

The Real Press

The small Steyning publishers taking on the mainstream



David Boyle founded The Real Press, which has a close association with Steyning Bookshop

David Boyle was sat in the office of a publishing director when he had a revelation.

Looking at the bookshelf, he realised that few of the sporting memoirs and celebrity cookbooks had been penned by the person whose name was on the cover.

As an author himself, David decided to fight back against the onslaught of ghost-writing dominating mainstream publishing, launching *The Real Press* in Christmas 2015. Since then, the small publishing house has found its niche in historical-based books. It also offers an outlet for local authors and poets and has formed a close association with *The Steyning Bookshop*.

David said: "Ghost writing may have been a fascinating venture into mass media, but it wasn't what I would call publishing. As a 'midlist' author, it seemed the writing was

on the wall for my authoring career, which was one of the reasons for starting the Real Press."

"As it turned out, I need not have worried. As the big players have consolidated, there is now a multiplicity of minnows taking on the mantle of publishing. However, the major publishers still enjoy a stranglehold over the trade and to succeed, all too often authors must accept their genre definitions and demarcations. That has been a problem for me with my second book, *Funny Money: In Search of Alternative Cash*, a travelogue about new kinds of money. Unfortunately, it was defined by Waterstone's as accountancy!"

"Truths and insights emerge in the cracks between conventional demarcations. That is what makes real, emotional, creative human progress possible. That is the *raison d'être* of the Real Press."

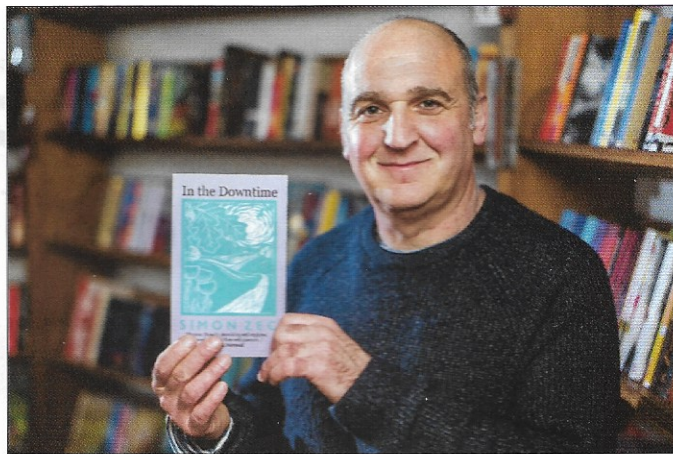
Beef on the Menu

Its authors include Craig Newnes, who recently penned '*52 Ways to Survive a Pandemic*' and '*Tearagh't*', an evocative novel harking back to the time of the Spanish Armada. Another recent book by the Real Press is '*Saving Munich 1945: The Story of Rupprecht Gerngross*' by Lesley Yarranton, an historical account of a coup in Nazi Germany which has been largely forgotten.

Kevin Newman is a Washington-based author who heard about the Real Press as he sought a publisher for his second novel. "I spoke to Sara Bowers at The Steyning Bookshop, asking if she could recommend anyone. To hear there was a publishing company in Steyning was a wonderful surprise. I pitched my idea to David and because it's historical fiction with a local angle, he was interested."



Kevin Newman's book tells the remarkable true story of schoolboy James Bernard Clifton



Simon Zec has created a poetry arm at The Real Press

"David is careful about what he publishes and has an eye for local stories that are quirky and unique. He likes to challenge the norms of publishing and at a time when many books are penned by ghost writers, he is helping to kick-start a more traditional form of publishing."

Kevin's book, *'Beef Every Day but No Latin'*, tells the remarkable true story of James Bernard Clifton, an 11-year-old who set up his own school in Hove in 1925. James dictated the timetable and recruited staff, including a one-legged swimming teacher. He decided that beef would be on the menu

every day, but there would be no Latin classes.

Since publishing, Kevin has become closely involved with the Real Press, helping to promote the work of its other authors too. During lockdown, he has used his teaching experience to participate in a project run by South Downs National Park, teaching primary history with a local angle. His workshop, 'Bring out your Belloc and capture your inner Kipling,' was one of four held online during February and March.

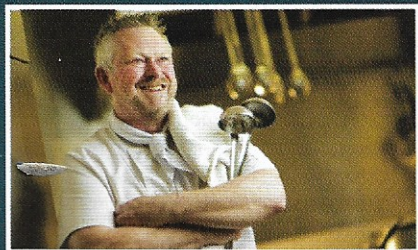
Rhyme and Reason

Simon Zec is a performance poet who as Poetry Editor has helped the Real Press branch out into new creative streams. Simon currently has two poetry collections available, *'Death of the Suburb'* and *'In the Downtime'*.

