

S T E P H E N K E L M A N

Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2011

PIGEON ENGLISH



'A book to fall in love with:
a funny book, a true book,
a shattering book'

The Times

'A gut-wrenchingly
sad novel that makes
you laugh out loud'

Guardian

'Made me laugh and
tremble all the way
through ... a triumph'

Emma Donoghue,
author of *Room*

B L O O M S B U R Y

Further praise for *Pigeon English*:

'*Pigeon English* will be read by millions . . . in a year or so it will be a fixture on the school English syllabus. Parents who do their children's homework are in for a treat' *Daily Telegraph*

'*Pigeon English* is a superb evocation of a child's inner world' *The Times*

'One of the hardest things in fiction is to write from a child's point of view – Kelman does it brilliantly' *Guardian*

'*Pigeon English* thrives on the sharp collision between Harrison's quasi-comic naiveté and magical world view . . . and the casual, nihilistic ugliness he blithely describes' **** *Metro*

'It seems hard to believe that this is the author's first book . . . It seems perverse to describe *Pigeon English*, with its spilled blood and wasted lives, as an optimistic book but, against all the odds, it is' Alex Clark, *Guardian*

'Kelman grew up on a similar estate himself, and Harri's experience of it is convincing . . . very engaging, *Pigeon English* presents us with a likeable young narrator and sheds more light on the pressures of growing up in modern urban Britain' *The Herald*

'As with the finest books narrated by children, the gap between their understanding and our own more nuanced interpretation provides both humour and poignant irony . . . Kelman's dead-on evocation of the horrors and freedoms of inner-city childhood deserves attention' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Harri's observations on his unfamiliar London life are full of satirical charm . . . Kelman excels at sharp observations and comic timing . . . Kelman deals sensitively with the subject matter of teenage violence' *TLS*

PIGEON ENGLISH

STEPHEN KELMAN

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

For the traveller

I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance
E. E. Cummings

MARCH



You could see the blood. It was darker than you thought. It was all on the ground outside Chicken Joe's. It just felt crazy.

Jordan: 'I'll give you a million quid if you touch it.'

Me: 'You don't have a million.'

Jordan: 'One quid then.'

You wanted to touch it but you couldn't get close enough. There was a line in the way:

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

If you cross the line you'll turn to dust.

We weren't allowed to talk to the policeman, he had to concentrate for if the killer came back. I could see the chains hanging from his belt but I couldn't see the gun.

The dead boy's mamma was guarding the blood. She wanted it to stay, you could tell. The rain wanted to come and wash the blood away but she wouldn't let it. She wasn't even crying, she was just stiff and fierce like it was her job to scare the rain back up into the sky. A pigeon was looking for his chop. He walked right in the blood. He was even sad as well, you could tell where his eyes were all pink and dead.

* * *

The flowers were already bent. There were pictures of the dead boy wearing his school uniform. His jumper was green.

My jumper's blue. My uniform's better. The only bad thing about it is the tie, it's too scratchy. I hate it when they're scratchy like that.

There were bottles of beer instead of candles and the dead boy's friends wrote messages to him. They all said he was a great friend. Some of the spelling was wrong but I didn't mind. His football boots were on the railings tied up by their laces. They were nearly new Nikes, the studs were proper metal and everything.

Jordan: 'Shall I t'ief them? He don't need 'em no more.'

I just pretended I didn't hear him. Jordan would never really steal them, they were a million times too big. They looked too empty just hanging there. I wanted to wear them but they'd never fit.

Me and the dead boy were only half friends, I didn't see him very much because he was older and he didn't go to my school. He could ride his bike with no hands and you never even wanted him to fall off. I said a prayer for him inside my head. It just said sorry. That's all I could remember. I pretended like if I kept looking hard enough I could make the blood move and go back in the shape of a boy. I could bring him back alive that way. It happened before, where I used to live there was a chief who brought his son back like that. It was a long time ago, before I was born. Asweh, it was a miracle. It didn't work this time.

I gave him my bouncy ball. I don't need it anymore, I've got five more under my bed. Jordan only gave him a pebble he found on the floor.

Me: 'That doesn't count. It has to be something that belonged to you.'

Jordan: 'I ain't got nothing. I didn't know we had to bring a present.'

I gave Jordan a strawberry Chewit to give to the dead boy, then I showed him how to make a cross. Both the two of us made a cross. We were very quiet. It even felt important. We ran all the way home. I beat Jordan easily. I can beat everybody, I'm the fastest in Year 7. I just wanted to get away before the dying caught us.

