



Author Spotlight

Teri Terry chats to Graham Marks

Teri Terry arrived on the children’s book radar last year with her debut novel *Slated*, which was immediately shortlisted for a number of prizes, and has recently won the 14-16 category of the Leeds Book Awards. Here she talks to Graham Marks about the extraordinary journey she has taken to become an author – a story almost worthy of a book itself.

You really do seem to have packed a massive amount into your life so far – not only in terms of places you’ve lived, but also jobs you’ve done. To start with, why so many countries?

Sometimes these things just kind of happen to you...my dad was in the Canadian Air Force, attached to NATO in France, and that’s why my parents were there and why I was born in France. We left when I was about a year old and went back to Canada and we lived all across the country at different Air Force stations; I lived just about everywhere in Canada, a base brat, as we used to call ourselves, and I didn’t miss out very many provinces.

Did the much-travelled nature of your early life have anything to do with the many different jobs you’ve had?

I think there’s some connection, you become used to never settling anywhere...I’m probably one of those people with a bit of a chequered job history. I start really great and enthusiastic and pick things up very quickly, and then get bored after not very much time.

But you’ve changed directions, not just jobs.

Oh yes...I never really knew what I wanted to do when I grew up, so I tried a lot of different things. I went to high school in Nova Scotia and got it into my head that I wanted to be an engineer, even though I hated physics, and then my Dad got transferred to Edmonton, in Alberta, and so I applied to university there. I asked for the Engineering prospectus and got sent the Medicine one by mistake, saw they did medical lab science and thought ‘Ooh, I quite fancy that!’ and applied for it. In my first year I found out we had to take blood, so I transferred out into microbiology as I’m actually extremely squeamish, to put it mildly. So I did a science degree to start with...it doesn’t sound like I put a lot of thought into it, does it! The day I was graduating, going up to get my degree...this is going to make me sound really flaky... the Law degree people were also there and I thought ‘You know, I quite fancy law!’. So I applied to a few law schools, got accepted and then in my second year I worked out it wasn’t for me, but I got talked into staying and I finished the degree. Then I worked in a few law firms, which is where I met an Australian and that’s how I ended up in Australia.

Once I got there I wondered what I was going to do – have I mentioned my ‘abiding interest’ in optometry? That was actually the bit of physics that I liked, all the lenses and stuff. So I thought I’d try that and it’s the job I stuck with for the most time, eight or nine years. And then I was on holiday in England, having split up with my Australian boyfriend, and met a man whose surname was Terry, so of course I had to marry him. As the legend goes.

So I moved to England and thought ‘What shall do I do now?’...

And 'what you did now' was write?

Backtracking to when I was about seventeen, we had one of those 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' things in English class one day; I remember thinking I wanted to be a writer, but I'd always thought it was fantasyland, not something ordinary people did, so I never pursued it. I would never have considered taking an English degree, for example, in a million years, because what do you do with an English degree? Beside teaching? Which isn't what I wanted to do.

So there I was in England and having to start over again as my optometry degree wasn't recognised, and that really ticked me off, because UK optometrists can practice in Australia. At that point I thought I really did want to write, but I needed to earn some money...I did a few jobs and thought about teacher training and was a teaching assistant for some time to see how I liked it. I realised that I'm not really a disciplinarian and I would have found that side of it really crushing.

I kept looking for other jobs, trying to think what I could do, and I was writing throughout all this – you didn't know this was going to go on for quite so long when you asked me about my jobs, did you!

My job is to listen!

I kept looking at the job ads and one came up at Calibre Audio Library, a charity that does audio books for visually-impaired and dyslexic people; they were very focussed on the older end of the market, but they had some extra money and thought they wanted to develop things on the children's side, and wanted someone who knew about that end of the market.

At that point I was writing adult stuff and didn't know much about children's literature, to be honest, other than that I'd read it when I was a kid. But I'd decided I wanted the job, so I put myself through a crash course in bookshops and libraries, working out what was what and what was popular in children's books, and I got the job.

While I was there I read a ton of children's books and I thought 'This is what I'm meant to write!'. Up to then I'd written one complete adult novel and started an awful lot of others; I'd done an Open University creative writing course and spent about a year trying to get short stories published, and never did.

I hadn't given up on writing, but I wasn't feeling that enthused about it at all. The books I read, that really struck me, that stood out, were *Skellig* and *Artemis Fowl*; I loved both of them for completely different reasons and I got really excited about writing again. I was coming back from a visit to Canada and I decided to start writing a children's story on the plane; I wrote the start to a story called *Freeze Frame*, which I then entered into the Winchester Writers Conference and it won first prize in the 8-12 category. This was around 2008, and it was the first children's story I'd written...I didn't have a lot of confidence in my writing and having that happen gave me a massive boost and made a big difference to me.

Do you think that an 'outsider status' is almost an essential part of being a writer – in that you have to have distance in order to be able to see people and events clearly?

I think there's some truth to that, because I do observe people an awful lot...I'm a bit of a weird mix of an introvert and an extrovert, if that makes any sense; I like to spend a lot of time by myself, but then when I get out I'm quite social. I tend to get to know people quite superficially and then not really have a lot of close friends. There is a little bit of that standing back and checking people out, maybe being a bit leery of people just because I haven't known them for twenty years like everyone else has.

