



# An interview with Michael Byrne

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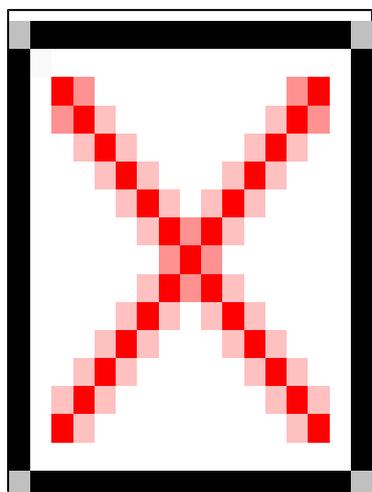
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**Geraldine Brennan** talks to the author of **Lottery Boy**

Michael Byrne's tale of a boy with nothing whose hopes rest on a winning lottery ticket was born out of his early classroom encounters with young teenagers whose lives were culturally as well as materially poor. **Geraldine Brennan** talks to him about his book, **Lottery Boy**.



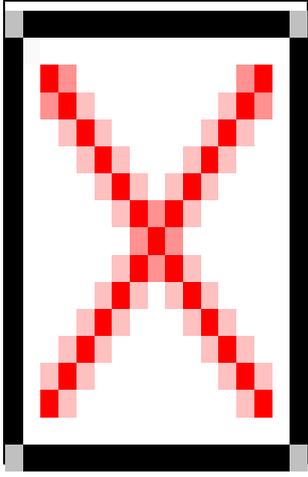
While training at the London Institute of Education to teach secondary English, Michael Byrne did his first teaching practice on the fringes of west London, in an area of sink estates controlled by gangs.

‘The boys’ worlds were so small and the gangs controlled a lot of their lives. They were in Year 8 and most of them had never been into central London. They seemed not to have anyone looking out for them.

‘My father was very poor growing up ? the teachers used to feed him jam sandwiches at school ? but this was the first time I’d seen this sort of poverty, a poverty from within.’

Michael’s *Lottery Boy*, *Bradley/Bully*, encapsulates some of the inner emptiness of a child who has given up on any help from the adult world, relying instead on an underground network where betrayal and violence is commonplace. *Bully* slips through every possible safety net when his mother dies and her partner focuses on his new family. The winning lottery ticket his mother leaves him turns out to be a curse rather than a blessing as it attracts the attention of the gang leader and his sidekicks.

The odyssey Bully undertakes with his precious dog, Jack, to cash in his ticket before the baddies find him places



him in the same position as Michael's first pupils. He moves through London's tourist spots but interprets them as hostile obstacles, treating strangers' concern and kindness with suspicion. When a middle-class family try to help him, there is a Mars-and-Venus quality to their relationship.

Again, Michael finds parallels in the classroom. Once qualified as a teacher, he taught near Heathrow Airport in a secondary where more than 70 languages were spoken and some pupils were refugees surviving harrowing experiences. 'I asked my class what they'd done in the school holidays and a pupil from Somalia said: 'we had to go to the airport and my grandad had his head shot off and we had to leave him by the side of the road.' You realised you had no idea what these young people had been through. In a similar way, there's stuff inside Bully's head you couldn't imagine, which makes it hard for anyone to reach him. He gets what seems to be a chance to change his life, but his experiences have made him brittle.'

His own childhood in Southampton also provided fuel for Bully's sense of dislocation among people who did not share his roots. 'My parents swapped our house for a house in a richer area and I'd have friends whose houses were much nicer than ours and I always felt a bit at sea when I went there.'

'Also, now and then I do give Bully the belief you have as a child that everything will be all right. I remember being warned again and again about getting into strangers' cars, and once a man I'd talked to at the bus stop offered me a lift and after a while I weighed up the possibility of him being OK and got into his car and it was absolutely fine. Every so often Bully decides someone is OK.'

After an unconfident start 'I'm quiet by nature and I felt that I had to put on a personality to teach' -- Michael enjoyed teaching until the death of his wife led him to move closer to his parents with his daughter and join the family taxi business. 'I needed something that didn't fill my head up,' as he says. Having taken ten years to complete his first novel for adults while teaching, he relished the extra pockets of time for writing. 'I'd drive from 4am to 9am and have big chunks of daytime left over.' After several unpublished adult novels, he sensed that Bully's story might work for a young adult readership. 'I worried about getting the tone right, then decided to write it and find out who it was for.'

The book that became **Lottery Boy** was shortlisted in **The Times/Chicken House 2013 children's fiction prize**, which led Michael to representation by The Blair Partnership and publication by Walker on May 7.

Some of the book's more challenging scenes, when Bully and his dog finally fall into the wrong hands, had to be reworked. 'I made quite subtle changes to give Bully a bit more power. And the ending is complex, leaving it to Bully how his future will turn out.'

**Geraldine Brennan** is a journalist specialising in children's books and education, regularly reviews for the **Observer** and has judged several literary awards.

[Lottery Boy](#) [3] is published by Walker Books, 978-1406358292, £6.99

Page Number:

**Source URL (retrieved on Sep '19):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/212/childrens-books/articles/an-interview-with-michael-byrne>

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