The buildings are all mighty around here. My tower is as high as the lighthouse at Jamestown. There are three towers all in a row: Luxembourg House, Stockholm House and Copenhagen House. I live in Copenhagen House. My flat is on floor 9 out of 14. It's not even hutious, I can look from the window now and my belly doesn't even turn over. I love going in the lift, it's brutal, especially when you're the only one in there. Then you could be a spirit or a spy. You even forget the pissy smell because you're going so fast.

It's proper windy at the bottom like a whirlpool. If you stand at the bottom where the tower meets the ground and put your arms out, you can pretend like you're a bird. You can feel the wind try to pick you up, it's nearly like flying.

Me: 'Hold your arms out wider!'

Jordan: 'They're as wide as I can get 'em! This is so gay, I'm not doing it no more!'

Me: 'It's not gay, it's brilliant!'

Asweh, it's the best way to feel alive. You only don't want the wind to pick you up, because you don't know where it will drop you. It might drop you in the bushes or the sea.

In England there's a hell of different words for everything. It's for if you forget one, there's always another one left over. It's very helpful. Gay and dumb and lame mean all

the same. Piss and slash and tinkle mean all the same (the same as greet the chief). There's a million words for a bulla. When I came to my new school, do you know what's the first thing Connor Green said to me?

Connor Green: 'Have you got happiness?'

Me: 'Yes.'

Connor Green: 'Are you sure you've got happiness?'

Me: 'Yes.'

Connor Green: 'But are you really sure?'

Me: 'I think so.'

He kept asking me if I had happiness. He wouldn't stop. In the end it just vexed me. Then I wasn't sure. Connor Green was laughing, I didn't even know why. Then Manik told me it was a trick.

Manik: 'He's not asking if you've got happiness, he's asking if you've got a penis. He says it to everyone. It's just a trick.'

It only sounds like happiness but really it means a penis.

Ha-penis.

Connor Green: 'Got ya! Hook, line and sinker!'

Connor Green is always making tricks. He's just a confusionist. That's the first thing you learn about him. At least I didn't lose. I do have a penis. The trick doesn't work if it's true.

Some people use their balconies for hanging washing or growing plants. I only use mine for watching the helicopters. It's a bit dizzy. You can't stay out there for more than one minute or you'll turn into an icicle. I saw X-Fire painting his name on the wall of Stockholm House. He didn't know I could see him. He was proper quick and the words still came out dope-fine. I want to write my own name that big but the paint in a can is too dangerous, if you get it on yourself it never washes off, even forever.

The baby trees are in a cage. They put a cage around the tree to stop you stealing it. Asweh, it's very crazy. Who'd steal a tree anyway? Who'd chook a boy just to get his Chicken Joe's?

When Mamma puts her phone on speaker it sounds like they're far away. It makes Papa's voice go proper echoey like he's trapped in a submarine at the bottom of the sea. I pretend like he has one hour of air left, if he doesn't get rescued by then it's all over. It always freaks me out. I'm the man of the house until Papa escapes. He even said it. It's my duty to look after everything. I told him about my pigeon.

Me: 'A pigeon flew in the window. Lydia was even scared.'

Lydia: 'How! No I was not!'

Me: 'She was. She said his wings were making her crazy. I had to catch him.'

I put some flour in my hand and the pigeon landed on it. He was only hungry. I tricked him with the flour. You have to walk proper slow, if you go too fast the pigeon will just get scared and fly off again.

Lydia: 'Hurry up! It's going to bite somebody!'

Me: 'Advise yourself! He only wants to get out. Shut up or you'll scare him.'

His feet felt scratchy on my hand like a chicken's. It was lovely. I made him my special pigeon. I made a proper good look at him to remember his colours, then I let him out on the balcony and he just flew away. You don't even need to kill them.

Papa: 'Good work.'

Papa's voice was smiling. I love it when his voice is smiling, it means you did good. I didn't need to wash my hands after, my pigeon doesn't have any germs. They're always telling you to wash your hands. Asweh, there's so many germs here you wouldn't believe it! Everybody's scared of them all the time. Germs from Africa are the most deadliest, that's why Vilis ran away when I tried to say hello to him, he thinks if he breathes my germs he'll die.

I didn't even know I brought the germs with me. You can't feel them or see them or anything. Adjei, germs are very tricky! I don't even care if Vilis hates me, he's a dirty tackler and he never passes the ball to me.

Agnes loves to blow spit bubbles. She's only still allowed because she's a baby. I even want her to blow lots of them. As many as she wants and forever.

Me: 'Hello, Agnes!'

Agnes: 'O!'

