

Mar 2015 / PHIL EARLE - Just Imagine

Still wearing two hats - by day Sales and Marketing Director of David Fickling Books, by night, and whatever time he can grab, author - Phil Earle has a new book out. Here he talks about how he came to write *Demolition Dad*...

Your first book took place in the very gritty, realistic setting of a children's home - as far a cry as possible from the streets of Seacross...what led you there?

A few things...the kids growing up - I wrote *Being Billy* when Albie was two and Elsie had just been born and I started writing it because my brain was turning to flab. We'd been watching fifteen episodes of *24* a night and going to bed.

It wasn't even in my thoughts about the kids reading what I'd written, but now Albie is nine and we do read *every* night and get through a lot of books together; we read *Danny the Champion of the World* about a year ago...I read that book when I was a kid - oh, actually, that's not true, someone read it to me, I didn't read - and I remember liking it. But it's never the book that people talk about when they talk about Dahl, they talk about *Charlie* or *The Twits* or *The BFG*.

Both of us were just *really* taken with it, and I was colossally moved by it; I think because I'm a dad now, and it's the way he paints that relationship between father and son. Often, when you read to the kids at night - this is awful - but all you want to do is get them in bed and go downstairs and set the drip of Sauvignon Blanc in your arm, but [reading that book] was the happiest I've been, putting Albie to bed, for months.

At that point I was four YA books in, struggling to get any commercial momentum going - even struggling, really, to get any critical acclaim, although I'd got a lot of shortlistings - and I wanted to do something different. [It's not the same] if you have big success straight out of the trap - *Skellig*, *Martyn Pig* -

it's so difficult if your first book doesn't go interstellar, it's *really* hard if your second doesn't; if your third doesn't you're knackered and if your fourth doesn't things are getting serious.

I was starting to worry, because I want to write, I *love* it, and the prospect of not getting published bothered me, and so I thought well, maybe people think that all they'd get from me ever is gritty stuff - not a lot of laughs, quite intense. I actually wanted to shake it up, so there was a sense of me saying "I can do *more* than I've already shown you". And that was coupled with the idea that I would love to write something like *Danny*, I would love to capture that father/son relationship in some way. Those were the two things.

The other thing was what turned me on to telling stories of any kind, which was John Godber's plays for the Hull Truck Theatre...he was writing plays about bouncers and about teachers and about hairdressers and about rugby players...Hull was really cut off, culturally, and, growing up as a 13 year-old, the only culture I ever saw was when I went to one of John Godber's plays. I completely fell in love with the rhythm, the speed, the fact that he had four people on stage for an hour and a half playing 25 different characters. The dialogue was *bang-bang-bang-bang* [snaps fingers] and it really influenced me, in terms of this lovely idea that there's drama in the everyday.

At school events I talk to the kids about being surrounded by stories, that when they walk down their street [they should] look at every front door, because I can guarantee them that behind every single front door there's at *least* one story waiting for them to re-tell. And I suddenly thought "That's it!", and that's where Storey Street came from. It's this idea that I want to write a series - no, not a series, because it sound like I'm Daisy Meadows and I'm not, and it's not *Rainbow Magic*.

I love the idea of being able to write standalone novels and that any kid can come in and read any book at any time. There's a little bit of Jimmy McGovern in there as well - he did *The Street*, that series of one-hour dramas about people who lived on the same street. So here, the first book is Jake's story, Jake and his dad, and the second is Mouse's, Jake's best mate, and the book

after that Masher Milner gets his own story. Nick Hornby does it a lot, and George Pelecanos, they reference characters and you don't think about them until you read the next book, and you think, oh, there were that other book.

I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, because I'm not a dour person in real life. *The Bubble Wrap Boy* had been a nice segue into it, because that was lighter in tone and I'd wanted to write something a bit more humorous there - looking back, it's interesting because I can't believe I wrote four such *miserable* books...

Which were *Being Billy*...

