



Authorgraph No.9 - John Christopher

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John Christopher interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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You'd think that publishers would be more than happy with a successful author who was producing four books a year. But alas, some people are never happy, and Sam Youd found that being prolific worried his publishers, to the extent that they asked him to use different names for some of his books. It's because of this that children have been able to read a number of books by an author called John Christopher, who is that same Sam Youd.

The original Sam Youd was born in Knowsley, Lancashire, in 1922, but moved south to Hampshire when he was ten. He was educated at Peter Symonds' School, Winchester (a city which was to form the centre of several of his books for children), which he left at the age of 16 to work in local government. But it was too late by then - he had already been bitten by one of the most virulent strains of the writing bug.

'I was messing about with writing when I was in my teens, and I was absolutely passionately devoted to science fiction from the time I was about 11 to the time I was 16 or 17. I published an amateur magazine which was tied up with the science fiction scene of the '30s. SF fans these days tend to be sort of intense, and at that time we were even more so because it was only just starting. We kept in touch by letter, through our magazines and even then at conventions.'

He was called up into the army in 1941, where he stayed in the Signals until 1946. Back in civvy street he was lucky enough to get a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation which enabled him to concentrate on his writing for a year. 'They gave me £250, which was quite a lot of money at the time, and all you had to do was promise to spend a year writing. You didn't have to produce anything, you just weren't allowed to take a job. I did one novel in that time, and started another.'

But all good things come to an end, and with a wife and growing family (he has one son and four daughters), he was forced to take a job. 'Meanwhile I kept writing in my spare time, trying to keep writing novels. At one period I was writing four books a year in my spare time from the office. I used to come home every night and work, although I did give myself Thursday evenings off.'

'I don't think it made me write any worse than I would otherwise have done. In fact I did once say that every writer ought to get married young and start raising a large family. There's nothing like that sort of incentive to make you work.'

It paid off for Sam Youd, at any rate, for one of the books he wrote in those 'hectic' years was **The Death of Grass**, which is probably his most successful adult book and which was made into an MGM film in the '60s. It was that book which enabled him to devote himself full-time to writing, the profession which he pursued in Guernsey in the Channel Islands for over 20 years before he came back to live in Sussex.

Other successful adult books followed, so it was as an established writer that he was approached by Hamish Hamilton to write a science fiction novel for children. He at first turned down the idea, mainly because he didn't like the idea of being commissioned to write a novel. Another problem was that his teenage passion for science fiction had cooled. He found the past by now more stimulating than the future as an incentive to imagination. 'In the old days, I - and many others who felt the same way - thought that science fiction was all wonderful stuff, but stuff which actually could happen. You could believe there was enough air on Mars to support life and so on, because we knew relatively little about the solar system. But by the time it actually began to start happening we knew so much more. That sort of science fiction seems to me more like fairy stories, now.'

'I suppose I like things to be a bit more practically based, so when I was writing adult science fiction I had found myself coming closer and closer to the present and just going maybe a year or two ahead. By the time I was asked to do a children's novel I'd totally lost interest in science fiction. But I think I got round that a bit neatly by writing a book which was set theoretically in the future, but which was much more about medieval England - the past in the future.'

That's a thing which he's continued to do in other books. His first children's novel, **The White Mountains**, is set in a future where mankind is dominated by a race of aliens who control the world from their huge, strange cities and all-powerful tripods. At puberty, everyone has a 'cap' placed on their heads which effectively reduces them to a state of contented slavery. A small band of freedom fighters struggle to save the world, and the struggle is depicted in two further books, **The City of Gold and Lead** and **The Pool of Fire**. The point is that mankind has been reduced to the level of the middle ages, something which worldwide volcanic activity achieves in **The Prince in Waiting** trilogy and the squandering of mineral fuels in **Wild Jack**.

His central theme is probably best described as the responsibility of freedom, and this is in a very strong sense linked to his approach to writing for children. 'I worked out some years ago, or at least I think I did to my own satisfaction, why **The White Mountains** had been one of my most successful books. I think the successful children's books are those which appeal to something at a deeper level which the child doesn't really quite work out. Now in **The White Mountains**, the whole thing is that at puberty people are brainwashed. The whole future of mankind rests in the hands of the young, the age group for which I'm writing.'

