

# David Thorpe



**Anita Rowe** meets an author whose talents go beyond writing mainstream teenage fiction

Prizewinning children's author David Thorpe was born in Robin Hood country and perhaps that is why he is a bit of a rebel: 'Robin Hood was one of my heroes - and still is! A fascination with 'challenging' art, music and literature led him to a study for a degree in dada and surrealism and later to a career writing comic scripts for the more iconoclastic publishers of graphic fantasy fiction. The emphasis that these philosophies place on chance and the power of the unconscious and irrational, is crucial to writing. I had to make a decision whether to concentrate on music, art or writing, and I chose writing. I only ever illustrated one comic strip that I wrote, which I recently published on MySpace. I'm now developing that core idea with a children's illustrator. It took too long for me to draw!'

David suffered from bullying as a child because of a mild disability (cerebral palsy), which is now impossible to detect. From this he retreated into the world of the imagination and excelled in English at school. 'I always wanted to be a writer. When I was eleven I won a national essay writing competition on the theme of 'my favourite haunts in countryside, field and park' - in which I lamented the fact that a field near my home where I used to play had been turned into a housing estate. Environmental concerns have remained at the core of my life ever since, and in fact I make more of a living from writing about the environment than writing children's books. When I was sixteen, my English teacher published a booklet of my lyrics and poems to sell in the school, and I won a school poetry prize.'

Some of David's best known comic scripts are *Captain Britain*, *Doc Chaos*, *Public Servants* and *Managing Hell*, many of which have acquired cult followings and been collected into books. David is also a TV and film script-writer: *Doc Chaos* was commissioned as a TV series as well as two comics series, and he has written a *Doc Chaos* novella - *The Chernobyl Effect*. The *Doc* series have also been

published in North America. He has collaborated with several talented graphic artists for diverse publishers, and also scripted comic books with environmental messages for children for Oxfam and Greenpeace, such as *How the World Works*, for Oxfam. Unusually, he has conceived, commissioned and edited a series of adult graphic titles matching works by bestselling literary authors, such as Doris Lessing's *Playing the Game*, with highly talented artists.

David now lives in a beautiful rural village in mid-Wales and has an office in Machynlleth from where he runs his own company, Cyberium. Working with a variety of media, including web design, he is fascinated by technology and has created his own lively **website: [www.davidthorpe.info](http://www.davidthorpe.info)**. A passionate interest in the environment has led to journalism on the themes closest to his heart and, as an enthusiastic blogger, he uses several different sites to put over his views. David writes poetry too, some of which is displayed on his website. 'I have written poems all my life,' he says. 'Poetry is the perfect form.'

David's entry into mainstream teenage fiction came about through his winning entry for the HarperCollins/*Saga Magazine* competition in 2006. *Hybrids* is a gripping tale of almost-realistic fantasy in a time very close to our own, in which obsessive technophiles develop a disease called 'Creep'. This causes parts of their bodies to be replaced with pieces of hardware, resulting in their being treated as lepers by normal people. The story is told from the alternating points of view of two victims, Johnny and Kestrella; the former having a VDU instead of a head and having to drink liquid food through a tube. He is a down-and-out, living a lonely existence in squats until he meets Kestrella, whose problem is less obvious. Her having a mobile phone instead of her left hand can be hidden by a long sleeve, and she is protected by a rich father. As hysteria grips the nation they live in fear of being rounded up and sent to the mysterious Centre for Genetic Rehabilitation,

## BUY THE BOOK

To order a copy of *Hybrids* (HarperCollins, £5.99), call Writers' Bookshelf on freephone 0800 015 0554. Postage and packing is £1.95. Please have your credit card ready.



## Young Brief

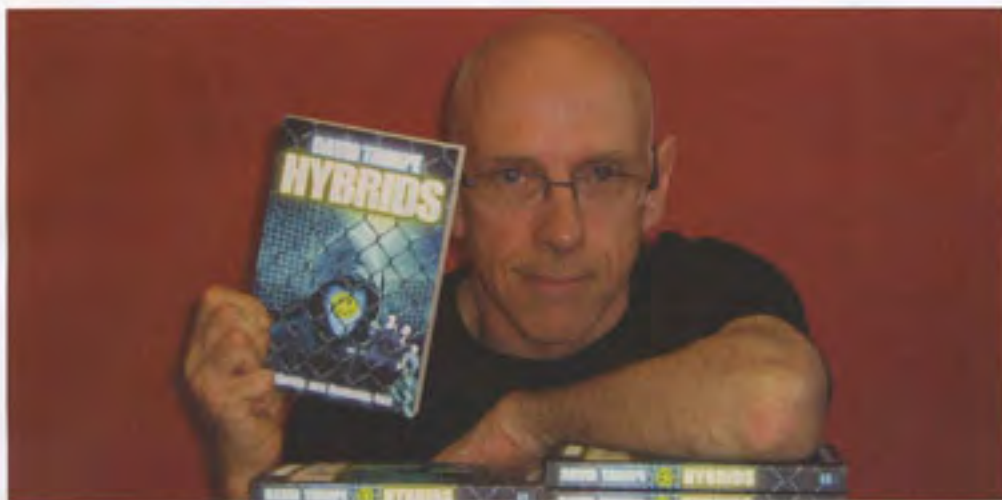
### Anita Rowe follows two parallel paths

