

# Ravens *and* Revolvers

**M**arcus Sedgwick has been steadily building an impressive backlist of novels. Having now re-read all of them, the feeling grows that he has been doing this far too quietly. These are books which deliver a complete satisfaction for the kind of readers who want total engagement, with the heart and the head. He writes primarily for teenagers. If he were a less good writer, the books would rely solely on his darkly gothic strands and the well managed tension but he is also a master of place, plot and the depiction of vulnerability and courage. The satisfaction for the reader comes from the fact that he is both a great storyteller and a craftsman.



Photo: Poppy Berry

His emphasis has been on novels which balance real and unreal elements for these older readers, always anchored in a setting that can be believed. His first published book, *Floodland*, won the Branford Boase Award and was set in a drowning East Anglia. Place was important from that beginning but it was not until *The Book of Dead Days*, he says, that he began to see place as another character. Drawing on details of cities like Krakow and Paris, he gives his city layers: treacherous streets, cold squares, dark corridors, rotting staircases to heaven knows where. It becomes a place where dangerous things are possible. This book seems to me to mark a change in his writing. For the reader, there is a sudden increase in sophistication of style and content. His always very good stories start to tighten their grip. Asked if anything ‘happened’ at this point, he says that he began to have some recognition and success and this gave him confidence and the book is a “distillation of all the things which fascinate me”. In the sequel, *The Dark Flight Down*, there is a further increase in detail. We feel the texture of the walls, experience the cold and move closer to the vulnerable main characters, Boy and Willow. They are so unprotected and the evil which threatens them is powerful. The mystery and fear would be enough but there is also compassion in this story and finally, hope for the young people.

The next two books are also linked. Unusually for children’s books, the young hero of the first book returns in old age in the second. *My Swordhand is Singing* introduces us to Peter whose father is weighed down by something that happened in the past. It is connected to a sword which his father kept hidden and when his father dies, Peter must take up the sword and allow it to do its work. This is a vampire story, enriched by being embedded in a folk myth. *The Kiss of Death* concerns the same source of evil but moves from the snow-covered forests to Venice, a city both

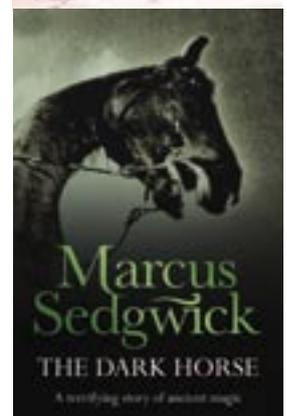
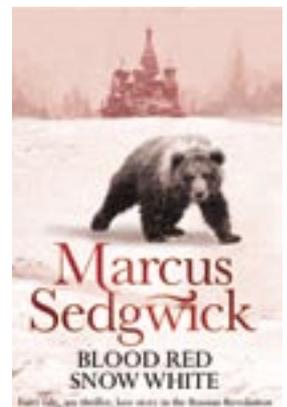
beautiful and sinister, especially at carnival time. Marko goes there to find his missing father and meets Sorrel whose own father is slowly succumbing to madness. It is the same ghastly force behind both events. All vampire stories share certain elements but here, there is an original imagination, allied to a powerful storyteller at work. The unequal struggle between the two young characters and the lovely Venetia, who seems able to bend all to her will, is evened up when the old man they meet says his name is Peter and his sword hand swings again.

The atmosphere of Venice compels. Is he a serious researcher? He says he likes research.

He is also interested in history, especially as

he can “pick and choose” what aspects he will use. He enjoys the research so much, he risks delaying the start of a book. Is there sometimes a tension between the material he discovers and the fact that he is, above all, a storyteller? His answer is that he has to be disciplined. “Ninety per cent of the research may not go into the book.” If an interesting piece of information does nothing for the story, it must be excluded. On the other hand, while doing research, he learns things he could not have otherwise known. He describes a particular moment in *Revolver*, which is set partly in Alaska and partly in northern Sweden. The plot turns on a specific event in which the main character knows where and under what circumstances a bank of snow will give way and his pursuer does not. He discovered this for himself while researching in Sweden, up to his neck in snow! His books give the impression of being written out of a deep fund of knowledge and this gives his storytelling conviction and assurance.

Precise research is reflected in *The Foreshadowing*, the story of a young volunteer nurse during the 1914-18 war who has an unwelcome Cassandra-like ability to foretell the moment of death. For this, he walked the WW1 battle sites,



pin-pointing where the action he describes took place. He writes equally for both sexes and, in this book, the main voice is that of Alexandra, the young woman. The book is strongest, not on the battles, but on the consequences of war. It gives a picture of the men and women behind the front lines.

