



Authorgraph interview 203: Anthony McGowan

Article Author:

[Caroline Sanderson](#) [1]

[203](#) [2]

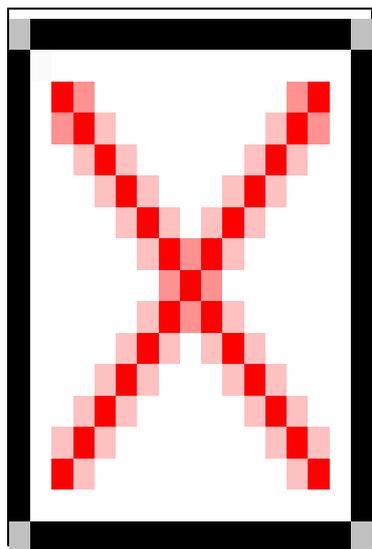
Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Anthony McGowan interviewed by Caroline Sanderson

?With most of my books there has been a nugget of a memory which triggers things. Then that gets melded with whatever I'm reading at that time?.



My morning's conversation at home with Anthony McGowan is chock full of literary references. His first published teenage novel - the hilarious, Baroque, poofest that is **Hellbent** - nods firmly in the direction of **Dante's Inferno**, the source of the 'gory and funny and rude' bits, he says, as well as the portentous epigraph, 'Abandon all hope ye who enter here?'. His second novel, **Henry Tumour** owes a debt to **Henry IV Part One**, the Shakespeare play he knows best having studied it for O-level. And the chillingly intense, **The Knife That Killed Me**, McGowan's 2008 novel about knife crime - a film adaptation of which is due to be released in early 2014 - was permeated by a reading of Homer's **Iliad** and Cormac McCarthy's **Blood Meridian**.

The Knife That Killed Me was quite an unusual novel for me to write because it's an issues book, something I normally shy away from?, he tells me. ?I think I needed **The Iliad** as a spur. And in **Blood Meridian** there's this character called The Judge; a psychotic evil murderer who's also incredibly intelligent and charismatic. My character Roth is a lot like a kid I knew at school, but with an extra element of insanity from The Judge?.

And then there's McGowan's weirdly wonderful latest novel, **Hello Darkness** - a book he dubs his most literary of all - which is shot through with the rhythms, pace and wry, dry dialogue of American noir detective fiction. Raymond Chandler; with a talking cat from Haruki Murakami for good measure.

Anthony McGowan has already managed to pack an awesome range of genres into a publishing career that is barely a decade old. And yet unlike most children's authors, who are wont to reel off the seminal books of their childhood, he

attributes his 'house style' to having read almost no fiction at all when young. 'My lack of being steeped in children's classics is where my own personal vision comes in. I didn't have any templates. When I began writing **Hellbent**, I let rip without stopping to think: what are children's books meant to be like?'

The child Anthony's route into books was a factual one. 'From quite small, I was obsessed with nature. I had my little nature table with a pheasant's wing and a seahorse, and a line of Ladybird books on the shelf. And **The Guinness Book of Animal Facts and Feats**, which I read over and over again. When I wrote my Willard Price adventures, I was basically just regurgitating that book?.'

'Then when I was about nine, my primary school teacher Miss Marney gave me a beautiful crucifix and a copy of **The Lord of the Rings** because I was 'and don't put this in? it will ruin my reputation? an elegant little altar boy*. I don't think I'd ever read a novel before, not even an Enid Blyton. It took me several years to finish reading it, but afterwards, I'd become a different kind of person; one who read novels and might one day write one?.'

Born in Manchester where his parents had met whilst working as nurses, Anthony McGowan's family moved to Sherburn-in-Elmet near Leeds when he was a small child. The second oldest of five children he grew up in a working-class household with 'lots of intellectual ferment, lots of arguments about politics. My parents were both socialists?.'

