

Magic Carpet Ride

Ever thought the world could do with a few improvements? Devon-based writer Giles Ward has just released his novel *100 Ways To Improve The World*, and tells *Izzy Kaminski* the world is just fine as it is.

You're sitting with friends in the pub and after a few drinks the conversation invariably turns to how much better the world would be if you were in charge. Would there be world peace? A ban on door-to-door salesmen? Tea-bags with guidance systems that make their own way to the rubbish bin?

The hero of Giles Ward's debut novel, *100 Ways To Improve The World*, has more than a few ideas. Peter Staines is a veteran carpet salesman with a growing suspicion that his life has been unfulfilling. His suggested improvements are a mixture of cosmological revolutions - no death - and niggling irritations - a ban on tuneless whistling. As the novel unfolds, Peter offers explanations for each of his improvements with details and helpful diagrams.

The premise is that the world is inadequate. God is, in Peter's words, a "typical cowboy builder," and has made a bit of a hash of creating the world. "I think it's one of those things that everybody at some point in their life thinks," says Ward, "I could have made a better job of putting the world together."

While there are a few teasing similarities between the author's life and that of his hero, Ward denies that they are at all related. Given that the book begins with the image of Peter holding his wife's dead body, this is something of a relief. Even the book's setting, suburban Bristol, was chosen as a matter of practicality and as a neutral base for his characters to live in. "I'd love to say there are mirrors and that sort of thing," says the Exeter based writer, "But right from the start I just thought it was nice to write it in the first person. I always like that sort of thing that you get wrapped into stories and you feel that the character is writing it as you're going along."

Writing, for Ward, remains primarily a sideline activity; an enjoyable way of occupying his time when not working or looking after his two young sons. *100 Ways*, which took about five years to write, was the first complete novel he had finished. "I'd set myself the task to get to the end and actually finish a book," he says. "In the past I'd written lots of bits - short stories and shorter books. But to sit down and concentrate and actually write a complete book, was something of a challenge."

What started as a hobby has luckily become a publishing deal, but any career as a full time writer remains firmly in the distant future. "I think actually I would have been quite happy for it not to have been published. I'm obviously delighted it has been, but it wasn't a massive urge to have it published. It was more an urge to write it,"

says Ward.

In the meantime he is the creative director of his own advertising agency, a job that, perhaps surprisingly, seems to compliment his nocturnal writing activities well. According to Ward, writing slogans and copywriting during the day gave him the confidence to write creatively, but his desire to write started, as with many writers, with an almost obsessive love of reading. "I absolutely love books," he says. "I love the whole physicality of books. I'm one of those people who loves to spend time in a bookshop looking at the covers of books, and yes I am seduced by the covers."

I admit to Ward that at first I thought his novel was a self-help book listing suggestions for improving the world - helping elderly ladies cross the street or recycling carrier bags to make stylish underwear. He replies that at first he wrote it as a list, but then realised he needed a story and wove one around it. It is the same sort of meandering approach in which he is writing his next novel, *The Price Of Everything*. Although there is no certainty that it will be published, you get the sense that for Ward the voyage is much more exciting than the destination.

"I always have a plot in my mind and it slowly unravels," he says. "I know where it's going to end up and I know the main points of getting there. It's a bit like taking a journey from here to Turin - I know I want to get to Turin, I'm just not 100 per cent sure of the route and I might stop off at a gite on the way."

