



# Author Spotlight

## Jonathan Meres chats to Graham Marks

Jonathan Meres has swapped a career as an award-winning stand-up comic for one as an award winning children's writer; to celebrate the publication of the *The World of Norm: 7: Must Be Washed Separately*, here he talks to **Graham Marks** about humour, music, dialogue and just exactly how he works.

### I wondered how long long it takes you to write a Norm book, Jonathan?

It depends how much time I spend on Twitter! It's a frequently asked question I get on school visits, how long do I take, and if I was to compress all the actual writing time into one neat little package, I don't know Graham, I would say...I was going to say I am churning them out, [but] I am, of course, carefully honing them out at two a year at the moment, and I do spend quite a chunk of the year waffling and talking in schools and events and festivals and stuff. Then there is the editing process. I suppose if I was to compress it all, we are talking about three solid months per book for writing. Because they ain't *War and Peace*, Graham! It's like *War and Peace* with pictures.

I think the [books] average out about 25-26,000 words. I think if you asked most authors they would say if they do 1,000 words a day it's like kind of a pretty good target for most people. If I do 1,000 words a day I am lighting up imaginary cigars and taking the rest of the week off! [But] that doesn't happen very often and I'm a terrible procrastinator – actually, I'm a really good procrastinator! I am an *excellent* procrastinator! Evil Twitter and social media and kids and family life and going to the shops and putting washing out, all these things get in the way, but I am quite badly disciplined. [Although] I have not missed a deadline yet!

### Are you the kind of writer who starts at page one and just works your way through to the end?

Yes I do, I do, and when it comes to Norm I am quite slow and methodical and sometimes have several days of absolutely crippling writer's block, ignoring all the advice that we give to other writers when we are doing creative writing workshops about, you know, moving on a few scenes and writing something completely different; I am terrible, I'm a complete hypocrite. You go off and preach and come out with all this guff and then [don't] abide by any of it; I never practice what I preach. I have fantastic days, two or three great days, and [then] I'll have a few rubbish days.

The upside of [the way I work]...because I am slow and methodical and also constantly tweaking myself everything as I go along...is that when I do deliver my first draft it's a fairly clean draft. So, touch wood, there is never a massive amount to do on it and I very seldom go beyond a second draft and then a few cosmetic tweaks. You can always make something better...you'll write something and it's like 'Yes! Exit, save and print that!' And then I'll go back the next day and I will be like 'What was I thinking?'

### Do you write the story down on paper first or are you into the keyboard straight away?

If you could see my office now! It drives my wife absolutely mad...I am strictly old school, living with ideas on scraps of paper. I've got all the technology, your smart phones and all the rest of it, but I've got enough notebooks, I could sell [them] on eBay and pay off my mortgage. I'm looking at them now, I am an absolute nightmare. I've got hardback notebooks, yellow stickies up in the kitchen...I have the archetypal office at the bottom of the garden - it's in the contract, I am a children's author, I blame that Roald Dahl – and about the only exercise I get is going up the garden path to make copious amounts of coffee.

The kitchen is full of yellow stickies and some of the ideas [on them], I think 'Yes, that's a Norm idea', or that's something completely different, or that's just some stupid gag I have got to file it away in the drawer marked 'Stupid Gags'. I've got a memory like a sieve, so I have to write it down there and then or it's gone, it's history.

So, yeah, I am terrible. I am like the David Bowie of the - I can feel an amazing sound bite coming on - I am like the David Bowie of the children's book world! You can have that one, Graham! Because you know that legend [has it] he allegedly used the cut and paste method of [writing lyrics], literally cutting and pasting words. You know like fridge magnet poetry. Well, I don't know if that is actually true, but I've got a pile of these scraps of paper, these 'Possible Norm ideas'.

So, at the beginning of coming up with a story line for the next Norm, I would simply just go through this mountain [of ideas] and go 'Now that one, that would go with that...', so it's mixing and matching and [making] mind maps. I am not one for plotting. You know you see some people's offices and it's all meticulously plotted story charts, but I just can't work like that. I suspect a lot of crime fiction writers, for obvious reasons, have to be really, really forensically methodical don't they?