They were also Roman Catholic which is why, instead of sending the young Anthony to the 'perfectly good local high school?', he was dispatched to the nearest Catholic secondary instead. 'It was the one my Dad used to drive past on his way into work so it was convenient. But it was one of the worst schools in Leeds?.'

It was a life-changing decision. 'My upbringing until then had been fairly sheltered and quite rural. Suddenly I was surrounded by lots of disturbed and dangerous kids from a sink estate. Every break-time there'd be fights, and the teachers kept control with absolute brutality. On my very first day, I was talking in line outside, and the next thing I knew, I was looking up at the sky. A teacher had slapped me to the ground. It was a massive shock to the system. But it was also the making of me because you had to confront reality bred in tooth and claw?.'

McGowan avoided being bullied by being good at football and cricket, sports which were 'and still are a big part of his life. 'The bizarre thing is, I had an amazing time there and made some really good friends?. What's more, his fearsome school, Corpus Christi, went on to become a leitmotif in his novels, recognisable from its recurring geographical parameters ' the brown, stinky waters of the beck running through it, and the 'Gypsy Field?. 'I keep focusing on my school in my work because that's when stuff happened in my head. Every day was full of conflict and terror and excitement. And I wanted to make kids and their social networks the focus of all my books. As parents (McGowan has two children of his own), we think we loom large, but we don't. There's been a lot of research about what actually forms the attitudes of teenagers and parental input is almost zero. That's the theoretical underpinning of my teen books. But also my memories of school are seared into my mind, and they are the stuff that fiction is made of: conflict and love and hate?.'

After moving to a different school for his sixth form studies (a much more traumatic experience as it turned out because for a year, McGowan was the only boy among 55 girls), he went to Manchester University to study for a degree in Philosophy and Politics, and stayed on to do an MPhil. A career in academia beckoned. 'I had a plan that I'd get a job teaching at a university or polytechnic, and write literary novels on the side?. Then he had a change of heart and moved to London (he stayed, and now lives in West Hampstead) where he took a job with the civil service. 'I hated every minute of it?. Out of sheer boredom and frustration, he began to write **Hellbent**.

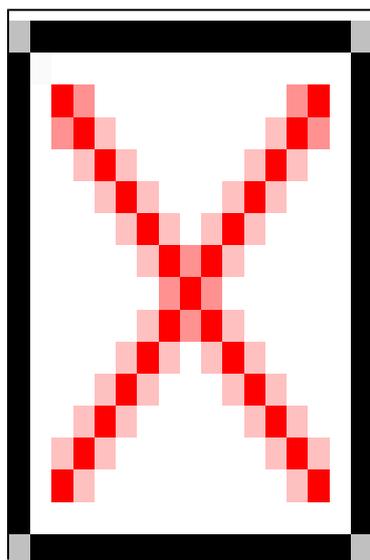
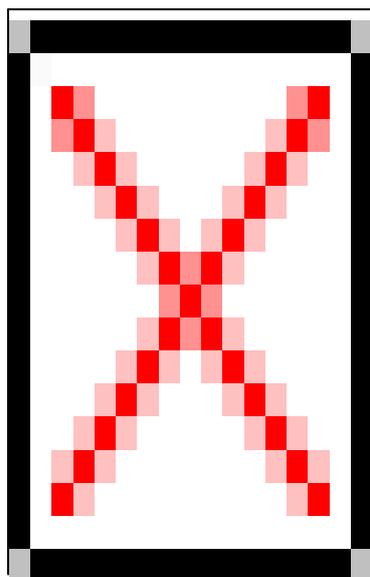
'I'd heard that there was this category called YA but I thought that meant books for people like me; young adults in their twenties. So that's who I wrote it for and consequently the first draft was slightly more extreme than the final version. I sent it to various agents, and got universal rejections. Not even personalised rejections.

