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Clive Barnes on an outstanding writer of science fiction.

Clive Barnes discusses the latest novel from the stunningly original science fiction of **Philip Reeve**.<!--break-->

Philip Reeve has said that when he was writing **Mortal Engines** he had not thought of anything beyond that first adventure for Tom and Hester. But the future world that he created, in which whole cities have become mobile and rumble across a devastated landscape devouring one another, had such ambition and scope that it begged to be continued. **Predator?s Gold** , the second book, added cities on ice and beneath the sea, and now we have the third in a promised quartet: **Infernal Devices** .

At the close of **Predator?s Gold** , it appeared that Tom and Hester had escaped from the operation of the inexorable laws of Municipal Darwinism: the vicious cycle of city eat city and the perpetual struggle of the mobile Tractionists of the West against the sedentary Anti-Tractionists of the East. They fled in the wounded city of Anchorage across the frozen north to the green shores of the Dark Continent that had once been North America and there promised to live a secluded life of peace and plenty.

At the opening of the new novel, after 16 quiet years, it is the adolescent restlessness of Tom and Hester?s daughter Wren, combined with a visit from the Lost Boys, the submarine artful dodgers of **Predator?s Gold** , seeking to steal a mysterious Tin Book from Anchorage, that draws the Natsworthy family back into the centre of conflict.

Memorable characters

Reeve has an enviable ability to create memorable characters within the space of paragraphs and a profligate propensity to kill them off, sometimes in a few chapters, that would be disastrous in an author of lesser powers. The Lost Boys are the earliest victims of this book, seduced by a cynical appeal to their orphan longings for lost mummies and daddies, to become enslaved tourist attractions in the decadent city of Brighton. Nevertheless, at the heart of Reeve?s imagined world is the ability of a few scientists (the Resurrection Corps ? a typical Reevian pun) to bring people back to life, replacing organic life by mechanical, and creating an invincible killing machine: the Stalker. So it is that Shrike, companion of Hester?s childhood, apparently destroyed in the first book, is unearthed and re-programmed in **Infernal Devices** , to join Anna Fang, the heroic aviatrix killed at the end of **Mortal Engines** , already resurrected in **Predator?s Gold** and made the Stalker commandant of the all-conquering Green Storm anti-tractionist forces. They too, are seeking the Tin Book.

Readers of the previous books may be secretly delighted to make the re-acquaintance of the duplicitous, cowardly, and curiously appealing shyster, Nimrod Pennyroyal from **Predator?s Gold** . He is now Mayor of Brighton, a tourist

suburb, headed for the coast of Africa to make the most of the annual suspension of urban hostilities: the Moon Festival. He has also come into possession of the Tin Book, courtesy of the captured Wren and the Lost Boys. And there are new faces, which promise to play a greater role in the next and last adventure: Fishcake, the bewildered, frightened remnant of the Lost Boys, and Doctor Zero, a scientist with a conscience to match her intelligence.

They are all there at the death as the Green Storm attack Brighton, Hester and Tom prowl the carnival battleground looking for Wren, and Shrike discovers that he has been programmed not to protect but to destroy his mistress Fang. The prolonged helter skelter finale displays Reeve's skill and stamina. He orchestrates plot and sub-plot, portrays violence and destruction on both an intimate and panoramic scale, and evokes the fear, relief, disgust and exhilaration of conflict all with equal force and economy, and, in the midst of it all, there are jokes ? as Pennyroyal's falling suitcase makes a decisive intervention and the Mayor makes another miraculous escape from death.

A brilliant and sustained playfulness

Reeve writes with confidence and power. He is not only a master of visceral excitement, but at every turn, surprises, entertains and makes his readers think. His playfulness was evident in the earlier books, but here it is brilliant and sustained. He stitches up a ragbag of cultural references, from music, literature, art, film and, particularly, children's books, to produce an eccentric patchwork of a future that uses forgotten brands like Nabisco and Windolene as first names, and features aviators with suspiciously familiar monikers like Ginger and Algy. Reeve is anything but portentous, and even makes an occasional wisecrack at the expense of more self important environmental dystopias. Under the rule of the Green Storm, you are as likely to be executed for refusing to recycle your rubbish as plotting against the government. But there is serious business, too. Mixed in with the thrills and laughs, there is a drama of personal relationships and the abuse of power, and an original variation on the great issues of modern science fiction, the relationship of humanity and the technologies of replication and mass destruction. To keep all this at boiling point, and to introduce new characters while developing familiar ones, is the work of a considerable talent. This is a book that really is unmissable. Don't miss it.

Mortal Engines (0 439 97943 9, £5.99 pbk), **Predator's Gold** (0 439 97734 7, £5.99 pbk) and **Infernal Devices** (0 439 96392 3, £12.99 hbk) are published by Scholastic. For readers of 10-14 and 14+.

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