

Oct 2015 - SONYA HARTNETT / Just Imagine

Back in 2001, you told me you wanted to write the great novel, but that you didn't think you ever would. I wondered, over the intervening years, how you felt you'd done in that respect?

Oh...badly. I've written some all right novels, but I haven't written a great novel. I think, even back in 2001, I knew that I wasn't ever going to. I've always considered myself to be just a journeyman writer. I have always tried my very best, but I'm not a great writer.

Some may beg to differ there...do you still write to entertain yourself at the age you are?

Oh I think you have to. You can't sit down and write a novel and spend the whole time not enjoying yourself in one way or another. I've always had to write to please myself [and] I have been the first critic; if it hasn't entertained me, then it hasn't gone into the book. I've always written on subjects that have interested me and written them in a style that pleases me, and then just hoped like hell that it's pleased somebody else as well.

Children of the King is much more of a straightforward children's book, it seemed to me anyway, and not so much a broad-spectrum novel as, say, *What the Birds See*. Was this just the way the story happened or was it a definite choice on your part to write it like that?

I think every book has its own demands and its own style that it needs to be written in, its own approach. I guess that was just the way it came to me, although it surprised me a little bit in that I think it became a more complicated book than I expected it to. I knew that it would be vaguely about

various forms of power, but, then again, what in the world is not about various forms of power in its way.

I was surprised how well the story of the princes tied with the modern day... well, the 1940s. I thought that it would give me more trouble than it did, but in fact, it went together quite smoothly. It was, nonetheless, a straightforward story, a nice clean sort of story I always felt and a pleasure to write in that regard. [When] they get a bit overly-complicated, like a book like *Surrender*, they can be a bit troublesome.

This isn't the first historical novel you've written - your UK debut, *Thursday's Child*, was set just after the First World War - so, what attracted you to the early years of World War II?

I think I like war settings because it's the same with the Great Depression in *Thursday's Child*: It puts people under stress. For the same reasons that I used the Depression, I used the war because it's a time in history where the everyday rules don't always apply and people find themselves in situations where they normally are not.

When you've got your characters under pressure you can do all sorts of things with them and they can behave in all sorts of strange ways that the circumstances they're living through can explain. I just think that war makes for an interesting backdrop. People are different when the rules are different.

We move very quickly from London at the start of the Blitz in the beginning of the book to somewhere else. Cecily, who I thought of as being the book's eyes and ears, doesn't appear to be at all sure where in England they are. She never places us, specifically. Are Heron Hall and Snow Castle real places, based on real places or pure imagination?

No, they're only imaginary. The whole thing is set in Yorkshire, where I've never been, but something like that is relatively easy to come up with...all I did was buy a few books from secondhand bookshops about the English countryside. I've written about England before. I've done a lot of research over the years about weather and wildflowers and trees and all sort of things like that, your landscape and your animals.

It wasn't a very hard stretch, but in terms of the places themselves, Heron Hall is vaguely...I used the plan of a house, whose name I can't even remember now, but it was a real house. Actually, it was in Yorkshire. The Snow Castle is just the ruins of one's imagination really, anything that I wanted it to look like and, indeed, anything the reader wants it to look like, is what it looks like.

May Bright and Cecily Lockwood, again from my reading of the book, are polar opposites to the point where it was sometimes hard not to actively *dislike* Cecily. She is, though, just a simple girl, I suppose, and not really a bad one. May is clever, but not especially good. How much of you, if anything at all, is in these two characters?

I think that you never write children's characters without somehow drawing upon yourself, at least / haven't. I'm more like May, I think, than I am like Cecily. I was never an outgoing, confident child, the way she is, although her feelings of being repeatedly wrong about things was certainly the way I felt...well, I still do feel in many ways.

May, I guess, was more of a kid that I would have been, although if I had been in May's situation of being an evacuated child, I would have found it incredibly traumatic. I just can't imagine that I would have been able to deal with it. Like all kids, you do what you have to do, but I would have found it a *really* traumatic experience, whereas May is quite stoic about it.

I found myself rapidly growing to like Cecily and not feeling very close to May. I'm surprised that she's been the most successful of the characters. Whereas I think Cecily is the most well-drawn of them and the character that

shows the most amount of change. Also, as a character, she was great to write because she really carried the book for me, and you can't do anything but help like characters that carry a book for you.

I found May to be something of a catalytic character. Her presence makes a real difference. Her willfulness and positivity underlined Cecily's naivety. When I read back a couple of the interviews that we've done in the past I found you'd said that you've created few memorable female characters. I think May is an exception to that, and possibly Cecily as well. Would you agree?

