

## **Stewart Foster on writing his critically acclaimed debut novel, and appearing at the Edinburgh Book Festival.**

**Stewart Foster's** debut novel [\*We Used To Be Kings\*](#) was published in January 2014, the same month [\*The Shock Of The Fall\*](#) by Nathan Filer won the Costa Book of the Year. These novels share a similar premise and explore the issue of mental illness, but this literary coincidence goes beyond words on the page, with the two writers living a mere ten miles apart and both gaining an MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University.

Stewart Foster talks to Sally Gander about his experience, and how the two finally met when they shared the stage at the Edinburgh Book Festival in August.

[\*Edinburgh Spotlight\*](#) says *'both books are defined by their brilliantly empathetic voices, which Foster and Filer bring to life with a skill and compassion which has justifiably already placed their debut novels as contemporary classics.'*

### **When did you first hear about the similarities of the two books?**

When I went to see three agents who had read mine and were touting to take me on. It was Sept 2012, *The Shock of the Fall* had just got a deal and one of the agents practically accused me of plagiarism. I don't think that word was actually used, but basically she said there are massive similarities and did we know each other, so that's what it came down to.

### **What impact did that have on you at the time?**

It really was the shock of the fall! It derailed the whole day, scrambled my head totally, and I decided not to choose her as my agent.

### **How did it affect the publication process?**

We had to change the title for the pitch to publishers. Nathan's original title was *Where The Moon Is* and mine was *Letters from the Moon*. I wish I could have kept the original title but most people love *We Used To Be Kings*.

To be honest, I blocked out the fact that Nathan's book was out there and I don't know if any publishers declined it for that reason. Reviews sometimes compare the two, but it's always been in a good way, so I don't think it's affected sales. You never know though, do you?

### **What's your viewpoint on the similarities and differences of the two books?**

If you take the basic plot points and characters you could say they're similar, two young men with the voices of their dead brothers in their head. But that's life isn't it? People have brothers and they die, it's just two people wrote about the same subject at the same time.

The main difference is the voice of the main characters and their points of view. I elected to have a really narrow point of view in order to live inside Tom's head. He only sees what's in front of him and all he's concerned about is himself and his brother and how they can sort each other out. Whereas Nathan's character, Matt, has a wider viewpoint with awareness of the social issues of healthcare and society's attitude to mental health.

### **You finally met Nathan when you appeared together at the Edinburgh Festival. How did you get on?**

It was absolutely amazing, that two people who wrote the same type of novel ended up getting on really well, almost as if we'd known each other for ages. During the discussion he said the writing was cathartic, and so maybe our connection is understanding that we went through the same creative process and understood it.

I only read *The Shock Of The Fall* a week before the festival. I really don't read much, I've got a terrible attention span and I only last five minutes before I get an idea of something I want to write and then I'm gone. But Nathan's last chapter is amazing, after all the pages of chaos in the main character's mind he manages to slow the world down, and I think that's pretty clever.

### **Can you tell me something about your own writing process?**

I don't set out with a plan in mind, it's essentially about the characters and what they want to do. They grow in my head as I write, and they stay with me for the day, the week, the month. Every character has something that makes them laugh, makes them happy or sad, and if I can reach those two extremes I know how they'll be in between.

Once I've written the first draft I go back and work a chapter at a time, usually about 3,500 words. I'll edit twice and email it to my editor, Jonathan Bentley-Smith. He'll then send it back with a line-by-line edit that looks at rhythm, sentence structure, if I'm showing too much or not enough, that sort of thing.

The story moves on the most when we meet up and work together. Jon says he creates a launchpad for the ideas to escape, which is pretty accurate, but essentially we're two blokes sitting in a pub looking at a paragraph and discussing how to make it better.

I'm always searching for the perfect line, the perfect paragraph, but sometimes I need someone to tell me when it's already there. That's what Jon does, apart from helping to create the ideas he stops me from making it worse. There's a lot of trust there. He's a friend too but there's no space for friendship when it comes to the edit. I can't write crap and he can't skim over it, so when it comes back with no comments I know it means 'this is perfect, mate'.

The edit with Jon took about a year for *Kings*, and that's the process I enjoy the most. I know I'm making it better and that's the slingshot to moving forward, that's what takes me to the end.

### **What would you say to anyone that's writing a book and hears of something similar appearing on the shelves?**

Keep going. It had already happened to me once with [Charlie St. Cloud](#), a film about a boy with his brother's voice in his head, which came out while I was writing. I was worried stiff but I kept going, you have to.

A friend of mine was halfway through a novel when [Avatar](#) came out and it made him stop, and then he started another and a similar book came out and he stopped again. I thought, you're never going to finish if you keep wondering what everyone else is writing. You've just got to hope your story is unique enough to have its own angle.

[We Used To Be Kings](#) is published by Jonathan Cape.

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