I swear by God, when Agnes says hello it makes your ears ring like a crazy bell! You love it anyway. When Agnes says hello Mamma cries and laughs at the same time, she's the only person I know who can do it. Agnes couldn't come with us because Mamma has to work all the time. Grandma Ama looks after her instead. It's only until Papa sells all the things from his shop, then he's going to buy some more tickets and we'll all be together again. It's only been two months since we left, you only start to forget them after one year. It won't even be that long.

Me: 'Can you say Harri?'

Papa: 'Not yet. Give her time.'

Me: 'What's she doing?'

Papa: 'Just blowing more bubbles. You better go now.'

Me: 'OK. Come soon. Bring some Ahomka, I can't find any here. I love you.'

Papa: 'I lo

That's when the calling card ran out. I always hate it when that happens. It's always a shock even if it happens every time. It's like at night when I'm watching the helicopters and they go quiet, I always think they're going to crash on me. Asweh, when the engine comes on again it's a mighty relief!

I saw a real dead person. It was where I used to live, at the market in Kaneshie. An orange lady got hit by a tro-tro, nobody even saw it coming. I pretended like all the oranges rolling everywhere were her happy memories and they were looking for a new person to stick to so they didn't get wasted. The shoeshine boys tried to steal some of the oranges that didn't get run over but Papa and another man made them put them back in her basket. The shoeshine boys should know you never steal from the dead. It's the duty of the righteous to show the godless the right way. You have to help them whenever you can, even if they don't want it. They only think they don't want it but really they do. You only get to be righteous if you can sing every church song without looking at the words. Only Pastor Taylor and Mr Frimpong can do it and both the two of them are proper old. Mr Frimpong's so old there's spiders in his ears, I've seen them with my own two eyes.

At church we said a special prayer for the dead boy. We asked that his soul would be carried into the arms of the Lord and the Lord would soften the heart of his killers so they'd give themselves up. Pastor Taylor made a special message to all the children. He said if we knew anybody with a knife to tell about them.

Lydia was peeling the cassava for fufu.

Me: 'You've got a knife! I'm telling about you!'

Lydia: 'Gowayou. What shall I peel them with, a spoon?'

Me: 'You can peel them with your breath. It's like a dragon.'

Lydia: ‘Your breath’s like a dog. Have you been licking bumholes again?’

It’s our favourite game to see who can make the best abuse. I’m usually the winner. So far I have a thousand points and Lydia only has two hundred. We only play when Mamma can’t hear. I chooked myself with the fork. It was only in my arm. I wanted to see how much it hurt and how long the holes would last. I was going to tell everybody they were my magic marks from when I was born and they mean I can see inside your mind. But they disappeared after one minute. It still hurt like crazy.

Me: ‘I wonder what it feels like to be chooked for real. I wonder if you see stars.’

Lydia: ‘Do you want to find out?’

Me: ‘Or fire. I bet you see fire.’

My Mustang has fire. I’ve got four cars: a Mustang and a Beetle and a Lexus and a Suzuki jeep. My best is the Mustang, it’s just dope-fine. It’s blue with fire on the bonnet and the fire is in the shape of wings. It has no scratches because I never crash it, I only look at it. I can still see the fire when I close my eyes. That’s what dying must be like, except the fire isn’t beautiful anymore because it actually burns.

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and the Guardian First Book Award

STEPHEN KELMAN

PIGEON ENGLISH

'A funny book, a true book,
a shattering book'

The Times

'Filled with
energy, humour
and compassion'

Guardian

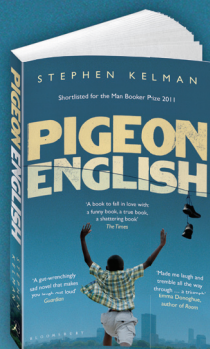
'Should
become a
classic'

Daily Mail



www.pigeonenglish.co.uk

B L O O M S B U R Y



January 2012

STEPHEN KELMAN was born in Luton in 1976. *Pigeon English*, his first novel, was shortlisted for the 2011 Man Booker Prize, the Desmond Elliott Prize and the *Guardian* First Book Award, and he was also shortlisted for the New Writer of the Year Award at the 2011 Galaxy National Book Awards. He lives with his wife Uzma in St Albans, where he is currently working on his second book.

First published in Great Britain 2011
This paperback edition published 2012

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The excerpt from 'you shall above all things be glad and young.' is reprinted from *Complete Poems 1904–1962*, by E. E. Cummings, edited by George J. Firmage, by permission of W. W. Norton & Company. Copyright © 1991 by the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust and George James Firmage

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Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin, New York and Sydney

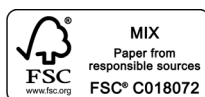
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 1568 7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in the UK by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



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