

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to *Land without Sorrow*

I came to TLC in June 2013 further to having sent out my novel to a clutch of agents without success. That experience was essential in enabling me to acknowledge that I needed an expert's perspective on my writing. My research quickly showed that TLC was long established and had an excellent reputation for providing honest and perceptive critiques of manuscripts. I therefore contacted them and had the good fortune to have Kavita Bhanot look at my novel. Her editorial feedback was greatly insightful and enabled me to iron out flaws that I would still be looking for if it was not for her assistance. TLC has now agreed to help me find an agent. I have my fingers crossed and know that whatever happens TLC and Kavita have helped me to improve as a writer.

Land without Sorrow, by Balvinder Banga

“Several weeks had expired since an envelope, white and bulging, had journeyed across the globe to arrive, battered, at its destination. It was bandaged in clear tape with the characters ‘Shri Tiloka Singh’ scratched into them so crudely that the paper was torn, hence the need for its dressing. Lakshmi, Tiloka Singh’s wife, knew it was coming, just like she did every week when she would shoot anxious glances for the postman before conceding defeat to her kismet. It was different this time. The gods were in a good mood.

Lakshmi knew the postman was approaching her mud home from the laughter of children outside. “He’s coming” she heard someone shout, not needing to hear who, for who else came to the village on Wednesday mornings?

She was squatting in the door way, the hem of her frayed kameez trailing in the dust next to her cracked heels, sweeping as the postman arrived. She did not stop. She barely looked at him when he said, ‘package for Tiloka Singh’ and looked at her planted feet, tingling now and wondering whether to yield their ground. She decided to stay squatting, her insolent head uncovered and grey, a defiant sheen of stale oil upon it with which she had cooked for eight days until even she had to concede it had to go, unable to conceal its rancidity beneath a mound of frying turmeric. Facing the morning sun that haloed his sweat-glowing head, she squinted. ‘Come closer’ she said. ‘Tiloka Singh? He works in the city.’ She drew out the last word and looked at his face, able only to make out its thin contour.

‘Closer?’ said the postman and threw the package near her bare feet, but not quite near her open left hand. She did not move her eyes from his face as he swivelled his bicycle around to go. She continued sweeping the same spot she had already swept in a slow, unhurried motion, forgetting that she still held the broom or that her grip on it had tightened, her knuckles paled. ‘Oh’, she called. ‘I beg your forgiveness. I have not offered you a glass of water before you cycle back to town. Sister, look at this bicycle. So nice,’ she said and turned her head towards the room behind her.

The postman hurried away, his bicycle rigid between his legs.

Lakshmi’s words floated in the dust her broom had roused, blowing in the darkened room to the manja she had reclaimed from a roadside ditch and restrung

with her own hands. The memory of that episode was, after all the passing years, still bitter to her, slapping her whenever she saw the wretched thing, bringing forth the recollection of how she had dragged the manja, past the home of its previous owner, for five hundred metres beneath a brilliant sun shining like a torch on her sweaty face as she had grunted and muttered, 'where are husbands when you need them?' knowing that her cataleptic spouse was lying somewhere swollen with drink. She had become then toughened to her own *bhejti*, her humiliation.

Reclining now on the nylon stringed bed was her ancient friend, Deepa. The old woman hoisted her rotund load onto its haunches, broke with the calmativ gossip and farted. Lakshmi smiled as Deepa put her steel cup of water on the dried mud floor and cleared her throat: Deepa only cleared her throat when imparting wisdom. 'So, you are the untouchable Amitabh Bachan now? Do you think that eunuch of a postman couldn't drown you in a well?' she said and looked away, her jowls wobbling.

'Sister, what can anyone do to me? My nails still hold the shit of other people's cows' said Lakshmi, sweeping the package towards her feet.

'Only He has the answer to that' said Deepa, pointing her left index finger towards a ledge above the 'Welcome' scar that had been carved into the wall as a homely touch. There lay the creased calendar bearing a picture of Ravidas the cobbler; a Chamar, an untouchable saint. 'All I am saying is watch your tongue – and put that package away in case he hasn't gone on the truck with the others.'

'What do you mean by that? Tiloka swore on his mother that he would be on it, going to work' said Lakshmi.

