

# Only books with the now factor set kids free

*Classics are all very well, says the author Stephen Kelman, but to be inspired pupils need contemporary novels that reflect their often tough lives*

**I** made my first author visit to a school in November 2011. My debut novel, *Pigeon English*, had been published in March that year – and stepping into the classroom of an inner-city comprehensive, I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. I expected to be met by a sea of blank faces at best, and at worst, I imagined some kind of siege situation.

I recalled my own experience as a pupil at a similar school in the mid-1980s: interest in literature among the year 10 kids, especially the boys, was non-existent and we wouldn't have taken kindly to some stuffy writer coming in and telling us that the route to self-fulfilment could come through reading – or even writing – a book. It just wasn't plausible to us then, and I assumed not much had changed in the intervening years.

But *Pigeon English* was about the world these kids knew – it tells the story of an 11-year-old Ghanaian boy who comes to live on an English council estate and gets

caught up in a murder investigation when a friend is stabbed to death – and it was written in the language of their streets, in a way they could relate to. I brought a whiff of credibility with me.

To my great relief, the talk went well. The kids seemed genuinely grateful that I was there (apart from one boy, who was intensely irritated that I couldn't put him in touch with JK Rowling). They'd understood my book in a way I hadn't bargained for and their banter was sparky but good-natured. I left with their applause ringing in my ears. I was hooked.

More school visits followed over the next few years, and every time the positive experience was repeated. The kids made me laugh with their impertinence – there was always one who wanted to know if I was rich or why I had a thing for talking pigeons – and sometimes they broke my heart too.

I visited a school in Elm Park, east London, a week after a boy had been stabbed to death in a gang-related attack outside its gates. His cousin was in the class. The anger burnt from him, but as I spoke I became aware that he was hanging on my words. He saw his life reflected in the pages of my book and it spurred him and his classmates to discuss things that would



normally remain unspoken. I had provided a means of catharsis. Perhaps I had even given them hope their stories would be heard.

When I related the experience to my wife that evening I broke down and cried. I realised I could speak for these kids, that my book could be a tool for change in their lives.

But what about those kids whose lives were not touched by violence and deprivation, who, thankfully, had it easier? Could I connect with them in the same way? I had my doubts that Pigeon English, with its portrayal of urban poverty and woe, would transfer successfully to the quadrangles of a prestigious fee-paying school in Sussex.

But the invitation came, from a principal anxious to expose his pupils to a taste of another world beyond their privileged and safe existence — where they march into lunch in the Great Hall to the accompaniment of the school band — and I accepted. In doing so, I had my preconceptions blown out of the water.

Not only were the kids here just as engaged and engaging, but their ability to empathise with the plight of characters whose experience was a million miles away from their own was inspirational. OK, so one boy offered me a flight on his father's private plane the next time I was in Nepal, but he also took Harri, the spirited but beleaguered hero of Pigeon English, to his heart. After all, isn't empathy a universal human trait, the duty and the privilege of all? And isn't literature its most efficient method of delivery?

In my office I write for myself. Every writer should, first and foremost. But in the classroom I have seen the most powerful evidence that books belong to everyone. They have an uncanny knack of toppling the walls that society or circumstance build between people. The "haves and have-nots" debate loses its edge when kids sit down to read a book and are transported by it. Books equip them with the empathy and the curiosity they need to go out and make the most of themselves, no matter where they have come from.

Perhaps this is partly why the AQA exam board has chosen Pigeon English for its revamped English literature GCSE syllabus from September. Aside from its reflections on contemporary British society, the story is infused with my concern that empathy and curiosity — especially among the nation's underprivileged children — should

be promoted.

Michael Gove, who was education secretary when the reading list was overhauled, had stated his preference for the classics; but times change, and if he is correct in his assertion that instilling good reading habits in our children can dramatically enhance their prospects for social mobility, first we must convince them that literature is not some distant, archaic thing that bears no connection to their reality but that it can speak directly to them and can contain answers to their questions.

A couple of years ago I visited my former high school, on the estate where I was born and raised. I was greeted like a rock star returning to play a hometown gig. At one point, a shy girl at the back of the class put her hand up. She asked me in a whisper if I thought she could make the same journey I had made and become a writer. The boy beside her answered for me. "Of course you can," he said. It was an opinion echoed by the class.

*Man on Fire* by Stephen Kelman is published on Thursday by Bloomsbury



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Source: The Sunday Times (News Review)  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Sunday 9, August 2015  
Page: 6  
Area: 611 sq. cm  
Circulation: ABC 763521 Weekly  
Ad data: page rate £60,690.00, scc rate £144.00  
Phone: 020 7782 5000  
Keyword: Bloomsbury

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**Stephen Kelman, whose novel Pigeon English involves a child being stabbed to death, spoke at a London school hit by a similar tragedy**