I don't know if they're *memorable* characters because, although it's a book that I'm pleased with; whether it is still around in fifteen or twenty years time will be a matter for us to see. I don't know if it will be. They're not characters that are perhaps going to last through the decades, but I think, for the book, they were successful characters.

They came out much more strongly than I expected them to. They arrived with personalities that I didn't have to do very much work to bring together, and [with] a strong sense of their place within the book and how they were going to interact with each other and with their environment.

There is an element of fantasy. It's not a pervasive part of the book, but it's definitely something that, when you put the book down, you realize how much of the story is fantastical. Was that your intention or was that something which grew out of the writing?

I think that grew out of the writing, although I think the two boys are just the most fantastic element of all. In some ways, I wanted them to be stronger characters, more involved in the story, but they were quite elusive to me.

I found they were the most difficult to write; all of the other characters within this story [were] much easier to bring to life on the page than the princes as ghosts. The ghosts were elusive, but I didn't fight that because I thought, "All right, if it's a weird, light, obscure touch that you want, then that's fine with me as well".

Sometimes it's easier to just go with what the book wants and *not* try to impose your own wants and desires on it too much. If a book is behaving itself, I have learnt from long, hard experience, don't mess with it [laughs]. If the boys wanted to be very elusive, then that was fine with me.

Cecily's brother, Jeremy, is a very interesting character. We have this boy on the cusp of manhood and the frustration you managed to bring out in him is intense.

He, too, was a character that surprised me. Even though the book was quite well planned out from before I started [writing], I didn't really realize how much Jeremy would step up to the plate and the book would become pretty much about him. It's really about Jeremy, the book. It's not about Cecily or May or Richard or anyone. It's about Jeremy. It's about a boy who learns to be both a child and a man. And yet he is a background character in many regards.

Even as I wrote it, I went, "Wow, I'm impressed with you. You're really growing up within these pages". He was a pleasure to write as well. I could really *feel* his feelings, I could feel his frustration with his sister and his desire to be something more than he was being allowed to be.

You've mentioned before about how you remember the sense of powerlessness there is in being a child - that children are the victims of the adults around them, I think is what you said. There's a strong feeling that, in *Children of the King*, both May and Jeremy fight very hard against that. Do you think that the war situation allowed them more freedom to do this?

I think it put children in positions where they *had* to become more than they had perhaps been. I think any intense situation like that demands a child grow up pretty fast, not just war, but anything; domestic violence and all sorts of dreadful situations make children grow up fast.

I think May, through the book, doesn't change and grow as much as Jeremy does. I think she was the sort of child who was born old; she's already lost her father, so she's gone through something horrific already. Throughout the book, she's a character who is grieving and really looking for a place to hide or [for] some kind of comfort, rather than looking for a challenge.

She's already had the challenge, hasn't she? Just being where she is.

Yeah, her whole existence throughout the book is a challenge. I tried to write her as a child who certainly has always been much more challenged than Jeremy or Cecily have ever been. She's an only child, she has working parents, she doesn't come across as being somebody who has had a lot of money, but she's also been brought up to be a thinking child and her parents have given her a wide experience of the world for somebody of her age. She knows about things that Jeremy and Cecily don't know about.

May's parents seem to be of very different to Jeremy and Cecily's...you like them more.

Look, I think when you write a children's book, you write the parents in a very *particular* kind of way. Of course, [Cecily and Jeremy's parents], Heloise and Humphrey are just silhouettes of people because the book isn't really about the adults. The adults in it have to fill a certain role that doesn't take up too much space. They have to fit within a confined space within the book.

You highlight Heloise's nastiness...that Humphrey [is] generous and foolish, that he loves his children, but in the end, they are secondary to him, to his job. But I would say that Heloise is not devoid of any good qualities; I think she's appalled by the war, that she thinks it's stupid and a terrible waste of life, [and] there's a moment when they're in the village when she defends May, even though she doesn't particularly like her. She won't have anyone else say anything bad about May.

You try to give every character at least some kind of realistic edge. No one is ever totally good or totally bad.

I thought that probably the best described player in this piece, and my favorite, is Peregrine. I loved him. I wondered whether there was more of a back story to him as he almost seemed worthy of a book on his own in some respects. I wondered where he came from.

He's just another of my Byronic characters, who appear, on and off, throughout all my books. He had to be a source of wisdom. He had to be a father figure. He also had to be a man of mystery. Yet, the fact that he seems to have a background that you can only catch glimpses of is very deliberately done. People think that he has a limp because it reflects Richard III's limp, but, in fact, he has had polio because I didn't want him to have gone to the First World War.