'How should I know if your Majnu has chosen to work today? Am I a pandit? I should go in case he comes back. Promise me now' said Deepa, pointing a finger at the ground. 'Don't you give it to him until nightfall. If you are lucky he will be drunk and won't take so much of it.'

'You are cleverer than a pandit' said Lakshmi as Deepa shuffled off the manja and trudged from the room, touching her skinny forearms as she went.

Gathering the package, Lakshmi blew the grey dust from it. She locked the wooden door and shutters, tenderised through the years by hammering monsoons. Her brittle limbs quarrelled with her will as they moved across the floor. 'Maharaj, if only death would come' she muttered, as if she was lamenting the missing of a bus.

Easing herself onto the manja and coughing from habit, she crossed her legs while her back wilted towards the ground like a dying flower. Her thin hands, just bones and nails and veins, squeezed the package between their fingers and thumbs, guessing its thickness, its value, its modest weight. 'This is so much better than the cheap blue letters from Lilapur bazaar' she thought. 'You only have to fart and they crumble.' Looking at the calendar of Ravidas, and the photograph beside it of the grandchildren she had yet to meet, she raised the package like a chalice to her wrinkled forehead. She lowered it again and held it against her rising and falling puny chest and just breathed and hoped the seconds would last, like the flickering hope she still held that her son would reclaim her, as she had once reclaimed a manja, restoring to its gnarled limbs a reason for living. There was always hope when the post arrived.

'Bastard' she said annoyed at the intrusion of the postman in her mind. Seconds later, he cycled away from her thoughts. In the stagnant heat few things stirred. And of the few was a rivulet of sweat trickling down her back. A dog barked in a nearby field, and when its final growl transmuted into soft whines a frugal breeze came cool against her face, carrying with it the jasmine scent of temple incense.

'My son writes to me from England' she would tell anyone who would listen. She would say it with a casualness suggesting that it was like a second home to her for whom Delhi too was a foreign land. She held the package close to her and wondered when her Ladoo, her Seva, would visit. She had no doubt he would, but who could he trust to manage his business if he was gone? She wondered. It was a conundrum she revelled in, exploring its infinite possibilities. Her heart burst with pride at the thought of him clicking his soft fingers (pink beneath the nails) at those who thought that he, a Chamar, an untouchable, would amount to nothing. 'Nothing? We showed them' she thought. Does he have a clip board? She wondered. He could recognise numbers and calculate bills in his mind. He was sharp like a pandit. She smiled. Jealousy was an awful thing. 'Things are never easy' she thought as the devilish postman barged into her mind again and then sauntered away, leaving her to her lonely love.

'My Seva' she said and smiled, sad and happy for a whole number of reasons, but mostly sad and pretending not to be. 'My Seva.' A second is all that is

required to remember a life, from a first scream to a last goodbye. She knew it and a sigh escaped her.

Lakshmi leaned down from the manja and lifted a fearsome blade (more dagger than knife) from a tarnished steel tray on the floor. It had been once used, a long time ago, by Tiloka Singh to slit a cow's belly, to strip its skin. The oozing warmth from the intestines had, she recalled, regurgitated in his throat in nightmares for several months. 'I am dying in blood' he would mutter in feverish sleep, sweating from intense summer heat, rum and thoughts of dead cow skin. His white vest (his second skin) would look as if it had been caught in a monsoon and smelt like it had been dredged from a ditch. Then one day he awoke, exhausted and avowed to reject his pre-ordained vocation: he would be a leather worker no more. 'Maharaj,' she had said, 'if this husband is your blessing I dread your curse.'

In the darkened room, holding the knife by its blade, Lakshmi slit open the package and counted fifteen five pound notes bound in elastic bands. 'Is that all?' she wondered and tapped the knife's blade, pondering which debts should be paid first. Deepa's, she concluded, for the indignity of indebtedness was harder to bear when it came and farted on your manja every morning. She extracted two of the notes, placed them in her kameez next to her ribs, and returned the remainder of the money to the package, listening all the while for the rumble of a truck engine and the shuffling of chappals in dirt.

There was no obvious crevice in the solitary room where she slept and ate and breathed the sullen air with Tiloka Singh. Glancing at the steel pot in the far corner of the room, she discounted the reckless possibility of depositing the package within it: the old man would find it and with his own power of alchemy turn it to rum.

