



Authorgraph No.174: Mal Peet

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Mal Peet interviewed by **Geoff Fox**.

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?No, I can?t say I *skip* upstairs to my desk ? I trudge up there reluctantly, really. Probably because I anticipate failure rather than success.? And when the words do come for Mal Peet, they come slowly. There might be just a single paragraph at the end of a session, but it will be a finished paragraph. Words working hard, the rhythms of sentences refined, sometimes through reading aloud. He?ll store sections in disparate files and find their sequence later; the first file he wrote of his 2005 Carnegie Medal winner, **Tamar**, appeared somewhere around page 250. The book has the tension of an intricate thriller, yet its author plotted no careful outline before he began. ?It?s like a Rubik?s Cube ? you turn a bit there, another there, and in the end, things fall into place. Or maybe 3D Chess, something almost ghostly, mixed with clearly seen incidents, and it?s those that I start with.? Strongly visualised episodes recur in his mind?s eye ? ?I make short movies in my head? ? and they come with dialogue soundtracks too.

Set in Occupied Holland, **Tamar** ignited when Mal was chatting with a WWII SOE wireless operator about the silk squares on which he had stored his secret codes. Codes and secrets. Mal likes that stuff ? and he?s also intrigued by the skeletons lurking in family cupboards. His own family?s skeletons didn?t bother to hide much in the Norfolk council house where he grew up (?North Walsham, Birthplace of Tedium?). His Regimental Sergeant-Major Dad was demobbed to a home firmly managed by his wife and her mother. Noise and acrimony. When Mal arrived in the late 1940s there were not many books around the house, but his grandmother taught him to read very early by way of **The Christian Science Monitor**, and he never stopped. Enid Blyton, Narnia and Arthur Ransome seemed remote to Mal. After the childhood comics, D C Thomson?s **Rover, Wizard, Hotspur** and **Adventure** and American imports kept him reading. **Eagle** was too worthy, though the artwork for **Dan Dare** was great. Then he talked his way into the town library before the statutory joining age of 12, and read his way through the junior shelves.

Mal?s childhood is much on his mind for that?s the setting of his work in progress ? in particular, the time of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. By then Mal (one of two boys from his estate to pass the 11+) was at the local Boys? Grammar School, an ancient foundation staffed largely, he now thinks, by mildly crazed ex-army officers of at least ambivalent sexual inclinations. He left home each morning in his blazer and braided cap, dodging the missiles and jeers of his erstwhile friends who were now at the Sec. Mod, hanging out with girls, whatever they were. The Headmaster was a Lieutenant-Colonel, the Combined Cadet Force was obligatory, canings were frequent. As the freighters carrying Kruschev?s missiles steamed ever closer to Cuba, boys were advised ?stick brown paper on the windows, keep your arses in the air and your heads down, and you?ll be fine?. Mal?s teenage characters in his present novel wonder if they will ever discover what sex is like before the bomb goes off. ?It was all about *carpe diem*,? says Mal, ?but there wasn?t much *diem* to *carpe* in Norfolk at the time.? It?s the sense of what it was like in someone else?s day which Mal hopes his readers will see, taste, and hear ? that?s the kind of *lucidity* he?s always after.

Inevitably, he encountered the mandatory influential English teacher. 'Doker' (?no idea why?) disliked young scholarship boy Peet ? until the day of the end-of-year exam results, usually another opportunity for ritual humiliation. Names and marks were revealed in reverse order ? the last came first. Down to single figures, and still no Peet M. The class tensed, eager for Doker's corrosive scorn. The black gown swept down the aisle to Mal's desk. Top? Surely not. 'Peet, 89%.? And then, 'I've got you wrong, Peet, haven't I?'

Mal did well in English and Art. The dull-dog Art teacher might focus on Cezanne, but Mal preferred cartoons ? drawing the **Beano** looked a likely career move. Art College sounded good ? nude girls and stuff. But in the end he went off to newly established Warwick University to read English Literature and American Studies, only to find he was also required to work up Italian to A-level standard. Mal's strengths did not stretch to modern languages, so he organised a rebellion and was summarily flung out. Through the next months, he scraped a living in Coventry (steady work at the local mortuary) and learned enough Italian to get back on the course. Things became more exciting. The young Germaine Greer taught Shakespeare and Modern European literature. ('Why's Ibsen so boring, Germaine?? 'F***ed if I know, Mal.?) She politicised her students too ? valuable for a generation seeing Politics as a question of voting Conservative or Labour. Mal stayed on to write a Masters? thesis on Poe.

The end of the Sixties meant flared loons, fur coat, beads, the hair ? 'I'd become a bit of a Beast? ? so marriage to a beautiful bank cashier was a surprise. He made a little money doing cartoons for the new magazine **Time Out** and reviewed for **Oz**. An archive of American materials at Exeter University drew him to the South-West for a possible PhD. He's never left, and we're chatting now in his Edwardian home maybe a quarter of a mile from the Exmouth sea front. Mal taught for a while at Exeter College, one of the first of the tertiaries. He co-authored a couple of textbooks ? 'Peet and Robinson? enjoyed good sales and **Leading Questions** is still on an A-level syllabus.