'Plan your work in advance' is the advice of some successful writers for children. 'Decide what age group you are writing for. Do your market research to find out what publishers want and give it to them.'

But other, equally successful writers seem to give the opposite counsel: 'Write for the child inside yourself. Think back to what excited you when you were young, relive those feelings, write what grabs you and ignore the latest trends.'

Which should you follow? In my experience you can only succeed when you manage to do both. So why not try what I call my 'parallel writing' method? I'm a great advocate of Dorothea Brande's early morning writing, as described in her famous book, *Becoming a Writer*, which, although first published in 1934, remains the serious writer's bible. Just set your alarm half an hour, or even ten minutes, earlier than usual, and begin writing before you have properly woken up. Write whatever comes into your head – snatches of description of a character you know well or have just met, an anecdote, how you feel about something, what somebody said to you, a description of a scene still vivid in your mind – anything as long as it makes some sort of sense. If you find yourself obsessively reliving some long past scene when doing something that doesn't engage your mind, break off for a few minutes to jot that down too. This puts you in touch with your own obsessions in a way that mere day-dreaming cannot.

Also, in a different notebook and in parallel with this automatic, self-indulgent writing, study the children's book market and note down ideas for stories that seem to fit in with editors' demands. Jot down snippets of overheard children's dialogue here too. The definition of parallel lines is that they never meet, so don't expect your two notebooks to relate to each other. Yet sooner or later, by some magic synthesis of the imagination, they will.



never to be seen again. The story, suitable for anyone over ten, can be read on several levels. Some children will see it merely as an awful warning against too much indulgence in technological activities, while older and more thoughtful readers will relate it to the persecution of minorities or encroaching state control.

As well as winning the HarperCollins/*Saga* competition, *Hybrids* also won the 2008 Lewisham School Books Award and was shortlisted for the Sefton Super-reads. The *Saga*/HC judges called it: 'Exciting, page-turning, vivid and unputdownable', while a review by Helen Dunmore said: 'The writing is sharp, the dialogue good... but there's a real depth to this story too.'

However, as many successful writers

know, having a prize-winning book acclaimed by critics does not mean automatic acceptance of all that author's further efforts. David now has several books seeking a publisher: 'I have a completed novel called *We Can Improve On You*, for eleven to fifteen-year-olds which I am currently hawking around. The central character is a thirteen-year-old girl who finds her place in her family and society usurped by an imposter and has to live as a homeless outsider and fight to regain her life, which means confronting uncomfortable aspects of herself. I am working on two other YA novels, as well as the next two books in the *Hybrids* series, which don't have a publisher either, and a comics version of *Hybrids*.'

#### David's top tips

1. Read a great deal of books written for the same age group that you're writing for.
2. If you find a book you like, dismantle it to see how it works. Examine the structure, pacing, how the characters are developed, language and style. This is especially true for illustrated books.
3. For your own work, follow your obsession, as the great JG Ballard advises. Never imitate, unless as a practice exercise. Write about what fascinates you, even if it seems to your conscious mind unacceptable or uninteresting. If it excites you, it will excite somebody else, and it is your voice or theme that you have been given.
4. Write every day. Even if it is only for two minutes. Practice makes perfect just as when learning a language or a musical instrument. Most of what you write will be rubbish, it doesn't matter. The important thing is to keep the channels open, to gain a facility and confidence, and to trust whatever comes out of your mind. Don't censor. Edit later.
5. Never give up. A very large percentage of your chance of success is due to the happy circumstance where your manuscript happens to coincide with the needs or tastes of an editor and the opportunity to be published. Therefore to maximise the odds, persistence pays off. Entering competitions is also advisable - at least you know your manuscript is going to be read.