



Authorgraph 225 Chris Priestley

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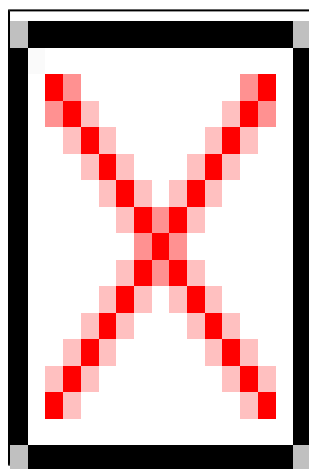
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Chris Priestley interviewed by **Philip Womack**

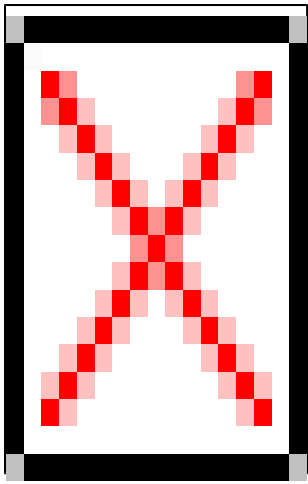


Chris Priestley is the author of numerous varied works for children and young adults: the superb [Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror](#) [3], which exhibit a flawless control of suspense, tone and horror, and most recently, a sequence of intelligent, elegant, dark reinventions of classics, such as [Mister Creecher](#) [4], which took its lead from Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**; and a Kafka-esque novel for teens, [Anything that Isn't This](#) [5], about an adolescent boy in a nightmarishly bureaucratic world. His new book, [Superpowerless](#) [6], covers similar territory, in that it focuses on a teenage boy's quest for identity and self-knowledge. It also refers to superhero comics and **Hamlet**. I caught up with Priestley over the phone - we had intended to Facetime, as I was in Spain, and he was in Cambridge, where he lives, but neither of us were able to work out how to use it.

Priestley's mind has a natural questioning bent, and that comes through very clearly in the way that his teenage protagonists develop. David, the protagonist of **Superpowerless**, is bequeathed a collection of comic books by his father, who died in an accident, and he obsesses over them, half-believing that he himself has powers, always trying, obliquely, to get to the truth of what happened. How big were comics as an influence on Priestley as a writer? He 'always loved comics as a child,' and when he moved to Newcastle and 'a really horrible estate,' it was 'an escape thing to go the newsagents and buy Marvell comics.' He still gets 'wistful' thinking about them, and especially as he can remember himself in his bedroom reading them: a 'very teenage boy kind of way of ignoring everyone,' much as David himself does.

There's a lot of imagery in the novel to do with light, knowledge and perception: a bird-watching scope that David uses to observe his beautiful teenage neighbour, and a super-villain apparently made of light. I asked Priestley whether this was a conscious move. In fact these images stemmed from Priestley's desire to explore the stereotype of 'the mumbling teenage boy', as well as from the kind of superhero trope emblematised by Spiderman: 'teenage boys feel that they're a lot more interesting, a lot cooler than people are realising, if only people could see this other side of them.'

Being a teenage boy is hard, says Priestley: 'Peter Parker is that teenage boy who's got this amazing side to him - I played



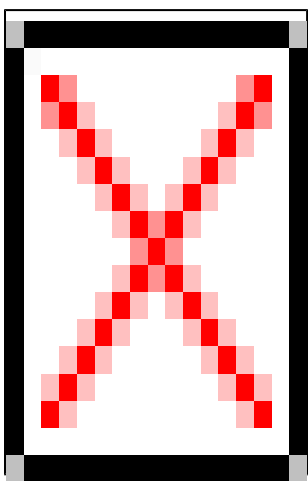
around with that in [Anything That Isn't This](#) [5] - and then I wanted to say something about sex and desire and those things that are also going on in teenage boys' lives - what's love, and what's desire, and are they the same thing - can they be the same thing, and that relationship with girls, not really understanding how to talk to girls, and not really seeing them as people, just seeing them as objects of desire.? In the novel, the scope leads to David talking to the object of his desire, and learning to see her as a human being.

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Priestley also feels that ?people seem to think that boys don't like books, so they [books] have to be like games, or about war or hoodies with knives, and all I can say is that when I was a teenage boy I wouldn't have wanted books about people living on horrible housing estates. So I wanted to escape - I read sci-fi to get away from all that. I think if you're going to try to do books about teenage boys at least accept that there isn't a template - I meet teenage boys all the time and they're funny - where are all the funny books??

Returning to superheroes, and their linkage of strength and vulnerability, I mention the Norse gods, and how they get more power when they are maimed: ?I loved Norse mythology because it's strange. Sometimes you read the stories and think - what? They don't make sense, they don't have story arcs in the way that we think of them as having. They're all riddles and weird things. There is something at the heart of that - I'm not sure I was conscious of that, vulnerability and strength. I think that is true but not something that I was consciously thinking.?

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I ask him whether he thinks his writing has changed: ?I'm sure I have developed as a writer - the interesting thing for me is part of the arc of my career has been about Adam my son growing older ? as he was going through his teens I spent a lot of time revisiting my own teens. Some things are massively different, but some things are the same, and that to me is fascinating. I think I'm lots of different kind of writers - I've never had the ability to be able to stick to one way of doing things ? to keep myself interested I try and go with whatever seems most vivid in my head.?

He loves experimenting: ?When I wrote **Anything That Isn't This** I found a little tiny notebook of a fable I'd written - I must have been reading Calvino and Kafka, and I thought - I used to be that kind of writer, I used to write weird little funny fables, and of all the things I've found in notebooks, they were the things that intrigued me most. I think I go all

over the place as writer. It would be hard for me to go back and find a style. I think I do have a style but I'm not sure what it is.?

This approach has also led him in other directions: 'I'm just about to do a funny series for Bloomsbury, a school set thing and that's been a lot of fun to write. Middle grade, it's a really fun age group to write for. I never had a plan to be a children's writer, I'm not one of those people who came in thinking it was a career - I thought of myself as a writer and I just ended up writing for children. If I ended up writing for adults it wouldn't be a change for me, it would just be another kind of writing.'

I ask him where might he go next? 'I think the temptation for me would be to write for adults now. I'm a little bit unsure about the teenage fiction project. I'm worried that we're training people to read teenage fiction rather than passing on the torch to adult fiction. I'm worried that we're creating a generation who will always be reading books with a 16 year old protagonist. I stopped reading children's books at the age of 16. I keep promising myself I'll write adult fiction. A lot of it doesn't seem very good - I think maybe I should have a go - either some short stories for adults or a creepy novel or something.' He adds, 'It would be quite interesting to just write something without any concern for the readership age.'

Whatever happens, it looks like we can expect a lot of interesting new projects from Priestley: 'There is no magic for anything - you have to reinvent each time and try and make it better. There's always that weird anti-climax when you finish a book, and writing a new one is a way of trying to address the things that you didn't sort out in the one before.' I can't wait to see what he does next.

Philip Womack is an author and critic. His latest novel [The King's Revenge](#) [7] is published by Troika Books and concludes the **Darkening Path** trilogy.

Books mentioned:

[Superpowerless](#) [6], Hot Key Books, 978-1-4714-0497-9, £7.99

[Anything that Isn't This](#) [5], Hot Key Books, 978-1-4714-0464-1, £8.99

[Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror](#) [3], Bloomsbury, 978-1-4088-7109-6, £6.99

[Mister Creecher](#) [4], Bloomsbury, 978-1-4088-1105-4, £7.99

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