

COMEBACK KID





Rebel author DBC Pierre is something of an enigma. Having enjoyed a reckless youth, his debut novel won the Booker Prize in 2003 and he has cleaned up his act. Christopher Kanal catches up with him, working on a third novel from his home in Ireland.

After winning the Booker Prize for his first novel *Vernon God Little*, DBC Pierre went from hero to villain. 'I'm a recovering Booker winner now on the 12-step programme,' he says. 'It was a mad adventure and I would never, ever turn down mad adventures.'

It was in the weeks leading up to the 2003 Booker Prize that the author's past was revealed to an equally fascinated and outraged public, when the relative of an American artist who years earlier had been conned by Pierre in a property transaction, came forward. The morning after what should have been one of the greatest days of Pierre's life was spent facing media descriptions of him as a swindler. While he freely admitted his crimes, and gave most of his Booker Prize money straight back to the American artist, there remains something of the literary outlaw about him. Born Peter Warren Finlay in Reynella, Australia, in 1961, Pierre was a nickname given to him by childhood friends after a cartoon character. The DBC, standing for 'Dirty But Clean', came later, after he cleaned up his act.

Despite his colourful past, Pierre does not consider himself bad. 'I felt bad,' he says. For an ex-con, he is remarkably honest. 'I never felt that I was badly motivated. I always felt that a lot of my shit was not from ill will but from doing things wrongly, getting tangled up in the wrong way and not handling the things around me correctly. You borrow a tenner from this man, but you have to borrow from someone else to pay him. By the end of the chain you pay very heavily for that.'

Pierre always refused to bankrupt himself because he believed he could pay everyone back. 'There was a beautiful and very short honeymoon with the first novel,' he says looking back on the period when his life story was being picked apart by the press. Old demons were reanimated but finally and, in Pierre's mind benignly, purged. 'I couldn't have asked for a better way to have to re-face stuff from long before,' he reflects. 'It was a detoxification. You sit for years and fester and it becomes very dark and paranoid. It threw fresh air onto the whole of thing.'

Success gave Pierre not just the foundations for a new beginning, it also gave him a job. 'I really needed that,' he says. 'To keep me out of trouble because you have to be pretty solitary with it.' Despite redeeming himself in the public eye with a critically acclaimed book that has so far sold over 750,000 copies, and cleaning up his debts for the first time in his adult life, Pierre still feels guilty and carries with him a heavy moral burden. 'I don't agree with just drawing the line under things 100%.' He is talking from his country home in County Leitrim in north west Ireland, where he is currently working on his third novel.

Little wonder

At times Pierre's novels seem like a milder version of his life, which would make for a story of its own. *Vernon God Little* is a satire of celebrity-obsessed American society at the turn of the new millennium, a world of endless shopping malls, The Jerry Springer Show, guns and God. It is a provocative mixture of laughter and horror, set in a small-town Texas high school, where an unpopular student has gunned down 16 classmates and left his only friend Vernon to face the music.

Written in 1999, the novel was eerily prophetic and predated a spate of high school massacres that started with Columbine. It is a journey of atonement told through the eyes of Vernon, the teenage narrator, who is wrongly accused of being co-responsible for the massacre.

Four years later in 2007, Pierre's second novel, *Ludmila's Broken English*, was published. The tale of a mail-order Russian bride and a pair of conjoined twins named Blair and Gordon Heath, separated 33 years after birth, is even darker and more twisted than its predecessor. It is a complex novel that abandons the safety net of the first person and commutes between two countries and sets of characters. 'I didn't write another Vernon,' explains Pierre. 'I went way out of my comfort zone and reset the clock.' The meditation on contemporary geopolitics that permeates the novel is exceptionally bleak but the dark humour and satire of this wild and raucous picaresque dripping

with flavours of British bacon and nasty Russian vodka, offers redemption as much to the writer as to the reader.

Ludmila's Broken English confirmed that Pierre was no one-off. Here was a writer who was angry but had something original to say. While his writing is very much the result of a difficult and fractured past, his novels are a new style for a post 9-11 world. Pierre signed the book deal for *Vernon God Little* with Faber on 11 September, 2001, 45 minutes before the first plane hit the World Trade Center in New York. 'I came into this at Ground Zero and in the red, so it was a starter pack to go and get some books written,' he says. Pierre seems to have his finger on the zeitgeist but it's not a position he is comfortable with. 'Everyone's zeitgeist is different' he says. 'It captures it for a certain small band of people, but is at least equally spurned, so any works are going to capture it.'

