



Author Spotlight

Bernard Ashley chats to Graham Marks

Bernard Ashley is the award-winning, Carnegie-shortlisted writer of over twenty novels; he has, in his long career, also written a number of picture books, TV scripts and stage plays. Here he talks to **Graham Marks** about his new novel, set in World War 1, *Shadow of the Zeppelin*...

I think you were a teacher before you were a writer, is that right?

No, I came into writing *with* teaching...I was writing all the time I was teaching, and it was, to quote Graham Greene, my way of escape.

I started teaching in 1957, and fairly soon after that, in the early 60's, I had my first books published. [They] were educational books, written initially for children in the class I had, who would have been called, in those days, 'slow learners'. There wasn't much they could read, they were top juniors and the best they could manage were a few books from the infant shelves.

So I wrote them some exciting stories for their age group, couched in pretty straightforward language and using easy vocabulary. My dear Headmaster at the time showed them to a publisher who came to the school, he took them away and they commissioned a series of them. So that got me going, and my proper break came in 1974 when I wrote my first novel, *The Trouble With Donovan Croft*, and I didn't look back, as they say.

What made you choose this particular time in history for your latest book, *Shadow of the Zeppelin*?

I'd written several World War II stories; the first one was called *Johnnie's Blitz*, which went down very well, and I've done a couple since then...I enjoyed doing them, picking up things from my own childhood, but it was actually my publisher here who asked if I'd ever thought about writing a World War I story.

I didn't have to think about it very long because the two experiences, World War I and World War II, sort of ran into one another for me...I was never 'bombed out', as the phrase goes, but I was certainly bombed at, I was in London, in an air raid shelter, and heard the bombs falling in the streets around us. My mother remembered the Zeppelins flying over Woolwich [in World War 1], and I had an aunt who told me about a house round the corner from her that was bombed by a Zeppelin. So I thought that was where I wanted to start the story.

All this is local to where I live now, very close to the Royal Arsenal, the ordnance factory, so I could begin to do my research locally. I found out about a house in Eltham, on an estate that was built in 1915 for people to live who worked at the Royal Arsenal, which was bombed by a Zeppelin in August 1916...and that's the house [my hero] Freddie lives in in the book. There were 557 people killed in Zeppelin raids in World War I, which is nothing like the number killed in World War II, but still quite a high number.

What I found strange in the book was the attitude Londoners had, about how cowardly it was of the Germans to bomb the city...how, from the British point of view, that was just not on...

The odd thing was that, from the beginning, the Kaiser decreed that London should not be bombed; airships could bomb the trenches and ships in the channel, but not over cities. Then he allowed other cities, but not London, then east London, the docks, and finally he said they could bomb London itself. It went in

stages...a fascinating subject to research.

I kind of worked outwards [from the Royal Arsenal], and then I thought that I wanted to show things from a German perspective as well, which of course would have to be in a Zeppelin; so I went upwards, too, and invented the character of Ernst Stender and his side of the story.

I very much liked Ernst's friend, Josef, with his catch phrase 'Got to be done, got to be done...'

Do you know who that was? I went to the funeral of a very old friend's wife, and the cab driver [I had] didn't stop saying it, telling me all sorts of stories and saying 'It's got to be done, got to be done', and I thought, I've got to use this somewhere!

Isn't it wonderful when you get given characters like that?

Yes, absolutely!

Was it hard, what with all the death and sadness which this story has to have in it, to make this as uplifting a book as it is?

Well thank you for saying that...but it's the human spirit, I suppose, and as you'll know, having read the book, there are some terrible decisions which have to be made [by characters], but they are uplifting as well.

In the book you use quite a lot of slang and make references to people, like the music hall star Mark Sheridan, and the long-gone *Firefly* comic, as well as referring to something called a 'maroon', which I discovered, on looking it up, wasn't a colour but a firework – did you worry at all that your readers wouldn't know what you were talking about?

I think if a reader doesn't know, it's not going to matter too much, unless it's really, really significant and you've got to explain it because otherwise the story would fall to pieces. But I think, using the sort of references [you were talking about], it's good just to go for it, because if you get too didactic in a book it's not good – actually, I cut something out of a story the other day, on the advice of an editor who said I was 'getting a bit teachy'...

Old habits, Bernard, old habits!

Well I suppose that is something I'm likely to suffer from! I do try and explain some things, but what I try to do is disguise it in some way or other.

I like the way you used the BSM, the Battery Sergeant Major character, to explain how the gun crews worked – the way he treated the rookie soldiers and taught them to use the guns taught us as well.

And also put in a little bit of comedy, too!

It certainly did! The research I found the most fascinating concerns the Zeppelins, and I came away from the book with the feeling that you, Bernard, could probably actually pilot one.

Well I know how a Zeppelin flies, but don't put me in command!

It sounds as if it was like flying a boat.

Flying one was subject to so many different things – the up and down draughts, which way the weather was coming from, as well as attacks from the ground and by air.

