

Zijin Chen:

Suspense writer with product manager's mind

紫金陈：用产品经理的思维写推理小说

By Ye Yu



Zijin Chen

crime fiction writer who reflects wider social context. Many of his fictions have been adapted to the screens.

The *Bad Kids* (隐秘的角落, yin mi de jiao luo) becomes one of the biggest hits this summer. The web television series that premiered on iQiyi scored an astonishing 8.9 out of 10 on rating platform Douban, with 714 thousand reviews. Along with the huge popularity of the drama goes the recognition of its writer Zijin Chen. *The Bad Kids* was adapted from the suspense fiction of the same title by Zijin Chen. After the drama came out, the book *The Bad Kids*, jointly published by Shanghai Insight Media and Hunan Literature and Arts Publishing House, sold more than 300 thousand copies in merely a month. The book was read over 746 thousand times on App WeChat Read. The author, Zijin Chen, thinks that the Japanese writer Keigo Higashino is his spiritual guide and his most reverent idol, while some of his readers consider him as China's Keigo Higashino. How does Zijin Chen think of the drama? What is the story behind the novel? Read our interview with Zijin Chen this mid-July to find out more.

The adapted web drama is warmer than the original fiction

Only a few days after Zijin Chen complained that crime fictions are only loved by a few ardent readers, he was pushed to the spotlight. Because of the huge popularity of the web drama *The Bad Kids*, many of the audience went to find its author on social platforms asking, is the plot of pushing someone off the mountain fictional or real?

Zijin Chen is a crime fiction writer, as well as the prototype of the boy Zhu Chaoyang in the drama. The novel began in 2013 when his wife got pregnant and he started to focus more on the world seen by children. He then started working on a novel with the genre of adolescence, however quite out of the norm, the story is dark and twisted version of the childhood. The plot was so refreshingly new to him that he thinks even after 10 years the issue addressed in the novel will still be relevant.

When he started writing the novel, Zijin Chen has quit job for a year. In 2012, he left his job as a product manager at an internet company because he thinks the job isn't fun enough, and started his full-time career

as a writer. Adolescent crime was rarely touched upon at that time, he reckons, so he wants to be the one who starts it. His last book was *Burning Ice*, a novel discussing the crime and love in the adult world.

Zijin Chen creates the story in *The Bad Kids* because he wants to show to the readers, the inner world of children is not just like a kid, like many grown-ups usually think. The plot revolves around the experience of three kids living in a coastal city. They unwittingly witnessed and recorded a frightening murder on their way out for hiking, and were therefore caught up in a series of troubles. As fictions are always the reflections of reality, Zijin Chen writes the novel with his own experience when he was at that age, except for the crimes. Many of the experiences of Zhu Chaoyang in his family and school have their counterpart in Zijin Chen's childhood. Like Zhu Chaoyang, Zijin Chen was a very good student, often ranking the 1st for test in his school and with a special interest in learning math. Because of his good scores and being a little introverted, like Zhu Chaoyang, Zijin Chen was suffered from the isolation of classmates. Zhu Chaoyang was from a divorced family, and in reality Zijin Chen's family situation is similar to his. "I understand the psychology of children growing up in single-parent families," he says.

Zijin Chen began watching as soon as *The Bad Kids* went online. When he finished the whole series, he posted on Weibo acclaiming that the drama was 'very good and satisfying'. He thinks the drama is well-adapted, even better than *Burning Ice*, which is the first novel of his trilogy *Kind of Reasoning* and his first popular TV adapted work. The drama version of *Burning Ice* also received positive feedback when it came out in 2017. When *Burning Ice* was out, the sales of some similar books were significantly increased while other books did not benefit. The same thing happened to the book *The Bad Kids*, but as the booksellers did not expect the drama to be so popular, they only have the stock of 15,000 copies and they were sold out in three days.

Readability, not literacy, is the true priority

Zijin Chen graduated from Zhejiang University majoring in water conservancy (his pseudonym, by the way, comes from his campus in Zijingang, therefore meaning student Chen in Zijingang), so he is a typical "geek". Solid knowledge of math is a big help in his writing of suspense novel. Many of his inspirations come from mathematical formulas, such as the design of contradiction proofs in *Burning Ice*, which is drawn from the truth that Quintic Equations have no numerical solutions.

When he was in college, Zijin Chen

read many of Gulong's novels, and wrote the horror novel *Zhejiang University Night Horror* in Tianya Forum, which was popular among many college students in China. He also tried the genres of martial arts, horrors and business conflicts. He began to write crime fictions only when he worked as a full-time writer in 2012. Talking about the reasons behind choosing the crime fictions, Zijin Chen said that he was using the perspective of a science student and the mind of a product manager to write fictions.

Although crime fictions belong to one of the biggest categories in the publishing market worldwide, in China the market share of original crime novels is meagre. Zijin Chen thinks there is a lot of space and opportunities behind this. "It's not necessary to be top-notch, and as long as my works are better than most people's, they will be popular." Zijin Chen is a very rational yet passionate novelist. His works have tight logical designs, the plots exquisite, the layouts compact and the endings always unexpected.

The great readability of his novels comes from only the twisted plots but also a compassionate view on human nature and society. He is therefore categorized by many as the "social school" of crime fiction: the reasoning must be solid, but the novel is far more than merely the logics; the reasoning is a game of the brain, but readers always want to read more about the story itself. The top priority of a novel is its readability. Though sometimes being criticized as having "poor literacy", Zijin Chen has his own point of view, that being literary is not the only goal of writing.

As a creator, Zijin Chen's day and night is often reversed from ordinary people. He always writes in mid nights, sleeps near dawns and gets up at noon. Crime fictions are so intricate that one tiny shift could lead to a change in everything, therefore Zijin Chen always faces the dilemma of turning his stories upside down. For example, when he was halfway writing a novel of 200 thousand words, he will start all over if he finds something is wrong and needs to be addressed.

Except for the popular trilogy *King of Reasoning*, his another novel *Low IQ Crime* is also published, in which he experimented the mixture of crime fiction and comedy in order to make more readers love the book.

The sudden popularity of *The Bad Kids*, however, did not disrupt Zijin Chen's writing plans. He declined waves of interview invitations and began his new endeavor. What will become of his next book? What story will his much-anticipated new book tell us? Speaking of this, Zijin Chen told us that the non-combative mentality of many young Chinese intrigues him. He would like to address the issue of class solidification and the growing income gap in his next crime fiction. He believes that crime fictions with a focus on social issues will still be loved by the market in the next few years.

(translated by Xiao Jianpeng)

