

DOUG MACLEOD

WORKING FOR THE CHICKEN CHANNEL

Writing Books and Writing for Television

By my mid-twenties I had written quite a few books for children. One of these books, *Sister Madge's Book of Nuns*, won some awards, which was very gratifying. But the money really was extraordinarily bad unless you built up a huge backlist or had a movie made out of your book or wrote Harry Potter and it didn't look like I was going to do any of these things. I thought the way to make money would be to write scripts for TV and stage. There was only one school in Melbourne at the time where you could do that, and that was The Victorian College of Arts. They only accepted a small number of students per year – thirty or so – and they wanted to make sure you'd be able to support yourself for those three years, so they asked you to write down how exactly you'd do this. I wrote down 'royalties' – which really was a lie because there's no way I could have supported myself on those alone, but that seemed to get me in.

I graduated after three years and still did kids books and still didn't make any money but I did have this degree that said I could write TV scripts. I started sending comedy scripts away to TV and radio and in the end they started buying them so I had a modest income – but it still wasn't enough to buy a reliable car. Then the Melbourne comedy boom happened. My real and lasting links with the Melbourne comedy scene happened as a result of Theatresports – the competitive improvisational drama game that enjoyed huge popularity in the eighties and is still played in schools today. As a writer I found it a good way to free-associate, to come up with ideas you wouldn't normally have in a more traditional, relaxed environment. A lot of Theatresports is about panic – back at the height of its popularity you would be about to face an audience of 2,000 people and have no idea of what you were about to say or do. I was fortunate to be in a team that featured Glenn Robbins, Simon Rogers and Mary-Anne Fahey. Other teams featured people who would go on to become famous on TV and radio as comedians. Theatresports increased my self-confidence a little, too.

My team once won a round by performing a four-minute improvisation about the story of the nativity done in the style of an Enid Blyton book. I played an angel who told Mary she'd given birth to a wondrous child called Noddy. We won that night but we didn't always do so well. Sometimes I'd get stuck and Glenn Robbins would rescue me effortlessly, by changing the whole scene around.

Surprisingly, Theatresports also made me a more disciplined reader. You really do have to know a few books and plays if you're going to compete well. One night I was embarrassed to be on stage and we had to do the story of Hamlet in the style of The Marx Brothers. I knew the Marx brothers but, to my shame, I didn't actually know the story of Hamlet all that well. Fortunately, our team captain that night was Simon Rogers, who was very familiar with the story, and he told me I had to be Ophelia. All I had to do was prance around being girly and Simon as Groucho Hamlet cried out one liners like 'Ophelia! Ophelia! I just gotta feelya' or 'To be or not to be? What a stupid question!' Having been suitably embarrassed by my lack of learning, I went home and made sure to read Hamlet, as well as a few other Shakespeares. So next time when we had to do MacBeth in the style of Sesame Street I was well prepared. 'With this dagger shall you slay Duncan! But don't try this at home, kids.'

Out of Theatresports came a gig as head writer on a pilot of a show called *The Comedy Company*. I was amazed when the pilot was picked up. It was supposed to be a six-week commitment, which went on to run for two highly successful years and one unsuccessful one and relaunched Melbourne sketch comedy on commercial TV. *The Comedy Company* was a huge education because it proved to me that comedy didn't have to be acidic or highbrow. I'd been brought up on satire shows and mainly English comic novels — like the splendid ones by David Nobbs — and I always thought sketches should be about people in suits having arguments over desks. (I think this was reflected in the sorts of kids' books I used to write.)

The first *Comedy Company* sketch I wrote was about a holiday resort where intellectuals went for more meaningful relaxation. It was called *Club Head* and it was a

complete dog. No one laughed. One of Glenn Robbins' first sketches was called *Mum on the Run*. It was a home delivery organisation that sent out these mums with plates of home-cooked meals — grey corned beef, bullet peas and Deb mashed potato — with Mark Mitchell dressed up like a mum emerging from a van. And Glenn's stuff worked. People did laugh. Glenn had the advantage of being a stand-up comedian and he already knew that, while there was a place for surreal comedy, the real crowd-pleasing material was more to do with observational, everyday stuff. He'd also done teacher training, so he had a fair idea about how kids thought — and most of our audience would turn out to be kids.

So I teamed up with Glenn pretty swiftly. We're different personalities but we did have that bond of a similar upbringing, similar childhood experiences. I wrote a lot of these 'suburban' sketches with Glenn, Mary-Anne Fahey, Ian McFadyen, Kim Gyngell and Mark Mitchell — and this shaped the show. We were doing gags that viewers in Australian capital cities could relate to. Washing the car and mowing the nature strip on the weekend, spending holidays at the beach. It was this looking back at everyday childhood experiences, recalling the events of a suburban weekend, that helped me when eventually I came to write my first novel for young adults that wasn't purely fantasy-based.

