Do You Love the Thunder?
An interview with author Philip Reeve

Philip Reeve is an English author and illustrator of children's books, most notably his 2001 book *Mortal Engines* and its sequels (the 2001 to 2006 *Mortal Engines Quartet*). His 2007 novel, *Here Lies Arthur*, a retelling of the King Arthur stories, won the Carnegie Medal. Since then he has written the *Larklight* trilogy set in space in the Victorian era, a trio of prequels to *Mortal Engines*, the *Railhead* books about a world where space-travel is undertaken by trains, and three books about Utterly Dark, who lives on the island of Wildsea, whose residents are ruled by myth and magic. In addition to that he has published many books for younger children, often in collaboration with Sarah McIntyre.

*Thunder City*, a new book set in the world of *Mortal Engines* but not the same time period, will be published at the end of September.

**Rupert Loydell (RL): So, an obvious question first: What made you return to the world of *Mortal Engines*?**
Philip Reeve (PR): People have often said they’d like more *Mortal Engines* stories, but I couldn’t really see a way to do it: there didn’t seem much more to say, and I wanted to push forward and try new things. But during the lockdowns in 2020 I found myself with some time on my hands, so I started tinkering with an adventure story that had no connection to the earlier books but simply used that world as a setting. And it absorbed bits of some earlier, unfinished stories, and very slowly turned into *Thunder City.*
**RL: *Thunder City* is a prequel set a century before your other novels in this world?**PR: The rule I set myself was that I wouldn’t write about any of the characters from the other books or visit any of the same settings. The problem with prequels so often is that the characters turn out to have huge, dramatic back stories which they somehow never mentioned before, or that we get to see events they did mention and they turn to be not nearly as interesting as they sounded. So *Thunder City* is set safely about 110 years before *Mortal Engines* begins, when the world is fairly similar, but none of the people we met in the original quartet has been born yet.

**RL: And for those who haven't read the seven original books (*Mortal* *Engines* plus three sequels, then three prequels)or seen the film (you should), can you tell us again about where you got the idea of nomadic traction engines roaming the land?**
PR: It was so long ago, I can’t remember! I was trying to write a big, sprawling, vaguely Victorian science fantasy story and it lacked a central hook to hang all the characters and ideas on, so I started thinking about putting them on some sort of big vehicle and I suppose the biggest vehicle I could think of was a motorised city. I imagined it looking like Breughel’s painting of the Tower of Babel, but on caterpillar tracks. That led me to wonder why you’d want a motorised city, and I realised you’d use it to catch and devour smaller cities, so suddenly a whole world fell into place…

**RL: The books are mostly about a small number of heroic characters in opposition to feudal systems and powerful baddies abusing and trying to control technologies, so on one level these are books about society and power too, perhaps in the same way Frank Herbert's *Dune* is a book about religion and feudal power using science fiction as a backdrop. Would that be fair comment?**
PR: I suppose so, but only in a very broad, cartoony way. And while stories like these obviously need villains, I try not to make it as simple as one side good, one side bad – I hope there’s a bit of nuance. I’d like them to feel more like historical novels that fantasy – my heroes are usually small, unimportant people just trying to survive these great upheavals. Although once you get into sequels and the stakes get higher they sometimes have importance thrust upon them.
 **RL: There's an element of anti-hero to some of your characters. Hester Shaw has a scarred and disfigured face, Fever Crumb is damaged (and has a scar on the back of her head) from having a stalker's (robot's) brain put in her head and has been brought up to not care what she looks like, so she doesn't. Tell me about creating strong and unusual female characters for your books.**
PR: I guess most of my main characters are girls or young women – there’s also Utterly Dark, and the android Nova in *Railhead*, and Gwyna in *Here Lies Arthur*. The first person we meet in *Thunder City* is Tamzin Pook, who’s sort of Hester-like – not quite so damaged, but tough as nails. And then there’s Miss Torpenhow, a spinsterish tutor who becomes an unlikely action heroine, and Vespertine, who – well, you’ll see. I’m not sure where they all come from. I suppose the science fiction and fantasy I read growing up was very much about boys and men, so putting a girl at the centre of the story made it feel a bit different – but every writer of my generation had the same idea, so tough, resourceful heroines are two a penny now.

**RL: In retrospect what are your feelings about the cinema version of *Mortal Engines*? I mean my family loved it, as do many people I know, but for some reason it didn't take off. And of course they somewhat glammed up those female characters of yours!**PR: I thought it was a pretty solid film, and the actors and special effects were great. Christian Rivers, who directed it, is lovely, and very able. It doesn’t follow the book very closely, of course. *Mortal Engines* in some ways is a sort of spoof of big action movies, but most of the humour has been taken out of the film version ­– which I don’t mind too much, I thought it was refreshing to have an earnest movie after years of all those wisecracking Marvel-type things winking at the audience.