You construct characters that do have backgrounds, but it's not necessary, and I think it's quite undesirable, to spell them out. It's better that Peregrine, like Richard and like the princes, is quite elusive in his way. A character like that you use with small touches. Otherwise, he loses his glamour.

Yeah, he has glamour, in the old fashioned sense of the word. He's quite magical, isn't he? And you do feel that if you were in his presence you

would always be looking up *at* him, and up *to* him,. Even as an adult I felt that.

Yeah, he's cool. He's pretty cool all right. [laughs]

There's quite a small cast in this book. We have five main characters in a setting reminiscent, apart from the fact it doesn't have a butler, of a classic Agatha Christie. Is there any element of homage here?

Mmmm...no, because that's not the sort of book that I have read to any great extent. It's not a genre that interests me particularly. I've read more than my fair share of people like Evelyn Waugh and [books from] those decades. They're all sunk deep in your bones. They're certainly sunk deep in *my* bones. When you picture English houses, you either picture a loud, Nancy Mitford kind of family or you have the thin, mysterious, slightly cranky, but nonetheless very decent gentleman. I don't know if these people really exist or if they're just, you know, literary creations.

Sometimes they become a trope, don't they? I don't know how close to reality PG Wodehouse was.

I know you have a love of the Gothic, and there is, woven right into the fabric of this story, the very Gothic tale of the princes in the Tower - which Peregrine tells the children almost in the style of a fable rather than history. I wondered what attracted you to the princes and if the past actually inspired the story?

I've always loved the story of the princes in the Tower, right from when I first heard it, back possibly in primary school. What has amazed me is how many people have gone, "Gee, I've never heard of those princes before in my life. I

didn't know that story at all", and I'm like, "God, what kind of education did *you* have?"

Really?

I know, shocking. I've had people say, "That was a very clever story that you made up about the princes". You just go, "What? I wish I had made it up!". It's a story that appealed greatly to my affection for the Gothic, and it has everything. I find it very interesting because I think Richard is an interesting character [and] I have no doubt that he was responsible for the death of the princes, none at all. I think anyone who believes otherwise is just being willfully stupid, to tell you the honest truth.

I like the fact that it's understandable that he did it. I like that idea that what was something quite terrible is nonetheless understandable. It appeals to my sense of...I like anything in the world that is a little bit warped [laughs]. To be able to go, "All right, that was a *terrible* thing to do, but nonetheless I see why you did it", it pleases me.

If things had gone slightly different for Richard, we wouldn't be having this discussion about it at all either. It was *not* an unusual thing to happen back in those days, not at all. If people had liked Richard, I think they would have been able to sweep it under the carpet, but he was in a difficult position right from the start. Unfortunately, it just became more and more difficult.

I feel some sympathy for a man, who I think was, at heart, a good man in a bad situation. He kept making the position worse for himself, but he very rapidly reached a point of going, "Well, what else can I do? There's nothing else I can do, *if* I want to stay alive". I feel his frustration that he wanted to be good, but circumstances kept making him bad.

I sympathize with that. I guess I feel I'm somebody who, more often than I could tell you in my life, feel that I have been misinterpreted - "No, no, no - that's not what I meant!", that kind of thing. I see that in Richard's story.

Did the story of the children come first and you then thought, “Oh, I can use the princes”, or did you have this need to use the princes and had to find a story to put them in?

For many, many years, I’ve wanted to write a story that looks much more closely at Richard’s story, not so much the princes. So I thought, “Right, well, this is it. I’m going to write a book for children about two children who were murdered, and how am I going to go about that?”.

[So] yes, the princes came first. Everybody else came second. I think I also knew that after *The Midnight Zoo* and *Silver Donkey* I wanted to write a third children’s book using the war as a background, just for my sense of completeness.

A trilogy?

Yeah, although they’re only a trilogy in that regard. They’re not a trilogy in any other way.

Do you have any feelings at all, personally, about ghosts?

Look, I’m very much a realist. I believe, and I really take a great deal of pleasure in believing, in the natural world...that what you see is what you get and that life runs on very simple lines; very clean, simple, obvious lines. At the same time, I have to say I saw a ghost once. She was that real that I stood up out of my chair and thought, “Chris didn’t tell me there was somebody else in the house”. When she faded away, I sat and went, “Oh man, that was a *ghost* or something. A *ghost*”. Then she walked out of the same doorway and stared at me again. I thought, “I can’t believe this”. I go, “I *know* what you are”. She just glared at me.

She *exuded* this sense of...she was an old Italian lady, she just *radiated* this sense of anger that I was a single woman in the house of a single man. She was *furios*. I felt my face going red, like you would if someone's old grandmother had berated you to your face. I just felt embarrassed, not frightened, embarrassed. It was so weird.

