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## **PRIVATE PEACEFUL**

### **MICHAEL MORPURGO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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## ***1. What in your life makes you feel so passionate about injustice?***

I don't think I'm any different from anyone else. I think we've got a deep sense of what's fair. And I suppose as I've got older I rage more and more against what seems to be a continuation of unfairness, whether it's in - towards our children, those who are more disadvantaged, or refugees or asylum seekers. And whereas clearly not to be an attempt to be merciful and just, but it's turned in to a kind of political expediency. And I suppose you recognise that we simply seem to go on doing this, and it amounts really to a kind of cruelty towards the people, very often young people - children - who should be treated with respect and given an opportunity in life, and not made rejects by us. I suppose that's what it is. But I think at his age, I think with age does come rage that things are not put right when they could so easily be put right

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## ***2. Is there a stark example of that today that you draw attention to?***

Well, it's wherever children are involved in conflict, which is none of their doing, and they become victims. So yes, at the moment it would be Syria, that's for sure. As we're sitting here children are being killed in their own houses, or driven from their own houses. And I know there are their parents and there are old people as well, but somehow there is a total innocence about children, and you know that they are - they're simply victims of man's folly. And then you only have to look back a few years, not even a few years, a couple of years, and we were in this country, putting children of asylum seekers in prison. And when I discovered this I thought hang on, this is Britain, it's my country, by and large we think we look after children, see to children, even if we don't necessarily always achieve it, we try our best, and yet their business place called Yarl's Wood, which until really a very short time ago - and it took a great campaign to stop it - was housing refugees and their children sometimes months at a time, and that people were coming in the middle of the night in uniforms, police, border control people, taking people from their homes, rushing them downstairs, putting them in to a lorry and driving them away, and then they were going to be waiting three or four months or whatever it was, in the prison waiting for all the papers to be worked out and then sent back. Now the justice about whether or not people are sent back is one thing, there is a political judgement about that, of course there is, but treating people like that, many of whom have been here five, six, seven years, and they go to school these kids, they have friends, you know, and they are simply wrenched, untimely ripped from where they were. Now someone sat down and made a decision that was an alright thing to do. That's what's outrageous. And in the end, frankly, the government did come round to that, but it took an awfully long time, an awful lot of campaigning to make that happen. So those are sort of two examples. And they go on, it's just that you can't mention them all.

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### ***3. The picture of rural life in 'Private Peaceful' is far from idyllic, how did you research the social conditions of the rural working class at the time?***

One of the important things about the beginnings of 'Private Peaceful' is that it's set in a community that I know really well. The place where I live is called Iddesleigh, a little village in deepest Devon, and you couldn't get any deeper, I mean it has a 100 or so inhabitants, I don't know, 40/50 houses, a church, a pub, a school that was and isn't any more. That's it. And all round people do what they always did, they farm. And the history of this farming is in the graveyard. And you can see the uncles and the aunts and the grandfathers and grandmothers of all the people that I know, and you can see how long they lived, which in many cases was not very long. Their lives were very hard, and they were very often very brief. And the houses which are now renovated, and we have some heating and we have electricity and things like that, it is not difficult to imagine how it would have been really a few decades ago. And the other thing that's not difficult is how the social class was rigid then. We run a project, my wife Claire and myself, called Farms For City Children, and just in a huge Victorian house just outside the village. I won't go in to what the project is, it doesn't matter for this, but this big house where the kids now live when they come down to do their week on the farm was built in 1871, it's sort of high Victorian/imitation Jacobean, that sort of thing, but it was the old manor house of the village. This is where the guy lived who ran the local hunt and kept his hounds, and there were the stables, and it had the servants' quarters. And the great thing about it, as far as I was concerned, is that the people who we were working with, look after the children, the lady who did the cooking and ladies who helped with the cleaning and looking after, were all under-parlour maids in another generation going back to the 30s, which isn't far from the 20s, which of course is not far from the First World War. So I had a kind of a direct link back to how that society was, and the rigidity of it and the way, very often, that people who lived in tied cottages and worked on the land were treated.

