

2005/MAY - ANDY McNAB & ROBERT RIGBY - Publishing News

Andy McNab initially found a shadowy kind of fame, and no little fortune, with *Bravo Two Zero*, his visceral tale of SAS derring-do behind enemy lines during the Gulf War. About four years ago he found the co-writer of his first children's novel, *Boy Soldier*, in entirely different circumstances.

"I was at Elstree working on [scripts for] the *Thomas the Tank Engine* TV programme," explains Robert Rigby, "Andy was in the next studio, we met in the canteen and just got on." McNab was there doing motion capture for the video game company Rage for an urban shoot 'em up, one of the many strands to a career which, apart from being the bestselling author of seven novels, includes a security business and film consultancy. So why add children's writer to the list? "Because Philippa [Dickinson, MD of Random House Children's Books] had been on my case for *years*, since the mid 90s, to do it, and it was always one of those things where the timing was never right, plus I had no idea how children's books worked."

Everything began to click into place when McNab, researching locations for the novel *Deep Black*, ended up in King's Lynn, where Rigby lives, looking for somewhere it'd be possible to land a helicopter. "I started telling Robert about being asked to write for kids, we decided to give it a go and I mentioned it to Mark [Lucas] my agent; then Philippa [Milnes-Smith, children's agent at LAW] got hold of it and off we went."

Rigby's career path has arced through journalism, songwriting, being a session musician, writing for radio, TV - his credits include scripts and two standalone novels for the BBC drama series *Byker Grove* - as well as directing, acting and writing youth theatre. How did these two strong, quite disparate characters get on when it came to writing together? McNab, very much the commander of his own destiny, smiles and says it was easy; Rigby thinks for a moment and considers. "We were a little bit anxious to see how we would *actually* do it," he admits. "We don't sit down at the computer together and write, we plot in great, great detail, scene by scene. And before we started writing the book we each wrote the beginning separately and then compared what we'd done. It was amazingly close."

They then broke the book up, went away and wrote, swapping what they'd done, rewriting and changing as they went until they'd got the finished manuscript. It's a system, says McNab, that has worked very well. "My adult books are all in the first person, and everything has to go through the character. I was brought up on TV, I never read books as a kid and I just think of this as television. All of a sudden you can bounce off to the other side of the world, with the bad guys doing stuff, so you can bring much more tension in, as opposed to the way I have to do it in the first person."

Did McNab think this new method of working would affect the way he wrote his adult books? "It's already has...in *Deep Black* there's a lot more bouncing from location to location without too much explanation, and in the new book there's a lot more physical country to country movement and I've discovered you can leave much of the storytelling out because it's already explained."

Boy Soldier is Book One in a planned quartet that will publish over the next two years. The opening story introduces us to Fergus, an SAS explosives expert, a hero who then betrayed his regiment and his comrades for drug money and is now thought by some to have died a traitor in a Columbian jail. Except he hasn't, and the army wants a word with him. And the only chance his 17 year-old grandson Danny has of getting an army bursary, going to university and then on to Sandhurst, is if he helps them find his grandfather. The trouble is, someone's watching every move he makes.

"I learnt an incredible amount during the writing of this book," says Rigby. "I was in the Boys' Brigade and Sea Cadets, which didn't help much when it came to understanding the difference between a gun and a pistol...there's apparently no such thing as a gun." Terminology apart, this book has at its heart a strong, action-packed storyline and one that has echoes of McNab's own past - he joined up as a boy soldier himself at the age of 16. "One of the things we're both interested in is writing stories boys want to read, as neither of us did as kids," continues Rigby. "I know teachers struggle to find the right kind of books for boys, books that will interest them, and hopefully we've done that."

When McNab joined the Army he had, he says, the reading age of an 11 year-old. “At that time, 40% of the infantry intake had the same reading age, and that’s because the army in general is the last refuge for a lot of people and infantry is the last refuge of that last refuge. Now it’s got worse, and 70% of the intake has an average reading age of 11. The army knows they have a problem and education corps are going to use *Boy Soldier* to help get them reading, like they got me reading.”

There is an easy rapport between these two men, and a quite surprising generosity of spirit, when you consider one, though very much shunning the limelight, is used to getting the top billing wherever he goes. But this does seem to be a partnership based fairly equally on friendship and professionalism. Had they enjoyed themselves? “It’s been great,” say Rigby, McNab nodding in agreement. “We do have a good time going it, because we both love the ‘what’s the worst thing that can happen next?’ method of working and love to put our characters through it.”