
QUESTION AND ANSWER

FEATURING WILLIAM CAMPBELL POWELL AND HIS EDITOR, SUSAN CHANG

SC: Hi, Bill. Congratulations on the imminent publication of your first novel, *Expiration Day*! Do you want to talk a bit about how it came to be published?

WCP: Well, I began work on it in August 2006, under the working title “A Child Alone,” and worked on it for about four years to get it to the point where I was ready to send it to a publisher. For years, I’d been trying to get an agent first, to avoid the slush pile, and that’s really tricky, because you have to first find an agent who loves your story, and then they have to find an editor who’ll love your story, which felt like needing to win the lottery not once but twice. So I decided this time to try the slush pile route, and approach a publisher directly. The question was then, which publisher?

The answer was actually already clear in my mind, because in one of the extras on Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* audiobook, he enthused about his working relationship with Tom Doherty. So I set out to find Tom Doherty, discovering him at Tor Books. I should also mention here the part played by my good friend, published author Howard Whitehouse. He’d met Kathleen Doherty at a book event, and suggested that she might be interested, when the book was ready.

I’ve learnt that *Expiration Day* was your first to come through the “slush pile”—how has that been different from working with an agented submission?

SC: Yes, it is actually the first manuscript I acquired from the slush pile in more than twenty years of reading the slush pile. Editors always hope to find something wonderful in the pile of unsolicited, unagented manuscripts—the proverbial “great American novel” (ironically not American in this case, but British). But the odds of finding anything publishable, much less a story that you love, are so low that most publishers no longer accept unsolicited manuscripts. I’m glad that Tor still does! Otherwise, I would have missed out on *Expiration Day*.

But to answer your question, the only way this experience differed from working with an agented submission was in the contract negotiation stage. Throughout the process, I was relieved to realize that you are very business-minded and savvy—a complete pro and a pleasure to work with both editorially and on the business end of things.

WCP: What has been your experience of working with non-American authors? Do they have their own challenges?

SC: I think you're the first British author I've worked with directly, although I have worked on British "imports," which are projects that we co-publish or buy from British publishers. It hasn't been very different, although we did have to discuss such things as whether we should Americanize grammar and punctuation. And we did talk about certain vocabulary choices—for example I didn't know what a "cagoule" was and didn't think that American teens would. So we changed it.

WCP: Yes, I remember those discussions—treading a difficult line between keeping Tania's voice authentically British, but making the language accessible to an international readership. But we did that work, which took a lot of time to get right, on a revised version of the manuscript. You also saw an earlier draft of *Expiration Day*, which you felt wasn't really ready. You never hear of editors saying 'not quite'—what on earth possessed you to break the mould?

SC: I was immediately absorbed and charmed by Tania's hopeful and precocious voice as she recounted her life in the near-future version of Britain that you created. I felt that she had an authentic teen voice. But the original manuscript was almost twice as long as it ended up being and it took Tania into adulthood and centuries into the future. It wasn't until I had an epiphany about splitting the book in half and ending it when Tania is still a teenager that I felt that I could publish this as a YA book.

What was your initial inspiration for the book? Did you think it was a book for teens or adults or both?

WCP: I wish I knew where the idea came from—as the saying goes, if I knew that, I could bottle it and make a fortune! But the opening scene—Tania's birthday—popped into my head a couple of days after my own birthday back in 2006. That scene came complete with the idea that all the other kids were robots, and that a vicar's daughter was probably in a very good position to observe all the strangenesses of life in a quiet village, trying to pretend that the world has not suffered a major catastrophe. (Spoiler alert!) I admit I hum'd and hah'd a bit over whether Tania should be human or robot herself, but then the final scene popped into my head, and it was so obviously right, that the decision was made.

As for it being a book for adults or for teens, I don't feel it's exclusively for one or the other, any more than, say, *Ender's Game* is a book for just a single age group. It's a tale for anyone who remembers growing up, as much as it is for those who are still growing up. At the start of the book, Tania is a child, at the end, she's practically an adult, and one of the challenges of writing the novel was to make Tania's voice change authentically over the span of the book.

SC: How did you come up with character and voice of Tania? Is she based on anyone in particular?

WCP: In hindsight, I think she owes quite a bit to some of the precocious and iconic young girls of literature. There's a bit of Roald Dahl's Matilda there, I think. And maybe a bit of Lewis Carroll's Alice. If you're asking about real-life inspiration, then Tania's a composite of several schoolfriends. But there's also a lot of me in the mix, as well, at least in terms of some of the incidents and frustrations of being a teen that she records in her diary.

SC: Why did you choose to tell the story in diary format?

WCP: I think what you're really asking is why pick such a hard format for your first novel. Diary format is hard, because—as early reviewers told me—you really have to examine every sentence and ask if someone would really write that, sitting in bed at the end of the day. However, I knew the story that I wanted to tell would span six or seven years, but dipping in and out of events. The device of looking over the shoulder of an alien archaeologist in the far future, skip-reading Tania's diary, gave me the vehicle for varying the level of detail. There are a few big gaps of time in the tale, so I allowed Tania to get a little retrospective on her birthdays or at New Year's, and write a little potted summary of the gaps.

SC: What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

WCP: *Expiration Day* is a robot story, and for me, the best robot stories simply hold up a mirror to our humanity—and also our inhumanity to one another. In human societies, people still get classified as “inferior” based purely on physical characteristics, so authors invent robots to bear the brunt of our inhuman prejudices, and help us see the stupidity of such attitudes back in the real world. Tania's English teacher challenges her with a definition of humanity as being the ability to put yourself in the shoes of other people, even the people your society oppresses. Put another way, humans look for similarities with other humans, rather than differences.

SC: What are you currently working on? Can we hope for a sequel to *Expiration Day*?

WCP: The obvious answer is, yes, I am working on a sequel! To qualify that, I want to write a sequel that's still a YA novel, even though by *Expiration Day*'s end, Tania is growing up. I've a few ideas about how to follow-on without losing Tania's readership, which I'm still experimenting with. It's a copout to simply pick up at the closing scene of *Expiration Day*, even though—as you mentioned—that future was well mapped out in the earliest versions of the manuscript. Perhaps those chapters will see the light of day as a spin-off novella, or some sort of eNovella for those who really want to know what Tania did next. But Tania's universe is bigger than just Tania, with more

wonders in it than poor, lonely Zog knows. It's that wider universe I want to explore in the sequel, but still seen through YA eyes.

But in many ways, I'd like to explore other sub-genres of YA and other genres of fiction before following the easy paths of sequels. So there's a fragment of an (adult) historical detective novel set in the 1830s and a YA fantasy (as opposed to SF) novel also getting worked on. At some point, the muse will intervene, and one of those will just take light.

SC: We look forward to seeing what you come up with next, then. Thanks, Bill.
