot is as watertight as possible. I'm very linear, I can't be doing with stories told from multiple viewpoints and with timeshifts; I have to see how the whole thing works or I end up going down so many dead ends it becomes very frustrating.

Do you go straight to the computer with an idea?

Used to, but now everything goes on bits of paper and postcards, which are more often than not laid out on the floor; there's hundreds of them and my family goes mad. In *Striker Boy* there are eighty chapters, some with a couple of scenes in them, and so there were well over 100 scenes that I had to organise, otherwise I can't do it. It's a weakness.

I also like a dramatic timeline and the books I write tend to take place over a short period of time, a couple of weeks, a month or two maybe. No huge sagas, and very influenced by *24*, a seminal programme in my view, and things like that.

My research leads me to believe you've written some adult titles - what might they be?

I've done some adult 'humour' titles with Ivor Baddiel [comedian David Baddiel's brother], a very old friend of mine who I've known since we were kids. He mainly writes for TV and we did a book called *Not the Highway Code* for Orion, as a mickey-take on the biggest-selling book in the UK. A totally different type of writing, if you're used to writing for kids, because

there are no constraints...you can use more complicated language and swear!

And where exactly does the stand-up comedy strand fit in?

There's been a mini stand-up comedy part of my life in that the BBC ran a new comedy competition...I'd been to see loads of stand-up in my 20s and I thought it'd great to have a go. I filmed five minutes of me doing material and by some miracle I got into the London regional finals of the competition. The rules were that you couldn't have had a paid gig before or been on TV and I turned up to find that out of the eight finalists, I'd seen four in clubs or on TV; it really was an uneven playing field. But I did OK, and after that I went on to do between 70 and 100 gigs and in the end was getting twenty minutes sets, but by then I had kids and you can't be going to Balham on a Monday night at 11 o'clock for £20.

The first time I saw you, you were on stage at a World Book Day evening event at Alexander Park School and it was obvious you loved performing...

I do, but [I feel a bit like] my musical hero Paul Weller...he always says that in the hour before he goes on stage he'd rather be anywhere else and he can't stand it he's so nervous, but the minute he starts playing he gets into it. Not that I'm Paul Weller, obviously, but I love bouncing off people, going off at a tangent, like Bill Bailey, and I think it's important when you're performing to use lots of different things...with kids I use magic and music.

Have all these different strands of our life been brought together in your writing - do you draw on all of them?

I think so...the teaching has been very useful, especially when I go into schools - and if you can do stand-up you can pretty much do anything.

Is there a future for you and Nat *Striker Boy* Dixon?

It's a two-book deal, so I am definitely writing the sequel, which will probably take place in Spain, to give it a more exotic location; it's set about a month after the end of the last book - where Nat has just helped save Hatton Rangers from relegation - and they get invited to Spain for a tournament. There'll be a thriller element to it as well.

What else is in on the cards for you right now?

I'm doing a series called *Monster Swap* for Hodder, and I'm doing a book about a boy who wants to be a Formula 1 driver for Scholastic - I spent a whole day at a karting track in Hampshire and I'm having to do lots of research for that one.

Is there a book that you really want to write that you haven't got round to yet?

There are areas I haven't written for yet - the 11-13+ age group, for which I've got a couple of ideas - and I've always wanted to write an adult novel...but when you've got work that's been commissioned, that's what you have to do!