Under the manja lay a suitcase mottled with grime covering its blue casing like a cobweb. In it were the clothes of the couple, two shirts of which were fugitives from a Lilapur stall owner who had slapped Tiloka Singh with the shoes he purported to mend. 'Well were you drunk or not?' Lakshmi had said, aghast, when Tiloka Singh explained to her why there was a footprint on his white vest. 'I am man' Tiloka Singh had mumbled before staggering out the house, only to return twenty-three hours later with his white vest reeking of stale sweat and his lips mumbling 'I swear on my guru's life, I have *never* been drunk.' The clothes were wrapped in yellowed copies of

The Hindu. Lakshmi placed her son's package beneath them and closed the case, pushing it to a discreet shadow beneath the manja, wondering if the truck had gone, wondering too if her husband was on it.

Tiloka Singh joined the cheer of timid irony that arose when two blackened feet pulled themselves free from beneath the old truck and stood on the ground. The feet's bare chested owner sweated and palpitated from the heat and relief of seeing daylight. He wiped his dripping head with an acrylic handkerchief that succeeded only in smearing the malodorous excretion around his forehead and oiled hair. 'What are you all looking at?' he screamed like a pantomime villain, walking to the side of the road. Amidst a pile of rubble he scraped the oil from his naked soles, like a dog performing its ablutions. 'We have lost one hour already while you sit on your arses smoking bidi. Get on the truck' he shouted.

A collective groan and twenty men of various ages, from grandfathers to boys with soft hairs on lips and scrawny legs beneath baggy trousers, started climbing into the truck. The agile ones went first, holding the untreated wooden beams that ran along the sides of the truck. The old ones followed in a procession, hoisted as if they were less than the men they were, as if weightless, one by one, towards the front of the truck where they sat on the dusty floor strewn with cigarette ash, their tailbones shaking to the noise of the engine below them while their mouths muttered amiable profanities and sucked down unfiltered bidi smoke.

Prem Lal, a thin nineteen year old with wisps of hair bubbling on his chin, squinted as the sun hit his face. He reached out his dusty right hand towards the final man standing in the heat of the exhaust fumes. 'Come on Bapu' he said in a high pitched voice, shaking his extended arm. 'Take it' he said as Tiloka Singh looked up and raised his arms like a child reaching for its mother.

The truck was already full. Some of the young men were gripping the wooden beams from outside the truck with their feet wedged between them. There was groaning at the prospect of making space for the ancient specimen below them. An unidentified voice from the truck called out, 'Array Bapu, an old man like you should be at home. Bibi must be lonely.'

'Maybe you could put your bidi in Bibi's mouth' said another as a collective titter arose among the young men.

‘He’s going to beat you with his chappals for that’ said his friend, slapping his left thigh and laughing with an intensity that took the breath from his lungs and sucked sound from his laughter. Another made to reply when Chintu called out. ‘Bastard’ he said. ‘He’s older than the monkey that gave birth to you.’

Everyone turned to look to Chintu and the man he called ‘bastard.’ ‘Just joking’ whispered Bastard and reached into his breast pocket for a packet of cigarettes. He found one and held it in his extended hands, his palms sweating while he inhaled from a cigarette lodged in his lips. The packet remained suspended there for a second before someone said ‘put it away.’ So he did, with Tiloka Singh agonising at the moment of fumbling: it was all because of him. Chintu glared. Thick creases over his eyelids seemed to hide the direction of his gaze. It unsettled Tiloka Singh who feared this camaraderie. Thick set, Chintu’s left ear lobe was missing. Tiloka Singh still recalled his numbness that time when he drank with Chintu who had laughed and relayed how it had been sliced off in a brawl. Two brothers had tried one sorry evening to rob him of the gold chain he wore around his neck. The younger of the brothers had his jaw smashed from a left hook. The elder one had run. Chintu had two sons in the truck and a gold chain around his neck. ‘Get him in’ he said.

Tiloka Singh grabbed Prem Lal’s hand and was catapulted upwards and into the hot truck, stumbling on his left chappal and relinquishing his lit bidi into the road as he did so. Momentarily, his cheeks flushed red, only to be cooled by the first gust of wind as the truck pulled away. Squatting and clenching a wooden beam so that his knuckles ached and turned white, he kept his eyes on an old scar on his left thumb. It grew in its fascination the longer he stared at it. It displaced the existence of the truck and the men in his embarrassed mind while his parched lips squeezed shut.

