

2002/Sept PHILIP REEVE - Publishing News

One of the seemingly absolute truths about authors is that most of them have day jobs. Circumstances dictate that they need to do something else - usually something not nearly as interesting, which actually pays - so they can indulge in their favourite 'I shall, one day, be a bestseller' fantasy. How unusual, then, to meet someone like Philip Reeve, the bestselling author of sci-fi adventure *Mortal Engines*, and man with an interesting day job.

The day before our interview a book he'd been involved with - *Albert Einstein and His Inflatable Universe*, one of Scholastic's Dead Famous series - had had some seriously good mentions in despatches, as one of the six shortlisted titles up for the Aventis Awards at the Science Museum. Reeves' day job, but not his passion, is being an illustrator.

"I always have written," he tells me, "but it's so much more difficult to get things published than to get illustration work - there's no great effort in doing that, no typing up a whole novel, no attempting to get an agent interested." Reeve started life as an illustrator doing cartoons for *Woman's Realm* and, he says, it just turned into a career. Surprisingly, considering his 'clear line' style, he isn't a comics fan, although he admits to having a liking for the work of Robert Crumb and Moebius, a *nom de plume* of French *bande dessinée* artist Jean Giraud.

After working in bookshops for some ten years, and doing cartoons on the side, in 1995 he decided to go full time as an illustrator and sent some of his work to a number of publishers, including Scholastic. "They were looking for someone to ease Martin Brown's workload on the *Horrible Histories*," says Reeve, "and I became a substitute."

Reeve, though, with what turns out to be characteristic self-deprecation, doesn't think he's the right person to illustrate his own work. He is an interesting, somewhat enigmatic character who looks, in a TE Lawrence-ish kind way, as though he should have arrived on some pre-war motorbike of British manufacture. Or maybe an open-topped MG. He grew up in Brighton, but now lives on Dartmoor in a house where you have to go up into the attic

and stick your mobile out of the skylight to get a signal. Needless to say, Reeve doesn't have a mobile.

Not, then, a fan of urban life and the modern world? "No," he says, "and I don't actually *like* science fiction - the mysticism annoys me. I wanted to write a good, nuts and bolts adventure, basically a historical novel without all the hassle of having to do all the research. I still like Wells and Verne, the steam-powered sci-fi writers." Take a look at the cover of *Mortal Engines*; it's as clever a pastiche of 30s and 40s pulp novels as the story is a very modern take on the nerve-wracking, cliff-hanging movie serials of the same era. A clever combination of retro tech and up-to-the-minute storytelling.

The book throws you into pell-mell action, following the brutally scarred Hester in her quest for vengeance in a city-eat-city world where Municipal Darwinism rules. It all began life, over ten years ago, as an adult novel. On completion Reeve sent it out to a selection of agents who, he says, showed universal disinterest. "So I sent it to Liz Cross, the Fiction Editor at the time at Scholastic," he carries on, "They were the only publisher I actually knew, and I told her I could change the ages of the male and female leads. She thought the book was a good idea, but needed tidying up."

Three versions down the line came the one that was tidy enough to be published, a version that was, says Reeve, much shorter than he'd originally intended and more of a thriller. "All the good things about the idea have survived, and all the bad things have been cut out," he tells me. "This is the first book I've completed, but I've been working on it for so long that I can't remember where the idea actually came from. I knew I wanted to do a big novel, and I had the characters but no world. Then I came up with the idea of moving cities and everything else appeared in one of those flashes of inspiration you hear about, and it all made sense."

Mortal Engines has sold over 9,000 copies in hardback since it was published last year - has he been surprised by the reaction to it? Very, he says. "I hadn't been thinking about what would happen *after* it was published - it's astonishing the way it's taken off, very gratifying. And it also

seems to be selling well to adults, which just goes to show how wrong all those agents were.”

Although he doesn't want to illustrate his own work (“the writing,” he says, “is now doing the kind of thing I'm not good enough to draw”) there are sketches of all the characters and costumes, as well as maps, all drawn in the margins of a manuscript he admits is very cinematic. “It was designed as a Terry Gilliam trap, pure bait!” Reeve smiles. “I wouldn't be surprised if it was made as a movie, but it would surprise me if it was done well...the first thing they'd do is make Hester pretty, they'd change the ending and then say ‘Does it *have* to be London?’”

Reeve says he's always had a penchant for “dark, melodramatic, operatic stories”, which is as good a description as any of *Mortal Engines*, but he also likes comedy, which is where Buster Bayliss comes in. Buster is Reeves' latest offering, a series of humorous stories with titles like *Day of the Hamster* and *Night of the Living Veg*. “I wrote the first book while I was trying to sell *Mortal Engines*,” Reeve explains, “and it really was a bit of light relief to write something you didn't have to agonise over.”

Are we to expect a follow-up to *Mortal Engines*? Reeve is cautious with his reply. Possibly. Maybe. At some point. He seems not to want to jinx anything by talking about it too early in the creative process, and who can blame him? “I am at work on something now,” he tells me, “and it could well take another ten years, but I hope it doesn't.” Is it as anti-technology as *Mortal Engines*? “I'm not anti-technology, I just don't get on with it,” he says, “I can't imagine doing anything set in the modern era, because if I sat down to write a gritty novel set in London in 2002, I'd probably get it wrong.”