

profile

“If I’d written about another hard-boiled, tough talking, two-fisted drinking cop, I’d be competing with writers who’ve done it brilliantly in the past”

It’s been a great life so far”, Marshall Karp declares on his website. Few could argue. Having carved out a successful career in advertising, overseeing contracts for the likes of Coca-Cola, Gillette and Nestlé, Karp turned to writing for TV, stage and screen. The author of the play *Squabbles*, and the screenwriter of the movie *Just Looking*, Marshall has now turned his hand to fiction. His debut, *The Rabbit Factory*, is 632 pages of unadulterated magic.

When an actor portraying Familyland’s beloved mascot, Rambunctious Rabbit, is brutally murdered on park grounds, Lamaar Corporation execs fear their spotless public image will be shattered. Under pressure from the studio, LAPD detectives Mike Lomax and Terry Biggs must keep their investigation from the public eye. With the media closing in and political pressure mounting, the partners race to discover the Lamaar-hating madman before he brings the family entertainment giant to its knees.

More than anything, it is the ordinariness of Lomax and Biggs that sets the book apart from many other crime novels. Neither is a

Given the theme of the book and the many comparisons drawn between the fictional Lamaar Corporation and other real-life entertainment conglomerates, could *The Rabbit Factory* be seen as a swipe at corporate entertainment? “It’s not so much a swipe as an insider’s perspective of true corporate behaviour... If it’s revealing, it’s because I’ve been able to get up close and personal and see the way corporate America – and corporate Hollywood in particular – works.”

The Rabbit Factory took five years to write – so what else was Karp working on? “Life. After starting the book in May 2001, I was in New York City on 9/11 and my daughter was at Ground Zero. Although she escaped unharmed, I put the book aside for eight months and just tried to make sense of the world. I spent all of 2002 as if some doctor had given me one year to live. My mantra became ‘live every day like it’s September 10’. My wife continued to live and work in New York City, and I spent weekdays in upstate New York. We’d reconnect every weekend and I finally got back to writing in the summer of 2002. I worked on it like any spec piece – dedicated, but not under any deadline pressure. I did a little freelance consulting for big corpora-

A rabbit out of a hat

Advertising, TV, stage, screen – and now fiction. No wonder Marshall Karp feels blessed. Chris High checked in for a chat

Karp: had to restrain himself

Photo: Fran Gormley

hard-drinking womaniser nor a faultless Supercop. “I didn’t create a cop. First and foremost, I created a man – a three-dimensional guy with all the warts, flaws and disappointments that one can accumulate in 42 years on the planet,” Marshall explains. “Then I added a devastating personal tragedy – the loss of Lomax’ young wife. Finally, I made him a homicide detective. For me the essence of comedy, tragedy, and character development – in fiction and in real life – is conflict. I’m a character writer. My goal was to create a hero who resonates in such a way that you feel you know him, you relate to him, maybe you even *care* him. If I’d written about another hard-boiled, tough talking, two-fisted drinking cop, I’d be competing with writers who’ve done it brilliantly in the past.”

On the opening page, readers are introduced to Eddie Elkins, a man who has just landed his “dream job” as Rambunctious Rabbit. That is to say, he’s a man dressed in a rabbit suit who is set free to pose for family photographs. But it turns out Eddie is a convicted paedophile who has managed to slip beneath the Lamaar security radar to land the role. Wasn’t it a risk to introduce such a character so light-heartedly and so early in the novel? “I wanted the reader to see Eddie as the patrons in the park saw him, ambling down Fantasy Avenue. The jocularity wasn’t the risk because it’s stripped away early on. When I let the reader know Eddie is an unregistered paedophile ... *that* was the risk.”

There is a poignancy in the book that is counter-balanced by many laugh-out-loud moments. Were the contrasts and pace difficult to sustain? “Not to *sustain*, no, but sometimes to *restrain*. I love humour as a counterpunch to murder. I had to make sure that I didn’t put the laughs in the wrong places, though, because there are times when humour is inappropriate.

tions like Mercedes. I also worked hard to convince my wife to quit her job in New York City, and live full time with me in idyllic upstate New York. When she refused I threatened to get a mistress or a dog... Of course, I got the dog, Jett, a black Labrador, and my wife adores her.”

In the novel, Mike Lomax’s wife, Joanie, has died of cancer. In an attempt to come to terms with her illness, she has written a series of letters that are to be opened, a month at a time, on the anniversary of her death. Where did *that* idea come from? “It’s part of my very own personal end-of-life plan. If I’m ever hit by a bus you’ll have to settle for what I’ve left behind. That includes 40 years of New Year’s Eve letters I’ve written to myself... No one has ever read them, and I’ve asked my wife to burn them, but who knows if she’ll want to or even be able to. On the other hand, if a doctor gives me some advance notice like Joanie, I’ll be writing farewell letters. I even thought about a video to be played at my funeral. Always leave ‘em laughing.”

What are the biggest obstacles facing aspiring authors today? “Good question. When I first landed an agent, I thought the manuscript was ready to be submitted but my agent insisted on not one, but two rewrites, the first of which was major. I asked if I shouldn’t be rewriting for a publisher. Isn’t that what editors are for? I was then instructed in the New Publishing ethos ... Editors don’t edit... Today’s editors acquire books. They market. The publishing ‘business’ is now just that – a business.”

After a life in marketing, Marshall is relishing the promotion process that these days goes hand in hand with being a novelist. “I’m looking forward to it immensely. I only pray that I don’t incur the wrath of God for promoting a dead rabbit over the Easter holiday.”

The Rabbit Factory is published by Allison & Busby on 6 April, price £9.99

