



Authorgraph No.114: Michael Cadnum

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Michael Cadnum interviewed by **Val Randall**.

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I met Michael Cadnum in the London office of Penguin, publishers of the three Cadnum novels available in Britain: **Calling Home**, **Breaking the Fall** and **Taking It**. Cadnum is a soberly dressed, unassuming man, far away from the sunshine of his Californian home: quietly spoken, weighing each word with care as we talked. He explored and developed each answer with a studied deliberation until he was satisfied with its honesty and accuracy.

Yet Cadnum's characters thrive on danger: it is their oxygen. What they have *not* learned is how to avoid being destroyed. His books contain an ultimate morality: he vividly portrays the excitement of misadventure but shows where it can lead? the price which must be paid? rehabilitation, painful self-realisation, even death.

Cadnum's protagonists are dysfunctional characters, obsessively acting out their behavioural maladies, trapped in their own distorted image of the world.

In **Calling Home** Peter is a teenage alcoholic so dependent on drink that when Mead, his closest friend, tries to curb his excesses he kills him accidentally with a single angry, drunken blow. He repeatedly rings Mead's parents, assuming his identity to assure them that all is well and to deny the crime by giving Mead 'life'.

Jared in **Breaking the Fall** burgles houses to challenge society, to experience danger, drawing his friend Stanley into the excitement until Jared's suicide shocks Stanley back into a saner but duller reality.

Taking It chronicles Anna's obsessive shoplifting, her battle to restore her life to balance, to escape the trap which she has set herself.

Cadnum's books for young adults explore fractured families and their problems. This preoccupation was stimulated by some of the many jobs he has had. His work for the Suicide Prevention phonenumber taught him 'a good portion of the human landscape. The callers were people not well enough to get up and go outside. I wanted to speak up for people who couldn't speak for themselves, to be on their side. This kind of character impresses and draws me.

'I am not portraying young people as wretched and incomplete but people we can understand, even when they *are* so incomplete. I am their friend? I offer them an alternative.'

His time in teaching was something Michael took very seriously. He admired children, felt they were his equals and treated them with respect. He feels that writers who are teachers draw on the same energy for both activities: teachers, he says, are artists.

The worst thing about finishing an enjoyable book is untangling yourself from the lives of the characters you have come

to know: saying goodbye to a friend you may never see again. Michael Cadnum enjoys an even greater intimacy with his characters, since he regards the writing process as sharing their lives, being guided by them to a better understanding of their desires, their motivations, their needs.

His characters' voices replace his own and he is the instrument through which they communicate with the reader. The excitement of being inside a character's skin is part of his love of the writing process and parallels the thrills enjoyed by his protagonists as they play their dangerous – and, ultimately, destructive – games.

What Peter does with Mead in **Calling Home** is what I do in becoming a character. Peter invents a character and becomes it, for many reasons. Also, he becomes an artist and he acts out what a writer does in creating a character.

In fiction, you get the character's tone of voice and the way they look at the world affects their voice. I describe what the character sees and feels – for example, Anna's humour (**Taking It**) comes through strongly in the visual image that cold spaghetti is like brains. It puts us there with the character.

This use of visual imagery is cross-fertilised by Michael's poetry – the literary quality of his writing has its roots here. It is this richness of imagery, this powerful, economical style which has prompted comparisons with the work of Robert Cormier – particularly earlier novels such as **I am the Cheese**.

Cadnum's subjects share similarities with Cormier's: the disconnected young adults adrift in a world which fractures their attempts to survive. Where Cadnum differs is in the belief in a wise or compassionate friend, someone who knows how hard and serious life is but can help the character to move forward. Cadnum sees this as another indication to readers of how they can achieve maturity – he describes the process as 'choosing new parents' – perhaps a wise friend outside the family, a book, a church, a teacher – and, he feels young adults are nourished and sustained by this support.

Indeed, he considers the real reason that books exist is to give us the teachers we will never meet, to provide us with a window through which we can look outside our immediate surroundings and use what we see to help us to grow.

A young character will not know some things because he is not old enough. There is a vivid compression of experience with pockets of things which the character has not yet learned. This creates a delicious challenge: to create someone like that is a thrill. Conversely, adult characters can actually know more than the author.

Cadnum maintains that a book can outstrip its author – in **Calling Home** there are things which he does not consciously understand; a clear example of the character leading the author in the way he wants him to go.

Implicit in this conviction is Michael's belief in the power of language.

I have a faith in language: it can convey life, what it's like to be someone else – all this out of mere words. They do something which no other art form can. I enjoy writers who relish language and enjoy writing.

He is one of this number, feeling that writing is vividly connected to life, so that his commitment to it is continually renewed. He began his involvement with writing early.

The first word I ever read was 'We'. The big W really impressed me and I was really relieved that the word was so short. One problem with being a child who writes is that it's difficult – it takes so long and this depressed me.

When I was about twelve years old I wrote a novel about dinosaurs – it was five pages long! You never get far from this – I'm still shocked at how little I've written at the end of a session. But we must be careful – writers tend to embrace their own suffering with too much enthusiasm. Writing is work, but not the worst work in the world!

Before I could read I loved looking at pictures and drawings. As I grew up I drew story pictures. I still feel that my books have a strong visual sense – for example, when Anna (**Taking It**) is driving through the desert I see it clearly and try to describe it to the reader through Anna's eyes. One of the wonderful things about writing is that you can see, hear and smell things with the character and be inside the character's skin. No other art form can so fulfillingly portray

what it's like to be someone else, to learn patience, to learn how hard we have to work to achieve maturity, to take an interest in things outside ourselves.?

It was not solely his admiration for young people which led him to write fiction for young adults. When **Calling Home** was written he was unaware of this market but wrote it because he was intrigued by the real crime on which it was based. It was his publisher's decision to slot it into the young adult market, but this did not trouble him.

? **Calling Home** was written years ago and not published for over ten years ? then I was very pleased with it being given wings. I am happy when my books come out because the characters finally have a life beyond me.?

His books explore a shadowy world where conventional rules are cast aside, where failure is experienced by those who do not have the inner resources to cope with it.

It is this dark side of things to which we, as readers, are drawn. Michael explains:

?I picture someone standing at a window, looking out at a storm. The rain lashes the trees, the trees swoon in the gale, but inside, where our Someone is safe, a warm fire crackles in the hearth. We feel a frisson of pleasure as our own sense of security meets the random hail and gusts of the storm, protected by the brittle membrane of glass.

?I suspect our interest in misfortune springs not merely from a pleasure in reading about damage and destruction. I believe our curiosity about mayhem makes us feel joined to a larger community, alive to the trials of others in a way which is both reassuring and healthy. It makes us feel a part of life, which we know in our hearts is not the step-by-step routine we try to enforce.?

So many of Cadnum's characters are out of step: he is drawn to Peter (**Calling Home**) because of his creativity and imagination: most people would not dream of getting away with the game he was playing.

Breathtaking creativity, imaginative engagement, risk-taking ? there is definitely much more of Michael Cadnum in his characters than he might recognise ? and long may he continue to play his own most individual game.

The Books

Breaking the Fall , Puffin, 0 14 038172 4, £4.99 pbk

Calling Home , Viking, 0 670 83566 8, £10.99 hbk

Taking It , Puffin, 0 14 037570 8, £4.99 pbk

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