'I think that kids at that age - around 12 or 13 - probably do look at the adults around them resentfully and think of them as hidebound and prejudiced. It's important for children to have stories which put them in the driving seat.' But the young hero of the book - Will, whose name itself is indicative - has to cope with the responsibilities of freedom, for the lives of most of the 'capped' adults are portrayed as enormously attractive, while the lives of the freedom fighters are arduous and weighed down with decision. It's these sorts of problems - of learning to make your own decisions and take the consequences - which he's writing about, and which children have to learn to face as they grow up. Perhaps the most concise expression of this theme comes in **The Guardians** which won the Guardian Award in 1971.

'I've been thinking about it recently, trying to work out why I became attracted to science fiction in the first place. I remember one book my mother read to me before I could read was **Swiss Family Robinson**, and I remember reading myself at a fairly early stage Ballantyne's **Coral Island**. The point is that they're about strange and wonderful happenings, and although in **Swiss Family Robinson** Wyss cheats like mad by having all sorts of things on the island you couldn't possibly have, you believe it all until you know better, it's something you believe could happen. And I was attracted by the **Coral Island** theme of three boys in a strange and dangerous situation having to learn how to cope.'

'That crops up in **Empty World**' (in which a plague wipes out all but the young, and most of them). 'When I first thought of the idea I remembered that when I was a kid - and I imagine everyone goes through the same thing - I had moments of thinking, wouldn't it be nice if there were no adults around? You could feel free to do anything without any harassment. What I was doing was to paint the blacker side of that. It really wouldn't be as good as it seems to have that sort of freedom.'

He feels that his own personal future now lies firmly with children's books, and his first novel after a gap of several years has just been published by Victor Gollancz. **Fireball** is his first 'alternative world' book, in which two boys

plunge through a 'dimensional overlap' to find themselves in a Britain where it is 1981, but where the Roman Empire never fell. 'When I was living in the Channel Islands I was beginning to think with over 50 books behind me I'd over-written a bit, and that it was reasonable to take a year off. It turned out to be three years, but it wasn't too difficult to get back into writing. It was good to have a book within three months of sitting down to write.'

He used the three-year lay-off to 'try and get in touch with my audience' and started to go out and meet the kids who read his books. They sell much better in the United States than they do here (which he finds hard to understand) and his American publishers were happy to help him meet his American readers. His visits to the States he has found fascinating, and he believes that 'the Americans are far better organised when it comes to kids and reading' than we are. Meeting his audience is something that he enjoys and which he intends to carry on doing.

He has been accused of pessimism in his books, and agrees that it's something which does run through many of them. **The Prince in Waiting** trilogy he thinks is 'particularly sombre', although they're his favourite books - perhaps even because of that. 'One thing which runs through those books - and others - is the destruction of the good things of the past by technology. Although they're fighting to restore science, it's not a good thing really, because the life they've got is better than the one they will have when they've got science. It could be just growing old, but there's always this lost world thing, looking back to a golden era. In my teens I was looking to science and the future. It was all going to be wonderful, but it didn't turn out like that. I do feel very strongly that children's books should have an upbeat to them, but there is this basic pessimism in me and it surfaces at some point.'

Pessimism apart, now he's started again he intends to keep writing. But he won't say much about what's coming. 'It's sheer superstition; I have a rooted objection to making statements about future projects or work in hand.' We'll just have to wait and see what the future brings.

The books

The Lotus Caves, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 01729 7, £3.25; Puffin, 0 14 03.0503 3, 75p

The Guardians, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 01795 5, £3.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.0579 3, 95p

The Prince in Waiting, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 01937 0, £2.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.0617 X, Reissue Summer 1981, 85p

Beyond the Burning Lands, Puffin, 0 14 03.0625 0, Reissue Summer 1981, 85p

The Sword of the Spirits, Puffin, 0 14 03.0630 7, Reissue Summer 1981, 85p

The White Mountains, Beaver, 0 600 39367 4, 90p

The City of Gold and Lead, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 91312 8, £3.95; Beaver, 0 600 31931 8, 90p

The Pool of Fire, Beaver, 0 600 371 34 4, 90p

Empty World, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 89751 3, £3.95; Puffin Plus, 0 14 03.1305 2, December 1981

Fireball, Gollancz, 0 575 02974 9, £4.95

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