The truck veered to avoid a deep pot hole in which a cat lay motionless, only to crash over another of equal depth. Flies circled around the unmoving feline creature while the men held onto the wooden beams of the truck as it continued along the long road, undulating like a blustery river and lined with banks of verdant fields on either side. ‘I think the bastard does it to show who’s boss’ said Prem Lal emerging from the ruck of men and kneeling next to Tiloka Singh. ‘The bobbing makes me want to throw up. I have tried ginger and onions. It makes no difference. It just gives you bad breath.’

‘My father swore by ginger. He could drink a bottle of rum and not throw up. Ginger, yaar’ said another nodding head.

Tiloka Singh’s glazed eyes remained fixed on his scar. He did not utter a word and was oblivious to the journey and the destination and everything but a vague sense of motion that threw him up now and again when the truck jolted over pot holes.

Half an hour later, the truck reached the outskirts of the city and the unmarked dirt road that led to the imposing five hundred acre estate of Shri Ramesh Ganguly, Barrister at law, scion of the landed gentry and, further to a series of Supreme Court victories, the most celebrated criminal counsel in the north of India. It was he who had asked his estate manager to seek out the finest skilled labour in the city to help dig the foundations for the new wing to his house. It was his estate manager’s jaundiced definition of “finest” that now rolled onto his estate.

Tiloka Singh marvelled at the lush earth, lacquered with grass, several species of trees, an aviary of doves, and manicured rose bushes of red and pink. The staff would urinate on them at first light, tingeing the clear morning dew with the amber muskiness of their piss. They said it helped to keep away rats. In the centre of the estate, in contrast to the flowing contours of the plants and trees, was the angular, whitewashed house with large bay windows.

By the time the truck had left the estate, leaving its cargo of ragged men in an area cordoned off on one side of the house, the water in Tiloka Singh’s guts was wrenching out in sweat bubbles along his back and legs along with the odour of stale rum.

‘You ok Bapu?’ asked Prem Lal.

‘Why shouldn’t I be?’ said Tiloka Singh as the walls refused to cast shadows on his swooning body. The men were told to line up against a gravel path border. The representative of Brahma Building, a foreman with halitosis and teeth leaning in several directions, informed them that they would not be paid for the hour of working time missed, the 11 o clock tea break would be cancelled, and that it was imperative to move at full steam. ‘Shri Ramesh’ he said, ‘trusts us to do a good job.’ Tiloka Singh smiled despite himself, amused at the insinuation that this rotting cabbage of a man had met the lawyer.

Being their third day at the estate the men were familiar with their duties.

They picked up the shovels from the spots at which they had thrown them like burning coals the previous evening. They resumed, wearing only chappals or with their bare feet, stamping them into the firm ground with the minimum vigour necessary to escape the foreman's attention. The fertile earth was heavy, barely yielding to the labouring men's efforts. Clumps of soil the size of new born babies were loaded on to baskets. These were heaved and balanced onto heads gliding above staggering legs for twenty metres or so towards a grass clearing next to the aviary. It was there that the soil was dumped. White doves, absorbed in their private idyll and shaded by palm leaves, would bleat disinterestedly when the men walked by.

Prem Lal's basket lay next to Tiloka Singh. The old man filled it with potato sized clumps of earth, breathing hard as he did so. Prem Lal tapped the handle of his shovel. He did not, as he had done for the previous two days, defer to the silent expectation of help. Sapping heat had boiled down his deference to words of genial encouragement only. 'It's ok Bapu. Just stand on it. Your weight will push the blade in four inches without you even trying.'

'Salah' mumbled Tiloka Singh, wiping his brow with the tail of his turban. He took a deep breath and stood and swayed with both feet on the shovel blade. It sunk an inch into the earth. The younger men clapped, bringing the old man out of his reverie and into a prideful digging frenzy. He wondered how long they had been watching him. 'He needs water, sahib,' said Prem Lal.

'Lunch is in one hour' said the foreman and told Tiloka Singh to go home if he was too old to work. 'It is too beautiful here, nah? This is like a holiday, Bapu' he said and laughed.