The Norm stories evolve as they go along. I know roughly what's going to happen - I have to because the title is up there in front of me! I start with the opening line, because all the books start with "Norm knew it was going to be one of those days when..." and I know roughly the journey I have got to take from A to B but I don't always go straight...I normally take the scenic route!

**What does a working day look like for you? Are you one of those people who has a strict schedule that you keep to?**

Yes, when I'm at home, but I use the word schedule in the loosest possible sense! Basically I'm not very good at writing when I'm on the road, whether that's on a train or in a hotel room. I was on a train up to Inverness last week and I actually spent about an hour of the train journey writing and I was like 'Wow!' It's not that I can't do it, but I'm too easily distracted looking out of the window or listening to music and whatnot. And listening to other people's conversations!

**That's called research!**

Yes exactly, exactly, justifiable research. The vast majority of my writing gets done in my office so if I'm away touring or talking or whatever, I tend not to work. I do put a lot of energy into my author events, and it kind of takes it out of you a little bit, without sounding too pathetic!

As far as when I am at home is concerned, two of my kids are still at school, and my wife works, so once they are out of the way I've got not excuse not to work. So I'm generally in my office in the morning, and if I work the other side of lunch, that means I am having a good day. But other stuff gets in the way doesn't it? Admin and you know, life, basically! But to answer your question, I don't write stuff by hand, it's straight on the laptop.

**I wondered, as I was reading the latest book, whether you had the Undertones' *My Perfect Cousin* playing in the background as you wrote?**

No I didn't! The Perfect Cousins first made an appearance in Book 2 and I found them really, really easy to write; [they were] a bit of fun, and it was a conscious decision to include them in Book 7, because we have got a fairly limited central character ensemble...core cast of characters, that's the phrase I'm trying to think of!

You know, beyond the family of five - Norm and his brothers and parents - Grandpa, Chelsea, Mikey, you tend to have maybe one extra-curricular guest appearance character and I became aware that we needed to start seeing different people. I think I mentioned to my editor [that] I was thinking of reintroducing the perfect cousins and she was like 'Yes, do that! They're great!'

But I love that song, I love the The Undertones, and 'no' is the answer! I can't write to music, can you write to music?

**For years I couldn't, but I trained myself to be able to do it.**

I love music so much and I can't even write to instrumental music; if I have to start listening to music with lyrics and songs, there's no way, I just focus on the words. You get people saying on Twitter or social media, 'Download the playlist that I was listening to', or the playlist that inspired their book or whatever; I would love to be able to do that.

**There is a lot of dialogue in the books, do you ever record yourself talking the story out?**

No I don't, but I am a big fan of dialogue, and I think the books have gradually become more and more dialogue heavy...I read the first one [out loud] recently because I recorded it as a talking book for the RNIB [Royal National Institute of Blind People] and there were big, big chunks of paragraphs and stuff happening. I don't know the precise proportions, but the first two books were narrative and structure, versus talky bits; I think there is probably more talky bits now, and I think I physically breath a sigh of relief when I get to a dialogue bit, because...I don't want to say I find easy, but easier.

And whether that's my stand-up background, [I don't know], but I think of a joke and I think 'Right, I will find a way to shoehorn this joke in'. Or very often, depending on how much coffee I've had, I'll write something and it sparks something else off, a play on words, or Norm ruminating about something ridiculous that his parents have said or, you know, he takes a perfectly ordinary phrase and reconstructs it in a Norm kind of way and you begin to realize what a ridiculous phrase his dad just used.

I love doing the dialogue bits. I do actually read them out to myself when I'm in my office. But I don't wander round with a Dictaphone, and I don't try them out on people. I'm fairly confident in my ability to write dialogue, because I know the characters so well now. I am not always confident in all the structure and all the other stuff but I am reasonably confident in my ability to write decent dialogue and a decent joke.

**Is writing manuscripts and writing the books a different process to writing a stand-up?**

Yes, very, because I never used to break down my stand-up work for a start; my set list would just be like a shopping list! Key words. Although, when I did my first 20 minute set I just sort of wrote...well I didn't 'sort of', I did write a 20 minute set and, looking back, it was just horrendous. But quickly that evolved into a string of daft things, little daft poems, one liners, rambling anecdotes and the occasional musical reference and occasional impression. It was a real sort of Liquorice Allsorts, **Heinz 57 mix**.

