

LIFE & culture

My family secret was stranger than fiction

H IS THE well-connected former literary editor who launched his latest novel with a party for 300 at the understatedly cool Cobden Club in Notting Hill. There he played covers of his beloved Bob Dylan with musician friends including members of the rock band Reef, watched by the likes of GMTV's Kate Garraway and Innocent drinks founder Richard Reed. And now the book, *Self Help*, a family saga of deception, has been longlisted for the £50,000 Man Booker Prize alongside Ian McEwan.

For a writer of just 35, Edward Docx is cutting a dash. That he is slim and handsome with a winning line in modesty helps. But there is also substance behind the affable front. He is happiest discussing the example of his literary masters Martin Amis and Tolstoy, whom he reads to learn by example. And he is shrewd.

After the success of his "brilliant" and "elegant" literary debut, *The Calligrapher*, Docx did for *Self Help* what many an aspiring writer has been advised to do before him. He took a nugget of personal history as inspiration. For the dramatic denouement of his second novel, hailed as "ambitious" by critics, his heroes are knocked for six by the revelation of a long-hidden family secret.

But with the buzz around the 35-year-old writer rising, that means he now finds himself in a sunny gastropub in Primrose Hill looking slightly uncomfortable at juggling questions about the revelation that similarly rocked the Docx clan when he was a teenager. For it concerned his mother's parentage.

When she was about Edward's age now, his mother discovered that the people she believed to be her parents were not. She had been born as a result of a brief liaison between her grandfather and a Russian

woman. To cover the shame, the older man persuaded his own legitimate son to raise the little girl. The man Edward's mother regarded as her father was, in fact, her half-brother. The wealthy high-class Indian lady she had always regarded as mum had decided to reveal the truth as she lay dying. And Edward — known as Ed — suddenly learned his family history was not full of the tigers and elephants

with which his grandmother had regaled him through childhood. It was, instead, part Russian. Nothing was as it had seemed.

His grandmother's knockout disclosure had a galvanising effect, provoking not the embarrassment which would have beset some families but fascination. His mother embraced all things Russian, staging piano recitals of music by Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky and researching the little she could ascertain of her true mother's life as a ballet dancer. She ditched her career as a bacteriologist to become an agent for musicians, establishing a small but successful business which she runs to this day.

"She had a renaissance and was trying to catch up on what she thought was her Russianness," he says. "It was a celebration, a way of her reclaiming what she had lost."

So Docx has no qualms about taking the idea as a starting point for his book. "One of the

Edward Docx is one of the brightest young novelists on the Man Booker Prize longlist. And he found the richest and most revealing material closest to home

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strange things about writing is you have to stop any censorship in your head, so no morality," he says. "You can't think about what your grandma thinks or anything like that otherwise you would not write anything. You write what you do."

But while the writer in him has no qualms, the loving eldest son of seven children evidently has reservations about landing his parents in the spotlight. He implies, carefully, that he does not want to make too much of it all if he can help it.

"My mum is a private human being and doesn't want too much intrusion," he says. "The central idea is stolen — the idea of growing up in a family that may or may not be your family. But it's not that close to my mum's story."

Instead, *Self Help* is the story of thirtysomething twins, Gabriel and Isabella Glover, their philandering father, Nicholas, and Russian mother, Maria, whose death triggers the unravelling of the family

secret. Set in London, Paris, St Petersburg and New York, Docx stresses that it is full of big themes — of nature versus nurture and the challenge of living in a godless 21st century where hedonism rules but isn't quite enough to sustain the thinking man.

Docx seizes my copy of the book to read from pages 405-406 for fear that the all-important message, as expressed by his protagonist, Gabriel, should be overlooked.

"If all there is is acquisitiveness and materialism then we're in real trouble because it's clearly not enough for human beings," the writer summarises. "This is the core of the book, if you like, that you always panic the reader will never notice."

He is deeply earnest, speaking at length of his favourite writers — John Donne, Tolstoy, Dickens, Coetzee — as well as the Big Ideas that tax him in a manner that has irritated some colleagues in the past judging by the

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Oliver Lim

spoke to advisors and addicts both at the Westminster Drugs Project in London and in Russia, encountering “the most human suffering that I ever witnessed personally”. The music that weaves itself through the narrative in the form of the pianist Arkady is a legacy of his mother.