It sank on release without making a ripple, which was a shame, but I think it’s picking up more viewers now on TV and streaming, I seem to meet a lot of people who have watched it. As for glamming up Hester, I think they actually made her as scarred as they were allowed to by the studio. I suspect if you’re making a film you can probably have a disfigured heroine *or* an effects budget that allows for mobile cities, but not both.

**RL: Do you write books as books for a specific age group? I know you have published some titles with Sarah McIntyre aimed at younger readers, but apart from that it seems they are simply good books, however they are marketed. I mean your *Goblins* books had me in stitches as much as my daughters when I was reading to them.**
PR: The ones I write with Sarah, like our *Adventuremice* books, are for kids who may be reading their first chapter book, and we try to keep them short and bear in mind that there are words they won’t recognise – but hopefully they’re fun for parents or teachers reading aloud too, they certainly make us laugh! With my solo books, I just try to write for myself, and assume that readers will work out any unfamiliar words and concepts from context, as I did when I was growing up.

**RL: I gather you and Sarah do quite a lot of school visits, in character and suitably attired. Is that something you enjoy or is it just a marketing tool? I mean, I remember when you came as the guest speaker for a university science fiction event I organised for teenagers there was an element of cyberpunk eccentric in your authorial presentation. My daughter who attended said you were just what the author of the *Mortal Engines* books should be!**
PR: Most writers probably aren’t natural performers, so it makes sense to adopt a persona when you’re asked to do school visits and public appearances. When Sarah turns up at a school you can feel this bow-wave of excitement ripple through the place: she wears fabulous dresses and hats so the children immediately assume they’re in the presence of a superstar – and they’re right! I just bob along in her wake wearing a colourful shirt. When we do joint events we can do little sketches and cross-talk bits, so it becomes more of a show. That obviously isn’t an option when I’m on my own, but some sort of costume still seems like a good idea, I think if you’re on stage you should dress up. In *Mortal Engines* days I had a sort of tweedy look. For *Railhead* I went much more New Wave and had ambient music and abstract videos playing behind my readings – that was great fun. But I haven’t done many live events about my recent *Utterly Dark* books, and I’m not sure what I’ll do for *Thunder City* – I may have to be myself…
 **RL: *Railhead* and its two sequels were fantastic books set in another amazing futuristic world, where trains think and undertake travel across the universe through wormholes instead of tunnels, and the universe is populated by somewhat Dickensian ruffians and children, androids and quite unfathomable and somewhat creepy insects able to assemble in the form of humans. Tell me some more about that series? I am assuming steam trains and childhood railway sets are in the mix? But railway lines crisscrossing the galaxies? Crazy stuff!**PR: It’s strange that people always think they’re steam trains! They’re more like very hi-tech, sentient bullet-trains. I was trying to write a futuristic story that was the total opposite of the rusty, run-down world of *Mortal Engines*: a shiny space opera set in a human empire that spans hundreds of different planets, full of technological marvels, watched over by godlike AIs. It’s the furthest I’ve gone down the science fiction road and it was very exciting! But while I enjoyed dreaming up the characters and worlds, I found it boring to write about starships, so after several abandoned drafts I settled on the idea of a hyperspace rail network to get my heroes from world to world. Trains are stranger and more interesting than spacecraft. I think the main influences were David Bowie, JG Ballard and my fading memories of *Blake’s 7*.

**RL: Do you have set ways of writing? A routine or routines? I'm interested in world-building and generating ideas as well as drafting and editing books. Are you someone who maps books out chapter by chapter or just write them and see where they go? I know you previously were a book illustrator, do you draw your ideas as well as write?**PR: I’m very haphazard. I get an idea and kick it around in my mind for a few months or years, then I just start writing, either in notebooks or straight onto the computer. The story goes through all sorts of different versions before it reaches its final form. I seldom plan more than a chapter ahead, although usually I have inklings of a few scenes or images that I’d like to fit in. I very seldom make drawings, beyond the odd doodle in a margin. But I did go through a phase of drawing little cartoon traction cities a few years back, I think that may be one of the things that prompted me to return to the *Mortal Engines* world.

**RL: What about when you retell or adapt something from the established literary or mythological canon, like your version of King Arthur, *Here Lies Arthur*? How much of the known story did you feel you had to keep, how far could you change and subvert what readers would expect? And what did you gain from 'plugging in' to a known story rather than starting from scratch?**PR: It’s not something I make a habit of. I’m sometimes asked to write a children’s version of a classic novel, and I can never see the appeal of that. But *Here Lies Arthur* was the first thing I wrote after the original *Mortal Engines* quartet – I thought I’d written about the future so I should try the past for a change – and it was quite useful to have the big beats of the story already set out.