Towards the end of my fourteen-year stint in TV I did start dabbling in kids' books again, because Julie Watts (Penguin's chief publisher of books for children and young adults at the time) offered to reprint some of my old children's books, including *Sister Madge's Book of Nuns*. The book required a substantial rewrite because it had been written back in 1986 when it was okay to do jokes about Princess Di. On the new *Sister Madge* book I developed a good working relationship with Penguin senior editor Dmetri Kakmi. I hadn't worked closely with an editor in this way before. It was an experience I rarely had in TV. There was time to talk over ideas and argue, in a constructive way. Most of my rewriting was done on planes between Melbourne and Sydney because I was recording shows at Fox studios but still living in St Kilda. So it's a jetsetting book. One

of the new poems, *Sister Bertha and the Beard*, was written at a height of several thousand feet over Eildon Weir.

After such a positive experience I considered returning to books. To promote the revamped Sister Madge book, Penguin had organised some sessions where I spoke to kids in schools, and these were terrific fun. I had become a little out of touch with kids, so these sessions were also very educational for me. (Kids hadn't changed that much, however. The first question they asked was still what football team I barracked for. The only difference was all the team names had changed since the last time they'd asked me this question in the early eighties.) But I still had this slight money fixation. TV paid a lot more than books — which is why there were so many ruthless, paranoid and insane people in TV. I remember visiting a programmer for one station who told me proudly that they had hired a PR firm to tell us who or what we actually *were*. What was their network all about? How did viewers *perceive* them? In the end the PR firm took them all to a fancy harbourside restaurant and told them what our network *was*, and what it should *aspire to be*.

They pulled aside a curtain and there on a podium was a plate with a roast chicken on it. This marketing manager, this guy with earrings and a shaved head, told them that their TV network was a roast chicken. That's how people viewed the network - comfort food. Then the bald guy showed us what we should *aspire* to be. He got out a little container of Thai sauce and poured it over the chicken.

Two things became clear. Firstly, the programmer was slightly unhinged. Secondly, it was probably a good idea for me to leave my full-time job in television. I took on part-time work instead, editing the delightful *Kath and Kim* scripts written by Jane Turner and Gina Riley.

My plan was to spend the rest of the time writing a novel for young adults, which I had never done before. I was sure it couldn't be that hard. I read how-to-do-it books and attended lectures. I read the book *Dear Author* by Carmel Bird, which gave me a few

ideas such as not overdoing the adjectives, and that worried me because I quite like adjectives. And ‘suddenly’ is also a bad word apparently. So I made notes, *not too many adjectives, don’t use suddenly*. I didn’t start writing the novel, however.

I heard Morris Gleitzman give a talk on writing for kids and saying the idea was to give your central character some real problems to resolve. I decided I’d write a book about a character with HEAPS of problems. Morris was a hero of mine because he’d moved from TV producing to kids’ writing and was very good at both. Well, I’ll be honest. The main reason he was my hero was - he was the first serious TV critic to write nice things about *The Comedy Company*. I still didn’t start writing the novel.

Then I read an article by James Maloney that stated that boys were more interested in action than introspection. So I decided I would fill my book with incidents – shipwrecks, volcanoes, etc. But I was yet to write a word of my novel. I realised I was actually frightened by the prospect. Writing television scripts had never bothered me, but the novel was a huge, scary thing. The only way I could do it was to follow the example of the maniacs who swam on St Kilda beach every morning in the middle of winter. Just hold your nose and jump in.

I sat down and wrote the first (very bad) draft of my novel in a weekend. I decided not to censor myself and just banged the whole thing out till I was finished and exhausted and had a 30,000 word manuscript. After six rewrites and wonderful guidance from Dmetri Kakmi (who refused to let me solve plot problems by doing jokes) the novel *Tumble Turn* was finally published.

Now that I’d done it, I was sure that writing a second young adult novel would be much easier. Once again I wrote the first (very, very bad) draft over a couple of days. Once again I had to write another six drafts before *I’m Being Stalked by a Moonshadow* appeared in the shops. I’d learned nothing from the earlier novel, only that having it published was one of the best days of my life. Nothing I had done for TV came close to it.

Now I'm still working part-time in TV and I'm also writing my third young adult novel. With two novels already under my belt the process is, of course, much more streamlined. I'm currently writing draft six.

I'm quite proud of the novels and I'm looking forward to writing better ones. I'm also proud of the very silly book that I did with Jane Covernton and Craig Smith at Working Title: *Leon Stumble's Book of Stupid Fairytales*. Though I still can't make a living from being a children's author alone. Which is why I wrote the jingle for Magda Szubanski's Jetstar TV ad. I'm not quite as proud of that.

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