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It wasn't slavery, but there was a lot of power coming from on-high. They could turf you out of your house when they felt like it, and very often did. In fact, in our village there's a Society, and there used to be in all these communities Friendly Societies, and these Friendly Societies were only forms of agricultural unionism, it's when the workers got together, paid a little tiny bit of their weekly wages in to the kitty, and from that if you had an accident and you were put out of your house and there was no money coming in, this fund would help you and your family for a while. They paid funeral expenses. It was some way, if you like, before there was any kind of social service support, of supporting people who lived on the land, because life was extremely hard, particularly if things went wrong, you know, if you did have health and you worked a long life and you could support your family. But then there were restrictions, you know, who could hunt where and who could fish where. And all this is in my parish, you know, and so it was not difficulty when I was beginning *Private Peaceful* to begin it very deliberately in the place that I live. I know every cottage and I know every tree, I sometimes know who planted the trees. It was what Thomas Hardy referred to as the old association, it's when you associate people and the land and the history, and so I was very close to all that.

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#### ***4. Private Peaceful has been adapted for stage and then the big screen, how involved are you in these adaptations, Michael? Was it hard to put your creation in to other people's hands?***

It's a choice you make. When - when people come to you and say we want to adapt your book in to a play or a film I think what you have to do is to be very, very careful before you say yes, so you have to do your research and you find out about people and their work, their record, what they've done. In the case of 'Private Peaceful' it goes back to the very first day the book came out, and it was quite extraordinary. I don't know quite how it happened, but I was invited - I think it was because of the subject of the book for children, which people thought was rather extraordinary, you know, the soldier waiting to be executed at dawn, and the First World War doesn't sound like a book for young people.

So I found myself on to the Today Programme, Radio 4, being interviewed by Jim Naughtie I think it was, and he asked me to read a bit from the book and talk about it, and in the car on the way back from the studio I got a phone call from a guy called Simon Reade, who said he'd just heard what I'd been saying and he was going to get the book, but he wanted to be sure that I didn't do any kind of deal about the theatre adaptation of this, because he was running at the time Bristol Old Vic, and he said he wanted to make a play of it, he knew he wanted to make a play, he was very passionate about it. And he went and read the book, and the next day he rang up again, he said yes, yes, it simply confirmed to me, I'm going to do this, I want to do this, I want to do this, but I have to tell you, he said, it can't have the ending that's in your book, because what I want to do with this is make a one-man show, and it's very important to me that the one man on the stage is the one man who dies in the morning, otherwise the play wouldn't go anywhere. So I knew his reputation, I knew the Bristol Old Vic. My daddy had even acted at the Bristol Old Vic, so I thought well, go for it. So I very much let Simon redo it, but - so he's kept very, very, very true to the words of the book.

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If you look at the script and you look at the book, yes, there are differences, there are cuts and all the rest of it but, by and large, he kept to the rhythm and most certainly to the spirit of the book. And the play's been massively, massively successful. It's been mostly in production for the last five or six years, and it's travelled the world and that sort of thing. So I've been delighted. And it was he who came to me then and said look, why don't we make a film of this together? And I had had a meeting with a director called Pat O'Connor, because I came across a film of his called 'Dancing at Lughnasa' and really loved it, and I thought he was wonderful and I thought he was the right man for it, so I basically put the director and the producer together and stepped back and let them get on with it.

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**5. You had the same editor on this as well?**

Yes, absolutely.

**6. A major theme of 'Private Peaceful' is the way the brothers look after each other, both Tom and Charlie look after big Joe, and Charlie tries to look after Tom at the front. Did you have any brothers or, if not, did you long to have had brothers?**

No, I had brothers. I had... I have one full brother, Peter, and I have a half brother and a half sister. We were very close I think when we were younger. As happens when you get older geography and circumstance takes you apart a bit, but we're still very close up here where it matters. So no, I was.. I grew up in quite a tight family really, with an authoritarian stepfather, maybe that's what bound us together a bit, I don't know. Maybe.

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## ***7. Do you think in the heat of a jingoistic nation threatening, do you think a war could happen again like that in Britain?***

Sadly, I think it can happen any time. I think it's a matter of... It's so much a matter of mood. Er, I - I think at the moment it seems unlikely that it would happen in Western Europe again, that is partly because of the First and the Second World War. I think what we.. I mean, you know, we know the reason we're in this European community and it's actually the only good reason, and that is that we can squabble about sausages and not fight each other and kill each other. And we can even squabble about our currency, but we don't fight each other and kill each other.

There is a kind of an understanding that living together is better than dying together and destroying each, and we've learnt that the hard way. There was never a worst century for war than the 20th Century, and out of that Germany and France decided to put all that behind, behind them. And we, in the end, have joined that - I suppose that philosophy really. We have all sorts of problems around the periphery but, nonetheless, we've had peace in Western Europe, certainly, all that time.

