



Culture, class and J G Ballard: an interview with Philip Reeve

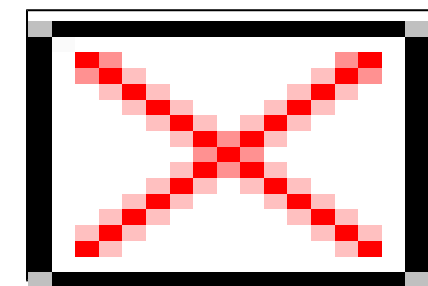
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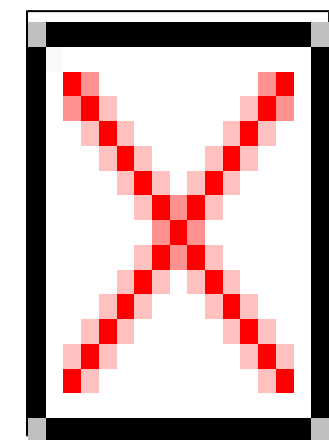
Philip Reeve interviewed by **Philip Womack**



Philip Reeve strides through the foyer of the National Theatre, his tall, spindly form unmistakable among the afternoon playgoers. I'm meeting him to talk about his new book, **Black Light Express**, which follows on from his superlative sci-fi, [Railhead](#) [3]

. The world he builds, in which sentient trains connect planets, is a rich and rewarding one, beautifully rendered; the plot full of classic, thrilling adventure. The protagonists of the first one, ex-thief Zen, and his android girlfriend Nova, have broken through into a new network of trains, and must face up to more threatening challenges. The universe is run by various aristocratic clans and we are introduced to the Prells, whose power hunger is a threat to the imperial Noon family. There are two main plot arcs, both featuring teenage girls breaking out of their circumstances; it's every bit as absorbing as the first.

Reeve's currently at work on the third, which will be out next year. His body of work so far comprises the superlative **Mortal Engines** sequence, in which cities cross the plains of a future earth; the Carnegie-winning **Here Lies Arthur**, and many other books for younger children.



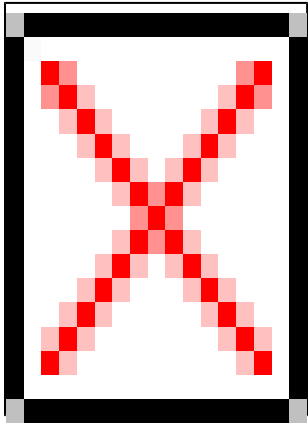
Wearing a colourful stripy shirt, and walking boots, Reeve sits down at my table. There is a calm, quiet air of charm around him. We have our coffees in the foyer, surrounded by people tapping at laptops, or waiting for their shows to start.

One of my favourite moments in the new book is something that happens in passing: there's a checker board lawn on which topiary hedges, spliced with crustacean DNA, are playing a game of chess. Reeve laughs. 'Indeed in previous versions of this I had whole action sequences built around the topiary chess lawn, but it's just been reduced to a little bit of set dressing.'

This is a good example of how Reeve sets about his work. When he finishes a draft, it's usually half as long again as the finished book, and possibly two or three times as long. So I hack away at them fairly ruthlessly to try and get them moving. I try and make them pacy, really. I ask him if it ever gets any easier. 'It never really gets any easier,' he replies, 'you know people say you only learn to write the book you're writing and then you have to start again on the next one, and I think to some extent that's true.' He often has 'stacks and stacks and stacks of unused ideas.'

Reeve populates his universe with memorable characters, from the young Empress Threnody to her reluctant ally the criminal Chandni, to the trains themselves. We discuss the 'cockney psycho train,' Ghost Wolf, who falls in love with the Damask Rose. 'She's a lot classier than him!' chuckles Reeve. 'It's kind of crossing class boundaries, this romance between trains.' 'There's a lot of that in the book, I say. 'I guess there is - well there, you know, I'm English, so everything's about class.' He's 'always having to explain this to Sarah McIntyre,' [the illustrator with whom he has worked on several collaborations, including **Pugs of the Frozen North**.] 'As a writer you can't escape class.'

I ask if he's ever read Iain M Banks's **Culture** sequence, which is a science fiction extravaganza set in a kind of utopia. He



has - but only because 'when **Railhead** came out everybody said, 'Ooh, you're obviously a Banks fan'. His trick is he has this kind of perfect society, much, far more appealing than the one I'm writing about in **Railhead**, but he always leaves it. People from this society then go and have adventures on various sort of grubby worlds. It's very hard to set a story in a utopia.'

How about what's happening now, in our world? 'It's a great shame that J G Ballard didn't live another ten years because we kind of need him to explain what's happening.'

Ballard was 'one of the people who started me writing, way back in my teens when I was borrowing sci-fi anthologies from Brighton library, I spotted his short stories and thought they were way better than anything else in them, and so throughout my life I've read him.'

What are the ones that resonate most? 'Well I think his short stories are brilliant, I think he has the sort of mind that maybe is better in a short story than a novel. Some of them feel a little bit overstretched when turned into novels, although always worth reading for the writing, I love that sort of metallic prose style he has. And I love how he's not interested in characters and all that stuff. That thing readers say about 'I couldn't identify with the character' - it doesn't matter! Not all books have to be like that, and I like the fact that his aren't. So I would say his short stories, and **Empire of the Sun** I think is great.'

We discuss Ballard's continuing influence: 'I still think he's one of the great British writers of the 20th century, way more significant than a lot of better known names. Life is becoming more Ballardian. It's very hard not to [write like that] because it's all around us, he very accurately predicted the 21st century, or the way that psychology interacts with technology in our particular society.'

He even predicted our obsession with broadcasting our lives: 'There's a fabulous one and I can't quote it verbatim, and this is back in the 70s, and the interviewer is asking about the future, and asks if he's frightened of the prospect of nuclear war, and he says, 'No no, that's not going to happen, we don't need to worry about nuclear war at all, but what we need to worry about is in the future everyone's going to have the means to broadcast their own lives. They're all going to become broadcasters and they're going to become obsessed with broadcasting to everyone else the minute detail of their everyday lives. And he wasn't a technologist in any way, he didn't see the internet coming, he was imagining people with little sort of home TV stations, video tapes, but he's absolutely right, psychologically. He really understood where we were going.'

Before we finish, I am bound to ask him how he feels about his novel, **Mortal Engines** [4], being turned into a film, which is being directed by Peter Jackson. 'It's very good. I got to go down to New Zealand in the spring and meet some of the actors - they've finished now, finished shooting, all the live action, and now the 18 months of post-production are underway, large chunks of it are going to be CGI, and very state of the art CGI, so it's not quick. So yes, we hope for the best. I think it's going to look very good, judging on the sets I saw and going round the costume department and going round the art department, where they have concept art for every scene pinned up. It looks remarkably close to how I imagined it really. I think it's going to be great. What difference it makes to my life I don't know really. We'll see.'

Philip Womack [5] is an author and critic. His latest novel **The King's Revenge** [6] is published by Troika Books and concludes the **Darkening Path** trilogy.

Railhead and **Black Light Express** are published by Oxford Children's Books.

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