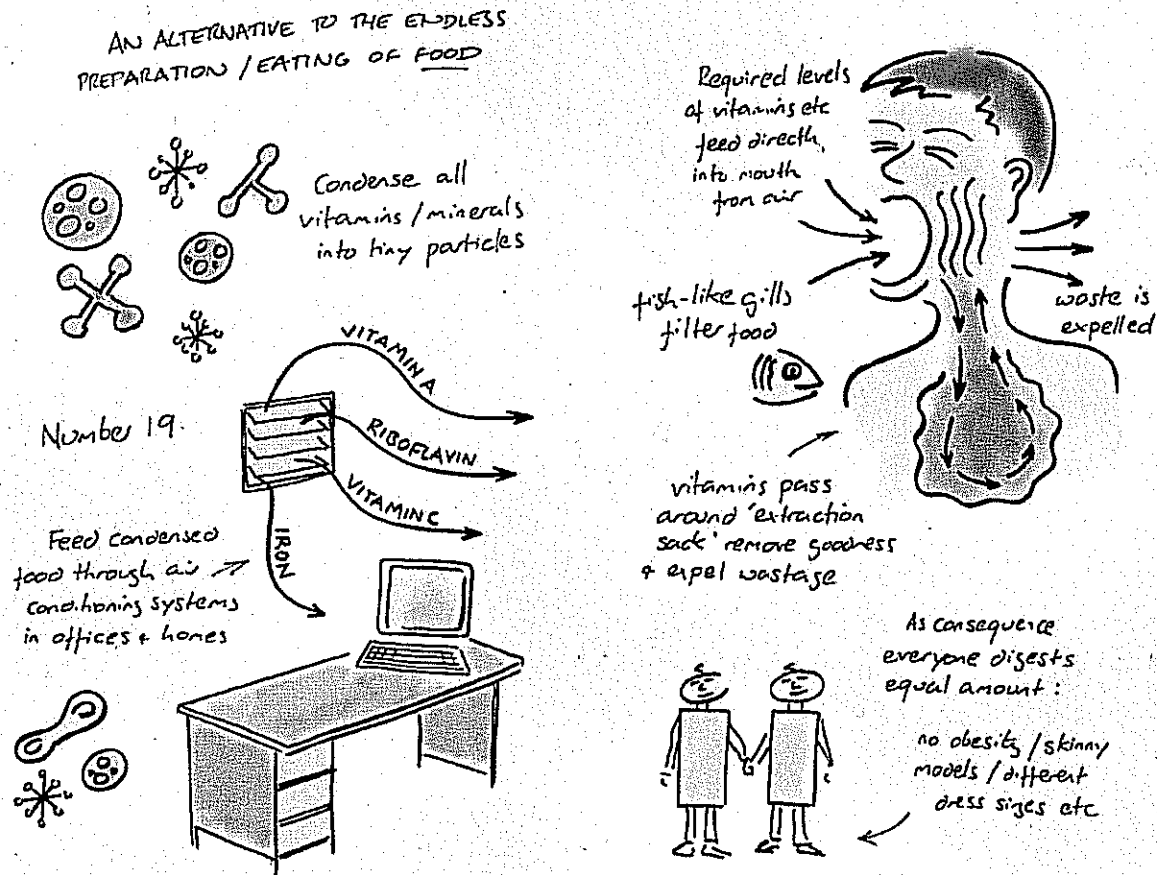
The publisher's website for *100 Ways* has a curious twist on it: an invitation to readers for their own ways of improving the world. It will be interesting to see where this leads, as everyone seems to have an opinion on the subject. "I've got a seven-year-old and a nine-year-old and it's very typical of a child to say 'why is the sky blue?' It's a childlike way of looking at it and I hope that's what comes across as part of Peter's charm. I think we all on occasion think like that."

This is where the book's appeal seems to lie, with Peter's childlike fascination about the world despite being surrounded by adult issues such as murder, prostitution, gambling and the Annual Carpet and Floor Covering Exhibition. The tone of *100 Ways* is gently but firmly positive, much like its author, who resists answering which of Peter's suggestions for improving the world are the most important.

"That's a big question," laughs Ward. "The easy answer to that of course is no war, lots of peace. But I think life comes down to lots of little pieces - carrier bags you can actually open - and things like that. Which would I pick? I'm not sure I would. I think I would conclude it a bit like Peter does at the end of the book, in that I think that for all the bad stuff there is good. Things aren't perfect but you've got to find your own way through it."

100 Ways To Improve The World, (Impress books, £7.99) is out now. Visit www.100waystoimprovetheworld.co.uk for more details.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE ENDLESS PREPARATION / EATING OF FOOD



"He has a childlike fascination about the world despite being surrounded by adult issues such as murder, prostitution, gambling and the Annual Carpet and Floor Covering Exhibition."

Number 7: character traits stored in an easy-to-access manner.