...*Saving Daisy*, *Heroic* and then *The Bubble Wrap Boy*. I'm really proud of all of them, and I'm proud that they're intense books, but it felt really nice to say that I'm going to prove I can do something a bit different.

Did you approach writing *Demolition Dad* in any way differently to your previous books?

No, not at all. There was no planning involved, which is the same as always because I don't plan, but I had to do a synopsis because I had to get a deal...and I only ever write one to get the deal and then never look at it again. The only things that was different with this book was that I don't have my commute any more as I'm working at home and the first four books were written on the X68 bus - and they were, no word of a lie, they genuinely were - and after I got the deal with Orion I realized I had about eight weeks to delivery deadline and I'd only written about 8,000 words, and that had been *really* slow, because I didn't have that 45-minute bus journey every day.

I had to find a way of working differently, and for both of the first two books [of this project] I've written 500 words a day, without fail, seven days a week. What's interesting is that, actually, you end up doing more than 500, you end

up doing at least 750 words...which means that in two months I have a draft. It's been quite revelatory to me, it works. What it does is, it allows you to stay in the zone, it allows you to stay in the story. I sit in a chair, with the telly on in the background; I watch footy, and I found myself watching a lot of *Blackadder* while writing these. It's quite nice having laughter in the background, it's as if you're the one making the audience laugh.

You have TV shows on *while* you're writing?

Oh hell yes! Always. I've got the *shortest* attention span in the world...as in, I'll write fifty words and then I'll have a look at what's going on on Twitter, and then I'll mess about on Facebook. It's deadly, and it drives my wife mad, she hates me for it. I've always been like that, though, I've always needed background noise; if it's quiet I end up being a bit introspective.

I like that buzz around me, it keeps me focused. But I can't listen to the radio when I write, I can't have a DJ in my ear - I don't know what the difference is between a DJ and someone in a comedy show, it's ridiculous. It's just my stupid head.

Did you 'road test' the story at all - with your own kids, or in schools?

I did...Albie was a big part of the road-testing - do you remember Michael Hoeye, who wrote *Time Stops for No Mouse*?

Yes, of course...

I heard him saying, when that book came out, that he wrote a chapter a night for one of his kids, I think; I would have loved to have done that but I can't work that quick, so I would bank up five or six chapters and then read them to

Albie at bedtime, so he was very much my guinea pig. I wanted to see if I could hold him in the same way *Danny* had.

I also [thought about] all those influential middle-grade writers who I've read and loved over the years...I *desperately* wanted to capture a bit of what Morris Gleitzman does so well, that heart, and I also wanted that narrator's voice, I really love the way Snicket is just a 'psst!' in your ear.

Was your dad your childhood hero?

Yeah...he was a really big part of this for me...my dad's amazing, awesome, and I've always put him on a pedestal, probably a dangerously high one, and the book is dedicated to him. I wanted to write something humorous, but I *purposely* wanted to write a book about depression, as well, and it *is* about depression, in a way.

Some people, in the wrong quarters, disrespect Jacky Wilson saying "Oh goodness, here comes *another* handling of an 'issue'", and I have a real problem with this - *all* books are issue books, every book ever written is an issue book, and the most commercial book in the world at the moment, *Fault in our Stars*, is an issue book. It's about death, for goodness sake. It's wonderfully done, but it's *still* an issue book.

I'd had my problems with depression and anxiety throughout my twenties, and my dad was amazing...he's a very emotional man, in some ways but not in others; he's not the sort of bloke who'd say "I love you", but when I was ill he *really* did step up - my mum did as well, and the second book centres on Mouse and his mum. These two books are complete love letters to my parents, and it sounds soppy, but the greatest gift it feels like I can give them is to say "I totally and utterly wrote this book because of you, and what you are". I wrote them for Albie, and I wrote them for my mum and dad. It's like a love letter in two directions, really. Does that sound soppy?

Well, yes, it does, Phil...but in all the right ways. And you have to say these things, or people will never know how you feel.

