An Introduction to...

Robert Westall

“The Robert Westall archive was the first collection we were offered, along with a promise of £100,000 toward a capital project from the Robert Westall Trust. Back in 1995, that offer really spurred the Centre project to get going.”

Elizabeth Hammill, Co-Founder of Seven Stories, on the importance of the Robert Westall archive

The Writer

Robert’s first book, *The Machine Gunners* (1975), won the Carnegie Medal and was very well received by both readers and critics. However, there was some controversy surrounding the book when it was first published. Robert wanted his writing to have a realism which ordinary teenagers – the sort he was so familiar with after decades as a teacher – could recognise and relate to. This meant including some bad language and violence in the book, which some adults at the time considered inappropriate for young readers. In the Seven Stories Collection there are letters from Kaye Webb, the hugely influential editor of Puffin Books, which discuss some of these concerns, and consider whether the bad language should be cut from the Puffin edition of the book.


The Robert Westall archive contains drafts, notes and letters which span the entirety of Robert’s career and includes a complete manuscript draft of *The Machine Gunners*.

Inspiration

Westall was inspired to write *The Machine Gunners* by a wish ‘to share his childhood’ with his son Christopher, then 12 years old. He said, “I wanted to invite him back into my world and let the two generations, just for a moment, stand side by side”. Westall told the story to Christopher as he was writing it, and edited it according to what his son most enjoyed. Sadly his son died at the age of 18, in a motorbike accident. Robert remained firm friends with his son’s biker friends, and motorbikes feature heavily in many of his later books.
Creative Process

The draft for *The Machine Gunners*, held in the Collection, is written in several exercise books and is the only surviving piece of Robert’s work which is drafted in that way. This manuscript is very close to the final published work, which would suggest it is not the first draft. Of course, it is possible that Robert had the book near-perfect inside his head before he started writing, but that would make him quite a rarity amongst writers!

Many of Robert’s most enduring works, like *The Machine Gunners*, are set in the North East of his childhood. Robert’s use of his own memories and experiences, as well as those of his family, as inspiration for his fiction can be traced in the archive. For example, a claustrophobic description of his grandmother’s experience of a “warren of steps and passages” around North Shields fish quay, which appears in an unpublished piece of writing in the archive, is an image which would later feature in the novel *Fathom Five* (1979).

The power which the North East held over his imagination can also be seen in the numerous pieces of artwork by Robert which survive in the collection, including drawings and sketches of places like Craster, Bamburgh Castle, Newcastle quayside, Tynemouth, Whitley Bay and Dunstanburgh.

Biography

Robert Westall was born in North Shields in 1929 and grew up on Tyneside during the Second World War – an experience which would feature heavily in his writing later on. He started writing at a young age; his first novel was written when he was just twelve years old, although it was never published.

Robert went on to study Fine Art at Durham University, and at Slade School, University of London, before training as an art teacher. In 1960 Robert moved to Cheshire, where he taught at Sir John Deane’s College in Northwich, Cheshire, for twenty-five years. He also worked as an art critic, an antiques dealer and a branch director of the Samaritans, as well as having several pieces of journalistic writing published in various magazines and newspapers. He retired from teaching in 1985 to devote his time to writing, but sadly died in 1993 at the age of only 63. Although he never moved back to the North East, Robert retained a strong affection for the region, which provides the setting for many of his stories.

In his own words...

“I think I was a bad writer, the worst kind of writer, from the time I could first hold a pencil. I wrote my first novel in the summer holidays when I was twelve... It was execrable. The police inspector got his first clue when the crooks dropped a crate of heroine on his foot. But it was twelve thousand words long, and that showed early stamina, if nothing else.”

Robert Westall on his early attempts at writing, from *The Making of Me* (Catnip Books, 2006), p. 169

For more information on Robert Westall visit www.robertwestall.com