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HEADLINE: Saved by my son from oblivion

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BODY:

By a bitter irony, it was the revelation that my boy Kit would need constant care that made a me a better writer, says Ian Rankin.

People are often shocked when I tell them I owe my success as a writer to the birth of my disabled son, but to a great extent it's true. I had 11 low scoring books under my belt and was on the brink of oblivion, struggling to find copies of my novels on bookshop shelves. This wasn't the fate I'd imagined for myself. It took my son Kit to turn things around.

I'd started writing while still at high school: song lyrics and poems to start with, then short stories.

I would copy the styles and themes of writers I admired, apeing the shape of Eliot's The Waste Land for a poem about my hometown of Cardenden (don't laugh), or reconfiguring Golding's Lord of the Flies so it could take place at my school in Cowdenbeath.

At the University of Edinburgh I kept up with the poems and stories, but also made a few false starts at a novel.

I met Miranda, my future wife, at this time: we were both studying English literature. After graduation she joined the civil service as part of its "high-flyer" programme, while I drifted into various short-term jobs before returning to university to study for a PhD in Scottish fiction.

In February 1986 my first novel was published by Polygon, at that time owned by Edinburgh University Students' Association. It printed a few hundred copies and paid me a few hundred pounds. In June of that year my PhD funding ran out and the following month I married Miranda. She had a job in London by then, so I joined her there.

For four years we lived in a maisonette in Tottenham, north London, while I tried to make a go of being a writer. I had written the first of the Inspector Rebus books during the last year of my PhD. It appeared in 1987 to no great fanfare.

Other books followed to a chorus of general indifference -a spy novel called Watchman, a thriller called Westwind. My editor suggested I write another Rebus title and I was happy to oblige. It appeared in 1990, the year Miranda and I moved to France.

Our reason for moving was simple: we hated our life in London: no space, soulless commuting. I wanted to be a full-time writer, but there was no way I could afford to take the risk with a London mortgage hanging over us. We were young and had no kids. It was the perfect time to make the leap.

Miranda left her job and did a course in teaching English as a foreign language.

This way, she reasoned, she could get work in France. In May 1990 we drove off in our rented van, carrying all our worldly goods (including the cat) with us.

Miranda had found us a place in the Dordogne. It was a creaky old farmhouse with missing ceilings, rotting floors and spectacular views over the valley below.

With the help of friends we set to work patching it up, leading to several near-death experiences (electric shocks, falls from ladders, chainsaw incidents).

Money quickly became an issue as we found that none of the farmers in the vicinity had any interest in Miranda's English lessons. In a scene reminiscent of Withnail and I, our first winter saw us dismantling various outbuildings so we could use them as firewood.

The whole thing was a rash experiment. We had no idea how long we could survive.

My French was practically non-existent and I spent a good deal of my time in an attic room, seated at a dusty old desk, thinking myself back to Edinburgh as I wrote more Rebus stories.

To supplement our income, I was trying to write two novels a year. I was also suffering panic attacks brought on by fear of failure. My books continued to sell in the low thousands and my publishers were beginning to lose some of their initial enthusiasm. I was in danger of becoming a "mid-list" author.

They are the ones who just get by, selling enough copies of each book to cover their publishers' costs, but who are never going to make the breakthrough to the bestseller lists. Their fate is to go unnoticed, with no publicity budget and the ever-present threat of being dropped from the list.

This might not have mattered had I not passionately believed writing was the only life for me. It was certainly the only thing I was qualified to do. There was little prospect of me gaining other employment in France.

I was the family's breadwinner and by now we were a family. Jack was born in February 1992, his younger brother Kit two years later. Living so far from the publishing (and publicity) scene in London, I was conscious that I could be easily forgotten both by the publisher and the public.

Parents tend to be blase about their second child. There was nothing during the pregnancy to cause us to worry. Kit's birth, however, was traumatic. His vital signs in the delivery room were poor. Two midwives fretted and jabbered in French.

I stood there uncomprehending while they willed Kit to emerge into the world.

Eventually he did and all seemed well.

It was a few months before we started wondering about him. Miranda pointed out he didn't so much as roll over when lying on the floor. His body also seemed to be twisted to the right, so that we would feed him from the side of his chair rather than the front.

At six months we asked our GP for advice. By nine months she, too, was concerned and Kit was undergoing tests at a children's hospital 35 miles away. There were additional trips to Bordeaux and it was a specialist there who first suggested Kit might have Angelman syndrome.

We'd never heard of it, but tests confirmed Kit did have AS. It used to be called "Happy Puppet syndrome" due to the jerky movements of sufferers, combined with sometimes unnatural glee. Eventually it was renamed after Harry Angelman, the doctor who discovered it.

Kit, we were told, would probably never talk. He would in all likelihood have seizures and his motor skills would develop very slowly. We went back to Edinburgh where, at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, the diagnosis was confirmed. We used libraries and the internet to find out as much about the condition as we could.

Back in France we found ourselves making the 70-mile round-trip to hospital several times a week. A child development psychologist would try to get Kit to respond to his games. More useful were sessions with Madame Mansouri, a physiotherapist, who was indefatigable in her attempts to get Kit to sit up unaided, to roll over and to crawl.

Between times we raged impotently, Miranda and I, wondering why this had happened to us, asking the usual questions of God and the universe. Another question, of course, bounced back: why not? Why suppose we were to be immune from misfortune? At night I would go for long, fast drives through the deserted country lanes, yelling at the top of my voice, releasing the tension.

