

Breakfast ruins good work

Alexander Masters, studierter Physiker, hat ein brillantes, präzises, lakonisches, trauriges und witziges Buch geschrieben - über ein auf den ersten Blick sehr gewöhnliches Thema: einen vorbestraften, drogensüchtigen Obdachlosen. Masters fragt sich: Wie konnte es so weit kommen? Wie konnte aus einem fröhlichen Jungen eine drogen- und alkoholsüchtige Dr.Jekyll-und-Mr.Hyde-Persönlichkeit werden, ein „gewalttätiges, furchteinflößendes Wrack“, ein Junkie, Krimineller und Psychopath, der laut Masters nicht soziale Unterstützung braucht, sondern ein neues Gehirn?

Und er erzählt die Biografie des Gescheiterten rückwärts, arbeitet sich aus der Gegenwart immer weiter zurück zu dem Punkt, an dem sein Protagonist, der 33-jährige Stuart Shorter, die Pfade des geregelten Lebens verließ. Er gibt das fertige Manuskript dem Porträtierten - der es miserabel findet. So entspinnt sich bald ein interessanter Dialog zwischen Masters und Shorter. Gekonnt montiert Masters Szenen mit Sozialrecherchen und dokumentarischem Material über Drogenkonsum, Strafvollzug, Obdachlosigkeit - und verzichtet auf Betroffenheit, Klassenkampf, Sozialromantik.

Maria Kufeld hat für das Reporter-Forum mit Masters per Mail ein Interview geführt, über sein preisgekröntes Buch, unprofessionelles Schreiben und seine Angewohnheit, nicht zu frühstücken.

1. Mr. Masters, as someone who trained as a physicist and mathematician, how did you come to write a book about a derelict?

To be blunt about it, I wasn't good enough at the maths to do anything interesting in science so (with great regret) I ditched it. My mother is a novelist, my father was also one, my great uncle was a poet, my grandmother an investigative journalist and my grandfather wrote about politics and economics – in short, the whole family is at it.

I came to write about Stuart because he was a friend I made while working in a homeless hostel, very funny, entertaining, intelligent, a sort of street raconteur, who exposed the secrets of a type of life I knew nothing about and had never been written about before.

2. You call Stuart Shorter a „biblical figure“. What was so special about him?

It was his daily battles with himself, his environment and with the system of government organisations, from prisons to homeless charities, that ruled over him that gave him an Old Testament feel. He had the troubles of Job (dt:Hiob); he struggled with his faith in himself in a way that reminded me of Ahab – battling God at the river ; his sense of being cast out; his desperation to find a place to live without persecution by his memories; his descriptions of his wars with other people, on and off the streets, and the police and in prisons – all of it had that quality of elemental engagement with life, survival and a longing for acceptance that runs through the Bible.

3. You wrote this book in almost five years. Did you have any rituals or routines while writing it?

I'm a slow writer at the best of times, and it didn't help that for a lot of the time I was writing Stuart I was very low on cash. I worked at a Day Centre for the homeless, then at a homeless hostel doing shift work. In general I am bad at patterns and routines. My one rule, however, is to get up as early as possible, drink as much coffee as I can, made as strong as I can bear, and not eat breakfast. Breakfast makes you sleepy and ruins good work.

4. Having had such a close relationship during that time, how could you keep up the professional distance?

I didn't. It is, in that sense, a deeply unprofessional book: subjective, full of uninformed opinions, unjustified assumptions, mistakes that have to be corrected later in the story. Part of the book is about my difficulty trying to write it, and my exasperation and sometimes downright fury with Stuart. But then it's not just a book about Stuart; it's a book about my friendship with Stuart. My failings and successes as a biographer and friend are a fundamental part of the story.

5. The book is very personal. But Stuart didn't allow any photos to be taken. Why?

He'd been in too much trouble. If he'd lived, he might have relented on this point because, clearly, he's not anonymous in the book. But while we worked on the book together, he was caught between wanting everything told, nothing hidden, and wanting not to expose his family to any repercussions. If the photos were in, people reading it locally might recognise him, even if they didn't know his name. As it was, when the book came out, his family were only too happy to help with the publicity.