He walked the streets of Paris where his philandering father figure Nicholas lives and visited Russia six or seven times to picture the cemeteries, the squares, the apartments of his characters’ lives. He first went to Russia when he was 24 or 25 “absolutely” because of his discovered Russian heritage. For him as well as for his mother, his grandmother’s revelation was significant.

“It did affect me massively — but also not at all. I was still me. I’ve always lived in England and I’m very English. I grew up in Cheshire and lived in London most of my adult life. But what it does is give you a way of being outside Englishness and the things that happen in England so you feel you can watch and write about these things in a way that perhaps you couldn’t while being part of it.”

And there is one characteristic, just a single way, in which he sees a streak of Russianness in himself. “In Russia, there’s quite a do-it-properly-and-to-the-best-of-your-ability-or-don’t-do-it attitude. You can see it in the gymnasts and the ballerinas and the pianists,” he says.

That is what he is like with writing. He works up to 10 hours a day seven days a week and, in the days before he got the contract for his first book, on holidays, too, to the despair of then girlfriends.

Producing *Self Help* took more than two years and was shattering, partly, he admits, because of the personal nature of it though also because it was a technical challenge. His next book is to be set in the less personal environment of South America but there is a “back catalogue of experiences” he intends to return to in future.

“I have a book about brothers I really want to write because I have three brothers,” he says. “A lot of myself goes into the books. Everything is you. But it’s never direct, not for bashful reasons but because it doesn’t fit directly. I don’t have a twin sister but you might think that if I did have a twin sister, this is what might happen.” He certainly convinced the Booker judges.

Book of revelations: clockwise from above, Edward Docx, aged 35; as a baby with his mother, who was given some shocking news by her own dying “mother”; and with his grandfather

family because it’s immediately disrupted.” Even reading was a guilty pleasure at home with Docx clan, a question of sneaking up to the attic for 25 minutes of Tolkien before someone banged their head or scraped their knees and needed seeing to. Anyone settling down for major introspection would be immediately harangued by a junior Docx — the youngest is still only 14 — to play football, he says.

THIS sense of closeness comes through strongly in the painting of the life of the Glovers in *Self Help*, particularly in the twins, Gabriel and Isabella. “The greatest drama is always family because you can’t get off the stage,” he says — that is, you never escape your family. “Families are dramatically a much more powerful thing to write about [than other relationships] and twins are the most powerful incarnation of that because you’re born at the same time.” He adds: “Tolstoy was hugely good at this.”

But if he is fine on family tensions in his writing, he also works extremely hard to build the detail of everything else. It’s the ex-journalist in him, says the man who interviewed Joseph Heller; Salman Rushdie and his hero Martin Amis for Rosie Boycott during her stint at the Express. It was a job he worked his way up to from secretary on the books desk after quitting advertising, which he hated. He left journalism, too, though, as soon as he secured his first book deal in 2001 and now lives comfortably thanks to sales success in America and Europe.

“What journalists and writers have in common is curiosity. When something happens, they want to know. To be incurious seems to me to be dead,” he says. “And I’m really thorough about it. There are millions of ways of writing a novel. Some people never go to the places they’re writing about. For me, I absolutely do.” Besides, he adds: “It’s the fun bit, isn’t it?”

So for a book featuring a heroin addict, he

bitchy anonymous comments that have surfaced since his Booker nomination.

But he also has a more frivolous non-literary life playing PlayStation with his younger brother, swimming at Hampstead ponds and hanging out with mates such as the comedian Will Smith, who he describes as “a top, top human being”. Most importantly, he speaks of Emma, his long-term girlfriend, now wife of just three months, with whom he lives in Belsize Park. She understands, he says, how important it is to be supportive but also to help keep his feet on the ground. “It’s a very difficult thing,” he says. “You need someone who doesn’t take you seriously but who also does.”

Perhaps the gravity comes from growing up in a high-achieving family. His father is a highly-trained specialist dentist and the children have each graduated to university. But Docx, who studied English at Cambridge, insists: “Nothing gets that serious in the