I wanted to approach any 'issue' in a soft way, but foremost what I wanted to do was tell a funny story. What I love about Gleitzman and Louis Sachar is that they'll make you laugh, but they'll break your heart on the same page, and that's been the nice thing, so far, about the feedback I've had, the early reviews have picked up on the mix of heart and humour. Some publishers turned the books down because they said boys didn't want that...they thought they just wanted hi-octane, balls-out, big adrenaline rush. And I disagree, I think boys have got masses of emotional intelligence, you [just have to] find a way in and make them laugh, and at the same time get them to empathize.

Is your childhood here in these stories?

Storey Street is totally based on the road I grew up on, which is called Bellfield Drive - Sara Ogilvie has drawn a *beautiful* map at the front of the book. It's an L-shaped road, and at one end were the posh houses, the late 1960s, boxy semi-detached ones, there were probably twelve of them, and the rest of the street were two-up-two-downs terraces. My school was at the end of the road.

I *love* the idea that when you're nine, ten, eleven, you think the street you live on is the world. It's a finite space and everything revolves around it and the people who live there - like the farmer, a 70 year-old guy, typical Yorkshireman, bent over, flat cap, and he always used to carry a sack, and we were *convinced* he had a head in that sack. What better thing is there than to have a street with all these people to tell stories about?

And was there a house that was stolen?

[Laughs] No! When I was in my third year at University I lived on Grafton Street - the street in Hull made famous by the band The Housemartins. One *very* late night, I'd been out all night with two friends who ended up a *lot* drunker than me, and we were walking home down Grafton Street, which was terraced all the way along, apart from where there was a gap between two houses, and all that was there was a really old mattress. My two friends just stood there and one of them went "That house has been stolen!", and it's *never* left me. The third book is called *The House that was Stolen*.

Did you have a Masher-type bully at your school, and if there was one, did he ever target you?

Yeah, we did, I was quite lucky, though; my older brother came a cropper of the school bully in his last year of Junior School and it had quite a profound effect on him, actually. I remember at the time it really troubling him...yeah, there's always a Masher, who was also part-based on 'Gripper' Stebson from Grange Hill. And I want to give Masher a backstory, at some point I want to give the reader the reasons why Masher is like he is.

The central pivot to *Demolition Dad* is wrestling - were you a big fan...are you *still* a big wrestling fan?

I *loved*, it, Graham, I don't watch it now - I would if I had a chance - but I spent my formative years watching wrestling, and at first it was British wrestling. I've done a few warm-ups at schools and I put up pictures of Hulk Hogan and The Ultimate Warrior and they love it; then I tell that when I was their age, before I discovered American wrestling, wrestlers didn't look like that, and I put up pictures of Giant Haystacks and Big Daddy - who was 30 stone and old and his real name was Shirley Crabtree - and it brings the house down.

I just loved the theatricality, that sheer over-the-topness - I knew it was fixed, I didn't care, because it was a world bigger than mine, the perfect

escape - and my dad used to come in and tell me to turn the TV off because I was wasting my life. But I'm a big believer that you write about the things that informed you and made you smile...*Karate Kid*, *Rocky* and wrestling, they were my reference points, I'm a popular culture person, I wasn't a reader as a kid.

So the town of Seacross is Hull?

Yes. It's that idea of the town at the end of the road. Because Hull has always been seen an isolated part of the UK; it's one of our biggest cities, but there's no reason to go there. As I say about Seacross, you drive through Hull and you drive into the sea. But I love that, because it adds to that sense of the underdog, and I love writing about underdogs...I'm a bit obsessed with that story arc - what of any interest could possibly happen in a little tin-pot town like Seacross?

I've always thought that every kid having a mobile phone puts the brakes on storytelling freedoms, and I know a lot of writers view it as a negative thing: new tech does not help storytelling. But I felt somehow you had managed to use it to your advantage and weren't worried by it; it was an integral part of the story.