Ten minutes elapsed and again Tiloka Singh was balanced on his shovel, willing it to penetrate the ground. The foreman placed himself before the old man with his mangled teeth on show. 'Come on Bapu. Hurry up. Extra chapatti for you.' The old man stepped off the shovel and raised it high to his knees and then crashed it hard into the earth. 'Arrgh' he whined. 'Again', said the foreman and up went the shovel. Prem Lal looked away, mentally drawing down a curtain to preserve the old man's dignity. 'Again, again' said the foreman and down it crashed. 'Again, shabash!' The shovel crashed onto the earth with an old man's feeble might, sufficient though it was to slice clean through his right foot. Blood poured out and softened the

unyielding ground.

Before he took cognisance of his amputated toes, flailing like unearthed worms, Tiloka Singh's bowels opened. A gush of hot urine ran down his thighs. His lungs expelled all the air they held and a scream came through his dry throat, muffling the beats of his shocked heart. It shattered the peaceful sanctuary of the doves and they beat their pretty wings against their prison netting. When Prem Lal would later dig in his dreams he would see doves turning from the old man as he fell and shot bile in watery parcels of vomit. It created the bed of sickness in which he fell. Soon that dream faded and the pestilential soup in which the old man had lain became transfigured in his mind into pools of liquid gold. When he would meet Lakshmi she was usually heating her bones in the sun outside her door, crouching down. He would bend down and touch the dust on her feet and attest to the blessed nature of the passing. 'Ma, it was as if Krishna was there.'

'My Seva is coming' is all she would say.

Chintu was the first to wake from the men's collective shock. 'Tie his foot with his turban' he screamed.

'He is a Sikh. You will curse him', said another man.

'He's a Hindu, Salah. What are you going to do, let him bleed to death?'

A heated debate followed about Tiloka Singh's faith and the karmic consequence of turbaned feet. By the time it finished he was oblivious to the conclusion reached and with his brown irises warmed by the sun, unblinking and dead.

One of the labourers, more boy than man, turned away from the others, bit on his quivering lower lip and stabbed his shovel into the soil with rapid thrusts. When Tiloka Singh woke up and stood up he looked and wondered at the cause of the boy's disgust. Gazing down, he saw only rose petals, crimson red and resplendent in sunshine. Beneath them lay his body. Looking around, curious at the foreman's exhortations to be calm, flying from his lips and falling furiously over themselves one after the other, he saw one old man crying at the irony of a butchered Chamar, a leather worker, laid out like a buffalo carcass ready to be carted away. Young men, afraid as they had never before encountered death, huddled together for composure. Voices, both meek and strong, started calling to the foreman, 'you have killed him, bastard.'

‘His wife is alone. Who will look after her?’

‘The Brahmin’s a lawyer. He will jail us all for his murder.’

‘Chintu, they listen to you and tell you everything. What is the matter with these people?’ said the dead Tiloka Singh, oblivious to the flesh that had fallen from his soul.

Chintu continued remonstrating with the foreman, ignorant of the disembodied voice. ‘No fucking shame’ he repeated twice as the foreman retreated a foot from him and his sons who glared like trained tigers.

Tiloka Singh gazed at Chintu and then at Prem Lal, not wondering at his personal oblivion before the men. How often had men walked past him as if he wasn’t there? He retreated to the shade of a Pipal tree, green and old, and the red bougainvillea that draped the perimeter wall. A butterfly, a *Pieris Rapae*, white like a swan, flew through the old man’s arms and rested on a rose. ‘Tiloka, what has happened?’ he muttered, retreating into his pain as he always did when the world had no answers for him.

And with that Tiloka Singh marched away, straight through the thorns of a rose bush and over its falling petals which he touched like smoke. ‘Just go’ he said to himself and turned from the living agonies of the men before him, consumed only by his own.

Tiloka Singh walked beneath brilliant sunshine, cool and unwary of the scorching heat as only a dead man could be. He traversed through fields of ripe wheat and corn, passing the paan-wallahs and beggars, and inhaling the fragrance of makani Daal and roti cooked by ragged boys from dhabas marking the road to home.

The village streets (all three of them) were silent, except for casual snorts of tethered buffalo and cows and the whimpering of children scolded behind closed doors. Approaching his own front door, he recalled that it had not been so long (five hours maybe) since his vision had blurred with his labouring thirst. He called to his wife to bring him cold water, knowing that the water lay by his own feet.

