

# Author's past is another country

**E**DWARD Docx didn't know his publishers were entering him for the Booker Prize until the longlist was announced.

Now, the 34-year-old's second novel, *Self Help*, is rubbing literary shoulders with a Booker "dozen", including four debut novelists and established writers Ian McEwan and AN Wilson.

On the morning we meet at Troika in Primrose Hill, his phone has been ringing constantly with friends offering congratulations and journalists seeking quotes.

Considerately (and unegotistically), he switches it off to spend a couple of hours talking about writing, family, Heath swimming and... book prizes.

"It's unbelievable. It's more than nice, it's amazing," says the former arts editor, from Belsize Park Gardens. "It's way beyond anything I had hoped for. If I was lucky I expected to get reviews.

"The problem is these prizes are so arbitrary. All 13 books are on the list because they are good novels. Once you get to a certain level it's a test of whether people like it."

Each publishing house submits two novels by an author from the British Isles or Commonwealth for the annual prize. This year, judges had to whittle down 110 books to a longlist of 13, reduced to six by September 6.

Docx (pronounced dox) has the surprised air of a man emerging from three years living

A death bed confession about his origins led author Edward Docx to the idea for his new novel, **Bridget Galton** writes

in his own head, to find the rest of the world shouting in his ear.

"The business of writing books is so long. Your day-to-day experience is a million miles away from prizes and reviews. You finally finish it and you are so bamboozled by the reviews. It's extraordinary to discover what other people think about it. Publishing is so Darwinian these days. You have to have self-belief and immense stamina."

*Self Help* springs from a shock family revelation 20 years ago – when the teenage Docx discovered he was a quarter Russian.

His mother had always believed she was half-Indian. But in a dying confession her mother revealed she was not her child.

She was actually born of an affair between the man she knew as her grandfather and a Russian ballerina. Her "dad" was actually her half-brother.

"It changed everything and nothing," says Docx, describing



**Booker long-listed author Martin Docx (right) and (above) with his mother.**

Main picture by Monica Curtain

how his mother and five siblings had to recalibrate their identity to incorporate a Russian element.

His mother frantically baked blinis and hosted piano recitals of Russian composers, while Docx became obsessed with the country and loves it still.

Ultimately, it changed nothing. Docx's mother decided to delve no further, fearing her search for the past would consume her life. You cannot, says Docx, lose touch with who you are in a search for who you might have been. It was a strangely double experience for my mum. It makes no difference but it makes all the difference. My mother has chosen not to pursue it any further. But as soon as I was old enough I went there to see it and understand it."

Docx knew he wanted to write about Russia, music and family. So *Self Help* is partly set in St Petersburg where a mother tracks down the son – now a talented pianist – she abandoned in an



orphanage. Meanwhile, twins Gabriel and Isabella start receiving strange emails from a Russian stranger after their mother's death. They travel from New York to London, Paris to St Petersburg to track down their estranged father and nail down the truth.

"The simple idea of a family bringing up children who weren't theirs and not telling them creates a dramatic force for the book," says Docx, who spent time in Russia talking to people who grew up in orphanages.

"Under Gorbachev, you were a child of the state and there was a more celebratory attitude to foundlings. There was a sense they were really proud of themselves. If you became a pianist or gymnast, you were an emblem for Communism. There were no mums and dads getting in the way.

"I love Russia. What's happening is a tragedy – the only mantra is 'make money, wield power, keep both'. There is no way for the people who write the books and play the music to grow. The result is hedonism – that's what you get when there's no political hope. Take drugs, party, stay up all night. It's such a shame because there was an incredible explosion

of hope in the late 1990s and it's gone. Yet the average person's life in a material rather than a spiritual sense is better."

Docx says the twins' relationship allowed him to explore "a sense of intimacy and candour between men and women without sexual tension".

"Also, I hate moral, bourgeois values. I like the idea that a twin is completely unjudgemental. The book has no characters who feel able to pass judgement on one another."

Indeed, the twins' amoral, cruel father Nicholas is partially redeemed because, however badly he lived, he at least remained true to himself. "He feels Gabriel is uncomfortable in his own skin and should inhabit himself more. But Nicholas is at least absolutely himself to the very brim."

He says the book explores the failure of belief in his generation.

Gabriel works on a magazine, Self Help, devoted to New Age therapies, which Docx views as a rootless search for a missing spiritual dimension.

"Communism has collapsed and capitalism is running all over the world. But where does that leave us? The failure of beliefs is a big problem for our age and times. It's difficult to pin your

colours to any mast.

"If you are religious, there are many people who can discredit that belief. If you are an environmentalist, people say it's pointless and maybe there isn't global warming, anyway.

"People seek bullshit spirituality in cod trips to India to see yoga teachers. But it's difficult to wholeheartedly endorse any position because we are all too aware of the opposite.

"We can't find something to believe in but, because we are human beings, we need a spiritual dimension. Our consciousness requires that we don't just live a materialistic life. But there is this terrible lack of robustness in modern life. All ideas have become small or superficial."

He watches his generation struggling with a "corrosive quest for authenticity because they feel they don't belong to something".

"A lot of people my age are kind of lost. There is a prevalent emphasis from all parts of life on vocation and talent. People feel they have the right to become something and they perhaps understand less the effort, time, discipline and stamina you need.

"They all feel they should be doing something they absolutely love yet they are not even sure what it might be. Vocations are rare. We are an anxiously vocationless generation."

Docx has certainly never been vocationless. He always wanted to write novels "about ideas", writing his first "excruciatingly bad book" at 14 and continuing through his 20s while working on The Daily Express book pages where he interviewed Amis, Wolfe, Rushdie and Joseph Heller. He published his debut novel, The Calligrapher, before he was 30.

"Those early books were terrible and rightly never got anywhere but I would have carried on even if they hadn't. I will continue even if everything stops and no-one buys them."

Docx now writes full-time – he has tried cafés, Swiss Cottage Library, the basement of the Washington pub and settled on a small office in Primrose Hill.

He jogs on the Heath and swims throughout the summer months ("I am a bit of a bottler and don't go much past September"). "Exercise resets the brain from living in your own head all the time," says Docx, who describes writing as having two sides to the brain.

"One side deals with reality, and the secondary brain notices things about your own brain and other people's brains. The downside is you can't turn it off. You are interested in secondary things all the time. In bad cases, it means you are dwelling unhealthily on stuff. In good cases you are brilliantly noticing things."

☐ *Self Help* is published by Picador £16.99.