



Authorgraph No.130: Aidan Chambers

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Aidan Chambers interviewed by **Geoff Fox**.

Aidan Chambers interviewed by Geoff Fox <!--break-->

In June, 1975, Aidan Chambers was close to panic. He had a contract for a book to fulfil, a mortgage to pay on the cottage he and Nancy had just bought and they needed to eat. Day after day, the page remained blank. In the end, he made himself write down whatever came. What came first was *??Literature is crap,? said Morgan.?* Then a fair bit more for an hour and twenty minutes. What he had written had little coherence, but he had no other way to go. So he tried again another day. To his astonishment, he found he had written about a boy masturbating. He also found that he was shaking *? as if, he says, he was suffering some kind of catatonic fit. He wanted to abandon the whole thing but Nancy, herself a publisher, wagged her finger at him (?for the only time in our lives together?) and said, ?You will finish this book.?*

That was the origin of **Breaktime**, accepted for The Bodley Head by those legendary editors, Judy Taylor and Margaret Clark. Morgan's concise assessment of literature is still there, no longer the book's opening line but moved at Margaret Clark's gentle insistence to page 2. (She pointed out that purchasing librarians would be so deterred by such a beginning that the book would lose sales, whereas they would never spot it on the second page.)

?That was the book that taught me what I am ? I'd come home. It was the book I'd have written at 16 if I could have.? In fact, by the time he was 16, Aidan Chambers already knew he wanted to be a writer. Again, the revelation was almost apocalyptic. He was in his O-level year at Darlington Grammar School. The regular teacher was away and the class was covered by Jim Osborn, whose reputation preceded him *? he could reduce grown boys to tears. He arrived, black gown swirling, said nothing, plugged in a gramophone, set a record on the turntable and lowered the needle: ?In Xanadu did Kubla Khan.?* Just that *? no more. ?Now repeat what you've heard,?* demanded Osborn. No one could. *?Listen!?* Again, the line and the question. And again. And then, he issued texts. *?And now listen!?* After an open-ended exploration of what the boys saw in their minds' eyes, a final reading, finishing dead on the bell. No further comment, no *?This is what it really means.?* The text had been allowed to speak, and for the youthful Chambers, a lifetime's exploration had begun.

Books had not played much of a part in his early life. There were just five of them in his home, an artisan's house in Chester-le-Street, County Durham, where he was born in 1934. His father was a craftsman *? a joiner who subsequently became an undertaker. Yet there were stories around; his father was a raconteur, and his grandfather told him ?The Lambton Worm? whose ?track? could be seen winding up a hill visible from the field where his grandfather told him the story. His mother took him to his first film at the age of three weeks; thereafter, it was twice a week to the flicks right up to the time he became a monk in his mid-twenties.*

Primary school was bleak; he was caned for getting sums wrong. Hardly surprisingly, he failed the 11+. Secondary Modern was better, though 'it had a fully-stocked library but none of us ever went into it.' Then, at 13, his enlightened Headteacher saw his potential and engineered his transfer to the Grammar School.

Through a friend, he started visiting the local library every week (Biggles, William Brown and the rest). Then there was the Damascus Road meeting with Coleridge and Jim Osborn. 'It was the intensity of it' and Jim's intense expectation that we would reach up for it.'

Osborn became his 'intellectual father'. He saved him from probable expulsion when it emerged that Aidan had been in the library, where he was a Senior Librarian, when he should have been on the sports field, shivering among the 'reserves'. Osborn told him to join the Debating Society and to audition for the school play; both became fierce enthusiasms. Later, after a horrendous family row when Aidan's father had flatly refused to allow his son to apply to RADA ('he never came to see me because I always got female roles?'), Osborn drove him home from school, swept into the house and told Mr and Mrs Chambers that their son was to become a teacher and was to go to Borough Road College, London.

And so he did, after two years in the Navy which he hated ('though I read all the time?'). College was good. His first play was performed, he enjoyed his teaching practices and found himself head-hunted for a job in a selective boys' school in Essex. The Head wanted someone who would give the lower streams a better deal and who could also do the Drama. 'Right, lad, sit down. Now here are the questions the governors are going to ask you this afternoon...?' According to Aidan, 'Everything that's happened to me in my life's gone through the back door, never the front.'

Three enjoyable years followed. Then, through the influence of some of his colleagues, Aidan became a lay brother in a newly founded monastery in Stroud, close to the village in which he lives to this day. His decision was prompted not so much through the acquisition of a personal faith but through a response to the disciplines, the language and the sense of theatre in the daily life of the order.