Someone who writes as he does for young people must surely have been a reader as a child? He thinks that all writers must have been readers. He mentions authors like Peter Dickinson and used to read Susan Cooper for the atmosphere. He says his favourite book was possibly *Old Peter's Russian Tales* and this bore fruit in *Blood Red, Snow White*, his book based on the extraordinary but true story of Arthur Ransome's time in Russia at the outbreak of the 1917 Revolution. He uses the characters of Old Peter and his grandchildren to introduce the story, with the addition of the bear, plodding through the forest, approaching ever nearer. The bear is, of course, the people of Russia, now roused and on their way to Moscow.

And now, we have *Revolver*, for me, the best book of 2009. The mystic and the folklore have been put aside for the moment. This story takes place in a harshly real world. It is a short book which says much. The setting is alternately Alaska and northernmost Sweden, in the freezing, snowy landscapes that Marcus Sedgwick depicts so well. From the first words: *Even the dead tell stories*, we know there is something to be unravelled here. Sig is alone in the Swedish cabin, with his father's frozen body, waiting for help. As he waits, the past intrudes in the form of a man carrying a Colt revolver. Sig learns that the story started ten years ago when he was a small child. His father then worked in the Assay Office of the Alaskan goldmine. He has never known why they moved so frequently after his mother's shocking death but now, ten years later, it seems that this violent stranger is going to tell him. The man is also asking questions that Sig cannot answer. If he is to save his life, however, some answer must be found. His only means of protection seems to be his father's Colt but it is very old and unreliable.

The denouement must not be revealed here but it is terrific in both senses. The author shows that he is not afraid to present his teenage readers with moral dilemmas. He does not offer an easy solution but what it does offer is the particular satisfaction of something complete. In the nineteenth century, the Colt was a triumph of armaments engineering. There is description in the book of its precision, each part fitting smoothly and purposefully. The book mirrors this, from the elegant opening chapter, pared down like the landscape, through the interlocking sections, to the powerful, inventive resolution. It has the qualities of a short story, sustained over a novel.

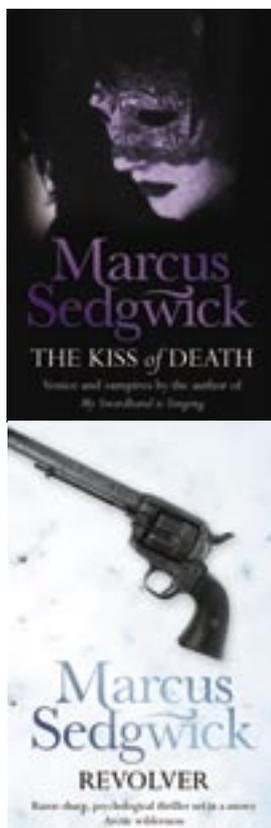
It is no surprise to hear that while he was writing this taut book, he was also thinking about his new venture, writing for younger readers. The fun of *The Raven Mysteries* must have been welcome.

Imagine an untrustworthy castle, housing an aristocratic, gothic family. Money and sense are in short supply and strange events occur so they really need someone to look after them. Who better than Edgar the raven, guardian of Otherhand Castle from time immemorial? Marcus explains that he had a single line in his notebook: *I suspect I may have fleas again*. This was the starting point for the first book, *Flood and Fang*, and the rest developed from there. He has clearly enjoyed being allowed to be more playful. The characters are splendidly exaggerated, like Lord and Lady Otherhand, too aristocratic to be practical. Edgar can rely on their daughter, Solstice, but her brother, Cudweed, has a pesky pet in the form of a monkey who becomes his arch-enemy. Add ghastly beasts, ghosts and dastardly outsiders and the result is a series of witty versions of the gothic tale, spooky and exciting, but nicely managed for the young.

So what next? There are more 'Ravens' to come, the fourth will be *Vampires and Volts* in October. He is also working on a graphic novel for next year. In July, however, he returns to a "modern gothic thriller", *White Crow*. Here we are right up to date – but no one can be entirely free of the past. Three characters, each signalled by a distinctive font, tell the story. Rebecca, suffering from both a break-up with her boyfriend and her father's apparent disgrace, is vulnerable. Ferelith is the local wild child, manipulative and damaged and living in the old Rectory where the third character once lived. He is an eighteenth century cleric, recording in his journal how he has been drawn into dangerous experiments concerned with life after death. All three elements come together in fear and confusion at the site of the old experiments. The story is as darkly gothic as its settings but it is the insight into the mental state of the two girls and the development of their relationship that will stay with many readers.

If your teenagers demand more than repeats of conventional menace, or your younger children have a wicked sense of humour, then Marcus Sedgwick is the author you have been looking for.

Pat Thomson



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