



Gun Control

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Alan Gibbons on writing about street violence for teens

Gun crime and street violence amongst young people remains high on the political agenda. Alan Gibbons, who has written about the subject in his new novel *Raining Fire*, finds that the issue has long occupied the best writers for teens, and examines their and his response to it.

Conflict is central to Young Adult fiction. The conflict can be to do with relationship difficulties, struggles over identity, bullying, racism, war or gang conflict, but it is ever-present. It is a staple of storytelling. It revolves around young people's struggle with identity, their attempt to locate themselves in an often complex, tough and challenging world where they can be feared, infantilised and shunned in equal measure.

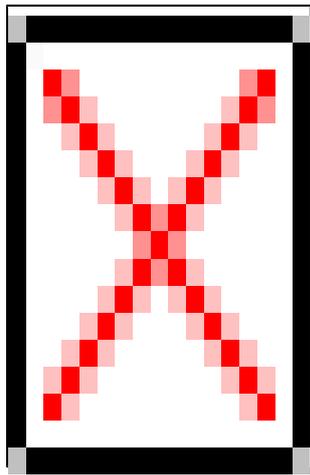
Two events in the recent past led me to re-examine the issue of gangs, in particular gangs who use firearms. The first was the shocking murder of Rhys Jones in Liverpool. Everton-mad Rhys, a keen footballer, was just ten when he was making his way home from football practice. A young man called Sean Mercer opened fire. The bullet passed through the innocent youngster. He died in his mother's arms. That was six years ago. On Boxing Day, 2011, a promising Lancaster University student Anuj Bidve was on a night out in Salford with his friends. Kieran Stapleton, later styling himself 'Psycho', approached Anuj and shot him dead in the street. Mercer has never explained his actions. Neither has Stapleton. The killings were senseless, the actions of individuals for whom career and community mattered little.

Mercifully, such crimes are rare, much rarer than some of the tabloids would have us believe. In 2011 just 44 people died in murders using firearms. In the year Apr 2010 to Mar 2011 there were 11,227 recorded offences involving firearms though that number is falling. Soberingly however, young people are disproportionately the victims of gun crime. 15 to 29-year-olds comprise 20 per cent of the population, but were victims in 45 per cent of firearms offences in 2010/11.

There is a rich seam of Young Adult fiction dealing with gangs. Sometimes the very same media that demonises young people and exaggerates the incidence of violent crime attacks these novels as sensationalist. They are far from it. The best of them seek to explain not to exploit. S E Hinton's **The Outsiders** is a seminal work exploring gang violence and identity. Hinton was fifteen when she started writing the book and seventeen when she it was published in 1967. Alongside Robert Cormier's **The Chocolate War**, it could be considered one of the founding texts of modern Young Adult Fiction. These two books were among the first to explore the dynamics of modern gangs in a convincing and authentic way.

Recent novels dealing with gangs include John Lucas's debut novel **Turf**, **The Crew** by Bali Rai and Na'ima B Robert's **Black Sheep**, Beverley Naidoo's **Web of Lies** and Cathy MacPhail's **Grass**. Standing in the tradition of Hinton and Cormier they do not externalise or demonise the young people whose lives they explore. They investigate them as people, not as stereotypes. Another notable contribution to the field is Benjamin Zephaniah's **Gangsta Rap**. Keren David's **When I was Joe** explores the aftermath of a stabbing and has a stunning first chapter. It is territory also entered by Anthony McGowan in his gripping thriller **The Knife that Killed Me**. Finally, Catherine Johnson and Saul Dibb's screenplay for **Bullet Boy** merit a mention. Catherine brings a novelist's eye to the story and that deepens its

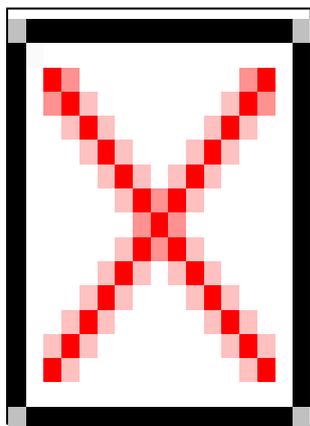
drama and ability to involve.



So writing my latest novel *Raining Fire* was always going to be a tough ask. But if writers didn't think we had something new to say, why would we do the job? Many of the novels listed above deal with the realities of ethnically diverse inner city communities. **Raining Fire** consciously does not do that. I wanted to investigate the white tribe that Mercer and Stapleton represent. I wanted to examine a group of youngsters about whom teachers increasingly express concern. They are white, disengaged, in many ways lost. Without the discipline their fathers or grandfathers found in unskilled work, often from fractured or dysfunctional families, they seek a new family in the company of lost boys like themselves. This does not mean that all gang behaviour is negative. Some gangs are simply extended friendship groups. The gangs I wanted to depict were the ones that were willing to resort to extreme forms of violence to fight for turf and exert discipline.

The novel opens with a group of adolescent males clustered on a street corner in northern England. Gang leader Jamie Leather shows his mates a gun. One young man Ethan, the main protagonist of the story, rejects the weapon. He is a promising footballer. He is bright. University beckons. In contrast, his older brother Alex is drifting. He finds a purpose and a sense of belonging in Jamie's gang. In the course of the novel's 270 pages they will be forced apart and brought back together by the presence of the gun.

Raining Fire stands in the tradition of those other reconstructions and dissections of gang life. It seeks to explain not to preach. Having said that, I would be delighted to see it used in schools to discuss the issues raised. Authors have always had an indirect and sometimes fraught relationship with education, but the classroom is probably the best forum for a serious debate about gangs and weapons. The future of our disaffected boys is not merely or even predominantly a law enforcement issue. It is one of education, family, community and self-esteem. We address it seriously or face the consequences.



Alan Gibbons? **Raining Fire** is published by Orion Indigo, 978-1780620275, £8.99 pbk

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