In Gloucestershire, after a year as a novice, Aidan took a post at Archway Secondary Modern School in the town. Here he taught English, ran the library, and directed school productions which attracted county-wide attention. Here also, he found some of his pupils calling in on the community for advice or refuge. The monk's habit and the 'safety' of his status meant, he thinks, that teenagers trusted him enough to dump on him at 2 o'clock in the morning. He learned much about teenage vulnerabilities and ambiguities and given his previously very male experience, something of the ways of adolescent girls.

At Archway too, he developed an increasing reputation as someone with new things to say about literature and teaching in classrooms outside the grammar schools. His pioneering **The Reluctant Reader**, the first of several books for teachers in which thoughtful practice was underpinned by theory, appeared in 1969. And before long, he originated the 'Topliner' series for Macmillan, commissioning texts likely to appeal to those reluctant readers. By 1968, Aidan had left the monastery to become a freelance writer and lecturer. He had also married Nancy, who in 1970 began the invaluable journal about children's literature, **Signal**, which she still edits.

So to that cataclysmic day in 1975 and the first stirrings of **Breaktime**. There had been other published novels and several plays but **Breaktime** drew on deeper wellsprings and served different functions for a new readership and for its author. He knew quite early on that there would be a sequence of six novels, linked thematically around the question, 'What does love really mean?' and 'the discovery of your own desire to be what you wish to be'. They are linked too through their attention to language, which is particular to each individual book. They are concerned with the nature of consciousness 'how do we know ourselves and each other?' The sense of place is always powerful and highly specific. There are 'baptismal' moments in each book. And literary references illuminate much of the action.

The novels have already spanned a quarter century of self exploration 'Aidan is working on the sixth and final one now. 'I will not play lightly with any literary action. In the reality of our life within our culture, the exchange of writing is the closest you can get to another person. It is more intimate than the sex act. It's a religious matter' it is the

experience which transcends the individual.?

Aidan writes slowly. He loves what he calls the 'wool-gathering' ('research' is too arid a term) and has come to trust the way in which each novel slowly reveals itself; and sometimes slowly reveals a dangerous area in himself. 'You have to risk dealing with the material inside yourself you'd rather not face or, certainly, not have other people face. Only in the act of writing do I declare myself to myself.' First drafting can be painful; there is still the fear of getting it wrong, the legacy of those canings for getting his sums wrong almost 60 years ago. Redrafting, however, is a consistent pleasure. He loves shaping and shifting the mosaic 'his plots never follow a simple narrative time line. As writer, reader or theatregoer, he finds much of his satisfaction in the artful crafting of the piece.

We talk on ' about the novel in progress with its female narrator ('It had to be ' that's where the others are leading.?). And we talk about work he has done in Sweden, Holland and Belgium where three of the novels have been dramatised. With one small group of young Flemish actors, he developed an intensity of relationship which, at times, overwhelmed all of them; it's this kind of intensity which marks his characters, and despite his calmly reflective manner, the man. He loves the rehearsal room, the discovery, the probing, the passion between the actors, the interplay of risk and safety in the enclosed world of the theatre space. 'If I had my druthers, I'd write a novel every five years, a play every year, and sit in a rehearsal studio every day. That's how I would live.?

He talks with great clarity about his writing and himself, the seriousness punctuated by regular chuckles. The laughter is sometimes shared with me, sometimes with his memories, and sometimes in recognition of the irony within an anecdote. We finish on Lear and Cordelia, Japanese pillow books, Ted Hughes and Chekhov. For someone who sees himself as a loner ('I love certain people intensely, but more than five people together I do not like?'), who enjoys no space better than the isolation of his writing room, he is a warm and generous communicator.

Geoff Fox edits the journal, **Children's Literature in Education** , and is an honorary Research Fellow at Exeter University School of Education.

The Books (*published by Red Fox in paperback*)/em>

Breaktime , 1978, 0 09 950281 X,
£4.99 pbk

Seal Secret , 1980, 0 09 99915 0 0, £2.99 pbk

Dance on My Grave , 1982, 0 09 950291 7, £4.99 pbk

The Present Takers , 1983, 0 09 999160 8, £3.99 pbk (reissue February 2002)

Now I Know , 1987, 0 09 950301 8, £4.99 pbk

The Toll Bridge , 1992, 0 09 950311 5, £4.99 pbk

Postcards from No Man's Land , 1999, The Bodley Head, 0 370 32376 9, £10.99 hbk, 0 09 940862 7, £5.99 pbk
(winner of Carnegie Medal, 2000)



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