Could anything happen? Most certainly, yes. I think one of the great problems we've got in society and in Europe and in the West is this huge division between rich and poor, and whenever that happens, when people feel alienated, put down, put aside, made to feel of no account, then you can have people rising up. And then you only need the right politician in the right place - or I should say the wrong politician in the right place at the right time to catch the mood. I mean that's all Hitler did. I mean the reason Hitler managed to do what he did was because Germany was a wrecked and starving country after the First World War, and there was a people humiliated.

Well, you look to whatever light comes along to life you out of that. I'm not excusing Hitler for one moment, but that's the circumstances, that's the reason that the German people took to him, is because they'd been right down there and this man was lifting them up. And I think our great problem is that if you have a Europe divided

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between rich and poor and it gets worse, and I think at the present moment it is likely to, it seems to me that that process about what seems to happen in the economy continues to go on.

And we are creating in all our countries in Western Europe a large proportion of the population which feels as if it has no investment in the community. And that's dangerous. Now whether it turns to war or to internal revolution one doesn't know, it just depends on who comes along. Could it happen? Most certainly, yeah.

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## **8. What does Remembrance, with a capital R, mean to your personal life?**

My Uncle Peter, who was killed in the RAF in 1940, he was aged 21, young, but then they were all young or mostly young. I never knew him. He was killed two years before I was born, so he was a photograph on the mantelpiece, a photograph over which my mother used to cry a great deal, it's the first time I ever saw an adult cry, and she went on crying I think inside all her life.

I think it contributed to what turned out to be quite a sad life in many, many ways. It was a big, big shock that family had, and in that sense it represents the same kind of shock that many, many hundreds of thousands of families up and down this country had in the Second World War.

There's hardly a family that wasn't touched by it in way or another. Er, and I suppose the remembrance of my Uncle Peter, for me he's the unknown soldier, he's still unknown, I never knew him, but he has a face. And as I grew older and older I realised that what happens in wars is that when people die it doesn't end there. It's no good just adding up the casualties and say well that - isn't it terrible those people died?

What you can't calculate is the damage that's left behind afterwards. Very often the wounded are not even thought about, they're the ones who actually we don't want to look at or don't even want to think about sometimes, because they have two less legs than they should have, or they're blind or they've gone mad. And these kind of things very often throughout history have been hidden from us, and they still are to a degree. And I think that's.. that's really important, and I think the other problem is this, that when people grieve it doesn't go away.

If you lose a son or you lose a husband that loss stays with you for the rest of your life as it did with my mother. And so you know that the Remembrance is important. I

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worry about big words, I worry about the word hero, I worry about the word sacrifice. I worry about building it in to something that's quasi religious, when actually what it's about is the loss of young life, yes, in a cause of fighting for your country.

But when they die they die, you know. I mean my - it turned out in the end that my Uncle Peter, who was not a Spitfire pilot with his coloured scarf being shot down over the Channel, the kind of heroic schoolboy Boy's Own sort of ending which would have been so satisfying in a way, he was killed because his plane crashed trying to take off. And then you think hero? No, he didn't have in his mind when he was taking off that he was going to do anything wonderful, he just wanted to get back home again, you know. And yes, he's a hero deep down, I know that because he died to save us now, which is heroic, but actually he's just a young man, and he's a young man who ended up burnt on a runway. And you - that's what you should think about, I think, and that's what you should remember, the terror and the horror of it, not simply wrap it up in a cloak of fine music, which we do wonderfully well in this country, and pomp and circumstance. That's good, that helps, but it mustn't cover the truth.

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**9. That was your experience. What role do you think Remembrance plays in the lives of young people today? Do they gauge with it at all with what you've just described?**

Well, I think they do more and more now. I think there was a period of time, probably during the Cold War, when it seemed as if war was put on hold, in a sense. And we kind of didn't want to know it, neither did we particularly want to remember it. And I don't know if the figures of the British Legion will actually go along with this, but it seemed to me anyway that the whole Poppy Day thing lost quite a lot of impetus and interest at that time.

And I think it honestly was because people felt it was old fashioned, it was to do with the First and Second World War, that was over, let's forget it, let's get on. And 'War Horse', funnily enough, the book 'War Horse' came out at that time and did not succeed. People didn't want to know about it. And it was the kind of book I think people thought was nostalgic, which it's not, but is it looking back? Yes, but it's looking back for the purposes of looking forward, which didn't seem to be understood.

