



Authorgraph No.166: William Nicholson

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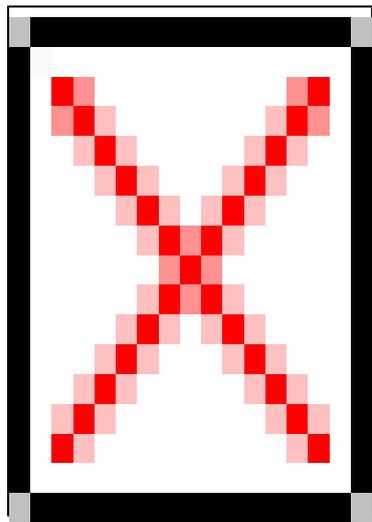
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William Nicholson interviewed by **Clive Barnes**.



William Nicholson interviewed by **Clive Barnes**

William Nicholson was a phenomenally successful writer before he began writing fantasy for children and young people about ten years ago. His screenplays for **Shadowlands** and **Gladiator** are but the most visible peaks of a career which began with the coveted position of BBC trainee after a double first from Cambridge, and has included documentary film work, play writing, film directing and, more recently, novels for adults. Yet he has said that **Noman**, the book which completes 'The Noble Warriors' trilogy, is probably the most important work he has ever done. It tackles a big subject: 'Who is God? What is it that lies behind this entire existence of ours?' And, as he tells me when we meet, 'The Noble Warriors' contains 'the most important thoughts I am capable of having'.

He had no such ambition when he wrote his first trilogy 'The Wind on Fire'. In fact the first book, **The Wind Singer**, had been intended to stand alone. It was only when it was accepted for publication (and was very successful - winning the Smarties Gold Award and the Blue Peter Book of the Year) that he saw the possibility of the two other books that completed the trilogy. In contrast, 'The Noble Warriors' was planned as a trilogy from the first. Not that Nicholson would want the revelation of what he calls its mystery (consciously using that term in one of its oldest senses) to overwhelm more conventional pleasures. When I ask him what experience he hopes his books will provide for his readers, he puts story and character first: 'I want my readers to care about my characters, to know them, and to feel for them.'

More of this, and the sheer enjoyment he gets from writing, come across later in our conversation, when I compliment him on the way he conveys the elation of physical action in his books, not just fighting scenes, but also the dancing scenes in **Slaves of the Mastery**, the second book in his first trilogy. 'I was always and still am a rubbish dancer,' he says. 'All the things I can't do I give to my characters and they can do them.' He had come to love the character of the dancer, Sisi, and he had concluded that 'inside me was this gorgeous sixteen-year-old princess just itching to have a

prance? All of the characters are me and I'm having fun.?

So the new book, **Noman**, isn't a sermon. On the other hand, Nicholson doesn't have any time for 'English embarrassment' with the big questions of existence and he believes that a desire 'to do something good with my life' is a real concern for young people. As a young reader himself, he had sought out books which dealt with deep questions in exciting ways: science fiction and, in particular, the Narnia books. And, although he is not proposing a Christian answer as C S Lewis does, he does want to create a myth with meaning that young people will find thrilling and intriguing.

He says the first book of 'The Noble Warriors', **Seeker**, was perhaps the easiest of the three to write, where the world and its central characters were established: the boy Seeker after Truth, the girl Morning Star, the crazy golden haired bandit, the Wild Man, and their quest to join the Nomana, the Noble Warriors. It is in this book that Seeker begins to believe that the God of the Nomana, who lives in the garden in the Warrior's island citadel, has chosen him for a special quest: a quest that continues until the last pages of **Noman**.

One hallmark of Nicholson's writing is the orchestration of several action packed stories in a single book, which gradually develop themes and characters running through all the books. **Seeker** itself introduces two carefully realised worlds in conflict: the Noble Warriors' island of Anacrea and the lakeside city of Radiance. The second book, **Jango**, introduces the Orleans, another, invading, civilisation, and a sinister cloud world inhabited by the immortal Savanters, whom Seeker believes he must destroy.

I comment that one of the other things that distinguishes Nicholson as a fantasy writer is his almost anthropological sensitivity to the different cultures he depicts. He feels this certainly goes back to his days working on the BBC Everyman documentaries, which he found 'incredibly enriching' an immense education in how different people of the world are, particularly their religions. And he finds it fascinating to be able to range across history for inspiration: in 'The Noble Warriors' drawing on medieval monastic orders, the Aztecs and the Mongols, among others. His fascination with ritual and ceremony, so apparent from the elaborately staged set pieces in his books, he immediately ascribes to his Roman Catholic childhood, particularly his time as an altar boy. 'I love ritual and I regret that there is no ritual in my life so I have to make it up.' Perhaps from that background, too, come those moments of stillness and meditation that become more evident in the latest book **Noman**, where a single blue flower in a glass in an empty room is the subject of rapt contemplation.

