



Nigel Hinton: Getting Things Right

Speaking by phone from his home in Sussex, just after spending a “wonderful” Christmas in France with his French wife’s family, Nigel Hinton began by describing the head-on offensive he’d launched after the thirteenth rejection of his first book. “One day

when I was going up to London, I decided to take the manuscript and drop it off at whichever publisher was nearest to where I was going and ask if someone could read it. When I got home – not that evening but the next – I had a phone call from the chief editor, who said he loved the book and wanted it.

“The girl on the desk had called up to the office to say a manuscript had been left with her and it just so happened it was the chief editor himself who took the call. He went down, picked up my manuscript and started reading in the lift on his way back up. Sheer chance.” Nigel’s guffaw was the only credible response. *Collision Course*, published in 1976, immediately received “five major reviews – five – that wouldn’t happen now” – and is still in print. “It only goes to show that if you get things right they become timeless.”

He found that he could get it right – as a writer, able to engage with his audience – when he was teaching. “This book stinks!” he declared during class reading. “Bet you can’t do better,” he was challenged. “Bet I can.” It was then he wrote *Collision Course*. “They loved it . . . That was what was so galling about those 13 rejections – I knew the kids liked it.”

He went into teaching “unwillingly, in a way.” Working in advertising, after leaving school at 18 (“I didn’t really like school”), led him to rediscover a love of reading (“beaten out of me at school”), which, in turn, led him on to taking a degree in English at teacher training college. Teaching practice – in a “very rough” school in Croydon – came as a surprise. “Until it happened I hadn’t realised you had to *do* teaching practice.”

He discovered he was good at it. “They responded to me and I to them.” The chemistry was right. Just as, in his books, the imaginative fusion between character and situation strikes responsive chords in the reader – embroiling them in, say, Ray’s stricken conscience in *Collision Course*; or Mick’s ‘twisting and tangling’ mind in *Ship of Ghosts*; or the father-and-son stand-offs in *Time Bomb* and the ‘Buddy’ books; or, for younger readers, Philip’s battles with the evil Oyin in the ‘Beaver Towers’ quartet. “All the time I’m writing,” Nigel remarked, “I’m thinking of the kids I taught.”

Just before *Collision Course* was published, “I reached a time when I felt I’d done all I could as a teacher.” (He later returned to teaching, on a part-time basis). So what next? A year off, studying for an MA in English and American Literature, was the answer. “My thesis was on Bob Dylan.”

Music is a defining factor in the ‘Buddy’ trilogy. By the end of *Buddy’s Blues* it has become such a part of Buddy’s psyche that

he considers ‘if you could just go a little bit further, you’d understand everything’. Music is also inspiration. Two ‘great musicians, Buddy Holly and Bob Dylan’, provided it for *Buddy’s Blues*; ‘old songs’ did the same for *Ship of Ghosts* and *Partners in Crime*; and the mere sight of a guitar on the set of the TV version of *Buddy* prompted thoughts of a sequel (“I was constantly being asked when I was going to do *Buddy#2*”) That sequel, *Buddy’s Song*, was later filmed, with Roger Daltry repeating his role as Buddy’s flawed, teddyboy dad, and Nigel writing the screenplay – and winning a gold disk for the lyrics.

He gave it up teaching for good in 1986, to become a full-time writer. “It’s hard work, and a difficult market. You’ve got to fix them [the readers] with your eye. Like the Ancient Mariner. If the story doesn’t grab them, all the other stuff won’t work either, because they won’t want to read it in the first place.”

This capacity for grabbing them – and including ‘all the other stuff’ – is on full display in *Time Bomb*, one of the best children’s novels of recent years. Among its many felicities it boasts an unforgettable character in ‘Captain Stanley Evans. *But you can call me Cap*’: a veritable dog’s-dinner of complexes, by no means good, and, ultimately, pathetic. “He’s no-one I know,”

Nigel said, “although, obviously, over the years, I’ve absorbed elements from various people of a character like Cap.” The American edition, he added, “has just been voted one of the six best international books. And a starred review in *Publishers Weekly!*”

The novel he’s now working on is about his grandfather. “He was born in what was then Prussian Poland. He left his village when he was ten, walked 200 miles to the sea, boarded a boat and sailed twice round the world, before fetching up in England at the age of 14. That’s all that’s known about him. So I’m having to make it all up.” His enthusiasm came across loud and clear.

“You know,” he concluded, “I sometimes worry that here I am, I’m now 65, writing for children . . . what do I know about them? Then I consider: they *still* want to be loved; they *still* care about relationships; they *still* have problems to share and dilemmas to face.”

Chris Stephenson



Collision Course Barn Owl £5.99 ISBN: 1903015421

Buddy Puffin £5.99 ISBN: 0141319208

The *Beaver Towers* quartet:

(1) *Beaver Towers* Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 0140370609

(2) *The Witch’s Revenge* Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 0140370617

(3) *The Dangerous Journey* Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 0140383883

(4) *The Dark Dream* Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 0140383891

Ship of Ghosts Barrington Stoke £4.99 ISBN: 1842991922

Partners in Crime Barrington Stoke £4.99 ISBN: 1842991027

Until Proven Guilty Barrington Stoke £4.99 ISBN: 1842993690

Time Bomb Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 0141318333