

The story behind “Tow Away Zone”

The seeds of this book were sown about two decades ago after watching the Coen Brothers’ “O Brother Where Art Thou?”. As a fan of their work, I’m drawn to the quirky plots, curious character names, dark comedy and visual style.

A key takeaway of this film was the use of a motif - hair. Key characters have interesting haircuts, and a pot of hair gel regularly appears.

Another influence was the obscure Italian language comedy “The Icicle Thief”. The film mixes black & white and colour plot lines, with the two visuals cleverly merging at a couple of points. It triggered the idea of creating a story whose MC can only see in monochrome but somehow enters a world where he can experience colour.

This meant there had to be a slightly fantastical, fairy-tale element to the story.

I also felt the urge to homage the Odessa Steps sequence from “The Battleship Potemkin” - although frankly, I was inspired by the station steps scene in “The Untouchables”, which is itself a homage to the Eisenstein film. To do this, I needed to find a way to get an adult into something like a baby carriage, as there are no young children in my book. In the event, I used a laundry trolley.

“Tow Away Zone” was initially conceived as a film, and I wrote a treatment in anticipation of moving on to write a draft screenplay. (I’d written several screenplays around this time). I felt that the influences, the visuals, and certain scenes (especially the slo-mo trolley/gun battle) demanded that the story be told on screen.

As I’d only written sci-fi novels up to that point, plus being in the groove of writing screenplays in various genres, I never considered that the “Tow Away Zone” story belonged in a book.

The work has retained that title from the start, stemming from the inciting incident wherein the MC is rescued by a tow truck, albeit in a very remote location that is in no way signposted “TOW AWAY ZONE”. I liked the irony.

Soon after writing the treatment, my work and home lives underwent a significant shift, and the document sat unloved on my hard drive.

In around 2018, after a couple of years of reinvigorating my writing career, I sought old projects and ideas to develop. I’d retained an enthusiasm for this crazy, uncategorisable story, but my screenwriting days were past.

The question was whether it was possible to novelise something whose charm was predicated on a visual language, including the mixture of colour palettes and the ballet of the “Odessa Steps” chapter.

I was encouraged by my ability, some 15 years earlier, to leap from a very derivative pair of sci-fi books - with deeply mediocre prose - into writing a space opera which was catalysed by reading Iain M Banks, and a desire to write with more richness, flair and intelligence. I still don't know how I 'grew up' so quickly, but it probably gave me confidence that I should at least try to do the "Tow Away Zone" idea justice.

After I fleshed the treatment into a detailed outline, adding backstories that created conflict and resonance, I set to work.

Writing a book almost entirely in one POV was unusual for me, but when I "found" Beckman's voice and inner monologue, I didn't see any real need to stray. His tone reflects his quirky manner, situation, visual handicap, and the odd journey he gets swept up in.

When I briefly used two other POVs, it was nice to show their character via interaction with someone that Beckman also met - in very similar circumstances, all three handle the guy differently.

Many of the character names in the book have a quirky, Coen Brothers - and even Carl Hiaasen - feel. I have no idea why the MC is called Beckman Spiers, nor what the source of Lolita Milan, Saul Paul, Walter Whack etc. are. These are lost in the mists of the crazy inspiration period two decades ago. A few minor characters are anchored by the names of current friends and colleagues. The only original name with any provenance is Amaryllis Broomhead, who was a girl I knew at college. This side character went on to play a more prominent role in the two sequels. (A sequel was never planned, but I enjoyed writing the book too much not to revisit the world I'd created.)

My favourite moniker is reserved for the cafe – OUR BUCK'S - which takes the proprietor's name and uses it to create a pun. (Actually, not true. I came up with the pun and created Buck Travis from that. He's envisaged as being played by John Goodman!).

The motif in the book is eyesight, with the MC suffering from monochromacy, which underscores his attitude to the world and provides the central theme - black & white versus colour. This encompasses everything from the wardrobe he wears to the slightly fantastical nature of the book.

Almost all the other characters have some kind of vision deficit or peculiarity.

Another key theme is the juxtaposition of a peripatetic life and a very static, stable life - and it underpins the central conflict. It shows as certainty versus uncertainty, routine versus change, and black & white versus colour.

Looking back, as I write this, there's a small parallel with the central character in the wonderful book "The Rosie Project". Both he and Beckman find other people's quirks amusing whilst not seeing their own OCD-like traits as anything special.

One reader compared “Tow Away Zone” to the work of Carl Hiaasen, and I can see the offbeat plot lines, characters and names suggest that.

Chiefly, however, this story was always a homage to the Coen Brothers’ brand of black comedy. Other films which share common elements with “Tow Away Zone” are “Roxanne”, “Grosse Pointe Blank,” and especially “Doc Hollywood”, where a stranger winds up in a small town after a car accident and falls in love with the place.

In the end, when it came to getting this book out into the world, I realised it was hard to categorise and hence unlikely to attract agent or publisher interest. I did, however, invest in the services of a professional editor to cast their eye over the manuscript. Partly this was to seek validation that it was a decent story, humorously told - and not a crazy vanity project that only appealed to my sometimes offbeat sense of humour.

Mercifully, she enjoyed it - but also couldn’t liken it to anything else. Yes, it can be pitched, but it crosses many genres. A lovable mongrel, perhaps.

I feel like I bottled lightning - like randomly emptying the larder into a bowl and somehow coming up with a moreish chocolate cake.

So the book was published (though it’s been through two new covers and five re-issues to tidy the prose further), and the initial ten or so readers gave it 4 or 5 stars. My self-belief was seemingly well-placed. I was chuffed to also get a thumbs-up from an award-winning UK comedic writer.

In summary: whoever said, “write the book you want to read”, I think that box is ticked now.

Of course, if the Coens want to offer me the movie rights...