I’d been obsessed with Arthuriana in my teens, so I knew the legends pretty well and just cherry-picked the bits I wanted. I set my version in the 5th Century, got rid of all the magic, and had Arthur as a Romano-British warlord carving out a little kingdom for himself in the wreckage of Roman Britain. That’s been done often before, of course, but I had fun finding plausible-ish explanations for the Lady of the Lake, the Holy Grail, etc. It was inspired by gangster movies and revisionist Westerns, and my Arthur was a bit of a ruffian, which I imagine you’d have to be in the Romano-British warlording business. We see him through the eyes of a girl who is apprenticed to the Merlin character, Arthur’s fixer and spin doctor. Together, they spin Arthur’s grubby exploits into the stories we know today….

Only the trouble is, I don’t think many younger readers actually do know the stories today. King Arthur and Robin Hood are characters they may only know, if they know them at all, from subversive, parodic, or bowdlerised reimaginings. They need to have some idea of the actual legends before these revisionist takes have much meaning.

Last year, with my wife and some actor friends, I made a little Arthurian film, *Gwenevere* (you can watch it [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4e2KgSPxSUE)). We had to come at the subject matter sideways because of the budget (there wasn’t one) but the look and feel is much more Pre-Raphaelite. If I ever do another Arthur book that’s the approach I’d take.

**RL: Your most recent books have been about Utterly Dark, a young female who has been brought up on the magical Autumn Isles. It's rooted in folklore and gentle magic, superstition and ritual, with echoes of earth mysteries, standing stones, psychogeography and folklore and customs; perhaps even some hints of Dartmoor where you live. would that be fair? It certainly seems to fit right in with a lot of ideas about myth and magic and communal memory at the moment.**PR: I didn’t know it was zeitgeisty! I don’t pay much attention to these things. But yes, the *Utterly Dark* books are set in the early 19th Century on the island of Wildsea, which is somewhere off the south west tip of England and is basically Dartmoor with a fringe of Cornwall. And just off its shores lies the domain of the Gorm, an immensely old and powerful entity who rules the sea, or maybe *is* the sea. There are ominous portents, and shambling seaweed figures, and it all gets very sinister, though there’s a lot of warmth and humour too. After creating all the different planets of the *Railhead* universe I thought it would be good to focus in on this one tiny island and try to imagine it in intense detail.

The three *Utterly Dark* books are my favourite of the things I’ve written, I think; they’re quite personal, and I felt they worked well. I don’t know if many *Mortal Engines* readers have found them – I suspect that, because Utterly is only 11 when the first book begins, they seem more like straight children’s books. But there’s a parallel story about her uncle Will who is a young man in his twenties, dragged back to Wildsea against his wishes, so in a way they’re my most adult books too. That idea of having a kind of mixed ensemble cast of young and old characters is something that’s carried over into *Thunder City*.

**RL: Can I ask who you enjoy reading, or used to enjoy reading? Who inspired you to be a writer and opened up the possibilities you have embraced? (I'm hoping Alan Garner, who is one of my favourites, will be in the mix! And perhaps some more obscure authors like Charles Williams or other contemporary Y.A. writers like Marcus Sedgwick.)**PR: I don’t read a lot of YA these days, though of course Marcus was brilliant, and is sadly missed. Geraldine McCaughrean is my favourite contemporary writer (the airship in *Thunder City* is named after one of her adult novels, *Fire’s Astonishment.*) As a child I loved Alan Garner, I remember reading *The Owl Service* over and over, not really understanding it, but fascinated. (I reread it a few years ago and I still didn’t understand it, but it was still fascinating.)

Also I enjoyed Lloyd Alexander, C.S. Lewis, and most of all Rosemary Sutcliff – *The Eagle of the Ninth* and *Warrior Scarlet* were great favourites, and still are. Later I read lots of science fiction, much of it very bad, but all inspiring in its way. And I always loved funny stuff – Asterix, PG Wodehouse, Spike Milligan. But it was Tolkien who probably set me writing – I don’t remember being much impressed by *The Hobbit*, but when I encountered *The Lord of the Rings* at the age of nine or ten I thought it was the best thing ever, the idea that you could just invent your own world, in so much detail and on such a scale. I’ve been trying to do that ever since.

**RL: Thanks for agreeing to answer some questions Philip, and for all the books. I'm really looking forward to reading *Thunder City*.**PR: Thanks for having me! I hope you like the new book. I’m busy with a sequel at the moment, and if they go down well, I’m sure there will be more to come…

Find out more at Philip Reeve's website [here](https://philipreeve.com/).