

Lovemybooks' Interview SF Said about his new book, *Tyger*

Could you tell us a bit about how it came about how did you come to write *Tyger*?

Nine years ago, I sat down to try and write a story that would be even more exciting than *Varjak* and even more ambitious than *Phoenix* and *Tyger* is it. I really wanted to push myself to go further, deeper, to write something better than I've ever done before and *Tyger* is the result. I really do think it is my best book so far and I hope your readers will love it as much as I do.

What was your Inspiration for the story?

The earliest inspiration for the book *Tyger* is the tyger herself, I remember when I was at school, we read William Blake's amazing poem 'The Tyger' (*Tyger burning bright, In the forests of the night*) it was my favourite poem then, it still is now. While I was writing my last book *Phoenix* I had an idea for a book called *Tyger* and there was always a being called a tiger with a y as in Blake's poem at the heart of this book, the tyger was that spark of inspiration and the characters and the world and everything else developed around the tyger. Adam and Zadie changed with every draft but the tyger was more or less the same all the way through. I always knew the book was called *Tyger*. The title never changed, the tyger never changed, but everything else developed around tiger.

How much is the character of Adam drawn from your own experience?

Adam has a lot in common with me. Adam's family is originally from the Muslim world as my family is. I came to live in London with my mum when I was two years old, I have no memory of ever living anywhere else though I was born in Lebanon, lived briefly in Jordan and my ancestors originally came from places like Iraq and Egypt, I have Kurdish, Sarkisian and Turkish ancestors too. My great grandma was born in Sarajevo in what is now Bosnia, so really my roots are all over the Muslim world, it's very much the same with Adam. He's a Londoner as I am, but he has this family history which at beginning of the book he doesn't know all that much about, and he learns a little bit more about it as he goes along. In that respect Adam and I, our identities are very similar. But we live in very different worlds. The world of *Tyger* is not our world, it is a strange alternate world and Adam's life is much, much harder than my life has ever been.

Pretty much everything that people say to Adam in the course of the book are things that people have said to me or to members of my family. I can't tell you how many times I've been asked 'No where are you really from?' So it is all based on what I've experienced. But I suppose the really big differences is in the world of *Tyger*, children like Adam or Zadie are not really allowed to have dreams or ambitions, they are not even allowed to go to school, they just have to work incredibly hard every day just to help their families survive, whereas I grew up very, very lucky in a family where everybody loved books and reading. I remember people reading to me from a very early age so it was very easy for me to fall in love with books and reading and to get the idea in my mind that maybe I can do that one day, maybe I could write a book too. And my family have been very supportive in that so in that sense my life is absolutely different to Adam's. Of course, I went to school and university, I've been able to make a living as a writer, which is amazing. Of course if you read to the end of *Tyger* you might find that Adam and Zadie manage to change the world to the extent that they can do all the things they dream of doing.

Tell us more about Adam and Zadie's London

The idea in *Tyger* is that this is world that has really stagnated, the Empire never ending, slavery never being abolished, it is a world that has not really moved on.

I did a lot of reading, I read about what things were like in Blake's time. It was very much like what you see in *Tyger*. There were public executions going on at Tyburn as a kind of spectator sport, like watching a football match now. You could buy a ticket to watch a hanging. Public executions went on in Britain until the late 19th century, it's extraordinary from our point of view to think that that could have been the case, but it was.

So many of the things in in *Tyger* that seem really horrific are all historically things that really did happen either here or in other European or North American cities, there's really nothing that's been completely made-up.

It is true that there was never a Soho ghetto as such, but Soho was very much an area where foreigners would live, it was right on the edge of the city in Blake's time, it was quite an 'outsiderish' kind of a place. Blake's father was a tradesman, they were what we would now think of as working class people that's where they lived, that's where you could afford to live as a tradesman.

So there are streets in Soho with names like 'Poland Street' for a very good reason, it was historically a place where migrants lived and outsiders of all sorts. The London of *Tyger* is partly built out of historical research but then it's also partly built out of my own experiences as a Londoner of walking around and I think you can see traces of that history everywhere that you go.

I love the fact that London has such a long history. Everywhere you go you could really imagine in the pavements beneath your feet there are thousands and thousands and thousands of years of history. Thousands and thousands and thousands of people have walked those paths before. they were paths through a forest before they became pavements in a city and so I wanted to put all of that into *Tyger*.

I felt it was really important that there should be some welcoming spaces in this very dark and dangerous world - Solomon's bookshop, the underground library, where the underground librarians hold the secrets of the universe and at the very end there's a new school that opens to allow all children, whatever their backgrounds, to come and get the education or the training that they need to do whatever it is they dream of doing.

There feels a connection to *Varjak* learning the seven skills and Adam and Zadie discovering the powers inside them, was this a conscious link?

There is not really a conscious link, with each book I just try and write a story I most want to read myself and it so happens I really like reading stories about characters discovering that they have powers and they just find their way into each story.

I really wanted In *Tyger* the powers to be things that we really do have inside us all in *Varjak Paw* the powers tend to be more about things like fighting, I think in *Tyger* I wanted to see if I could make the act of really looking at something as exciting as a fight scene, could I make the act of writing and drawing something as thrilling as a fight scene that was a challenge I set myself, so that imagination and creation end up being the super powers that are going to save us all.

Tell us about the wonderful doors, where did that idea come from?