But I think the... the thing that has happened is that when the Cold War ended and the world fragmented in to little shards of wretched anger and revenge, deeply hidden, then the little wars started, and these little wars, which have become big wars, involved us in this country and many other countries sending our soldiers out again, and then what happened, and this is newspapers, radio, television, focusing on that and then on the coffins coming home.

And suddenly you've got a little kid of eight or nine and he's sitting watching the news and he sees coming out the back end of an aeroplane a coffin with the Union Jack on it, and he hears the word Iraq or Afghanistan or whatever, he doesn't understand, she doesn't understand everything that's going on, but you do understand because you can see people looking sad and you can hear the music

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and you can hear the voice of the... They get that it's a sad thing, and they also get that it's happening now.

Therefore when people start talking about the First and Second World War it has much more meaning now I think, than it's had for a long, long time. I don't think it's an accident that 'Private Peaceful' has been filmed or the book is read so widely, er, particularly in schools, or that 'War Horse' has done so well on the stage and cinema. It's not an accident. Books, stories have their time, have their moment, and sadly, and it is sadly, those coffins coming home have made people think again, and I hope it's made people think again about the whole question of going to war.

I mean Ted Hughes once called the First World War huge and senseless. Wilfred Owen called it a futility. These words are not used lightly by our great poets. And it... I think if a book or a film or a play can help make us think harder then it's maybe worthwhile doing.

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## **10. How important is Remembrance in relation to your work, can you summarise its role.**

Well, I suppose that it would be Remembrance in the widest sense of that word. I mean most of my stories have some connection to my memory, and I'm a war child. I was born in 1943, my first memories are of bomb sites, I played in bomb sites in Philbeach Gardens near Earl's Court. And I can't remember which numbers of the houses had gone, but there were two houses right next door to our own which had been bombed. Now I didn't know as a little thingy growing up what that meant. All I knew was that there was a notice outside which said "keep out", which meant of course you went in, and that when you got there there was the most amazing adventure playground that had been created. You had dens, you could go down in to walls that you could climb, birds nesting, because the birds.. the bird life and the - it was all overgrown. And, of course, it lasted for years.

The notion that London was sort of rebuilt fast is nonsense, it took forever and a day to get things going again. So we had this as our playground. And I used to walk to school, to St Lithas School in Warwick Road, and right at the end of the playground there was a rusty old chain link fence and beyond that another bomb site, which we all crawled in to because we weren't allowed to go in there. So this sense of the War being a physical presence in our lives was there. We didn't know what the War meant, that happened later, when I got to know about my Uncle Peter and most of the people in my school got to know that they had lost people as well. And then, of course, it became serious. But what happens to you when you're five, six, seven, eight, you don't simply shut that window of life off, it becomes part of who you are. And I think it's because of that that much of my life has been trying to make sense of my childhood, and the circumstances of my childhood, that's remembrance. It's a - it's a personal remembrance, but that's - that's I think what remembrance is for, is to make sense of what happened, so that you can maybe understand the possibilities of the future better. I don't know. That's the way I rationalised it anyway.

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## ***11. How do you talk to young people about things that happened a century ago, and help them understand where that fits in their life today.***

I think the most important thing is how you do that. I think if you preach at them they just walk away, you know. Anything which says life was better they just don't want to know about. Er, I think when it's different and when clearly the voice of the writer or the filmmaker or the play tells you with a passion that this was how it was, and they can really grasp it and lose themselves in how the world was, what they then do is make connections between their own world and that world which then brings history to life, which is really important. Because if history is this dry, dusty subject, which it was when I was taught, and I was taught, you know, dates, and there's nothing wrong with dates at all, but I wasn't taught much that happened around the dates. So I can tell you 1746/8/9, the Battles Audenard, Malplaquet, the Duke of Malborough.. I can - can I tell you what the Duke of Malborough was doing in the Low Countries, why he was there? No. But I can tell you the dates. Well, what we need to know is why, you know, and what it was like for the soldiers who went across to Holland at that time, and horses that went across as well. Then we get under the skin of history, and then it becomes interesting to children.

