



THE BOOKS INTERVIEW

The grit beneath the froth

Sue Townsend has given Adrian Mole a smart new career, but he still has battles to fight. So does his creator. By Liz Thomson

Can it really be 17 years since we first met Adrian Mole, then a spotty teenager with the cares of the world on his back? It would seem so. For in *The Cappuccino Years*, (Michael Joseph, £14.99), the diarist is now 30, less dependent on Bio-Spot but no less concerned about the state of the nation. That, as the book opens, is about to be transformed by New Labour. Mole, a celebrity chef at Hoi Polloi, an ironic Soho eatery, is heading back to Ashby-de-la-Zouch to do his citizen's duty. The candidate is none other than the love of his teenage life, Pandora, now Dr Braithwaite – a Blair Babe after whom he still lusts.

"I always planned to do him at significant birthdays, and 30 has got to be the most significant, the time when people start to panic and ask themselves what they've done with their lives," explains Sue Townsend, aged 53, who remains as refreshingly unchanged by her success as Mole does by his failure. Together, the previous four Mole volumes – *The Secret Diary*, *The Growing Pains*, *From Minor to Major* and *The Wilderness Years* – have sold eight million copies in 34 languages. In between his *cris de coeur* there have been other novels, including the comic *Queen and I*, and most recently, *Ghost Children*, a serious novel about serious issues. Her thoughts returned to Mole only in early 1997.

Mole arrived fully formed in Townsend's fertile imagination one Sunday some 20 years ago. "I was living in a council house at the time, on my own with three kids and three part-time jobs to keep us going. So Sunday was a total collapse; I was exhausted. My eldest son said, 'why can't we go to safari parks like other families do?' That's about the only thing from real life that's in the Mole books, and it reminded me how critical I was of my own family when I was a child – but in secret." The question "triggered that adolescent, self-pitying voice. Mole's voice. I just heard it. He descended with his family in the space of an afternoon."

Over the next decade, Townsend kept him in motherly check before he was fancy free for a few years. So how difficult was it to imagine Mole at 30? "His voice hasn't changed that much and in a way neither has he. I don't think people do. We all drag our childhoods with us through adult life and he has hardly learned a thing.

"I knew he'd get married, that was the most important thing, and I knew he'd have a little son and I knew the marriage wouldn't work. How could it? Mole is far too fastidious to be married. I knew he wouldn't have found his Shangri-La, in that he wouldn't be a professional writer and he wouldn't have the love of his life, Pandora. But I think, to his own surprise, he finds a kind of happiness through looking after his sons." He looks on the bright side and believes fervently in a better tomorrow. Thus, as his Diary opens, Adrian is full of hope for the New Labour dawn.

Townsend, as Old Labour as they come, admits to having to rewrite much of *The Cappuccino Years* because it was "too Townsend". She feels "slightly better" than under Thatcher but believes Blair should be braver, delivering home truths and increasing tax. The council estates she visited for a series of pre-election profiles have not changed. Britain is still hopelessly polarised, the future still bleak for much of its youth. "The problem of extraneous people hasn't even been addressed."

Mole has earned her millions but the money has not changed her, and she has not forgotten the lessons of her early life.



Sue Townsend was born in Leicester in 1946 and left school at 15 to begin a series of unskilled jobs. She married at 18 and by 25 was alone with her three children. Her work with children's adventure groups led her to enrol on a canoeing course. She met Colin

SUE TOWNSEND, A BIOGRAPHY

Broadway on the first day. They have now been married for 25 years and have a daughter. Her career took shape when, in 1978, she joined the Writers Group at Leicester's Phoenix Arts

Centre. *Womberang*, her first play, won her a Thames TV bursary. Among later stage plays are *Bazaar and Rummage* (1982) and *Disneyland It Ain't* (1989). At the Phoenix she began

writing about Adrian Mole, whose Diary was first broadcast on Radio 4 in 1982. *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4* had sold more than a million copies by the time of *The Growing*

Pains of Adrian Mole (1983). Two further Mole volumes came out in 1991 and 1993, now followed by *The Cappuccino Years* (Michael Joseph). Her other novels include *Rebuilding Coventry* (1988), *The Queen and I* (1992) and *Ghost Children* (1998).

