

The Unconventional Leading Man and the “Damsel” in distress.
September 2018

In 2015 when I began this latest chapter of my life, I had no idea the direction it was going to take me in, and certainly not that now, barely three years later I'm about to publish the seventh (!) book in a series about perhaps one of the least likely leading men committed to print. But that's what I like about him. I've said it before, Hugo came to me fully formed, warts and all, and what you see now has barely changed from my original vision. In 2015 I wrote the first chapter of what was to become 'Un homme qui attend' as a sort of done that now, move on kind of thing. I had no intention to go past the first chapter and only did because the two people I showed it to seemed keen and nagged me for more.

The feedback from that first chapter taught me one particular valuable lesson, the importance of not *always* listening to feedback! My erstwhile husband and fiercest critic and supporter, Dan, handed it back to me and said something along the lines of 'great, he's a bit of a Mr Bean character.' I was non-plussed to say the least. Mr Bean? That really had been the furthest thing from my mind and not at all how I had envisioned this tall Francophile with the mop of blond hair, emerald green eyes and an awkward stature. As it turned out, it was more about his reluctance to get off the Eurostar that seemed like a bit of a farce to Dan but it served me well to trust my instinct and not necessarily write with other people in mind. That point later became even more evident when the second reader announced her vehement dislike of the Benoit character (or Bennoy as she mispronounced his name). I was again struck by the marked difference between my vision of these characters and someone else's. A second person later also expressed their dislike of Ben and for a moment I almost considered writing him out of the stories. Ironic really because one of the most frequent comments I get as the series has gone on is how much Ben is loved and that he isn't in the books enough! That proved to me it wasn't just me who 'saw' these wonderfully imperfect characters.

One of the other most frequent questions I get asked is, is Hugo based on me? Or is Ben? Or are they based on my husband? The truth is it's impossible to really answer that question. Hugo is me, and he isn't me. He's better looking than me, smokes like a trouper because I can't and is always fiddling with his hair because I haven't got any. I don't need a psychiatrist to tell me that. What's interesting to me is the way we differ, because we do. For the most part it would be silly of me to say that what Hugo and the other characters say or do isn't directly influenced by me and my politics, beliefs etc. But I always take it in context. I'm not the one in Montgenoux dealing with a serial killer so it's uncharted territory for me. I can see me in Hugo and I can see me in Ben, same with Dan. The character of Etienne Martine, how technically savvy and knowledgeable he is and his love of Hawaiian shirts is a definite nod to Dan and his, while the fact he wears shorts and flip flops for as much of the year as he can get away with is a definite nod to me. The similarities are there, I can see them and I'm okay with that. I like to think Hugo and Ben in particular are a pretty good pair of multi-dimensional characters.

The sexuality of the characters was in no way deliberate. I had no plans to make the lead character gay, and really didn't decide until half way through the first book. It's hinted that Hugo has only been in two or three relationships and it's suggested that one of them was with a woman. I wasn't being difficult then, or hedging my bets and hoping to please all audiences - I'm not that smart! It was rather about the character evolving in front of me. Hugo was never going to be the sort of man you could label, gay, straight, bi. To me he was a 'fall in love with the person' sort of person, a prospect a lot of the LBGTQ+ community have a problem with because it seems like a cop out. Somebody once snipped I was representing the LBGTQ community badly by making Ben a nurse (a supposedly prominently female occupation), insinuating he wasn't "very masculine," the first issue I had with it was they'd obviously missed the part where I explained WHY Ben had become a nurse (a finger up to his father who said he wasn't allowed to be a nurse because "only woman were") and in the end he stuck with it because he found he was actually very good at it and enjoyed helping people. The second reason was because why SHOULDNT he be a nurse? He is no more responsible to conform to gender or any other kind of stereotypes than any of us are.

The same goes for Hugo. The reason he never said he was gay, or bi-sexual in the first book was because he didn't care in the same way I never have. If you're lucky enough to be comfortable in your

own skin you don't need someone else apportioning a label to you and with Hugo it's just that. His private life is just that, private. Of course, we're talking about a book here so it had to be explored and my vision of the blossoming relationship was that Ben would have to do the chasing and for some it came across as aggressive. Perhaps it was, but only because Ben was nursing his own insecurities and realised he was going to have to do the running. It is because Hugo can see behind the bluff and bravado that he finally decides to take a chance.

The rest as they say is history. The other danger with love stories in books is that, what do you do with the love interest? Have them hanging on the hero's every word? Do they always need to be rescued? I spent a lot of time thinking about that and because the second book was almost finished before the first was even published, it gave me a chance to establish a formula which worked for me. It didn't sit right with me that Hugo and Ben should "just" become a happily married couple or fitting into any stereotypes if that was not what the story called for. My original notes were quite clear. Ben wouldn't appear much in book 2 because he had no part in the story and to have shoe-horned him in would have felt wrong. I already knew he would get his own major story in book 3 (it actually was pushed to book 4, but in book 3 he was back with his own major story arc too).

I didn't want the two of them to be poster boys for any cause, other than their own and I realise that decision has probably altered the course of the books and their reach. A well respected editor told me the books would have a better chance of mainstream success if the 'gayness' was implied rather than discussed openly. At first I thought she was wrong, but she probably wasn't. The world has changed remarkably, but there are still going to be people who don't like the gay part of these books and there's not a lot I can do about that and take no offence except perhaps on comments such as "what started out as an exciting, well written thriller was spoiled when it turned into a queer tale." If they'd said romantic tale I wouldn't have minded that particular comment so much. Conversely, any gay theme may attract people interested in that part of it but again they accuse it of "not being gay enough."

My mantra for these books is simple and I never veer from it. A crime is committed and Hugo solves it. Fin. There might be a bit of banter, a bit of chatting, a bit of sloppy loved-upness in between, but the core of it is the story, and my most unconventional of leading men. I always felt sorry for Agatha Christie when I read she hated Hercule Poirot but had to keep writing him because her audience demanded it. Perhaps that's why Hugo came to me fully formed. He wanted me to like him, and I do, and thankfully, so do lots of others! So as long as the stories come to me, long live Hugo and his cast of unlikely heroes!

Much love, and wishes of good health and peace of mind.

Gary