Publication eventually came via an unorthodox route. 'Whenever people ask me for advice about how get published, I say, you just couldn't do it like me. In short, McGowan's fashion designer wife, Rebecca Campbell had an idea for a

novel. ?I helped her write it, but it was basically hers. And then straight away, based on the first few chapters, she got an agent and a colossal book deal?. The agent in question ?Stephanie Cabot from the William Morris Agency ? asked to see his book, and ?out of pity I think, she took me on?. She sent **Hellbent** out again, and this time it received nice, personalised rejections. Cabot suggested he wrote something more commercial. So McGowan wrote the first few chapters of an adult thriller, **Stag Hunt**. It was snapped up by Hodder who published it in 2004. ?I was Hodder?s hot young thriller writer. Things looked really good?. And then a mistake in printing the barcode on a huge order of paperbacks destined for Tesco stalled his nascent career as an adult writer. ?They sent all the books back and the paperback completely flopped as a result?.

It?s an appalling story but out of the ashes, a committed writer for young people was reborn. ?I had finished **Hellbent** and turned it into a teen book by taking out some of the more explicit stuff. It got taken on quite quickly by Random House, just as my adult career was shrivelling on the vine. I realised that I enjoyed writing for teenagers much more?. Acclaim came quickly with some rave reviews from the likes of Anthony Horowitz, and Amanda Craig, who called **Hellbent** ?a brilliantly nauseating thriller?. It was shortlisted for the **Branford Boase Award** , and then **Henry Tumour** won the **Booktrust Teenage Prize**.

To broaden his market, McGowan went on to write books for younger children, including the Bare Bum Gang series for 7-9 years olds. ?They were partly based on my own childhood growing up in Sherburn which was really rather idyllic, with dens and gangs and wars against other gangs but not serious ones. I really enjoyed writing them, and they are probably my most successful books in terms of sales?. There is also the **Donut Diaries** series which McGowan wrote as his own children were growing up. ?I was thinking about my son going up to secondary school and the trials and tribulations of that?.



A chance meeting in Scotland when **Henry Tumour** won the **Catalyst Award** led to McGowan being invited to write for Barrington Stoke. To date, he has produced two books for them: **The Fall**; and the CILIP Carnegie nominated **Brock**, the bleak but redemptive story of a boy, Nicky, and Snuffy, the badger cub he rescues, set once again in the fertile territory of McGowan's Yorkshire childhood.

Having recently completed his fourth and final Willard Price adventure, along with some titles for OUP's **Project X** literacy programme, McGowan has some intriguing new ventures in the infernal fire, including a collaboration with Joanna Nadin on a novel he bills as a pastiche of 'death lit' and 'all those novels about teenagers dying of cancer'. Ever one to roam wide across stylistic and genre boundaries, he has also been mulling an idea for a fantasy series. 'In my Cormac McCarthy phase I read **The Road** and was massively affected by it. I've thought of a fantasy plot that is a bit **Game of Thrones** for teenagers. It's set after the next ice age with a few scraps of humanity holding on. I'm deliberately avoiding the word, 'dystopian'. 'Will it be set in your school?' I ask, flippantly. 'It's kind of like Corpus Christi. And it's got monsters in it. Cannibal mutant human monsters'. I can hardly wait.

*Later he said I could put this in.

Caroline Sanderson is a freelance reviewer, editor and writer.

Brock Barrington Stoke, 978-1781122082, £6.99

The Fall Barrington Stoke, 978-1842994863, £6.99

The Knife that Killed Me Definitions, 978-1862306066, **£6.99**

Hellbent Definitions (Young Adult) 978-0099482130, £7.99

[Hello Darkness](#) [3]Walker, 978-1406337846, £6.99

Henry Tumour Definitions, 978-0099488231, £6.99

Willard Price adventures are published by Puffin, at £5.99

Bare Bum Gang series is published by Red Fox at £4.99

Donut Diaries series is published by Corgi at £5.99

Page Number:

10

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/203/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-interview-203-anthony-mcgowan>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/caroline-sanderson>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/203>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/202/childrens-books/reviews/hello-darkness>