

2000/Sept ANTHONY HOROWITZ - Publishing News

Pre-publication copies of new children's novels don't usually arrive, complete with sharp graphics and film-style tag lines, in silver cardboard boxes the size of small paving stones. But, it has to be said, neither do most adult novels either, so why all the fuss about a book called *Stormbreaker*? With an eye-catching, lime green cover, it's a spy story, the latest from the pen of Anthony Horowitz, a man who's output is, to put it mildly, quite astonishing.

"Right now I'm in the middle of a seven-part series for the BBC called *Murder in Mind*, and I've just finished the first two hours of a new detective series, hopefully for ITV, as well as a TV film for Granada called *The Criminal Element*," says Horowitz, better known in the children's books milieu as the man behind such bestsellers as *The Falcon's Malteser*, *Groosham Grange* and *The Switch*. "I'm also working on a multi-million dollar musical, based on the Dr Seuss story *The Five Thousand Fingers of Dr T*, which will open next year."

As I said, quite astonishing. Since his first book *Entertaining Frederick K Bower*, was published 20 odd years ago. Horowitz has written for children, he's written for adults, he's tackled comedy, horror, fantasy and mystery, and he was, he tells me, on the look out for something new. "I'd never done spies, and for years I'd wanted to. I've always loved James Bond, as a child and an adult, and I'd always particularly loved the books - the writing. It's interesting that Bond goes from generation to generation, everyone loves him, but it was the connection between Bond and modern children that really interested me - they both have to have all the right things, all the right brands."

The idea for a child Bond had occurred to Horowitz some five years ago, but he'd sat on it out of nervousness. Nervousness that, if he did pursue it, the outcome would be seen as veering towards rip-off more than homage. "It bothered me that there'd already been attempts at doing 'Bond for kids' and they'd been terrible," says Horowitz. "But I thought that if I did it completely seriously - cut out almost all the humour and made myself be

serious - and really figured out what would happen if a 14-year old was trained to be a spy, it would work.”

To make sure it did work Horowitz embarked on three months intensive research, re-reading all the stories and watching the movies; he read up about SAS training, but to know exactly what it was like to be trapped inside a Lefort Shear car crusher in a breaker’s yard he went and stood right inside one. Which was scary. “I realised I could write a book based on the films and inspired by the books - snobbery with a hint of violence - but the biggest challenge was to be completely original and steal nothing. Although I knew I had to have gadgets - none of my readers would forgive me if there were none. Alex, the hero, has a Nintendo 64 that doubles as an X-ray machine, a Yo-yo for climbing and some zit cream that dissolves metal.”

Horowitz always worked very closely with his editor, the late and much-missed Wendy Boase, with whom he discussed all his ideas before starting a new book. “She loved this one,” he recalls, “and I loved writing it. It’s 15,000 words longer than Walker would normally want and I insisted that it looked like an adult book. In fact, for the first time, I rejected cover art and now I have a fantastic cover - without the Walker bear on it - they really stuck their neck out by doing that.”

He loves the cover, he thinks it’s the best book he’s written and he feels it deserves to do better than anything else he’s done. He feels so strongly, he told his publisher that if it didn’t it would be his last book. He’s remarkably relaxed for a man who admits to writing 10-15 hours a day, seven days a week. “I’m very passionate about my children’s books - they’re my first love, they’re where I feel at my most potent - and although, when you begin as a writer, you’re excited your books are on the shelf, when you’ve been writing as long as I have, you get depressed that they’re on the shelf and not in someone’s pocket.”

He is, he says, used to sales of around 15,000 a book, which he readily admits is good by normal standards, but he thinks that’s just a tenth of what he could be getting and that frustrates him. But if the indications Horowitz is talking about, which include mainstream press interest, Waterstone’s doing an exclusive month’s promotion and two - count them -

offers from Hollywood that he's considering, it'll have made signing the 450 books that have gone into the silver presentation packs all the more worthwhile.

For all his bravura comments, Horowitz is probably too much of a writer to ever really stop. He's someone for whom telling stories appears to be as important as breathing. Real integral stuff. So it's not much of a surprise to find out that he's already well on the way with plans for the next Alex Rider story, or that coming up with the title he loved - it's called *Point Blanc* - was what pushed him into writing it. "I believe that kids today are much more visual than word-oriented, the sophistication of their imagery is fantastic," concludes Horowitz. "I'm writing for an image-rich generation, and, in a way, attempting to write like a film because I think my books have to be 'seen' as well as read." And, if the film deal materialises, *Stormbreaker* will be.