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## ***12. Apparently 'Private Peaceful' was inspired by your visit to graves of World War I soldiers, was it? Why did you choose to base your story on the name of a real soldier?***

First of all, the idea for 'Private Peaceful', the notion I should ever write a book about a soldier who was shot at dawn in the First World War was because of a visit to an extraordinary museum. And it's interesting, because we're sitting in a museum here, the National Army Museum talking, and what wonderful places they are for exactly this kind of thing, finding out what you didn't know and opening your eyes and heart to new things. I was in a museum called In Flanders Field in Ypres in Belgium, and I was there - it's all linked - I was there with Michael Forman, my illustrator and good friend, and we were there at a conference, and the subject was writing for war about young people, and people had come from all over the world to this conference, which had been good. And after the conference was over Michael and I went to this museum just to walk around, and it is extraordinary, because it sees the First World War on all sides. And there's wonder... there's poetry, there's music, there's all sorts of extraordinary.. It touches your heart, so you come out feeling er, really wretched, you've been through it a bit, which is how it should be. And Michael and I are normally quite good at sort of quipping and getting through things, well, we were wrecked by this, we couldn't speak. And he went out, he said I'll see you in the - in the Square outside. And I was looking at the time at a - it sorted looked like a letter on the wall in a frame, it was almost the last thing in the exhibition, and when he left me I was concentrating really on what it said, it was in rather faded type, and I read it again to sort of confirm what I thought I read, and it said something like "we regret to inform you that your son, Private So and So, number and.. was shot at dawn for cowardice in such a date, 1916" and signed Lieutenant.. And then above it, and this is what got to me, was an envelope of the telegram or letter, I can't remember what it was, but ripped, so that you saw and could see the woman, the mother putting her thumb in the envelope, knowing - knowing it was bad news, tearing it open and then receiving the worst news that any mother could ever possibly have, the death of her son and then the manner of [her] dying. And immediately I thought how did that

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change her life, how did that affect her and her family and her friends forever and ever and ever. And I went to the man who ran the museum, a man called Pete (Chillans), who I got to know very well, and I said look, this is one of many such letters and telegrams you have? He said yes, and also we have - we have the trial papers, would you like to see some? And I read some of these trials of these men. Some of them you knew as you read them couldn't have lasted more than 20 minutes, half an hour. Many of the people who'd come before the Court Martials, charged with either cowardice or desertion, two of them were shot for going to sleep on duty. Many of them had already gone through hospital with shellshock and then been sent back to the Front. It was quite evident that a significant proportion who already... everyone knew they'd been ill. And then it's quite also obvious that one or two who had murdered someone or whatever, you could see they were real villains there who'd done something, but hugely they were victims. And they were not trials, these were - if we saw this happening in another country now we would simply be horrified. The circumstances of war were such that it was important that soldiers obeyed, did what they were told, went over the top when the officers wanted them to go over the top, and it's very evident that a lot of the executions happened - because 3,000 were condemned to death, roughly, and only... there were over 300 shot, about a tenth of them their sentences were confirmed and they were shot. And then I read of the circumstances in which these people were shot, how.. Well, I just can tell you one case, it's the best thing to do, how you were led out at dawn and blindfolded and tied to a post, and then this particular case they picked six people from the man's own company, his chums, to shoot him, and then to bury him afterwards. And there was an extraordinary moment which I read in the record of soldiers afterwards who'd been in the firing party, standing by the grave of the man they'd just shot all day because they couldn't disobey the order, to show the authorities just what they thought of what they had been made to do, because they knew the injustice of it. That has no connection at all with the name of *Private Peaceful*. I had the idea in my head to write this story because I thought it was important.

At that time there'd been a campaign running for years, run really by the families of those soldiers who'd been executed, trying to get the government to pardon them,

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because it was very evident that there had not been justice for these people. And they'd been refused. Well, after refusal they didn't want to set a precedent, they didn't want to do this.. and I felt, as they felt, that there was a huge injustice here, so I thought I would write the book, and decided that I had to write it inside the story, to become a 17 year old boy living in my little parish of Devon, joining up with my brother, going off to France, and then the circumstances that this all had to happen during the last night in my life. To me that was the voice of the story. And I got all that set up in my head, and I was sort of relatively pleased with the way it was going, but I hadn't settled on a name yet at all for my soldier, I found that really quite difficult. I'd been to the graveyard up in my village and hadn't found a name that I was happy with. And then we had to go back for more research to Ypres. And when we go to Ypres, my wife Claire and myself, we always make a point of not just going and doing whatever it is that you intended to come and do, but to stop at one of the cemeteries, out of respect really. And we stopped at a place called the Bedford cemetery, five kilometres outside Ypres, because we were driving along and we saw it, you know. And it was drizzly and there was about 2,000 graves there, it was quite a big one, and I was just walking along with Claire and stopped, and the grave I stopped at I bent down, I looked, it said Private Peaceful. And I thought well, hang on, I've stopped - something has stopped me here to bend down and look at the name on that particular grave, and so I thought that's the most wonderful name. I went and asked Pete Chillans about whether or not there seemed to be any living relatives that had come and made enquiries about him, and there hadn't been, so I thought well, yeah, I can pick that name, it's a name like any other, why can't I? And so I picked it. And er, it seemed to suit so well. And then, I don't know, 13, 14 years later I get a letter from someone in that Private Peaceful's family, not raging, but I think rather pleased, to some extent, that the name had been used. And what's really interesting is the their name is Peaceful with a double L and they'd misspelt it on the grave. Er, very little is known about this man, he's really an unknown soldier.