William Blake himself has a famous line which I think is if the doors of perception could be cleansed then we would see reality as it truly is, infinite, something like that. The phrase 'the doors of perception' is very much Blake's phrase. I remember when I first encountered that phrase I thought, 'Wow the doors of perception!' And I suppose it made me wonder what other doors there might be so as I worked on *Tyger* gradually it seemed like that there could be a series of these doors going deeper and deeper into something and through each of them you might find greater and greater powers.

Tell us about your language choices and writing process

I wish I could be somebody who could write a perfect story in one go straight away the first time, but I now know many other authors and none of us can do that, no writer can write a perfect story in just one go, we have to build our stories over many stages, and we call those stages drafts. I am one of the slowest writers you will ever meet, it took me 19 drafts to write *Tyger* and to get it all right. The story gradually developed and gradually evolved and with each stage it got better and better.

As far as language goes, as a reader myself, I really love it when I feel like the writer is in absolute control of the language and then it's almost like poetry- very, very rich yet very, very clear. The writer who I think does that best is probably Alan Garner, that's in all of literature not just children's - clarity and at the same time depth, it's enormously dense and yet clear like a diamond. I aspire to something like that quality in my own writing, it is very, very difficult to do. Alan Garner makes it look very easy, but it takes him about a decade to write a book he works and works and works at it and I certainly work and work and work at mine. So, in the end, there is only exactly what is needed to tell the story there is no more and no less, you know only the absolute essentials are there.

There was a lot of cutting. Towards the end of the writing process, I would read the whole thing aloud, when you're looking at it on the page you see it one way but when you read it aloud you hear it another way and I'm very conscious that with children's books in particular, they could be experienced in either or both of those ways. It really does clarify where there is unnecessary stuff, you can absolutely feel where a reader would fall asleep or wander off, you know where it gets boring and dull and that's when you put lines through whole paragraphs and go yep we don't need this so it's tough, I can't pretend I find writing easy, I actually find it very difficult but it's worth it in the end if you want to make the very best book you can possibly make I don't know any other way to do it.

I think there are all sorts of kind of contrasts and patterns that you might see if you read *Tyger* and look at it closely, particularly on a second or third reading. Of course I read it thousands of times, there are a lot of patterns there that are conscious, deliberately chosen but I think there are probably also some that are serendipitous that just maybe came about without my being aware of them so that there might be a bit of both.

The writing is very sensory, and smell seems particularly important- especially the very surprising smell of the tiger!

The smell of the tiger is factual. I did huge amounts of research, obviously I read all the books I could read about tigers and I watched all the documentaries, but in the end I needed to do real in the world research and so I was lucky enough to spend some time with the keeper of large mammals at ZSL (London Zoo) and he let me go into a tiger cage (the tiger was elsewhere!) and the smell is exactly as it is described in the book. I think the phrase I ended up when I was standing at the tiger's cage was 'a sweet high musky scent like honeysuckle growing wild' I was surprised - it's a wonderful smell, intoxicating.

As far as writing with the five senses goes like most of us, I don't necessarily think to do that on the first draft or even a second draft, usually my early drafts have a lot of visual description, what things look like and there's a lot of dialogue and that's really about it. It's as I read through a draft and try and think how can I make this better, how can I make it more vivid for the reader so they can project themselves into the scene as if the thing is actually happening to them that I begin to think what does it sound like, what does it smell like, what does it taste like, what is the temperature? All of these different sense perceptions develop as a result of my asking those questions, the senses can be so evocative - I think smell is the probably the most evocative of all.

So, for anybody interested in writing if your first drafts don't have all of that that's okay, don't worry I don't either. I don't think many writers have all 5 senses in on their first draft, you can work on your writing and build that in and make it better and better.

The book is stunningly illustrated did you feel it important for *Tyger* to be an illustrated novel?

Illustrations add another dimension to the story, and I've always wanted all my books to be heavily illustrated. I love illustration and I'm so lucky and grateful that I got to work with my very favourite artist in the whole world, Dave McKean. Dave is a genius and his background in the world of comics as well as film making has given him the ability to do things that you just don't see in other books. So, what he did in *Varjak Paw* I can't take credit for any of it, it's all him but with *Tyger* I think he's gone even further, the stuff he has created is even more magnificent and I feel sure it is going to delight and amaze readers. It's stunning and the layout design is beautiful as well, the way he uses the white of the paper or the page numbers, they are rather beautifully done. We wanted it to be a beautiful object, not just visually but also the way it feels, I love the way the book feels. It's a pleasure to hold this thing in your hands which will take you into this other world and then bring you out again so the book itself is I suppose a little bit like a gateway into another dimension.

So what do you hope will stay with children about the story as they develop readers as they grow up

I think for me if a reader could come away feeling that this could have been their adventure, they could be the heroes of this story and if they could come away feeling that they could do anything that they dream of doing as Adam and Zadie eventually do, I would love that I think that would be brilliant. So if readers were to come away feeling oh I have the powers of perception and imagination and creation, I could write, I could draw, I could change the world - I would absolutely love that. I really do believe every single one of us - we can do that, we can all have dreams and ambitions and make them come true, it is possible.

It was always crucial to me that there should be hope. I think for children's literature in particular hope is just vital. However dark and dangerous things are in our own world, and things appear to be getting darker and scarier all the time, I do still believe in hope. When I have met teachers, librarians and booksellers who work so hard to help every child find a book for them, a book they're going to love, that really gives me a lot of hope. Whenever I talk to children themselves as I often do visiting schools as a children's author, they themselves give me huge amounts of hope for the future. I think there is hope, I wanted there to be a very uplifting transformative hopeful conclusion to the story.