

An Interview With Kevin Cowdall

Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?

The usual early memories, I suppose; my parent's reading picture books to me as a very young child and linking the words to the images for me to learn.

My Primary / Junior School had an excellent library system and the teachers were always really encouraging.



Then going to my local library, a wonderful old building, was always an adventure, and I always came away with two or three new 'friends'.



I also read lots of classic 'boy's own' comics - I always preferred the 'real-life' stories to the cartoon type.

If there is one book from that period which inspired me to be a storyteller, if not a writer, then it was Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. There was also a b/w television series based on the novel showing in the UK at the time (an old 1950s US import, I think), so that helped put images to the words.

Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?

As above, plus a wide range of classic children's adventure stories popular at the time - everything from Enid Blyton's *Secret Seven* and *Famous Five*, through the works of Robert Louis Stevenson, G H Henty, Jules Verne and C S Lewis, to J R R Tolkien, H G Wells, Richard Hughes, Laurie Lee and John Wyndham.

Add to that the fact that I grew up as a child in the 1960's Golden Age of escapism television (*The Avengers*, *Adam Adamant*, *The Prisoner*, *The Man From Uncle*, *The Saint*, *Batman*, *Robin Hood*, *Thunderbirds*, etc, etc, etc), stir them all up in what my parents and teachers would call a vivid imagination, and it was no wonder I started playing out, and then writing down, adventure stories of my own.

In my teens, Graham Greene, H E Bates, Daphne Du Maurier and John Steinbeck were a great influence as far as style, characterisation and narrative are concerned.



Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?

For me, as a writer, it's all about visualisation - I 'picture' the scene mentally as I'm writing. The satisfaction comes from watching those blank white pages being populated with words which, hopefully, will transport the reader to a different place – I want him or her to be able to see the 'scene' they are reading as I did myself when I first imagined it. When a review states, 'you could almost be there'. I know I've got it right.

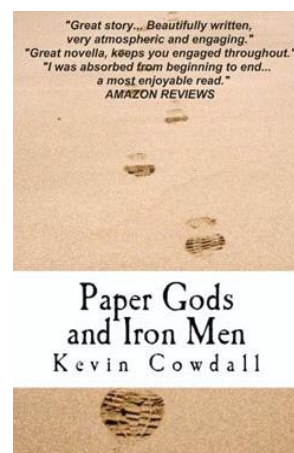
It's the same when I'm reading a book - I want to be able to 'see the scene'.

I love Thomas Berger's quote: 'Why do writers write? Because it isn't there.'

Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books / plan your illustrations?

I've been asked several times which genre I write in, but I don't have a specific area of interest. For me it's about the emotional appeal of that first 'scene' that pops in to my head and building on that to create believable characters, situations and plot lines. I've written poetry, short stories novels / novellas and a play.

My novella, *Paper Gods and Iron Men*, is a story for adults set in WWII and is a tale of endurance and survival, of 'ordinary people in extraordinary situations' (the companion short story, *Flanagan's Mule*, shares the theme of personal determination and resolve, and which is set in a South-American mining community in the 1950s). I have also written a children's novel, *The Dinsdale Fox*, and my WiP, *Cosgrove's Sketches*, is about an Edwardian Liverpool Artist - so a pretty mixed audience!



Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

I think a lot of publishers and authors were a bit weary of electronic books when they first appeared.

One of my favourite contemporary authors, Warren Adler (*War of the Roses*, *Random Hearts*, etc), who was a consultant when Sony pioneered the e-reader, encouraged me to publish *Paper Gods and Iron Men* on Kindle and it's been very successful (I've recently published a second book, *Assorted Bric-a-brac*: 50 selected poems, which has also been well received).

E-publishing has been a God-send for Indie Authors, but I still want to see my books physically on the shelves of bookshops / libraries and I am pursuing the traditional route of submitting to agents / publishers with my latest work.

The e-book boom seems to be levelling out now and I think there will always be a market for paper- and hardback books because people enjoy the simple tactile sensation of holding 'real' books and browsing bookshelves.

Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?

I am an avid reader and have *so* many books! When people visit, they look at my two main (fiction) bookshelves and always ask, "How many of those have you actually read?" To which I answer, "Those *are* the books I've read - the unread ones are in the spare room upstairs."

On Facebook I and several other authors had a spate of posting pictures of our bookshelves (we called them 'Shelfies'!).



I also collect signed copies of books (which is a different set of shelves) and I'd love to have (or be able to afford to buy!) signed first editions of some of my favourite authors' books - Graham Greene, H E Bates, Daphne Du Maurier, and, oh, so many others...