And there was a marvellous thing that happened, which I can tell you because it's a lovely story in itself, I went to do a radio programme about 'Private Peaceful' in another cemetery, I can't remember which one it was, and it was raining, as it usually

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is around Ypres and I want to get over quickly, and the BBC guy was talking away and I was talking away, when this coach arrived outside the cemetery. And, I don't know, 50, 60 English teenagers poured noisily out of this coach and came through this archway of this cemetery in to this place, rowdy and not respectful, and I was pretty enraged because no-one seemed to be kind of in control and looking after them. And I said to the BBC guy have we got to stop because there's, you know, background noise, and he said yes. And I said well, maybe I'll say something to the teacher because this isn't good. And then, suddenly, the extraordinary thing was that all these children just calmed down and a silence descended on them, and they went off in twos and threes, no-one told them what to do or how to behave. The atmosphere of the place clearly got to them and they went and then they started looking at the graves and making one or two notes. But it was peaceful, peaceful, peaceful, hardly a word. And then finally the teacher came up to me and said what are you doing here, I recognise you, don't I, sort of thing? So I said well, I don't know. She said well, I do because, as it happens the reason we are here is because all the school have read 'Private Peaceful', and we heard that there was a real Private Peaceful, who wasn't your Private Peaceful, but there is a real Private Peaceful, so we decided to make Private Peaceful in the Bedford Cemetery our unknown soldier, and we've made a wreath, and we've just been to Bedford Cemetery, and here you are at the next cemetery we came to, so it's extraordinary. But we left a wreath, and every single child had written a letter or a poem to Private Peaceful, and it's wrapped up in plastic, and if you go to the Bedford Cemetery you'll find the wreath and you'll find those letters. And so we did, and there they all were. And, actually, every time I've been to the cemetery since then there have always been lots of poppies on Private Peaceful's grave, which I love. And luckily the family seems to understand and appreciate rather than think that I've somehow appropriated the name for no good reason.

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**13. Who was *Private Peaceful* in the title refer to? Tom, Charlie or both of them?**

Both of them. That's an easy answer. And the idea really is to make it completely confusing all the way through and to the last pages to what is going to happen. So yeah, both.

**14. How do you treat adult themes such as military executions and gruesome experiences in a way that are appropriate to young people?**

Well, first of all, I hope it's not just for a certain age group, it's for everyone. But it is about young people. In both the books I've written about the First World War, in fact, all three books, there's another one called the 'Butterfly Lion', what has happened is not.. I haven't done it intentionally, but it seems that if you write about a horse in the First World War the children are going to be interested in the horse, first of all, and then about the First World War. It allows the child to be, if you like, led by the hand in to the story and in to the background. And providing you're not focusing in any way too heavily on the violence, but it is suggested rather than - and most certainly not enjoyed, most certainly not made to be exciting, that's very important, then I think it's a way of introducing children to the grief and the loss of war, that's for sure, through the eyes of an animal. With the 'Butterfly Lion' it's not that different. it's the story about a soldier who comes whilst he's recuperating from an injury er, comes across a circus and saves a white lion. And to some extent it's the same thing, it's drawing people in to the past, in to that war, through this iconic figure of a white lion.

When it comes to 'Private Peaceful' er, the only reason it might be considered I think a story for young people is it is absolutely about young people. One tends to forget just how young some of the boys were who went to the First World War from all

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sides. I was sent a photograph the other day by a German grandmother who had seen the film of 'War Horse' wanted to send me a picture of her great - no, of her grandfather who had gone to the First World War as a 14 year old boy. So there's this kid who looks like a primary school boy with his little sort of hat on and a huge...

I got this letter from a grandmother in Germany who sent me a picture of her grandfather who'd been to the First World War aged 14, and he looks even younger than that in his huge uniform and his little peak cap, and he stood there next to a giant of a horse, and the letter said something like my grandfather came home else I wouldn't have been here, but the horse didn't, and I wanted to share this with you. And I think the youth of the soldiers is something that is really very, very often forgotten. The youth and the fact that they were almost as innocent these young men as the animals that went to the war.