Lakshmi lay curled on the manja, sleeping with a rosary clenched in her right palm. He recalled how she would sleep like that when she was heavy with child. He had joked that she was getting fat and they had laughed together at the absurdity of everything. Who did she pray to today he wondered, Nanak or Krishna.

A stainless steel jug stained with dirt lay by Tiloka Singh’s feet. Upon it was a

chipped glass plate. It acted as its lid, keeping out mice and flies. He bent towards it but his thirst had long gone. The memory of it already seemed hallucinatory and impersonal as if it belonged to a friend who had told him about it. 'No, I do not need a drink' he said and contented himself with drawing on a bidi. It hung from his lips, undiminished and lit. Had it always been there? He left his home, walking towards the well where he had often spent evenings drinking by moonlight with friends (or rather acquaintances he termed dear friends and family in accordance with village etiquette). He reminisced and time magnified for him the travails of his youth. No one was there but a neighbour's granddaughter. She was throwing stones in the well. 'Bindi' he said. 'You should be at home helping your mother. Go now' he said, pointing towards her house in case she needed reminding of where she lived. He put it down to the impertinence of her generation when she ignored his presence. As the day turned to dusk the child strolled home. 'Shameless, shameless, shameless' he kept saying at the thought of her brazen presence before him, a village elder. A stream of women then came and drew water from the well, complaining as they did so of husbands and sons. 'He drinks too much' said an old woman and nobody cared who she referred to: it could have been any of their men. When the women had gone, old men came and sat and looked out on the open fields of corn. They drank fierce moonshine with the innocent appearance of water and talked about how the long day had unfurled like a viper to spit its venom at an old man. The fields before them were subdued, refusing to make a sound. Tiloka Singh brooded on the insolence of Bindi and his failed overtures to the moonshine and, over a lifetime, to Lakshmi. Lakshmi. How did she enter his mind? 'It doesn't matter' he sighed, shaking his head and not wondering at the rolling days and nights.

For fourteen days he sat there shaking his head, oblivious to the world and himself, aware only of a vague feeling of disgust at something he could not define, a longing for something he could not see. Then on a bright day a young man, an apparition of a fading time, approached him and smiled, evoking in his mind memories already sinking into the sludge of oblivion and myth. He knew this was Madan Lal, a skinny dead boy who had once played with his bare feet kicking the same dust as his son's, eating too from the same bowls of thin daal in which they submerged their first burnt roti, made in the gas fires of a restaurant in which they were worked like machines. Were they only six when they were banished to that

culinary purgatory from which they would only return in nightly rituals, scrunching in their tiny fists rupees that he and Madan's grandfather would grab with solemn intonations on the importance of work? Time was blurring, picking random events and chucking them in random sequence. 'I knew your grandfather. He was a good man' he said, pausing in reverent recollection, nodding his head in a slow and considered way to indicate his profundity and profound agreement with the words he spoke.

Madan looked at Tiloka Singh and in that eternal moment the sky darkened, blending the subtle contours of his apparition with the Indian night, scrubbing his tender existence from view. 'Don't leave me' whispered the old man, thinking of his own son, weary now of the company of his own bitterness. He got to his tired feet, wondering where the weariness had come from. 'Madan' he said, his feet etching lines in the dust, scurrying forward like a rat mesmerised by a piper. 'Where is he now?' he said, thinking of his son, untouched by all but the suffering of his life's lament, for the son he had lost before he understood that he was his to lose.

His eyes dimmed as he sought to understand where things had gone wrong and steered away from the personal glory that was his when the news was confirmed, that Lakshmi was expecting his child. In the blink of an eye, the fall of a tear, he lived that all again, starting with the disbelief that coursed in him and indeed the world when she first spoke of that miracle."

About the Writer

Balvinder grew up in Birmingham to first generation immigrants from Punjab, India. He went on to study Law at St John's College, Cambridge before going on to practise as a barrister. As part of a varied career, he has practised law as an officer in the British Army, an opportunity that enabled him to see first-hand post war poverty in Bosnia. This, along with the poverty experienced by his own family in rural India, reignited a dormant wish to write. He has now had several short stories published and has also had an extract from his novel, *Land Without Sorrow*, accepted for publication by *Wasafiri Magazine*. He lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and son.