21st century decadent

Pierre describes his third novel as set in a contemporary period of decadence, the result of lost ideals and the bringer of seductive illusions, a time of decline and fall. The main character of this 21st century *bildungsroman* is a poet switching between the United Kingdom and Germany. 'He's much more damaged and hurt by his environment,' he says. 'At the outset of the book he

A love of literature in whatever form has been with him since he was a child, collecting brochures from the lobbies of hotels. He watched himself become Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, 'waiting for the next good thing to happen' and reading Gore Vidal and Evelyn Waugh. 'All the books I remember from those days had some bearing on how my life then played out,' he reflects. Did he ever feel he was writing himself out of trouble? 'It gets back to why I am so pissed off sometimes with my culture,' he says. 'It is a sense of entitlement, a sense of magical powers which is an apparition. Now it makes it tricky when actually in the end you do something and it works out.'

Double trouble

Pierre used his advance for *Vernon God Little* to move to an old house in Leitrim, an isolated part of the least populated county in Ireland. 'The nearest house is a mile away, so it's not easy to get builders to come out,' says Pierre. 'Two things happened at once, I got enough money for a mortgage and an opportunity to keep writing. It was immediately clear that the whole 9/11 thing was the herald of a new time during which we were going to be stupid as a nation.'

Neutral Ireland is by no means Pierre's rustic redoubt; it just keeps him out of trouble. 'People always say, "Oh is that an inspiring environment?"' he says. 'I love being in the city but there's too much going on, too many people to see,



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intends to commit suicide and is in a limbo where nothing matters anymore so decides to have a few decadent adventures. The story is about the extent to which he is successful and also thwarted in trying to break free of all the catheters and the time he lives in.' However, it's not all angst. 'He has a good few parties,' reveals Pierre, sounding like a co-conspirator.

Born in Australia to wealthy English parents, Pierre moved with his family to Mexico City, which he says was at once a corrupting and liberating place to be brought up. 'I didn't learn any sense of responsibility or restraint,' he says. His real troubles began aged 16 when his father was diagnosed with a brain tumour and taken to New York for treatment. 'I was a classic black sheep,' he says. 'I was disillusioned and running after the wrong things.' Back in Mexico, Pierre got into drugs and petty theft. When he was 19, his father died and his mother moved to Spain. Then the Mexican government nationalised the banks and devalued the peso. The family lost all their money. His 20s were largely spent on illegal and unprofitable schemes, working as an album-sleeve designer, a cartoonist and planning a documentary about Montezuma's lost gold. At the end of his wayward twenties, Pierre was diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder and had therapy. 'It was a very anxious time,' he says. 'It is stupid to feel, so young, that you have already missed the boat.'

For the next few years the debts weighed on his conscience and he worked on and off in the advertising industry. At 38, after a couple of years advertising in Trinidad, he decided to write a book. The way Pierre describes it makes it sound like it was the last throw of the dice. 'There comes a point after all, especially approaching 40, when the gods tell you to put up or shut up,' says Pierre. 'With that thought in mind, that was when I decided to write.' It was at this time that Pierre met Jenny, his long-term girlfriend. Eventually he ended up in Balham, London, where he wrote out of poverty. He borrowed a friend's computer every night and wrote it. He never printed out the novel until it was finished. 'It was truly for free,' he says. 'That made it accessible.' It sat in slush piles until it was bought by Faber on that crisp, murderous September day.

too many things to do.' Ireland is home, for now, but, he says, 'There is always going to be somewhere you miss.'

Night-time is when Pierre writes. 'I am not only alone individually but I have a sense that the world isn't even up and watching,' he says. 'It's also secretive. You have to force yourself to tell the truth and it's uncomfortable. It feels like you are stealing things, stealing time.' He works until sunrise or until the 'birds become insufferable'.

The spirit of Pierre's work can be found in the way he evokes the hyper-reality of our times through the electricity of his language. He has been compared to Gore Vidal, whose *Duluth* is one of Pierre's favourite books. Like Vidal, politics motivates his writing. 'My books aren't so much making points,' he says. 'I did take some pains to balance them so that they can't be taken as a liberal or a conservative viewpoint but it is impossible to write a contemporary novel that isn't touched by the flavour of the time.'

Pierre wants his writing to hold a mirror up to the times. It's a cracked one, a mosaic on which he can re-arrange a disparate, desperate present to reveal hidden truths. 'Any anger and darkness comes from taking ourselves so seriously,' he says. 'All the things that we hold as certainties are more clearly uncertain than at any point in the past, in the absence of any other faith or guiding light if you like.' A 21st century of false idols has evolved insidiously, says Pierre. 'The only lie we have now is the one we have of democracy and freedom both of which are utterly, utterly false,' he says. 'We have been molested as children rather than beaten into it.'

'It is very easy for a writer to sit in a dark cubby hole of endless paranoias,' he says. 'My instinct is that we are in a similar period as the gay Twenties, the one between wars when little changes were starting to be tinkered with, like fascism, and so while we are all out having cocktails, these things are in the background ticking along. It's fascinating to watch and speculate.'

Pierre is enjoying every minute of it but in times like these come temptations. 'I can certainly imagine getting on the wrong side of things,' he says. 'The same weaknesses are there but I won't look for it, I will tell you that.' ■