One old soldier told me once, once of the old soldiers who, in a way, have provoked this interest in the First World War, these are three old men who lived in my village of Iddesleigh and who 30 years ago I got talking to, and one of them said to me something remarkable, he said about his view of the Germans, who I said well, what did you think of them, you know, before you went, he said well, I'll tell you what I thought and I thought this through the war too, he said I thought in my head, and I still think, "I will kill a rabbit to eat it, I'll kill a rat because it's full of disease, why would I want to kill a German?" And it just brought the whole thing. These men were plucked from whatever it was, a factory floor, a farm, and brought together, put on these uniforms, went further away than they'd ever been in their lives before, and this guy I think he'd never been to Exeter, let alone to France, and then they suddenly are fighting in this war against enemy they don't know at all because they'd been told to do it, and because there's flags and there's bands and all the rest of it.

That's important to know that it's young people who went out there and died. And so when you walk along these graves what are you looking at - 18 year olds, 19 year olds, 21 year olds, it's really rare to find people in their 30s and 40s. They're there. You know, the great poet Edward Thomas I believe was over 40 but, by and large, it

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was the youth of Europe whose blood was soaked in the.. in No-Man's Land right the way across Europe. And it's - it's terrifying to think that happened to these young people.

So young people today I think can identify with - with the youth of these people, and the fact that in the story, the way it's told anyway, and I think maybe it's why it works for young people, they can grow with the child's memory. And so as Tom and Charlie grow up in the story they grow up with them. And I think children love stories that are aspirational.

They want to be grown up now, not tomorrow. And here is a story which in a very few quite short chapters they go from being infants in a - in a school to being in a soldier's uniform at the front and 19 - well, during the First World War. I think... But it's not for children, the film is not for children, the book wasn't for children. It's a book for everyone about a couple of young soldiers.

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**15. How reliable is the historical content of the novel and film to students learning about World War I. Do you think 'Private Peaceful' will make a valuable contribution to their knowledge and understanding of the period?**

Yes, socially I think you get some sense of where these soldiers came from. Er, I think also you have some sense of the pressure these young people were under, why they went over the top, what the discipline was like, that's for sure. And you have some sense of society, how it was ordered, how people.. And it's very difficult to understand these days, because the first question a child is asked when he's told to do something these days is why? Well, you didn't ask why. Er, you sang songs maybe about the officers, but when the officers told you to do something, by and large, you knew you had to do it. Why? Because back on the factory floor there was some saying you do this, you do that, and if you don't turn up tomorrow morning on time you're sacked. On the farm it was the same thing. I think it was a time when authority ruled. And the notion now... now that people would have climbed over the top on July 1st, 1916, as those extraordinary men did, because the whistle blew, when they knew from previous experience what was waiting for them, and that it was no better, the shelling would not have broken the barbed wire, it wouldn't have, you know, destroyed all the Germans in front of them, they kind of all knew this, and they walked. You know, they were told not to run. Well, why on earth would you not run forward in those circumstances to get closer to the enemy quicker and make it a little bit more difficult to get to - no, you walk. It's stuff like that, it's so difficult to imagine. And I think - I mean I hope it's a decent book and a decent story, but I certainly know that the great stories of the First World War and the great films of the First World War, the great plays, you know, whether they're talking about 'Journey's End', or whether you're talking about 'All Quiet On the Western Front' or 'Oh What a Lovely War', all these things enable us to get closer to that experience. And if 'Private Peaceful' has its small contribution to make, I'm really pleased.

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**16. As well as your concern about war and its effect on individuals, 'Private Peaceful' touches upon issues of class and gender. To what extent are these important things to you and what message about class and gender do you hope reaches the novel, and audience of the film will take away with them?**

