

# WRITING4CHILDREN

**SETTING THE SCENE** Bestselling author Peter Kerr talks to Anita Loughrey about how he adapted his screenplay for children into a novel

I'm a Scottish author of 15 books, with a background as a jazz musician, record producer, a farmer of beef and barley in Scotland and of oranges in Mallorca. My first book, *Snowball Oranges*, was a humorous account of our family's adventures in Mallorca in the 1980s. It was published in 2000, became a bestseller, has been translated into 14 languages and spawned a series of four sequels, two prequels and a selection of fiction titles ranging in genre from mystery to historical.

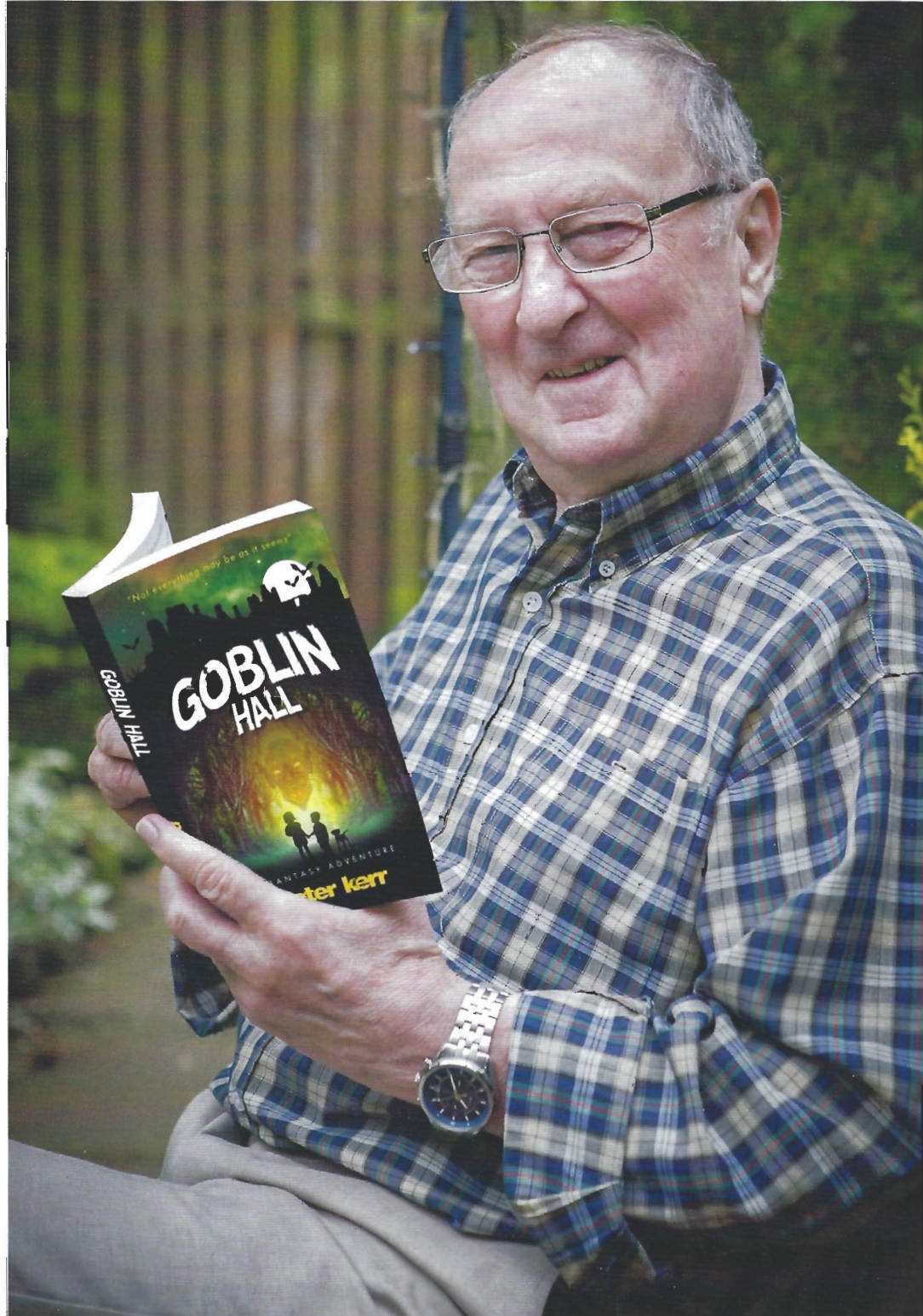
I originally wrote the *Goblin Hall* story as a 90-minute screenplay before my first book was published, purely as a self-imposed writing exercise, then filed it away and forgot about it I was until transferring old files to a new computer a couple of years ago.

*Goblin Hall* really exists. It is a large, remarkably well-preserved subterranean chamber that lies hidden beneath the ruins of Yester Castle, near the village of Gifford, about five miles from my own home in East Lothian.

Legend has it that it was built in the 13th century – with the aid of 'demonic forces' – by Sir Hugo de Giffard, a Norman nobleman, who, because of his reputation as a practitioner of the 'black arts', was dubbed the Wizard of Yester.

The legend is well known locally – Gifford's inn is even called The Goblin Ha' Hotel – but had never been used as a basis for a novel, although Sir Walter Scott did mention it in his poem *Marmion*.

