



## BfK Profile: Kevin Brooks

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**Julia Eccleshare** on the fiction of **Kevin Brooks**.

Julia Eccleshare on a new author with a high profile, **KEVIN BROOKS**<!--break-->

### Hard to Pigeonhole

Two novels down and one just published and Kevin Brooks has already become familiar not only with glowing reviews but also with the circus of long lists, short lists and award ceremonies. He has even experienced winning ? **Martyn Pig** won the 2002 Branford Boase Award and was short listed for the CILIP Carnegie Medal while **Lucas** was short listed for both the 2003 Guardian Children's Book prize and the Book Trust Teenage Book Award. This is an unusually high profile start for an author and especially for one whose books are so hard to pigeonhole.

Unlikely many other writers, Brooks had not originally thought of himself specifically as a writer. He had tried expressing himself through music and art as well as writing but with little success. He lists his previous occupations as being ? a petrol pump attendant, a crematorium handyman, a civil service officer, a vendor at London Zoo, a post office counter clerk and a railway ticket office salesperson? ? the kind of fashionable list of temporary jobs that many writers are now admitting to for no apparent reason but which, in Brooks' case, do at least have the merit of matching the kind of books he writes.

Since Brooks' books fit no tick box it is easy to see why he found it hard to get published and yet, now they are and now that his distinctive voice is so recognisable, it seems surprising. One reason may be because ? especially at a time when literary fantasy is all the rage ? his writing is artless. Instead, he adopts an adolescent voice of raw authenticity reminiscent of Iain Banks and Irvine Welsh. Like them, he writes about anti-heroes living un-heroic lives which reveal there is nothing so special about heroism anyway. He writes about what seems like ordinariness in people or places and shows that what is going on inside adolescent heads is what matters, not what they look like on the outside. But ordinariness and boredom, drab surroundings and TV dinners are hard to handle without bogging stories down too much. Brooks mostly pulls it off though he takes his readers right to the brink. Just occasionally, especially in **Kissing the Rain**, the voice is so authentic that, like the adolescents themselves, it runs right up to the wire of being irritatingly dumb with conversational exchanges that grind almost to a halt.

Brooks writes in the first person creating characters whom he appears to inhabit wholly. He favours outsiders, those who are picked on either by their peers specifically or just by society in general, with whom he has a remarkable empathy. To add to their difficulties, he gives them dysfunctional family backgrounds which means that they are largely operating on their own when it comes to interacting with the outside world and working out survival tactics or moral codes. The eponymous hero of **Martyn Pig** is a boy who has led a hard life, largely, it seems, just because he has a terrible name. The bad hand he has been dealt at birth dogs him long after and leads him to the accident ? the killing of his father ? that provides the centre of the unlikely and blackly funny story that Brooks tells. Lucas ? another eponymous hero ? is a mysterious stranger who arrives in a closed semi-island community where he is immediately treated with the greatest

suspicion despite saving a young girl's life. Brooks tells his story through the eyes of Caitlin, the girl who falls in love with Lucas at first sight. In **Kissing the Rain**, he reverts to telling the story through the eyes of the victim. This time it's Moo, the fat boy whom everyone despises and beats up. When Moo witnesses a road rage accident he finds himself at the centre of a tangled and dangerous intrigue. Very quickly, Moo recognises that the knowledge he holds is power. Brooks' subtle handling of Moo's shift from passive victim to someone who is making decisions is the most sophisticated character development he has yet achieved.

While characters and their narrative voice are central to Brooks' books, location is also important and he has an unusual ability to describe places, giving them a clear physical identity that makes them tangible. His underdog characters live in suitably drab surroundings. There are domestic interiors that are stale and run-down filled with the lingering smell of cigarettes and the dregs left in abandoned beer cans. Fridges are empty, dads are out of work, mums are absent or passive. Homes are not cosy havens but temporary shelters from what may be a worse world outside. Not that Brooks makes the outdoors seem much more attractive. His landscapes are as forlorn as his interiors. He favours grey skies and muddy foreshores. **Martyn Pig** is set in sleety December, **Kissing the Rain** begins on a wet November day and, though the months pass and some very hot days are described, it is the real rain as much as the metaphorical rain of the title that is memorable. The crescendo of the drama of **Lucas** is played out against a full-scale thunderstorm.

For all that Brooks should not be thought of as a dark or drear writer. His books are funny and emotional, dramatic and thoughtful. Above all, they are interesting and different and raise important dilemmas without for a moment being defined by their 'issue'.

**Julia Eccleshare** is the children's books editor of *The Guardian*.

**Martyn Pig** (1 903434 51 3, £11.99 hbk, 1 903434 99 8, £5.99 pbk), **Lucas** (1 903434 76 9, £12.99 hbk, 1 904442 12 9, £6.99 pbk) and **Kissing the Rain** (1 904442 19 6, £12.99 hbk) are published by Chicken House.

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