Er, gender I'm.. I'm not sure, I'm not sure that you sort of glean much about gender from it. Er, but class - yes. I think it's very - very clear to children growing up that there is still class about. This happens in terms of you go to one kind of a school or another kind of a school, that education seems to divide us now, possibly in the same sort of way as blood used to, it's rather odd. Money certainly divides us. Er, there are a lot of divisions out there. We call it class, but actually it's simply division, I think. But to give you an example about the arts and reading, you know, if you have this facility, if you can read and you love to read and you've been to a good school where there's a good library and good teachers and you grow up with this, you can become part of the literate society, the society that is empowered, people are empowered by what they know and by what they understand. And if you're left outside that, it's not called lower class any more, it is the alienated class, it's the people who do not feel that they belong. And it is not just the money, it is the education. So it is those kids, a couple of million or so of them, who we need to get reading, who we need to get in to theatres, who we need to get in to cinemas to see.. to see the kind of films which help them to understand the world rather than be simply b stimulated by violence. Yeah, I think it's - it can make a contribution to that by seeing that this kind of class separateness happened before, and how - what a wicked thing it is, because anything that separates us, be it class or religion, which divides people from people, and generations now are doing that as well, I think, to some extent, I think it's - I think they can help to understand that. But gender I don't know.

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## ***17. You've written a lot of books about World War I, what is it about the period?***

Well, I think World War... World War I, 1914, actually, was the cusp of history. I mean politically what it was was the great European powers coming together to try and sort out who was the big boy. Er, this had followed a period of European dominance of the world through - through our empires for 100 years and more in our case, more. And life, to some extent was, in England, was quite settled at that moment.

There was - there was clearly a class, a system which was, by and large, accepted, there was a certain kind of prosperity. It was, to some extent, you could say at that moment for many people a green and pleasant land. People who, for instance, lived in my village, where I come from, had been farming the land at that time with the same church and the same pub and in the same sort of way for hundreds and hundreds of years, since Saxon time, and with the horse, you know. Everything was done by hand and with the horse.

Then what comes along is this massive conflict which draws everyone in to it, at the same time as the technology of was rushing in to this extraordinary ability to - that we had discovered to destroy ourselves really quickly. So you had machine guns and you had massive shells and you had barbed wire. Steel, if you like, had come way beyond the sword and the shield to weapons of mass destruction, that's really what it was, was the first war where there were weapons of mass destruction on this level.

When the horse met the tank, the moment in War Horse, is the moment really when the horse, the old ways, the 1,000 year old ways of fighting wars and ploughing your land, 'cos tractors were coming in a little bit on the farms as well, that moment was the moment when things were changing around. And then at the same time the access of world power. Come 1917, and I think it was 1917 and the Americans came

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in to war, that was the moment when weak and bleeding Europe wasn't coping any more, and in came fresh, young America with its huge industrial base, and actually that was, from that moment on, it was America's world, you know, that's when the American empire building, if you like, began. Certainly the American influence in the world began. And so the whole thing was turned on its head. And, of course, that affected massively society back at home.

Think of women, for instance, suddenly in the First World War, all the men have gone, middle class women found they had to wash up for themselves, cook their own food, things that many of them had never - never had to do.

Others of them were found working in factories, began to earn the money, began to find that they had actually the ability, thank you very much, to do this very nicely myself. And so the men came back from the war to a rather different kind of a woman sometimes, so it was changing socially that way.

The class system had been really broken down, broken down, because many, many, for instance, officers in the British Army were now working class people, not simply people who'd come out of public schools with money. A huge, huge amount happened very, very quickly. So it's a fascinating period to look back at. And for me, fertile ground, yes, for making stories.

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## **18. When you were a teacher, what three questions would you ask a class about 'Private Peaceful'?**

The first question would be "have you read it?", and that always gets them flummoxed, because someone in the class is sure to lie, you know. No, I wouldn't ask that, of course I wouldn't. What would I ask presuming they'd all read it. I think I'd say to them which part of the story could you see most clearly in your mind's eye as you were reading it? Would it be pastoral beginning or would it be at the front itself? Which - is there a moment you can see most clearly? Then I might ask what do you think about the ending? Do you think it would have been better to have the other brother tell the story, the one who is going to get shot, might that have been better? And the third one is how relevant is this book for today, is there anything in this book which you can connect with today that has - has maybe helped to open your eyes to some issue, such as having someone in your family or in your community who has learning difficulties of one sort or another, like big Joe has? Are there moments when you think, hang on, this is interesting now, it's not just about the First World War. A fourth question - because I would rattle on - is is there anything about society today which you think is unfair as things clearly were then? I would try if I could to immerse them in time. I would certainly take them to the Western Front. I think every child should go to two places in Western Europe, one is Auschwitz and the other is the Western Front. We have to know what happened in order to be able to move on. And I do think that would be important, not just to count graves, not just to weep and moan and to put flowers down, but to think about it. And at the end of the day, really, after my three or four questions or whatever, that's all - if I walk out of the class and leave them, what I'd hope is that I'd leave them thinking.