**March – 2014 - MUCHAMORE / Books for Keeps**

Recently, ten years, pretty much to the day, after the publication of *The Recruit*, the first title in the *Cherub* sequence, a brand new Robert Muchamore series hit the shelves of bookshops around the country.The new book has none of Robert’s previous trademarks: there are no terrorists, no spies, no skulduggery and not a whisper of the war-time heroism in the *Cherub* prequel series *Henderson’s Boys*. The conflict is more personal, the battlefields are stages, the weapons musical instruments and the troops young musicians taking part in a reality TV show. Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to *Rock War*.

 The idea for the series – there will be four books in total - came to Robert some five years ago. He’d noticed that many of the fans coming to get their books signed at his events were wearing music-related T-shirts featuring the logos of bands, like AC/DC and the Ramones, which were more of their parents’ generation than their own. “And also, I have this really lively internet fan forum, the *Cherub Forum*, and I’d look on there and there’d be a lot of kids taking about my books, the characters in the books and what the next book was going to be about – but, when something like *X-Factor* was on, and the other talent shows, there’d far *more* kids talking about that,” he says. “I realised that a lot of my fans were really quite into this stuff and thought it was cool, but it was also quite divisive as there were a lot of kids who thought those shows were really *un*cool and totally slagged them off. And that got me into the idea that even if they didn’t like the shows they were still quite interested in them, so it really was the interaction with my fans that made me think maybe it’d be fun to do a series about kids in rock bands.”

 So far, so good, but nothing is ever that simple. Robert liked the idea for *Rock War* so much that he found the time, in between his commitments to *Cherub* and *Henderson’s Boys* titles, to write the complete first book of his new idea. But that is as far as it got. “I basically had to wait four years until I’d finished the seven books in the *Henderson’s Boys* series, before starting to publish *Rock War*.”

 Four years after first writing the book Robert got it back out and breathed a huge sigh of relief. “When I re-read it I was pleased with it and I laughed at the jokes…[the gap] did give me a fresh perspective. I think that’s really helped make it a strong book.” The next job was to do a re-draft and give the manuscript a little polish and make everything as up-to-date and contemporary as possible and get it out to the readers.

 One of the reasons for the success of *Cherub* is that it has what Robert refers to as ‘The Attainable Fantasy Element’. “What I mean by that is with books like *Harry Potter*, which have dragons and spells and wizards, by the time kids get to nine or ten years of age, they know that that stuff isn’t for real, they know it's all fantasy,” he explains. “Whereas, with the *Cherub* books I try and make everything as *real* as it can possibly be – I actually want everyone who reads a *Cherub* book to think ‘Maybe CHERUB *could* be a real organisation - maybe if *my* parents got run over by a bus next week, *I* could be recruited and become a CHERUB agent.’”

 So, will the fans be happy? I think so. With *Rock War* Robert has served up a loud, energetic slice of contemporary urban life; it may have been misused and overused, but the word ‘gritty’ is appropriate here as there’s a reality, a documentary angle to this story of kids from different backgrounds and social strata. But this is far from an ‘issue’ book – though issues, such as children who are carers, are core to the plot – as it is much more one that you find yourself having to listen to, a story with a soundtrack.

 And this is no easy trick. The written word and Rock’n’Roll music, be it on vinyl, tape, CD or a digital download, have never been the most natural of bedfellows. Why read about a screaming guitar solo or killer bass line when surely it has to be better to listen to it? But *Rock War* has it’s own Attainable Fantasy Element. Readers will be able to see themselves as Jay or Summer or Dylan, the three lead characters in the book, andwill no doubt be playing air guitar in their heads as they turn the pages.

 This project is no cookie-cutter project; a lot of thought has gone into the cracking plot and a cast of very believable characters, and Robert has not played at all safe. How does he feel about his latest creation? Is he nervously standing in the wings, waiting to see what happens when the spotlights hits the stage, the band cranks up the volume and the kids begin to play? “Yeah, there’s always a level of angst,” he says, displaying no sign of any level of angst at all. “Especially when you’re starting a new book or series…I like *Rock War*, I’m very proud of it, but there’s always the worry about what if the audience doesn’t get it, what it they don’t want to read it and what if it’s a disaster? But I think that’s just part of being a writer and I guess the risk is also part of what makes it an interesting job.”