I do always wonder what makes people tick, I've always been like that, and I remember in my early teens having a friend whose mother had a quite a sad story to her life; no one had ever told me about it, but somehow I just sort of knew...it's about picking up things that people don't say out loud.

You say you're 'obsessed with characters who don't belong'; is there an element of therapy for you in writing about people like that?

I think there's an element of therapy in writing for all writers, if they're honest! With [Kyla,] the character in *Slated* who's had her memory wiped and doesn't know where she comes from – all that not belonging and trying to fit into an unfamiliar place – I never really set out to write about that, and I don't know that I've ever written about it in quite such a direct way.

Starting a new school, especially when you're a teenager, can be quite traumatic, but of course when you don't even remember having ever been to a school before it's all magnified; I think it was drawing on those kinds of feelings from when I was in school myself...I think there's an element of that, but [Kyla's] not me at all, although I worked out, as I was writing, that that was probably why I related so well to her.

Your description of the world of *Slated* and *Fractured* isn't very futuristic; apart from the levos, there aren't many gizmos and you can imagine it's just a few years in the future...I liked that it was a tangible place.

I liked that as well...a lot of dystopian novels are so far into a world that's so different from ours that you can't picture yourself in it at all. I think it's a lot more interesting for readers if they can see themselves in the situation you're writing about.

Of your many jobs which one do you think contributed most to your writing?

The legal thing, in a sense...law wasn't for me, for various reasons, but it was never from the point of view of thinking like a lawyer, because my brain very naturally thinks that way, as in I can look at things from every side. You know how some people, if they have a strong opinion on which side of a debate it correct, they can't actually argue the other side? I don't have that problem.

Could you be either the defence or the prosecution?

I think I'd be lousy at prosecuting people because I wouldn't want to put anyone away. That ability to see how different people would look at situations, that works from a writing point of view, it makes people real and sympathetic. And the science side of things has been useful as well – I can't say that I've ever written any optometrists [into a story], but it could happen!

You completed eight novels before the ninth, *Slated*, was published. Did you show the others to anyone?

Yes, the first one I completed, the adult one, I did some submissions on – I think at that point I actually thought the fact that I'd finished an entire novel meant someone should probably give me a gold medal and, you know, instantly publish it. Having said that, there was also a completely contradictory feeling. So I did some submissions and got form rejections and I got one back that had a nice, personal comment.

What kept you going as you wrote and wrote and wrote, all without the benefit of an audience?

Well, I'm stubborn. That's part of it, and I did get some encouragement...the first children's novel I finished, I got a few full-manuscript requests on that and had someone who was quiet interested, but then said no. And had someone who rejected it on my birthday when I was on holiday, which was kind of mean, although I shouldn't have checked my e-mails.

But then a year after that I joined the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), got to know people and got to understand a bit more about how long it could take sometimes, and was probably more pragmatic about things. I wasn't expecting everything to happen instantly, but having had full-manuscript requests on my first children's novel your expectations get raised, and I kept getting nearly there, but never getting through; that happened quite a few times.

Mostly I was OK, and I think the key to that is – people say this all the time, but I think it's really true – as long as you're writing something else when the rejections are coming in you'll be all right with it. With me, I always like to have something out there, because as long as something's on someone's desk, somewhere, there was always a chance they'll say yes.

What do you think was it about *Slated* that made it different everything else you'd done?

I kept writing, and I suppose you learn as you go and things came together better. And nothing I'd written before was probably good enough, in hindsight.

Where did the idea for *Slated* come from?

I had a dream, which was the prologue in the book. I use dreams a lot, that period when you're half awake, half asleep, when your unconscious takes over and it can come up with some interesting, great ideas. Not long after I'd written the prologue down I had the title as well. My best writing time is about 5am, which is why I look perpetually tired.

***Slated* and *Fractured*, to me, are very layered books, with you slowly peeling away elements – particularly of Kyla's story - as the pages turn. Did you have to be very careful about what you said and when you said it?**

Oh yes, that was quite the headache! I think, in hindsight, if I'd written all three books in one go I'd have probably would have made things simpler for myself. It was really hard keeping things straight in my head, but I'm happy with the way it all works.

The books are very predictive about our very near future; as you wrote them, was the political landscape, here and in Europe, changing almost by the day?

That was so weird! The whole idea of the background story - with the economic collapse and the UK withdrawing from the EU, and a coalition government that didn't work – none of it had happened when I came up with all of that. And then there were the 2011 riots, in the summer...that was horrible, obviously, but I kind of watched it on another level, and you could really see how things could get out of control so fast, and spread to so many places. More interestingly, from my point of view, you could see how the authorities can over-react, but people won't care because they don't feel safe and they want to.

How accurate a picture do you think you've painted?

[Laughs] I don't know! We'll have to see if the rest of Europe collapses and then we close borders and the riots take off...then we'll know. But that's a bit of a scary thought.

Book Three is finished now, and you said that, if you have a book out there, you like to have something else to work on; so what's coming next?

Well, I probably can't tell you, as nothing is set in stone as yet. I can tell you that I'm working on three ideas, though.