"Seeing my book for sale in the shop is an honour and holding a launch event there was a real highlight," says Simon. "Most of my sales are through the bookshop, as I always direct people there to support them in the same way they support us."

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Simon has also been involved with various poetry projects during lockdown. "I've been writing about my experiences at different stages of the pandemic and through social media have encouraged other poets to do likewise. I hope that eventually these poems can be collated to highlight changes in our lives as lockdown has progressed. It's a strange time and everyone's writing about their stories and experiences, but finding the nuances that lift these everyday occurrences is key to poetry."

Hub of the Village

Like Kevin, Simon was introduced to David through connections at *The Steyning Bookshop*, an independent business and hub of village life. David describes the shop as having the same kind of effect on the community as the Bailey Building and Loan bank in Frank Capra's film *'It's a Wonderful Life'*, providing a "sprinkling of magic" to the place.

The bookshop was founded by Sara and Robin Bowers in 1984 and has since become an integral part of Steyning's events calendar, welcoming many authors and illustrators. Sara said: "Because it's been our family home for 34 years, we're entrenched in Steyning life through the bookshop."



Sara Bowers outside Steyning Bookshop, after a day of book signing by local resident and author of *The Gruffalo*, Julia Donaldson

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The Steyning Bookshop was founded in 1984

"At one point, the shop was like a centre for the Grammar School's Sixth Form, as one of my daughters used to bring her friends here every day after school. It's always been a lively place and latterly we've been fortunate to welcome many writers for events."

"Steyning hosts a wonderful festival that's well supported by the community and venues including Sussex Produce Company and The Gluck Studio. Through the festival, Simon Zec has been able to interview the likes of Sara Pascoe, while Prue Leith, Robert Webb and others have visited the shop to promote books."

"We maintain close relationships with publishers and publicists and they look to us to put on good events for authors. So, we've hosted the likes of Louis de Bernieres, who went on to have great success with 'Captain

Corelli's Mandolin'. It was a similar case with Julia Donaldson. The first time she came here, I was anxious about anyone turning up! That was 20 years ago, before 'The Gruffalo'. We love hosting local launches too, including a fabulous lunch for Simon's latest poetry book."

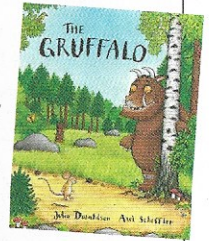
Help from The Gruffalo

Former Children's Laureate Julia Donaldson, who lives in Steyning, has helped keep the bookshop busy over what could have been a challenging lockdown period.

Sara said: "Julia has produced three new books since the first lockdown and has been kindly signing them and offering dedications to anyone ordering them through our website. Since she extended the offer to include any of her books, we've been absolutely inundated, and she's signed

Did You Know?

Steyning author Julia Donaldson's much-loved classic, *The Gruffalo*, is inspired by Chinese folklore. There is a tale about a little girl who escapes the wrath of a tiger by claiming to be the Queen of the Jungle. The tiger follows the girl and misinterprets the fear of the other animals to be scared of the girl and not the tiger.



hundreds of books! She loves acting out her stories too and every week during the first lockdown, she and her husband Malcolm filmed a short performance. My husband filmed some of them and they were hilarious! They made 23 in all, which were made available through Macmillan Publishers."

A Touch of Bryson

As well as supporting other writers through the Real Press, David Boyle has written several of his own books, including the recently published Brexit thriller, *The Remains of the Way*. He also helps produce books for leading publishers (recently collaborating with renowned economist Paul Johnson) and remains committed to mining new seams of local history.

"There is something special about publishing in a Sussex village, especially one with a slightly offbeat publishing history itself," says David. "I find working for yourself and supporting other local businesses very worthwhile!"


Kevin says that Steyning is fortunate to have people like David and Sara bringing people together. "David is a true polymath and has an incredible back catalogue of work. His book *Back to the Land: Distribution and the Politics of Life* has shades of Bill Bryson. There's a combination of intellectualism and naivety which makes his books very funny and thought-provoking. He's enthusiastic and helpful, and has vast experience in publishing. I feel we're very lucky to have him around." ■

Words: Ben Morris


Photos: Toby Phillips Photography

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