

CHILD'S PLAY

At 37, Alan Healy has tried his hand at many things – globetrotting, investment banking, even opening a brick factory in South Africa. His latest endeavour may prove the most successful yet.

LAUREN HADDEN speaks to the self-published author.
Photograph by AGATA STOINSKA.

Inside the front door of author Alan Healy's Victorian red-brick house sits a stack of wine crates, filled with identical bottles of red wine. Has he joined the ranks of hedonist wine-loving writers from Hemingway to Jay McInerney? No, it turns out the wine is for the impending launch of his book, *Tommy Storm*, an intergalactic adventure with a message that will appeal to kids from eleven to eleventy. The reason the wine is being delivered to the venue by Healy and not some publisher's lackey is because from editing the first draft to typesetting to negotiating with printers and finally – finally – telling people it's here, he has done everything himself.

On kinder days, the books industry calls this massive effort of will by an author "self-publishing" (especially if the book is a success). The nastier term is "vanity publishing", a reference to the fact that writers who publish their own work must be filled with both huge self-regard and delusional conceits about their literary abilities. Healy, in fact, truly deserves the "self-published" accolade and his can-do attitude has been apparent ever since the 37-year-old left college in the late 1980s.

There couldn't have been many others in his class with writerly notions: "I studied Commerce," he laughs, "I suppose it had to do with being brought up in a recession, you're aware of the need to make a living." Against the advice of the careers department at UCD, he decided to travel the world for a while. After globetrotting from America to Australia and lots of places in between, he came back to

Dublin with a loan to pay off. "I would have loved to live on a barge and write a book, but it wasn't practical. I told myself, find a means of earning a living and then later, if you still want to do it, you can write."

He went from a poverty-stricken life of travel to earning "almost immoral" amounts working for investment bank Goldman Sachs in London. "I saw what employees gave up to be immensely wealthy and decided there and then that I wasn't willing to make those sacrifices." He stayed on for two years though, saving money and gaining important experience.

"My immediate boss at the time was the guy who, last year, had £6 million siphoned out of his account by his secretary and didn't even notice. That was the life I decided to leave when I went to South Africa. I wanted to do something completely different."

It was 1994, Nelson Mandela had just come to power and he and a South African friend decided it was an ideal opportunity to become entrepreneurs by opening a brick factory, at the same time empowering black townships. "There was talk of building a million homes in South Africa in five years and we thought, rather than let the big companies make a fortune out of this, why don't we set up a brick factory that's very labour intensive and gives locals employment? The plan was to create a formula and replicate it so we could franchise it out to local businessmen." On paper it sounded great, but Healy discovered that a post-colonial country can be an anarchic one: "We had our house set on fire and the driver of one of our trucks shot a fellow worker."

He had his own brush with death on wages day at the factory. “I found myself with a gun to my stomach, taken completely by surprise.” In the end, the only shots that were fired went into the ceiling, but the memory, needless to say, has stuck. It surfaces again in *Tommy Storm*, when the eponymous 11¹/₄-year-old hero faces what seems to be almost certain death and realises that, when there’s no escape route, what you experience is not fear but resignation.

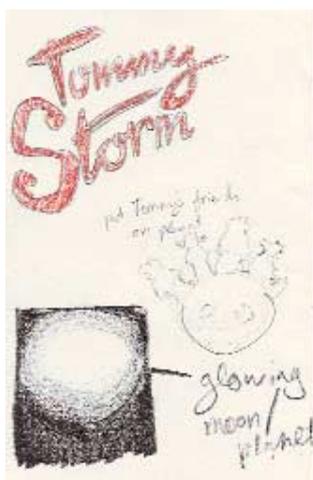
Tommy’s author has strong feelings about the Western obsession with living a safe life: “There’s a lot of fear out there. I meet people who ask how I could have given up Goldman Sachs, or how I could start a business in South Africa or how I could take the risk with this book. Other than worrying about ill health striking myself or my family, I’m not that afraid. I’m lucky to be educated and to live in the First World, so I’ll never go without a bed to sleep in. All the stuff after that is about whether you have four cars or five, or how many holidays you take a year.”

After his adventures in Africa, Healy returned to Dublin in 1998 to try his hand at venture capital and the dot.com boom, getting involved in “various vaguely entrepreneurial things”. After September 11, things changed and he lost interest. He remembered his promise to himself about writing a book. He’d started writing a murder mystery in South Africa and half-heartedly sent it to a few publishers, but it wasn’t the finished article. In March 2002, the writing bug struck again.