He becomes thoughtful when I ask him about the violence in his books. He says it is a storyteller's purpose to create a 'mythic equivalence of the real world', and our real world is 'a world of collisions, aggressions, misunderstandings and torments'. He refers, by way of example, to terrorism and suicide bombing 'and there is, indeed, a unique suicide bomb in preparation in **Seeker**. Story, he says, takes the world at its most extreme and 'puts it into an ordered and moral framework that gives it meaning.' He deliberately avoids creating villains who are monsters, or heroes who are perfect. Those characters in his books who do the worst things believe that they are doing them for good reasons. His heroes can be weak and fallible.

Nicholson's aim in **Noman** is to resolve all the battles, puzzles and tensions he has created in the first two books of 'The Noble Warriors' trilogy: the purpose of the Savanters and the relationship of Seeker with his mentors Jango and Noman; and the fates of even minor characters 'who loves whom, who finds a new life and who gets their just punishment. 'I believe in endings very strongly.' And the ending includes a resolution to Seeker's search for God, although Nicholson does not know yet how convincing or stimulating his readers will find his answer to this central question.

His feeling of responsibility to his readers is something that goes beyond the books themselves. He enjoys school visits, and he is a powerful and engaging speaker. The responses to young people's questions on his website are prompt, thoughtful and frank. When I ask him about this, he says that he feels his readers have a relationship with him 'somebody has come into my life' 'for which he is grateful but which carries obligations. And, in answering those questions which seem to come from real fears or anxieties in young people's lives, he sometimes has to ask himself, how might a teacher respond, or a father?

The writing itself takes precedence, of course, and he finds the screenwriting and novel writing complementary. He has learnt lessons from the screenwriting process which carry over into the novel writing. Every draft of his screenplays is pored over by 'development executives' who criticise them in enormous detail, asking for revision after revision. As he says, 'I am now quite a distinguished screenwriter, but I am still treated as if I were a complete rookie.' Each draft is pulled apart. 'They hammer me and hammer me' And it's great! Because it's all about whether the story and the characters work and that no one is going to be bored watching the film (or reading the book).

Despite what he has learnt from film writing, Nicholson is very protective of his books as distinct imaginative experiences. He will not have portraits of his characters on the covers of his books in case they influence the readers' perceptions. He refused to sell the film rights for his first three books before they had established themselves. He has, however, completed the first draft of a screenplay of **Seeker**, although there is no way of knowing yet if it will ever be made as a film. Film production is a long and ineffable process.

By now our interview is drawing to a close and we have been generally quite earnest in our conversation. I regret afterwards that I didn't ask how his admitted childhood passion for **Tintin**, **Just William** and the **Beano** might have fed into his fantasy books. Yet anyone who has read them will know of his mischievous sense of humour, reflected in characters like Mist, the sardonic cat who longs to fly, in 'The Wind on Fire' trilogy; and blackly comic events, like the explosive end of Soren Similin, in **Jango** - perhaps more **Viz** eventhan **Beano**.

I do ask him about whether he might write anything for young people that wasn't a fantasy. He says he has thought about it, but hasn't done it yet. He's held back by the feeling that to be young now is 'seriously different' from when he was young, more than forty years ago. But he would like to write a contemporary teenage love story.

Love brings us lastly to his own three children, who have moved from childhood into adolescence as his books have been published. His youngest child, Maria, was the same age as Pin Pin, the youngest member of the Hath family in **The Wind Singer**, when he was writing it, and I sense his own enjoyment of family life, which came relatively late to him, has carried over into his books. Other people have said so, too, he says, although it was never done consciously: 'writing is the most extraordinary process, you don't really know what you are doing' and if it works, it works because you've got a line to something inside yourself that's true' something emotionally powerful.'

The reception of **Noman**, marking the completion of his most ambitious work to date, may show how well that line holds.

Clive Barnes is Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City.

The Books

(published by Egmont at £12.99 hbk, £6.99 pbk)

'The Wind on Fire' trilogy

The Wind Singer, 978 1 4052 0990 8 pbk

Slaves of the Mastery, 978 0 7497 4901 9 pbk

Firesong, 978 1 4052 0654 9 pbk

'The Noble Warriors' trilogy

Seeker, 978 1 4052 1895 5 hbk, 978 1 4052 3402 3 pbk

Jango, 978 1 4052 2422 2 hbk, 978 1 4052 3127 5 pbk

Noman, 978 1 4052 3167 1 hbk



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