



# Authorgraph No.164: Philip Reeve

Article Author:

[Geoff Fox](#) [1]

[164](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

**Philip Reeve** interviewed by **Geoff Fox**.

## Philip Reeve interviewed by Geoff Fox

<!--break-->

Philip Reeve was close to finishing an illustration job on the day we met; it will, he thinks, probably be his last. Illustrating keeps him chained to the task from 9 to 6; but a writer needs open thinking time, for 90% of writing is thinking, and you can do something else while you are thinking; like cooking the tea or going for a walk on the Moor.

To reach his home, you skirt a couple of massive tors and drop off a minor road onto a more minor road, winding past huge tumbles of granite, between stone farm buildings down to a house looking out over the Natsworthy valley familiar to readers of the *Mortal Engines* quartet as the family name of 3rd Class Apprentice Historian Tom. Philip knew early in life that Dartmoor was where he'd like to live. The Moor was the overnight stopping place when his family travelled from Brighton to holiday in Cornwall, and young Philip would gladly have settled for the valleys, rivers and empty hillsides rather than the busy coast.

Dartmoor could not have been exactly *en route* for a father in a hurry to get his family to Cornwall; and not every father would have taken his children to the Lakes, read them **Swallows and Amazons** and rowed them out on Coniston to what, for Ransome, became Wildcat Island. Now that Philip is reading the series to his five-year-old son Sam, he wonders whether some of his roistering adventurers in the *Mortal Engines* quartet or Jack Havock in **Larklight** could trace their piratical origins to Ransome; and his strong young women might well owe something to the Blackett and Walker girls.

So 90% of Philip's writing is thinking. He keeps the ferment of his adventurous plots to himself, mulling them over, teasing things out. Even his wife Sarah doesn't know where he's been journeying until the bound copies arrive from the publisher. His stories, often enhanced by illustrations, were a private matter when he first began to write, aged about six. He wasn't much bothered whether anyone else read them and even now, he seems not too interested in the prizes he has won, the book-signings, the celebrity author life-style or the details of his sales figures ('well, it's nice, but I don't really know how I'm supposed to react?'). He doesn't read reviews. He has no idea of his books' reception in the States ('I think they've been put up for a couple of awards?'). The *Mortal Engines* quartet is published in more than 20 countries, so the promotional tours would surely be there if he wanted them but he doesn't relish the travel and all that wining and dining, taking him away from Sarah and Sam and soaking up time when he could be writing. He'll do occasional visits for local schools since it would seem rude not to, but festivals are better, since people have usually read the books. It's not that he is reclusive today, for instance, he could not be more welcoming and there's plenty of laughter as we talk; he prefers to answer what I ask, rather than rehearsing a run of practised anecdotes. There don't seem to be many of those.

He never stopped writing for long after that early start, neither needing nor expecting encouragement from others. He enjoyed primary school, but I sort of tolerated secondary school. I'd rather have been drawing and writing my own

stories. His bleak comprehensive in Brighton has now been flattened and 'the ground salted over'. In a way, though, it was just the place for the budding artist. With the teachers absorbed by crowd control, 'I spent most of my O-level year in the art room listening to old David Bowie records and discussing Monty Python'. School productions offered the chance for a rather shy boy to show off a bit, which he enjoyed 'scripted shows, none of that improvisational workshop nonsense ('A workshop has to have a lathe in the corner, or I'm not interested?'). Two good years at last, taking A-levels in Art, Drama and English at a 6th Form college, then a Foundation Arts Year and a B.Tech at Cambridge College of Art. There he discovered he couldn't draw well enough to do the kind of illustrations he admired, such as those by Brian Froud to complement folk tales, or Alan Lee's work for **The Mabinogian**. Back in Brighton, he worked for five or six years in a bookshop, an extension of his old weekend job as a teenager. He kept on writing, mostly for himself, but also for no-budget theatre shows, in which he performed with friends and unemployed actors. He started to make Super 8 movies. As much as any part of the process, he loved the editorial cutting and splicing, not worrying if the only people who saw the films were a few friends. It was to fund his film making that he sold his first illustration 'to **Woman's Realm**. They'd phone him ' 'We've got a gap on the letters page' ' and he'd be on the milk train the next morning to drop the work in at the London office.

One of those fortunate chances that shape careers brought him employment on the 'Horrible Histories' and then the 'Dead Famous' series, for which he illustrated all the early titles; and he found he was generating enough income to allow him to fulfil his boyhood wish to move to Dartmoor.

By now in his late twenties, he'd begun **Mortal Engines**, initially with no thought of publication. Then those great travelling, rapacious cities invaded his imagination. Now *that*, he thought, might be worth showing to someone. So **Mortal Engines** began a journey which took it through six years and some 25 drafts. He started with a beginning, an ending, and a few set pieces along the way ' much as he'd begun with his films. He'd find what happened in between as he wrote. A character from his last movie, an enigmatic gunslinger bent on revenge, developed into one of his most complex characters, the damaged Hester Shaw (no disfiguring scar in the film ' 'I couldn't afford it ' a continuity nightmare?).