When I was 12, I was taken on a visit to Yester Castle by a school chum who lived in







with  
 children's author  
**Anita Loughrey**

Gifford. What little of the ruins that still exist are well hidden by the surrounding woods, and it would have been difficult to find them without a local guide. I was immediately struck by the atmosphere of the place, and I never forgot my immediate thought that it would make a great setting for a creepy movie. That's probably why it became the inspiration for my experimental screenplay some 40 years later.

### From script to novel

I was already familiar with the locality of Goblin Hall, and there really wasn't much more about its history that could be researched. In any case, those aspects that were generally known served only as a kind of launchpad for the story that would develop as I wrote it.

All I had at the start was an idea that the script would feature two children, a ruined castle and a haunted underground chamber. And as there weren't any historical 'facts' that had to be adhered to, I had a fairly blank canvas to work on.

Whether I'm writing fiction or non-fiction, I never have a preconceived plot or road map that I follow. Maybe it's a creative process that harks back to the improvisational essence of playing jazz. I know it isn't a method of writing that would work for everybody, but it's what comes naturally to me.

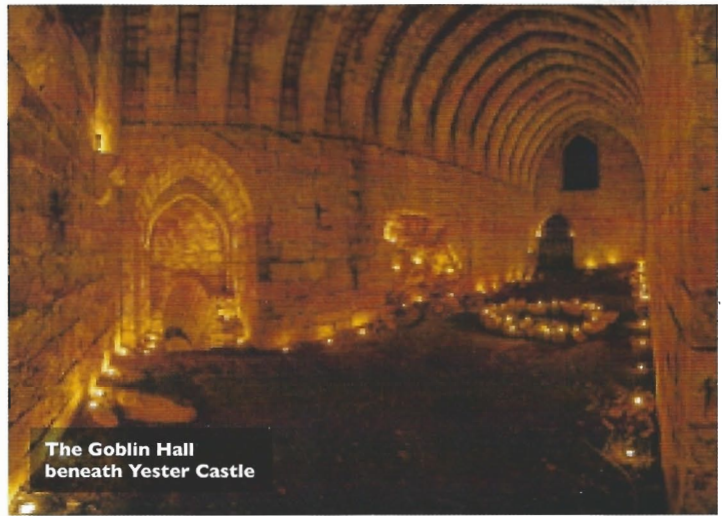
I almost proved the point to myself the hard way when I started to write the book adaptation of my original Goblin Hall screenplay. For the first time, I had an existing storyline to stick to, and a detailed one at that. It took a

bit of getting used to, but it was a worthwhile exercise and another step on the learning curve that's always in front of us, no matter how experienced we think we've become.

The screenplay was aimed primarily at a young audience (perhaps nine-year-olds upwards), but with an eye to a wider family appeal as well. The main practical difficulty I found in converting the film script to purely narrative form was how to adjust the balance between action and dialogue. In the script, only an outline of the actual scene locations and the physical actions/reactions of the characters was required; it was left to the film's eventual director to provide the visual detail.

To an extent, the same applied to the dialogue, which was written with a view to it complementing, or being complemented by, what would be seen on screen. In other words, a sort of shorthand was employed in both regards. For example, a simple 'Yes' might be all that was needed to answer a question on screen, whereas a fuller response would inevitably be required in the book version.

The other major challenge was presented by the fact that the screenplay involved a lot of quick changes and fairly short scenes, which also meant changes of location and characters. This could add to the tension of a movie, but could easily have become confusing and annoying to the reader of the book, so great effort had to be put into providing a more expansive narrative without losing the



The Goblin Hall  
 beneath Yester Castle

essential pace of the story. It was a new experience for me, but again a very valuable one.

### What now?

My previous publishers didn't do children's books, and I had no contacts with any who did. Having been down the long and winding road before (it took me 10 years to find my first publisher), I chose to self-publish. Fortunately, I already had an imprint of my own that I'd set up to keep in print some of my older titles when their publishing rights reverted to me.

Self-publishing has its attractions: it's fast and you're in control. However, it's a big ask for indies to match the editorial input and marketing clout of a good traditional publisher. So if you're giving it a go, familiarise yourself with every aspect of the process before you take the plunge, including the technical side of typesetting/formatting and so on. Don't be tempted to skimp on hiring qualified editorial and proofreading help. Don't rush into getting the book 'out there' before it's in the best possible shape. And be prepared to invest a lot of time and effort into its promotion once it is.

Kids have a very fertile sense of imagination, less influenced

by reality than adults. But it has to be treated with respect and care, as a gardener would a young plant. I've found this an enlightening experience, reminding me of something CS Lewis once said: 'Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales.'

A tip on writing for children I think will benefit readers of *Writers' Forum* is to establish the characters of your main protagonists early, and then they'll help you carry the story forward; they really will. But keep an eye on what they get up to. Stay in control or they'll lead you a merry dance.

The greatest aid to writing is reading. Read, read, read, and not just the type of books you want to write either. But above all, be original. Don't try to squeeze yourself into other authors' shoes, no matter how much you admire their style. Children, like dogs, are very good at spotting a phoney.

It's worth noting another quote from CS Lewis, who, after all, knew a bit about writing for kids: 'A children's story that can only be enjoyed by children is not a good children's story in the slightest.'

• Peter can be found at [www.peter-kerr.co.uk](http://www.peter-kerr.co.uk) where there are also links to his Facebook and Twitter pages