It wasn't as conscious thing...it's interesting, I think writers like Anthony Horowitz, who is a very astute and clever writer, knows his readers want that tech, that detail, but there was never anything as clever from me like that, I used it simply as a plot device. But I do worry about the tech, because these things do date incredibly quickly, and books that are meant to be totally up-to-date, three years down the line they're really antiquated.

Peter Ustinov said that comedy is simply a funny way of being serious - how do you see it, and was it harder to write than what you'd done before?

Hand on heart, I've *never* had so much fun writing as I have with these books...I came to writing quite late, didn't start out until my mid-twenties, and I'd struggled with the idea of classing calling myself as a writer, because I look at David Almond and Patrick Ness and Tony McGowan and I think "No, *you're* writers, *I'm* just trying to tell a story". They're craftsmen, all of them, I think.

I genuinely had so much fun and it honestly makes me wonder how I managed to write those other four books...I must have been in a different head space and not known it. They flowed incredibly well, and I knew that if I was tickling *myself* while I was writing it, then, hopefully, it would make at least one other person laugh - you don't want to *think* you can make other people laugh, that's dangerous, I think it's got to be quite natural. I'm quite an instinctive writer, I don't plan, I don't plot, I don't do anything except sit here and write, and I surprised myself that I was making myself chuckle as I did it.

But I think, Graham, it comes back to formative years. I wore out VHS tapes of *Blackadder* and *Only Fools and Horses*, and *Happy Days* and *Cheers* - I can watch *Cheers* now and it still makes me laugh - and I learnt a lot from those programmes, just through osmosis, I think. All those things I've surrounded myself with over the years are in the background. And that Peter Ustinov quote is a great one, because I *was* writing about something quite serious, but it doesn't feel serious because you're having a right laugh while you're doing it.

This book has illustrations - what was it like to see how someone else saw your world and the characters that were in it?

Yeah, that is a very interesting one...my editor and I had a conversation about Sara Olgivie, who illustrated *Dogs don't do Ballet*, and had done a lot of picture books, and we made a really conscious decision that we weren't going to send her briefs - we weren't going to say "OK, illustrate this, this, and this", we wanted her to be more of a collaborator, really. The only one thing I said was that Mouse is black, because when he appeared in my head, that's what he

was; but apart from that there were no stage directions - use the text for what it is, because I do much describing, and illustrate what you want. Sara's an incredible talent and I feel desperately lucky - she's one of those rare artists who can straddle the Greenaway list, but also sell, and that's difficult to do.

How have the warm-up school events for the book been?

The joy I've had! Instead of 150 Year 9s you've got to stop from rioting - you can't slow down, because if you slow down you'll lose them and they'll start killing each other - all of a sudden you've got 150 eight year-olds who you have to go quickly for, but for very different reasons. There's a lot more interaction ...actually, I love school events more than I like writing, I mean I like writing, I really do, but I *love* doing school events, and the more I can do the better.

Have you stopped writing YA books?

One of the reasons for not continuing with them is that I haven't had an idea that I felt strongly enough about writing. I'm a big believer - and I say this to kids in schools, so I think I've got to live by it - that you've got to write the book you're *burning* to write, and I haven't had as many ideas on the YA front I was desperate to tell.

Interestingly, I've got an idea which was a gift from my father-in-law, who told me a story about his dad in the Second World War. It will be *completely* different from anything else I've written, but it's very much on the back burner; it's in my head, I know what the story is, and it'll be more YA...there won't be a lot of laughs in that one, I don't think [laughs].

I'm having such a good time, and I want to have a long career, but you have to [be aware] sometimes about the commercial realities; bookshops and librarians, they can have quite short memories, quiet short attentions spans, and as I said earlier, if your first, second or third book doesn't cut through, there's not the time to build a career any more. So I do feel a pressure to try

and find something that will break through, commercially, but I've got to balance that by making sure I'm writing it for the right reasons.

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