Those hospital visits were incredibly painful. I felt embarrassed that I couldn't understand everything that was being said to me. I stumbled over my mumbled responses, trying to form questions I knew needed asking. I was a writer -someone who spent his working life with language, aiming for precision and lucidity. Then suddenly I was reduced to monosyllables and gestures. When I'd first driven into our local village to let the barman know Miranda was pregnant, I'd managed to pronounce the word "enceinte" (pregnant) as "ancien" (ancient).

I'd been telling all and sundry my wife was elderly. Now I was listening to medical experts trying to tell me things without being too explicit, hoping I would understand without them having to spell out the bad news.

In one's native tongue this is challenging enough. Doctors often seem to speak a technical language designed to bamboozle and elude follow-up questions. Miranda did her best to translate, but it's not easy when you're in a heightened emotional state.

In a word, we were failing.

Then there would be the drive back to our isolated house, where I would climb the rickety wooden ladder that led through a trap door into the attic with a day's writing ahead of me. I was busy with a novel called Black and Blue.

I had a pretty big theme and was going to move Rebus out of Edinburgh, taking him to Aberdeen, Shetland and the oilfields of the North Sea. The story was convoluted, requiring more plotting than previously. There was every chance this could prove my breakthrough book.

Not that my publishers had sounded overly impressed when I'd pitched them the story line. But those hospital visits added another, vital ingredient to my writing. The book became angry as I put Rebus through the physical and emotional wringer. All the frustration I felt, all the questions about destiny and chance, were channelled into my writing. It became my therapy and seemed to work.

When the book was finished I felt it was my most successful to date, and so it proved when it was published. Kit was two years old in January 1997, the month Black and Blue came out.

Writing in The Times, Marcel Berlins predicted it would be the best crime novel of that year. In November it duly picked up the Gold Dagger for best novel and was shortlisted for the American equivalent. It had by that time already sold four times as many copies as any of my previous efforts and my publishers, who had been discussing whether to drop me, offered me a multi-book deal that would take us a decent distance from the poverty line.

It wasn't just because of Kit, of course. Many of the old Rebus novels, out of print for years, had just started reappearing in a striking new livery.

These gave an added impetus to sales. Also, we'd made the decision to move back to Scotland.

The reason for moving to France had been to do with a love of the countryside. But if Kit was to get the treatment he needed, we would have to move into town. So we returned to Edinburgh in the summer of 1996 and began a long fight with the forces of bureaucracy to ensure Kit's needs were catered for.

Having no family to fall back on in the vicinity, we relied instead on charities, and were lucky that Capability Scotland was able to provide a pre-school place for Kit one morning a week. A children's centre in Craigmillar also helped out.

But most helpful of all was an organisation called Special Needs Information Point (Snip). Staffed by parents of special needs children and based at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Snip was the first port of call for parents whose child had just been diagnosed with special needs.

It offered not only a sympathetic ear but also structured advice on what to do next, and helped us through the maze of local authority and social services applications. It was also able to point us in the direction of Assert, a charity for AS families.

As the years have passed, we have discovered that Kit is near the bottom of the AS development spectrum. Most Angelman kids can walk by the age of six. Kit is now 10 years old and still happy to crawl on hands and knees. But he keeps improving.

He has visual problems not usually associated with the syndrome and doesn't yet have the ability to use sign language. Living with him has been a challenge.

There's nothing he likes better than ripping up books, newspapers and magazines, and he possesses no sense of danger, meaning trips out to the shops or the park can be fraught.

He's big for his age and moving him from bedroom to kitchen to bathroom can take its toll. But there are plenty of rewards, too. He's gregarious and tactile, always ready with a cuddle and a chuckle. Life is one vast adventure for him.

He'll always retain a child's innocence, never knowing war, famine or the stresses of unemployment or bereavement.

As for me, eventually I took pity on John Rebus, but only after I'd put his daughter into a wheelchair in my follow-up book to Black and Blue. That was down to pure spite on my part and I regret it. But then I've always used Rebus in this wanton way, as a punchbag of sorts. In an earlier book I took him to London merely so he could come to hate the place on my behalf.

These days there's more of a truce between us. I don't have nearly as many panic attacks, and never feel the need to retreat to my car for a good, long scream.

It's not all fun and games, of course. Kit has made me think long and hard about mortality, about what happens to him after his parents are gone. But money cushions a lot of this. There's a trust fund set up in his name and trustees to carry out his parents' wishes.

We're luckier than many, who must fight for every specialist piece of equipment, every night's respite, every bit of extra care.

Since Kit was born I've been introduced to a world parallel to the one I'd inhabited before. It's a world of stalwart professionals, heroic carers and parents who refuse to be beaten.

Once or twice I've been asked: if you could sacrifice your successful career to have Kit be "normal", would you do it? The answer is... maybe. Who knows what that "other" Kit would be like? He might have grown up into a tearaway, a mugger, a murderer. He might have led a terror group or become a venal captain of industry, raiding the company pension fund. All these potentials exist whenever a child is born.

Instead we've got a child who's always ready for fun, whose face lights up when he's cuddled. He's an outgoing boy who makes friends wherever he goes.

There's a Rolling Stones song I want played at my funeral. It's called You Can't Always Get What You Want and it opens with that sentiment, followed by the line "but if you try sometimes, well you might find you get what you need".

Maybe we needed Kit. Maybe he needed us.

YOUR CHANCE TO STAR IN A REBUS MURDER MYSTERY

Ian Rankin is helping to raise money for Snip, the Special Needs Information Point, which provides advice, information and emotional support to parents and carers of children with special needs.

Sunday Times readers who donate money to the charity will be entered in a prize draw and the winner's name will feature in the next Rebus novel.

Send donations to Snip, 14 Rillbank Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 1LN, mark your envelope Sunday Times and include your address and daytime telephone number. The winner will be announced in Ecosse in the new year.