The most fascinating piece of research, I found, was about the bullets the British used against the Zeppelins towards the end of the war. What did for Zeppelins was the invention, by a man called Pomeroy, a New Zealander, of exploding bullets. I thought, before I started [the research for the book], that a Zeppelin was just one great big envelope of hydrogen gas, but it actually had up to sixteen individual 'cells' and ordinary bullets just went through the outer covering, making a tiny little hole, and through a cell, only causing a small leak and not making much difference.

By the end [of the war] machine guns in the British planes had three different sorts of bullets: the Buckingham which was a tracer you could see, the Pomeroy which exploded, and the Brock which was an incendiary bullet – I don't mention it in the book because I didn't find out about them until recently. So one bullet guided the pilot's aim, another would go in and explode and the third would set the whole damn lot alight.

The invention of those bullets ended the Zeppelin menace, and they brought down two significant 'Super-Zepps' as they were called, one of which in reality bombed the house I chose for Freddie to live in. In the

book Freddie's father, Sam Castle, like my own Granddad, works at the Royal Arsenal making these bullets, and when I found my Granddad's death certificate it said 'former explosives worker', so he actually did the job Freddie's father did.

In *Shadow of the Zeppelin* you choose to use some real characters, like the Zeppelin commander Lieutenant Mathy, with fictional ones – as you did when you telescoped three real Royal Flying Corps flyers into the Second Lieutenant George Simmonds character. Was there a reason why you didn't use all real characters?

Well, because not everything I write about actually happened. I wanted things to work my way and I think that's a fair technique because then you, as a writer, can have your cake and eat it!

One of the many interesting aspects for me about the book was finding Ernst's feelings of ambivalence towards the war echoed early on by Freddie's older brother Will – was that something you devised, as an author, or did it come up through your research that this was the way people felt?

I certainly knew there were young men who were against going to war, and I thought, dramatically, it made for a stronger story if, initially, Will doesn't want to go. He's is a printer in Woolwich – and that is a real printing firm I use – and he likes his life; of course Freddie thinks he's a craven coward [for not signing up], even though he loves him dearly.

So, if it's not a rude question, how old were you during World War II?

I was born in 1935, so I was four when the war began and ten when it ended.

Did you spend most of the war in London?

The first part, including when the Blitz began, but we did get away before the Blitz finished and went to Preston in Lancashire; my dad, who was a London fireman, stayed. I wrote a book, *Ronnie's War*, based on that experience.

We came back when the Blitz stopped, and everything was all right until 1944 when they started with V1 doodlebugs and V2 rockets coming over and then everybody evacuated again, which is what we did as well.

There is a strong story thread, linking all the major characters, running right the way through the book which relates to cowardice, and the way people feel about their own bravery; where did that come from, was it something you'd planned or did it happen as the book progressed?

I went into it knowing that I wanted to look at cowardice, and I think that's why, initially, Will is portrayed as a coward. But Freddie is a coward, too, he won't stand up to [the bully at school], and of course that's the sort of boy I was. Some kids you meet and you say 'D'you want a fight?' and they'd say 'Yes!' and put their fists up. If you'd said do you want a fight to me, I'd have said 'No!' and I'd have run!

Of course, when push comes to shove, these people [in the story] show themselves as something different; I wouldn't say they would describe themselves as brave, but what they do they do because circumstances demand it of them and they acquiesce to that demand.

Each in their own way gets pushed to the point where they have to make a choice and they find they have the strength and courage to make the right one. Of all the characters, Freddie might be the one who gets pushed the hardest and changes the most – in fact his life, towards the end of the book, turns quite Dickensian, doesn't it...

Yes, especially going down to Rochester!*

**Many of Dickens' novels included references to Rochester and the surrounding area.*

It is those moments in the book, like when Freddie goes off, that remind you this is set a hundred years ago, when the world was a very, very different place, and you've managed to capture that feeling – did you have to spend a lot of time 'getting into character', so to speak?

I suppose in a bit of a way, I did; [if you think about it], we are only touching distance away from Dickens' world in 1916...he died in 1870 and a lot of the world hadn't changed very much 40 years later – in 1916 they'd only had cars for fourteen or fifteen years, and the Wright brothers had first flown just thirteen years before.

How long did the book take to write?

I'd say about a year...I'd finished the last bit of research last April, when I did my research on [the battlefields of] the Somme, which was the last bit of it, to go and get a feeling of what it was like for Freddie's older brother Will. It wasn't the full trench experience, more like doing a recce for a film, as I wanted to see exactly where certain events in the story took place.

It does make a huge difference, actually seeing the place where something in a story happens.

It does, it does...the things is, you spot the thing that makes the scene a little bit idiosyncratic, and then that gives it a reality it otherwise wouldn't have. You manage to find something you wouldn't invent, but because you've been there you can use it - because it's real, and it's true. I love doing that, seeing it in my head and knowing that I've been there and didn't just write at my desk at home.