What came out over the next few months was ostensibly a children’s book but, like some of the best children’s literature, it appeals to adults too. Filled with madcap characters, adventures in space and a view of our own world that makes it seem like another planet, it also contains a preach-free and humorously-written moral message about global warming. The book opens on earth in 2096, where we discover a whole new world as a result of what the politicians (whose names have changed, but are a recognisable breed) like to call The Great Climate Enhancement.

Why a children’s book? “I liked the challenge of writing a message that’s for everyone and is hitting different levels. Nothing has influenced me in the same way as when I was a kid. Books may inspire you or move you to tears as an adult, but as a kid you absolutely abandon yourself to the world of the book.” There are lots of children’s books interspersed with adult literature on the bookshelves to be found all over the house that Healy shares with his wife, Mary Frances (the couple are expecting their first baby early next year). It must be Mary Frances reading them, as while his own manuscript was languishing under his bed, he found it hard to read other children’s books, although he mentions enjoying Philip Pullman’s trilogy.

While the manuscript gathered dust, he tried to find an agent. “I naively thought all you had to do was write a good book. I felt like a convicted criminal ringing for a school placement – and this was before they’d even read anything. I rang one agency to ask were they accepting manuscripts and they just sighed, said ‘Not today’ and hung up on me. So I changed tactics.” Healy decided to try the book out on some members of the general public and began emailing friends to see if they knew anyone with kids. Then he hopped on his bike and cycled around Dublin to deliver the manuscripts. “It was like making a beautiful pair of shoes and finding someone that would fit them



NCAD student Nicola Carthy worked on illustrations for the finished cover (below).



perfectly. I got all these great letters back from the kids with really detailed explanations of why they liked it and where they thought it might be better.”

Along with an enthusiastic endorsement from UCD’s Professor Declan Kiberd (who sent him four handwritten pages on his thoughts), he had the confidence to approach top literary agent Marianne Gunne O’Connor – and she didn’t hang up. The publishers, however, still needed to be convinced, but they weren’t biting. “J K Rowling has done children’s literature a great service, but the negative repercussion of the Harry Potter phenomenon is that publishers want everything to be the next big thing, so I had editors saying yes, they liked the book and yes, they would buy it, but that they were nervous of putting three million behind it.”

For a number of reasons – the ever-increasing number of books published each year, the need for guaranteed sales to justify big marketing budgets, the battle to convince big bookshop chains to give them a space on the top table – publishers have very little time to “push” a book and there often isn’t time for slow gestation periods and word-of-mouth publicity. More rejection followed, including: “We think your book is great but (a) you need to go on a reality show and have a sex change (b) we already have a book with a male protagonist and you’ll cannibalise its sales or (c) a book for kids *and* adults will never sell.” Gunne O’Connor wanted him to stick with it and Healy reckons he might have found a publisher in the end. “Typically you would think of the self-published author as going for it as a last resort, but it was like leaving Goldman Sachs – I thought, do I want to hang around for another two years? Maybe I can be my own publisher?”

His odd combination of writerly creativity and business acumen finally came together in a thrilling (if bumpy) adventure into the worlds of editing, typesetting, graphic design, printing, marketing and distribution. He’s eager to mention he’s had a huge amount of help along the way – including some wonderful illustration work from NCAD student Nicola Carthy and help with the launch from his brother Ronan Healy, who owns event management company Catapult. The printing was done in China, and was one of the more difficult elements. “I didn’t realise how much needed to be done at that end: format, paper weight, typesetting, signing off on covers. I was determined to keep production quality high.” Miraculously, he managed to keep within his original budget of €10,000.

With the gleaming finished copies back and the launch looming, all Healy has to do is convince the booksellers that *Tommy Storm* is worth stocking. He can understand their wariness about self-published authors: “‘I’m an idiot and I’ve written something that’s terrible and I haven’t got a clue what I’m doing’ is the point you’re starting from. It’s as if that’s been said before you enter the room and you have to prove them wrong.”

In fact all they and the reading public need to do, for once, is believe the back-cover blurb – because it’s come direct from the children who read the manuscript. Cue Sam Ford, 15: “Wow! What a read!! *I want more!*” ■

Tommy Storm (ENOW Books, €9.99) by AJ Healy is available at all good bookshops; www.tommystorm.com for more.