I do like the idea in general that there is something else, that life has a trick up its sleeve that we don't know about, but I certainly don't believe in God and angels and all that sort of thing.

That's completely different, that's not ghosts. That's not ghosts at all. And, yes, I'm completely with you on that. I've had my own spectral vision, only once, and what you just said made my spine tingle. It is weird when it happens.

I wondered if there was ever a moment for you where the supernatural element could have played a bigger part than it does in the book?

[Pause] The book got as much ghost in it as it needed, I think. In fact, perhaps it's got a little bit too much ghost. I would have liked the boys to seem more likely to be runaway evacuees than they do. I was a bit stymied because they had to speak in a certain way and they had to have a certain relationship with each other, and they had to have a fear of outsiders, that sort of thing. It was hard to describe them as anything except the princes.

I thought that was finessed *really* well. I tend to be somebody who likes to be led by the writer, I don't try and second guess, so I didn't realize what was going on for quite a long time. I think I got it when the kids in the book got it, and it came as a surprise.

I'm glad. I've had other people go, "Oh no, I knew right from the start that they were ghosts". And that's kind of disappointing. I've had a lot of practice

writing characters that try to appear to be something they're not, and it surprised me how much trouble it gave me to disguise [the boys] as comparatively modern-day children. I thought it would be easier. Really, one of the problems was the fact that they had to speak in a certain way, which restricted what I was able to let them say.

People often don't like you to talk about the mechanics behind the book, the bones underneath the writing. To *me*, what I like about writing a book often is how it's as much like solving a puzzle as it is anything else. It's like a jigsaw. I like finding which way every piece has to go. It's interesting to me, but I do know from experience that some other people prefer not to know. I do tend to sometimes - i.e. with *this* interview - talk about the nuts and bolts and not about the actual words on the page [laughs]. In a book that was relatively easy to write and well behaved, the [princes] were probably the most difficult elements to deal with.

The set-up of every book, in a way, is a writer posing a problem and then having to find a solution to it.

Yeah. As I said, I was pleased with this book. As I approached the end, I thought, "*How* am I going to tie these two [elements] together, this whole idea of Jeremy and the princes and power? How am I going to pull these things together?" Looking at what I had planned to do, which is what I did do, I just thought, "I don't know if this is going to work...", but as I wrote it, I thought, "Actually, this is doing the job. This is pulling all the things together". If I may say so myself, as soon as I finished it, I felt that this one was good. It's true and it holds itself together. I didn't need to worry about it.

I knew that it would be well received because it felt like it would. I think you'd have to be pretty mean not to get some sort of enjoyment out of it in one regard or another because it's got a lot in it. It's really got about six major topics that it covers, major issues that run through it. You don't like one, you

can try another one! For a children's book it's complicated...it's a complex book, and that's good too, I think.

At the end, I wondered if you always knew that you were going to tell us a bit about the future of the characters, or whether you got towards the end and just felt you had to do that.

I can't really remember when I made that decision. I think the book just demanded I do that. It's not something I do in my books as a rule. It also was something that people have found not 100% to their liking. [But] I felt that the book wanted it, and my rule is if the book wants it, the book gets it; I don't argue. If I really feel, instinctively, that this is what needs to be written down, then I just write it down.

As the writer, you can have those feelings. What happens then if your editor doesn't agree with you?

Well, I've been working with my editor for many, many, many, many books, since *Black Foxes*. For almost my entire career, I've worked with Alex. We're quite in tune with each other.

It's only because some people haven't liked having the future told that it's even occurred to me to think again about it. I was convinced at the time that it was the right thing to do, and I remain convinced that it was the right thing to do. There are some things in my career that, if I had the chance, I'd go back and write it differently, but that's not one of them. I think my feeling behind it was that I knew I was writing a book about the past for modern-day children and I wanted, in the last pages of the book, to race forward in time to cover decades and decades, to bring the characters into a world that the child reader is inhabiting as they're reading it. You know, that kind of thing. The book wanted to do. It wanted to bring itself right up to date.

I think it's true that the books you read as a kid stay with you far longer and echo in your life to a far greater extent than anything you read as an adult. The 'updating' is the kind of thing that a kid will remember and think about later.

It's why I much prefer to write children's books. I think when you write a good children's novel, you're making much more of a contribution to the world than you are if you write an adult novel. You don't take them through the rest of your life, do you? Not very many of them.

No, you don't.

I've read some fantastic adult novels, but oh man, if you asked me to tell you one recently that I'd read that was great, I'd struggle to think about it. Yet, I could name a dozen children's books that I loved 40 years ago. I know I've said this before, but I think it's the only sort of writing that really matters, when it boils down to it. It certainly matters more.