He had no success in finding an agent, so eventually he sent **Mortal Engines** direct to Scholastic. The book won the Smarties Award, the Blue Peter Award for Book of the Year and was shortlisted for the Whitbread; Scholastic wanted more. He'd had no thought of a sequel, let alone a quartet. **Predator's Gold** was rewritten so many times that Philip doesn't think there's a single sentence of the first draft left in the published version. And the third book, **Infernal Devices**, grew so much that he needed the fourth, **A Darkling Plain**. You might think that a writer who drives four or five simultaneous adventures along at breakneck speed with characters scattered all over the globe through four books, would need some sort of chart to keep track. Not at all. It's all in his head; 'If I wake up in the middle of the night, that's it, I've had it'. Those adventures find their shape in moving pictures as well as living words ' scenes are strongly visualised as he thinks and writes, the images shifting in his mind as draft follows draft. Not unlike editing film.

Every now and again the reckless narrative is interrupted by a quirky wit that is so, well, *cheeky*, that I laughed aloud. You're absorbed in a Sci-Fi fantasy, for want of a better classification, when suddenly: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a fake explorer in possession of a good fortune must be in search of a wife, and Pennyroyal had got himself lumbered with Boo-Boo Heckmondwyke'; that's Professor Nimrod Beauregard Pennyroyal, of course, the wonderful re-writer of world history as ripping yarns starring himself. A guest at a chattering drinks party is none other than 'the great P P Bellman, author of atheistic pop-up books for the trendy toddler'. Then there's Mr Shkin the slave trader, with his 'Investors in People' logo. Biggles' pilot pals, Algy and Ginger, take to the air again with the Flying Ferrets Squadron ' commanded by a woman at that. Philip is less interested in the in-jokes than the texture and depth that names and allusions give to the language; after all, not too many of his young readers will pick up the references. He is acutely conscious of the rhythms of his sentences, that sense of 'rightness'; which is why he regrets the American edition of **Mortal Engines** where the publishers tinkered with names and phrases, as well as spellings. Changing 'torch' to 'flashlight' shifts the balance within a sentence; and when characters are voyaging in airships drifting through dangerous skies or aboard cities sliding over thin ice, every word must work to sustain the precarious equilibrium.

Other projects had been on hold while the quartet was completed. **Larklight**, 'A Rousing Tale of Dauntless Pluck in the Farthest Reaches of Space', was an enjoyable collaboration with illustrator David Wyatt; it came more easily – altogether lighter and needing fewer drafts, he says. The first two chapters of his latest book, **Here Lies Arthur**, were written on the train home from receiving the Smarties Award for the quartet; it seemed time to forsake the future for the past. How to tell a story which had been told so well by many others, particularly Rosemary Sutcliff (a boyhood favourite) and, more recently, Kevin Crossley-Holland? And who were the first tellers of those tales of questing knights, of fidelity and betrayal? Well, Myrddin himself was a bard. Then suppose Arthur was a boorish, self-serving womaniser more interested in gold than honour? If Myrddin wanted to present a romantic image of a king the people might follow, then rather than a bard, he needed to be a spin doctor?

So what's next? The film rights for the quartet are with the company currently making **His Dark Materials**. Maybe that will happen, maybe not. There's a kind of prequel to the quartet already in the making, a noir-ish Sci Fi, his Raymond Chandler book perhaps. There are other tales embedded in the universe of **Larklight** waiting to be told. And there's quite a different story, set in silent movie Hollywood – around 1912 – for which the research reading is just beginning. Four or more projects brewing, then.

At the core of things will be his family and the writing – essentially for himself, with Philip Reeve aged around 13 or 14 not too far away. Playing together in his mind, there will be conflicts and conversations, journeys and battles, and maybe flying machines and robots; there will be desperate adventures, surprising humour and moments of stillness when one character gently finds another. That, and much more, we'll read in his books; but if you met him casually, you probably wouldn't read any of that in the easy, modest, smiling grace of the man.

**Geoff Fox** edits the international journal, **Children's Literature in Education**, and also works as an occasional storyteller and part time actor.

## The Books

(published by Scholastic unless otherwise indicated)

**Here Lies Arthur**, 978 0 439 95533 1, £12.99 hbk (see review on p.23)

**Larklight**, ill. David Wyatt, Bloomsbury, 0 7475 8240 8, £12.99 hbk

*The 'Mortal Engines' Quartet:*

**Mortal Engines**, 978 0 439 97943 6, £5.99 pbk

**Predator's Gold**, 978 0 439 97734 0, £5.99 pbk

**Infernal Devices**, 978 0 439 96393 0, £5.99 pbk

**A Darkling Plain**, 978 0 439 94997 2, £12.99 hbk, 978 0 439 94346 8, £6.99 pbk

*The Buster Bayliss series:*

**Night of the Living Veg**, 978 0 439 95569 0, £4.99 pbk

**The Big Freeze**, 978 0 439 95570 6, £4.99 pbk

**Day of the Hamster**, 978 0 439 97950 4, £4.99 pbk

**Custardfinger**, 978 0 439 98090 4, £4.99 pbk

[www.mortalengines.co.uk](http://www.mortalengines.co.uk) [3]



[Philip Reeve.JPG](#) [4]

Philip Reeve

Page Number:

8

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Oct '19):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/164/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no164-philip-reeve>

**Links:**

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/164>

[3] <http://www.mortalengines.co.uk>

[4] [http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Philip Reeve.JPG](http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Philip%20Reeve.JPG)