

2006/Sept Charlie Fletcher, Sam Enthoven & Mark Walden - Publishing News

The concept of ‘high-concept’ [adj emphasis (esp. in a movie or TV plot) on a striking and easily communicable idea] isn’t one that you would readily have associated with children’s publishing, until now. But, along with targeted marketing campaigns, six-figure advances and most of the rest of the adult side of the business’s bag of tricks, kids’ books now have those too.

Where you’ll mostly find these high-concepts is in books that are aimed primarily at boys, even though, so perceived wisdom will have it, boys don’t read. Despite the slightly creaky aphorism, this autumn three major imprints are introducing three male debut authors with big, very ‘Boy’ with a capital ‘B’ blockbuster novels. Something is obviously stirring out there.

From Hodder comes Charlie Fletcher’s *Stoneheart* (“When George breaks the head of a stone dragon he awakes an ancient power...”); Doubleday have Sam Enthoven’s *The Black Tattoo* (“Take trip into Hell, towards the dark secret at the heart of the universe...”) and finally, Bloomsbury are bringing Mark Walden’s *H.I.V.E.* to the party (“Thirteen-year-old master criminal Otto Malpense has been chosen to attend the top-secret school of villainy...”).

All three books have either sold their film rights, or have serious interest, which makes Charlie Fletcher’s background so apposite. He started as a film editor at the BBC, then went to USC’s film school in South Central LA on a Warner Bros scholarship. He got an agent and a job immediately on finishing and, in true Hollywood style, handed the script for his first movie, 1995’s *Fair Game*, into the studio the night his wife went into labour.

This, he says, is a portable career, which explains why he’s now back home in Edinburgh, but not the move into books. “It’s partly because in the movie business you write a lot of scripts that end up never getting made and I wanted to actually see my work in the public domain,” explains Fletcher. “I then got loosened up from the constraints of screenwriting by doing various columns for *Scotland on Sunday*, and finally it was the fact that my

kids were the right age for the story I wanted to tell; it was an idea I'd had when I was their age.”

He was, he says, a reader as a child, someone who was always after a story. “Being a screenwriter obviously affected the way I write, but what really helped was being as film *editor*, because editing is at the centre of the process of how storytelling works. And I am hugely enjoying writing books,” says Fletcher, who is juggling Part II of *Stone Heart* alongside scripting the movie of Part I. “It’s a very liberating experience, and I revel in being able to tell the story in the way *I* want to tell it, with no other filters in the way.”

For Sam Enthoven it was ten years of hard labour (“a decade of instant noodles, writing and *well* into three figures-worth of rejection slips”), with only his part-time job as a children’s bookseller at Blackwell’s in Charing Cross Road to keep him sane, before *The Black Tattoo* finally found him an agent and a publisher. *Black Tat*, as Enthoven refers to his internationally successful debut, is actually his fourth novel and the breakthrough came when he realised he’d been misusing his bookselling experience to try to second-guess the market.

“Then I decided to put everything *I* wanted into a book, instead of what *I thought* was wanted...I wanted sword fights, monsters, explosions, the end of the universe; I wanted to set the story in Hell; I wanted to have demonic possession and I wanted fight scenes that reflected manga, computer games and films, the places where boys get their narrative thrills.” And what Enthoven wanted, he got. In spades. The book is much like the man himself, an explosion of enthusiasm, a breathless sprint from page to page as fists fly and viscera erupts. It is a beat-em-up game, with added story, in book form.

With a six-figure US deal under his belt, Enthoven has said goodbye to his colleagues at Blackwell’s and is hard at work on the next book. “It’s a giant monster smackdown set in London...a kind of Godzilla vs King Kong type of deal, only slightly different,” Enthoven’s signature mad giggle erupts at the thought of what he’s doing. “I’ve got dinosaurs, an evil professor and clouds of super-intelligent nano machines set to take over the world!” His audience will no doubt lap up every word.

For the last ten years, Mark Walden's job was designing and producing video games, but the longer he stayed, the further he seemed to move away from the creative heart. "Management and the day-to-day stuff wasn't exactly why I got into the business, and nor was working in huge teams," says Walden. "So I left." Going solo, Walden created H.I.V.E., the Higher Institute of Villainous Education, his own world of über-scoundrels, like Dr Nero and Contessa Sinistre, and a place where "even the goodies are baddies".

Walden is a huge comic book fan "...and I always have been, it's another medium where the villains are suitably melodramatic and overdrawn, and that's the kind of thing I'm trying to recreate in *H.I.V.E.*; I'm very keen to keep it tongue in cheek." A reader, even as a teen, Walden remembers how important the presentation of a story was - get it wrong and the book would not be read. "The back of the book had to catch my imagination, and a high-concept idea is, I think, a very effective way of doing this; my target market are into comics, games, computers and films, and I have to compete with all of those things."

Boys do read, says Walden, if you give them what they want. "There's always room for good, strong stories, and my time in video games showed me what boys like, and it's not always explosions and car chases...I think there's definitely room for books." Especially ones that are paced like movies and games...