**Would I be right in thinking that Norm is actually growing up in age if not in actual behavior?**

It's interesting if you think that that's happening, [because for me] he doesn't age, he's always conveniently nearly 13. Which, with hindsight, was a great decision because I had obviously no idea that there were going to be this many books when I started. If I'd aged him a little bit book by book he would have been dead about two books ago I think! So it was a happy accident that I didn't age him.

As for growing up in behavior, I don't actually know, Graham, but if you think that that's the case it's not something I have consciously set up to do. Funnily enough, in the one I'm writing at the moment hormones are rearing their ugly heads again, and there is always that sense that Norm isn't quite as mature as Mikey physically. I don't go there in too much detail, though, to be honest.

**I wonder whether if there was any chance of a romance with Chelsea coming in any future books or would that be too much of a spoiler?**

Honestly, I don't know at this point. have obviously thought about the Norm/Chelsea thing before, and I think there have been confused signals. I think it came in *May Produce Gas*, actually, I am terrible at remembering my own books! The kids go 'You know that bit in Number 6...' and I'm like 'Stop right there! No! Which one is 6 again? The yellow one! Oh right okay!'. Kids know more about the books than I do, it's quite scary in a nice kind of way.

Anyway, I think I visited that area in *May Produce Gas* [when] there was a little kind of thing going on between Chelsea and Mikey; but then it was revealed that a friend of Chelsea's had rather cruelly bet Chelsea to pretend to fancy Mikey. That actually did happen to me when I was at High School, [although] I was actually older than Mikey and Norm. I don't write about too many incidents from my own childhood, but that stuck with me for all these years!

**There are what can only be described as 'quite a lot' of fart jokes - do you think that boys ever grow out of this kind of humor?**

If my 16 year old son is anything to go by no, never! He actually embarrasses my youngest boy, who is 13. If anybody says that fart jokes aren't funny they're wrong. I'm not afraid to chuck in the odd bodily function reference either, and famously there is a big...famously that sounds pretentious! But relatively famously in the opening of the very first Norm, Norm wakes up to find himself about to pee in his dad's wardrobe.

There is a damned sight more to Norm than fart gags and bodily functions, but it does tend to get picked up on - by the way, girls love them too! I get quite grumpy sometimes when *The World of Norm* gets labelled as being boys' book [because] I would say I get an equal number of girls at signings and events. I always say Norm just happens to be a boy, but the feelings and the issues he deals with are by and large universal

issues...the series could equally be *The World of Norma*. It just happens to be about a boy.

**Norm does seem to be in a continually frustrated and sometimes in a very angry state of mind - is it difficult to keep that level of angst going?**

Yes, and be funny about it! It's a fine juggling act. I'm not saying the books are a 100% laughfest from page 1 to page 250, but they are supposed to be funny books, and I suppose once you start being funny you set yourself up, you can't suddenly not be funny. That's what I do, I don't take myself that seriously, it's just the way it comes out. But the whole fact that he is angry - cliché alert – [means] we are laughing with him not at him.

And we are talking about fairly heavyweight subjects, whether it's the fact that Norm's Grandpa is not going to be around forever, or his Grandpa goes to the bookmakers, or his Dad has lost his job and money's a bit tight, and his Mum's addicted to TV shopping channels...

**I think your quoted somewhere saying the books are 'real life with laughs'?**

Yes. I think so, I think so. And as I always say to the kids, [there's] nothing in any of the Norm books that couldn't actually happen in real life; I take real incidents and exaggerate them for comedy purposes, but I defy anybody to find anything in any of the Norm books that couldn't actually happen in real life. I wanted [the books] to be real and still be funny.

**You've got the books, you've got the website and now you have got an activity book. Where did that come from?**

Well, I would like to claim the credit for it, but I can't. It came from it came from my editor who came up with the idea. And I have to say that when the subject of a possible Norm activity book was broached - is that the right word, broached? When it was suggested, I was not convinced. I don't know if it was a question of not being convinced, possibly because I hadn't thought of it, if I'm being brutally honest!

**Is this the way forward for *The World of Norma*? Is it going to spread out into other areas?**

Well, I don't know...

**Or can't you say?**

I can say it to you, but only off the record...

**CLICK...**