6. For testing purposes you have been homeless for three days, too. What did you learn about living on the street?

Those three days were not homelessness! I'd never pretend they were. They were easy, part of a protest about two homelessness charity workers who'd been put in prison, and among a friendly bunch of homeless and non-homeless people with dozens of reporters cropping up over the time. But one thing it did teach me, which Stuart confirmed: it takes about a day and a half to feel you are outside of society, and begin, very mildly at first, to resent the rest of the world. That's why people who work with the homeless say it may be many, many years of decline before a person ends up on the streets; but, once there, it takes about four weeks for them to feel like it has become the place they belong, and start to feel safe.

7. Stuart died by the age of 33, just before you finished the book. Would it have been the same, if he was still alive?

Almost certainly not. The ending would obviously have been different, for one thing. Had he lived, our plan was to set up a small company and start lecture tours and school talks about street life, drugs and prison and the need for more people to learn about the stories of people who live on the streets.

8. You write in chapter Zero, that you rejected the first version of the manuscript after two years work just because Stuart told you that it was boring. Is that true?

There was no “just because” about it. Stuart was right, and there’s nothing worse you can say about a manuscript. A boring manuscript belongs in the dustbin, which is where that one went.

9. At the opening of the book, you write about the process of interviewing Stuart and writing the book. Why?

The main purpose of this book was to make money for Stuart and myself. We regarded the book as a business venture, in which he told me his life, explained everything I needed to know about prisons, street fighting, drug dealing, surviving on the streets, the crime culture in a university town like Cambridge, and I did the writing. It worked: his half of the money now goes to his family. The difficulty was, figuring out how then to sell the book to a publisher, because the moment the word ‘homeless’ appeared, they’d imagine a worthy, lecturing book telling us all how we ought to be nice to these people, and switch off. But the book is not like that.

Stuart was extremely funny, full of tricks about how to break into cars, burgle post-offices, make prison vodka, and always telling remarkable stories about fights, midnight escapades and emotional struggles. So I viewed the first chapter of the book – Chapter Zero – as my sales pitch: it was a way to introduce Stuart as a person, rather than as a category of person, to say to a publisher and reader: ‘look, this is going to be fun!’

10. What did you learn about writing in respect of this book?

To be as simple as possible; to leave a lot unsaid, because the job of writing is to put the reader in a position where they can supply what you haven’t provided, in their own imagery, which will be a lot more powerful than anything you could have come up with; not to lecture or hector the reader (painful memories of my first draft of the manuscript, when I think of this), but to accept that the drama of the story is the master of the book: all these things were essential to getting Stuart right. His story was so strong, and so full of emotion, that I had to learn to guide it, rather than try to be in control of it.

11. Almost ten years ago you first met Stuart. Are there any specific situations you think about him?

Most of the time. Sometimes, when I am back in Cambridge, I hear his voice on the streets, then turn round and see it’s just someone else from his village who has exactly the same accent and tone.

12. Did your attitude concerning life change as a result of meeting Stuart?

Yes. I think I became calmer, less worried about inconveniences and setbacks, but also less confident of my ability to understand people and their behaviour without spending ages

asking them questions about it. It's a nuisance in a way: it slows down judgement – but from Stuart I learned that our gut reactions to people (the sort of reactions that politicians constantly make) are so often fatal simplifications. The best way to understand why someone ends up on the streets, refusing to go into a house when there are houses available; refusing to get a job, when there is plenty of work around; refusing to cooperate with the police, when the police are being perfectly polite to them – is to think, “what would make me, however far-fetched, tortuous and extravagantly disastrous it might sound, behave like that?” That is often not too far off what has happened to a person like Stuart.

Alexander Masters

Alexander Masters wurde 1965 in New York geboren und wuchs in Devon, im Südwesten Englands auf. Nach seinem Mathematik- und Physikstudium schrieb er die Biografie über Stuart Shorter und wurde für sein Debüt mit mehreren Preisen ausgezeichnet. Derzeit schreibt er an einem Buch über den Mathematiker Simon Norton – einen Freund Masters, der in „Stuart Shorter“ in Kapitel vier erwähnt wird. Die ebenfalls preisgekrönte TV-Dokumentation zum Buch erscheint am 25. August 2008.