



(photograph by Tessa Hallman)

Very well planned

It's not all football and laddish behaviour for Belsize Park-based David Baddiel. The comedian and writer talks to **Cathy Levy** about his latest novel, being a serious writer and missing his daughter when he doesn't see her for a day

David Baddiel has been stuck in a small room in his publishers' office for days, weeks even, talking to all kinds of people about his latest novel *The Secret Purposes*. You must be really fed up? I ask. "No, not at all," he replies, behind a slight weariness of the eyes. He loves talking, he explains, and indeed it's what we know him best for – his being funny in a dry, laconic kind of way, acting laddish with fellow funnyman Frank Skinner (*Fantasy Football League*, *Baddiel and Skinner: Unplanned*) and now, as a rather serious and capable author.

A comedian turned serious? Absolutely. But Baddiel manages the transition smoothly enough in this his third novel (don't forget he has a First in English from King's College, Cambridge; clever chap). "Comedy is a serious business," he says, seriously, "and actually the creative energy and focus required to write comedy is hard. Most of the time you're not sitting there pissing yourself laughing – you're thinking very hard, how can I make

this funny? What's the best way of articulating this joke? So to actually move to write a serious novel is not such a leap. One thing is serious and the other is just a different sort of seriousness."

He's very unaffected when he talks, without a sense of trying to please or win anyone over – much like he is on TV in fact. Either that, or days of interviewing have worn him down. But he is personable, and seems happy with his lot, living in Belsize Park with his partner Morwenna Banks, (the comedian, writer, filmmaker) and their three-year old daughter, Dolly. *NorthWest* interviewed Banks a while back, our interviewer reporting how lovely she was. "Yes, she is lovely. When she started going out with me a lot of people were thinking 'why?' – people who don't know me thought, he's difficult and arrogant and a bit of a lad and she's an angel and sweet and whatever. But it worked out," he says sounding a little like he can't quite believe it himself. He admits he's not as laddish as the sofa-laden character

would have us believe, instead being rather sensitive. Certainly his books reveal him to possess a strong insight into the human condition.

The first two novels, *Time For Bed* and *Whatever Love Means*, are witty and wry, sensitive observations on love, unrequited and reciprocated, death and tragedy, set within solid, page-turning plots. They were more what you'd expect from the comedian; actually they're better than you'd expect. The latest novel, *The Secret Purposes*, also a love story, is centred around a much weightier subject and written in a very different voice; more literary and more ambitious, but equally engaging. The story, handed to him in an ancient hatbox of memorabilia discovered three years ago by his mother, is based on the experiences of his German Jewish grandfather interned on the Isle of Man with other Germans resident in Britain during the Second World War. So it's quite personal too. "I didn't want to write a Holocaust novel, but the internment camps and the experience of them can't be thought about without the shadow of the Holocaust across them. It is completely involved with me being Jewish and my own thoughts about being Jewish, where I come from, but I wouldn't say it's a Jewish book. It's as much about being British and about Britain and what Britain is like in its response to other cultures than it is about being Jewish."

“...the creative energy and focus required to write comedy is hard”

The story is a fascinating one, peopled by internees that read like a list of Nobel prize winners. "If you actually go and check the records it's amazing who was on the Isle of Man. Really the cream of European intelligentsia was there at the time. That's why they established the community that they did. They didn't know how to be soldiers, they knew how to be intellectuals. And that's why my grandfather always talked quite nostalgically about being on the Isle of Man." The story centres upon Isaac, a German Jew who defied his rabbi father to marry a non-Jew. The heroine is a young translator, June, who works at the Ministry of Information and stubbornly refuses to ignore reports of the horrific massacres of Jews, about which writers of anti-German propaganda are being encouraged to keep quiet by the government.

"I suppose it remains a slightly silent thing in British history because it is shameful in retrospect. But at the time I actually think it was understandable. German army massing on the French border, everyone in Britain thinks we're about to be invaded. The Ministry of Information is repressing information about atrocities, so the first thing is, who are these people? Are they spies, are they de-stabilising the country? We don't really know why they're here because we're not being told. So the decision to intern is linked to that. I think there probably is a justification for it, but in hindsight when you find out what was happening to Jews in Europe, it seems very shameful and very mistaken," says Baddiel, thoughtfully.

The Baddiels as a family are a funny lot – older brother Ivor has also recently published a novel, *David Feckham: My Back Side*. Not a serious one then? "He's got a way to go before he decides to write his serious novel," he laughs. Ivor works as a comedy writer on various shows (*Johnny and Denise's Passport to Paradise*, the BAFTAs, writing speeches for Stephen Fry etc). "He really makes me laugh in a way that virtually no-one else can, but that's partly because of my familiarity and affection for him. But my dad is where the humour comes from. He's an odd combination. He's Welsh, he's got a Phd in chemistry and he was a research chemist for much of his life. He was then made redundant and sold Dinky toys at Grays Antique Market, which he still does. But despite being this science bloke and intellectual, he's a swearsy Welsh lad, much more laddish than me or my brother. And he did introduce us to comedy quite early on with his Goon Show and Peter Sellers records and watching Python – and my dad laughs at funny stuff. Dr Colin Brian Baddiel. I love the way that his names are Colin and Brian – which are basically the same name," he says, really livening up now. But time is up and Baddiel must head back home to Belsize Park to daughter Dolly: "on any single day that I don't get to see her, I get really upset about it." And off goes one of TV's most famous footballing, guffawing lads.