She grew up in a Leicester pre-fab, the daughter of "idiosyncratic" parents who were "very clever" but couldn't afford to take up their scholarships. As a child, Townsend immersed herself in books and remembers that "*Jane Eyre* was the first book I read right through, non-stop. It was winter; freezing cold, and I remember seeing this thin light outside and realising it was dawn. I got dressed reading, walked to school reading and finished it in the cloakroom at lunchtime. It was riveting."

At 15 she read *The Gambler*. "Somebody had to help me pronounce all the names," she laughs. "I didn't even realise it was a classic. From Dostoevsky I went on to read all the Russians, then the French, then the Americans. I remember getting in trouble for reading *The Grapes of Wrath* under my desk in a boring lesson. I really envy people who have all those books still to read."

University "wasn't even considered. You went in to shoes or hosiery". Townsend went through a series of dead-end jobs and, by 19, was married with a small baby. At 25, she was a single parent. Among other jobs, she worked in an adventure playground, ran a youth club, looked after old people and "made tropical coffees in a restaurant that was later condemned". All of which came in useful when she began to write – secretly at first, and then with the Writers Group

at Leicester's Phoenix Arts Centre.

"That's where Bert Baxter came from," she explains, referring to the cussed old bugger in *The Secret Diary* – and Archie Tait, the Old Labour OAP whom Mole befriends in *The Cappuccino Years*. "It was a revelation to me that old people were awkward and miserable like we are. I also learned they had secret lives," she recalls, thinking of Harry who was gay but, even in death, did not want his daughter to know.

Townsend had a writing life before Mole. Her first play, *Womberang*, won her a Thames TV bursary and she became Writer in Residence at the Phoenix. It was in a workshop there that Mole made an early appearance, only a year later did she post early pages of his diary to John Tydeman, head of drama for Radio 4. Broadcast in January 1982, it was an immediate hit and led to a book contract and an advance of £1,500. "I thought I'd hit the big time."

Methuen published the book in October 1982 and, by November, it had begun a long run atop the bestseller lists. Within a year, it had sold a million and went on to become the decade's biggest-selling book.

Unlike Joe Orton, Leicester's other great literary success story, Townsend has remained intensely loyal to the city, ploughing money into local projects. One converted factory building is already up and

running. On the ground floor, husband Colin – whom she met on a canoeing course 25 years ago – builds canoes, while the top floor is given over to a recording studio run by her son Daniel. "It's to encourage local talent and give them a place to work either free or incredibly cheaply." A second building is currently being refurbished.

Townsend does not see all this as altruism, but as "pure pleasure. I don't understand why everybody who makes money doesn't want to do this." She is not interested in "abstract money", though she has a few shares. "I've bought lots of property but people live in it. Family, but they're very sensitive about it. I like bricks and mortar. Even if you lose money on the initial investment at least you can live in it."

Has she ever felt tempted to up sticks? "Not with the trains – they run every quarter of an hour." As for a second home, "I can barely manage one house, so why would I want two? That's what hotels are for. I can't think of anything worse than the usual rich lifestyle."

It seems entirely unjust that so decent a soul should have been dealt some duff cards – though that is not how Townsend sees it. At the height of Mole-mania in the mid-1980s, she suffered a heart attack which, it transpired, was caused by diabetes. The concomitant loss of vision was imper-

ceptible at first, but she has now lost 60 per cent and is registered blind. She copes well with day-to-day reality, but allows that "bumbling around like Mrs Magoo" is inconvenient. "The Blind Society have now been to my house and sorted me out with all kinds of aids." She carries on, "though I have to plan before leaving the house."

In between the writing, teaching annually at the Skyros summer school, and her various local projects, Townsend spends time with her four children, aged 22 to 35, and five grandchildren. She is "still amazed" by the success of Adrian Mole and always amused by people's reactions. "My second son thought he was wimp and my daughter thought he was tragic. He is a tragic figure. The first book is the story of a marriage break-up. Adrian has a nervous breakdown, runs away from home. He's worried about world peace. He has got the weight of the world on his shoulders. A psychiatrist comes to the house and says it's unreasonable of him to expect world peace and there's nothing he can do about it. But Mole feels responsible."

And yes, Townsend admits, "he is me. He is all of us, to a greater or lesser degree." He is, indeed, Everyman. As to Mole at 40? She laughs. "I can't imagine myself living that long, but I've left him with a clean slate."