

## MAL PEET – A BIOGRAPHY OF SORTS

I was born in, and grew up in, a small country town in Norfolk, England.

My father had been a professional soldier; after leaving the army he spent most of the rest of his life working in a confectionery factory in Norwich. When she wasn't mothering, my mother was a part-time book-keeper.

We – my parents, my younger brother and sister and my grandmother – lived in a small council house. It was rather crowded and quarrelsome.

When I was ten and a half I passed 'the Scholarship Exam' which entitled me to go to the local Grammar School. It was the kind of place that, in 1958, thought it was still 1858. Or even 1758. It was a bit like Hogwarts, minus the magic. And the fun. And the girls.

It was, in many ways, a cruel place; but there were a few masters there who were keen to nurture working-class boys like me. One was an English teacher who persuaded me to abandon my dreams of going to art school and instead apply to university to study Literature. My parents were not keen on the idea. My father, in particular, thought that at the age of seventeen it was high time that I got a job.

I went anyway. It seems to me now that university involved a great deal more fun than work (it was by then the late 1960s, after all) but I somehow managed to earn an Honours degree and, two years later, a Master's degree. Then, like many of my peers, I sleep-walked into teaching.

After a few years I grew very bored – I am, unfortunately, no good at routine. I quit in 1976, thinking that I could make a living by writing and illustrating. I couldn't. I kept more or less afloat for the next ten years doing mostly manual work: building, painting and decorating, things like that.

In 1987 I met and married Elspeth Graham. It was her idea that together we write and I illustrate books for children. For three years we were extremely unsuccessful. We lived hand-to-mouth. Then we responded to an advertisement in *The Author*; an educational publisher was looking for new writers. We submitted an eight-page trial piece, with my drawings, and it was accepted. Over the following twelve years or so we produced well over a hundred short books for a variety of publishers, most of them for Oxford University Press.

Then my old enemy, boredom, turned up again. To fight him off, I began a novel. Actually, I conceived it as a graphic novel; but back then British publishers thought that such things had no future. Eventually an editor at Walker Books persuaded me to write it as a conventional novel. This became *Keeper*, and I think both Walker and I were surprised by its success. With Elspeth, I was still busy producing educational texts and I had no plans to write another novel. However, Walker told me, in no uncertain terms, that they expected one.

Second novels are, infamously, difficult. I was determined not to be labelled as a 'football writer' – even an unorthodox one - so I embarked on an ambitious story about Second World War espionage and the effects of the past upon subsequent generations. *Tamar* took two years to write and many months for me and my editor to cut and weld it into a satisfactory shape. I was absolutely shocked when it won the 2005 Carnegie Medal; but it forced me to accept that, for better or worse, I had become a novelist.

In my next two books, *The Penalty* and *Exposure*, I returned to the imaginary South American setting of *Keeper*. Although I am a devoted football fan, and although some of the characters in these stories are footballers, these three novels are not really 'soccer novels'. I'm interested in subverting the so-called 'rules' of genre; so while these stories are disguised as sports novels, they deal with diverse issues such as rain forest conservation, slavery, religion, celebrity and politics.

More recently, *Life: an Exploded Diagram*, is for me something of a departure in that it is semi-autobiographical. It's set in Norfolk, and several of the characters are based upon people I grew up among. It tells the story of a pair of mismatched young lovers whose affair coincides with, and is accelerated by, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

With Elspeth, I continue to write picture-books for younger children. *Cloud Tea Monkeys* (2010), brilliantly illustrated by Juan Wyngaard and beautifully designed by Walker Books, was shortlisted for the Kate Greenaway Medal in 2011. The next two, *Night Sky Dragons* and *Mysterious Traveller* are, at the time of writing, being illustrated by Patrick Benson and P. J. Lynch.

One of the great pleasures in my life is taking daily walks with Elspeth and our dog through the countryside or along the coast of east close to where we live in south west England. We call this 'work' because we talk about ideas. Now and again the dog comes up with a good one.

<http://redhammer.info/mal>