As the College responded to the pressure for Results, Mal quit to try a different kind of writing. It didn't work out. So, he says, he lived in rural mid-Devon and 'screwed around for about fifteen years, doing this and that?. He and the bank cashier hadn't survived his 'walkabout? period, but at the end of it he met and married Elspeth Graham and the foundations for his present writing life were laid. Without irony but with a smile, Mal had introduced me to Elspeth as 'my muse, inspiration, collaborator, organiser, wife ? everything, really?.

Their turning point came in the early 90s. Collins Educational were looking for authors for their **Pathways** Reading Scheme. Mal and Elspeth devised such titles as **Scrub-a-Dub** (bathing from the Romans to Now), **Never Sell a Hen on a Wet Day** (proverbs) and **Five Little Men** who fly in from Space to check out the ecological mess we've made of the Earth. Elspeth researched and wrote the words which Mal illustrated ? you can see the **Beano** in there, or maybe a touch of the Terry Dearys. OUP headhunted them for their **Literacy Web** and they did around a hundred titles for the Press; but meeting the demands of the National Literacy Strategy, taking Desirable Outcomes into account and so on, finally sapped the spirit.

So Mal turned to something he had long wanted to write ? perhaps since he was about fifteen. There hadn't been enough to read when he'd done with William and Biggles and story-paper heroes like Limp-Along Leslie, the little inside forward whose amazing skills were not a whit impaired by his disability, or Gorgeous Gussie, the toff goalkeeper whose butler served him a cuppa when the action was down the other end. A graphic novel seemed the logical thing. It would include football, but it wouldn't be only about football. He had no luck with publishers, but a couple of years later, when Mal and Elspeth were talking to Walker Books about another reading project, someone asked whether he'd ever published that graphic novel. We'd be interested in a good literary football novel, said Walker. Mal feels you can sense the double page spreads beneath some of the set-pieces in **Keeper**. The book won the Branford Boase prize for 2004. There is indeed far more than football, for this is part ghost, part mystery story, set in the forest of an unspecified South American country. **The Penalty** (2006) is rooted in the African slave trade and ancient religions ? football is a trigger rather than a focus. **Keeper**, **The Penalty** and **Exposure** are published as 'The Paul Faustino novels?', for 'South America's top football writer? plays an increasingly active role in all of them. (Readers can check out Faustino's website in the real world.) **Exposure** draws on the celebrity circus which is the Beckhams and, more daringly, the *dramatis personae* and plot of **Othello**. Othello, Roderigo, Montano ? they sounded like soccer stars. Mal thought he'd

turn Shakespeare around ? Othello would be a white player with a top British club, uneasy in a largely black squad. His agent, Jago, would be all motiveless malignity. But a conversation with his much-valued Walker editor Averil Whitehouse and his agent Philippa Milnes-Smith, switched the setting back to South America and Faustino eased into the story again. Mal agrees there's a touch of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe about the journalist. He sees himself as the hard-bitten sophisticate, celebrating his love of surfaces, his emotional disengagement. Faustino has 'possible girlfriends' but no relationships. And yet, in spite of himself, he ventures deep into the underworld of the dangerous city to rescue a couple of street children.

Listening again to my tape, I'm struck by the warmth, the swift wit, and the explosive chuckles which characterise Mal's voice ? Frankie Howard, maybe, without the manic edge. You can well believe it when he says he does stand-up routines on his visits to schools ? though he's sometimes saddened by what he finds. A class which shadowed the Carnegie contenders ? they had even voted for **Tamar** ? was deemed too busy with the Curriculum to be allowed an hour with the book's author. He is especially glad to talk to girls as well as boys. For, although Walker understandably emphasised the football in their initial packaging of the Faustino novels, he always wanted girls to read his books too, which has proved increasingly to be the case. And nowadays, he gets the covers he wants, though 'I had to win the Carnegie to have a shout in it?.

And next? The enticing proofs of a picture book, **Cloud Tea Monkeys**, are spread out on the table ? exquisite Indian langur monkeys step delicately among the words on the page. The artwork is by Juan Wijngaard; the story, discovered and researched by Elspeth, is written jointly with Mal. When their son Tom, now 22, was about seven, they reached that point of still enjoying picture books together but wanting a more substantial story. So here there are some 3500 words. There's a timeless feel to these pages and that is very much to Mal's liking. 'I know this might sound arrogant ? but I want to write books which will *last*. Something which has the feel of a Classic.?

The Books

(published by Walker)

Exposure, 978 1 4063 0649 1, £7.99 pbk

Keeper, 978 1 4063 0393 3, £6.99 pbk, 978 1 4063 1029 0, £19.99 audio CD

The Penalty, 978 1 84428 099 5, £6.99 pbk, 978 1 4063 1034 4, £19.99 audio CD

Tamar, 978 1 4063 0394 0, £7.99 pbk, 978 1 4063 1022 1, £24.99 audio CD

Cloud Tea Monkeys by Mal Peet and Elspeth Graham, illustrated by Juan Wijngaard, is due to be published in 2010.

Geoff Fox has now almost retired from editing **Children's Literature in Education** but works as a storyteller and role play actor in schools and in training medical students.



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