



An interview with Mal Peet

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Mal Peet talks about his book *Life: An Exploded Diagram*

*1. You've said that in **Life: An Exploded Diagram** you didn't set out to write an autobiographical novel, but admit that there are striking similarities?. What are they?*

Well, Clem's family is my family, but photoshopped, so to speak, almost beyond recognition. There are very few people still alive, other than my brother and sister, who would recognise the models for George and Ruth. And my gran, although churchy and prayerful, was nothing like as harsh, or bonkers, as Win. I altered my family's personalities not out of love or deference (or revenge) but in order for the dynamics of the story to work. Newgate is a pretty accurate, if sour, portrayal of my old school. The bike rides, the strawberry fields, the fearsome mystique of sex and the non-availability of condoms are all ingredients of my youth. Sadly, however, there was never a real Frankie. I had to make her up.

2. The geographical setting of the novel is clearly precise and important ? there is even a map on the endpapers of the paperback. Why did you choose this particular location?

North Norfolk is where I grew up; I've cycled most of the roads on that map. The locations named in the novel are barely-disguised real places; sometimes I didn't even change the names. But for several reasons it's the perfect setting. North Norfolk is ? was ? pretty remote. In post WW II Britain, great social and cultural shiftings were gathering momentum, but their vibration didn't quite reach us up there. We lived a little apart from the historical flow; we were, as Clem observes, still recognizably feudal. This sense of isolation, of living behind the times, of being unaware of nascent freedoms, is a significant contributor to Clem and Frankie's difficulties. It feels to me as though the events in the novel might have taken place a hundred, rather than fifty years ago; I rather hope younger readers will feel likewise. Also, in some of my earlier books, I devoted a great deal of energy to creating an imaginary country: its history, landscapes, society, all of that. Writing out of memory was just a little bit easier.

3. What are your own memories of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

This connects with the previous question. I think that a good many Norfolk folk (like Ruth, in the novel) felt that it had nothing to do with them. Most of us wouldn't have been able to find Cuba in an atlas, and so carried on regardless. Unfortunately, though, East Anglia was home to a number of British and American bases for nuclear-capable bombers, and we would have been a prime target for Soviet missiles. I was fifteen at the time ? two years younger than Clem ? and when the crisis arrived out of the blue I was filled with terror and resentment. In the book, my own feelings are expressed not by Clem but by Goz, in his outburst in the school bogs. And by Frankie when she says ?I absolutely refuse to die a virgin. It would just be too awful.? I was incandescent with outrage at the thought that the Yanks and Russians might convert me to ash before I'd got my hands on the prematurely voluptuous Avril Samms at number 64. Now, the whole episode seems like a weird dream, an interruption of normal service. We'd sit and watch the terrifying news on the telly, then get comfy for ?Dixon of Dock Green?.

4. Clem says he has no time for nostalgia: ?The past has bloody teeth and bad breath,? he says. Are you ever nostalgic for times past?

I suppose anyone who writes a novel located in his own past might be accused of nostalgia. But I'm not guilty, I think. I have an uneasy sense of things getting quietly worse, especially for the young. I do get wistful about free university education and student grants and principled governments and affordable housing, vanished old stuff like that. But it's just delusional to look back and say, without qualification, 'things were better then?'. The antidote to nostalgia is the memory of agonizing dentistry.

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