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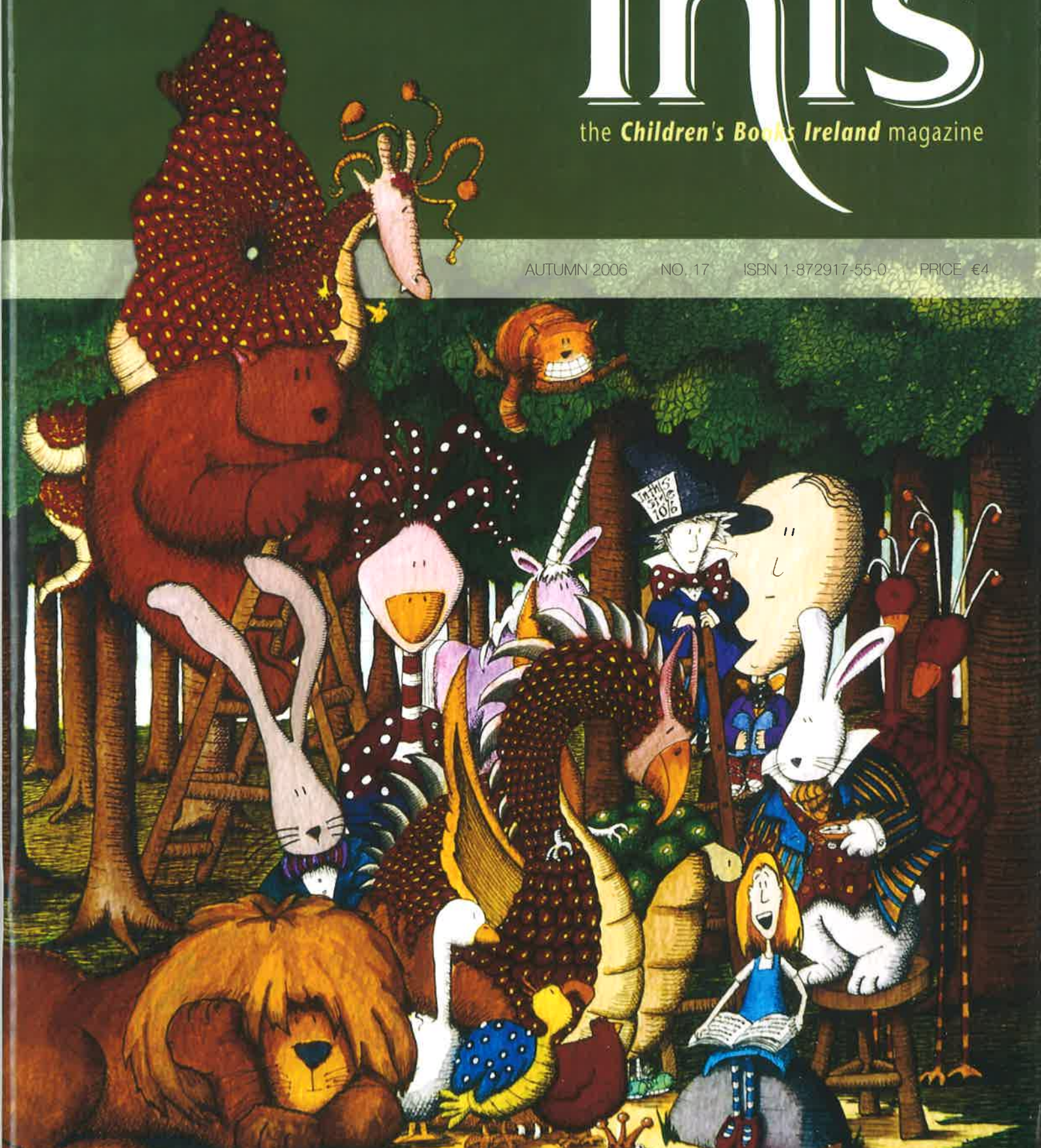
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David Rudd on Roald Dahl • Robert Dunbar remembers some forgotten books • Ruaidhrí Ó Báille chats with Terry Deary

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editorial



THE CBI board has recently undergone some changes with Geraldine Meade stepping down as chairperson and Seamus Cashman taking over the role. Ger, who

has been on the board since 2000 and chairperson since 2003, has shown formidable energy, courage and vision and helped CBI achieve its respected position within the arts world. Seamus, along with a dedicated and enthusiastic team, will carry on the good work.

It is now ten years since CLAI and CBT joined forces to become CBI, and this year – Summer '06 to Summer '07 – there will be lots of events and special celebrations. The first event of this academic year takes place in Farmleigh House on September 10th. It's called 'Celebrating the Story' – an exciting day of events celebrating children's stories in all their colours and forms – oral, visual and written. There will be storytellers captivating crowds with their tales, illustrators giving workshops on visual storytelling and authors presenting their written stories. Watch out for Oisín McGarr, Marita Conlon-McKenna, Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, Joe O'Brien, Dave Donohue and storytellers Niall de Burca, Billy Teare, and Toby Kinsella. Children from 5–12 years are welcome.

Other dates to put in your diary are October 10th, when Geraldine McCaughrean comes to Draíocht in Blanchardstown, and Michael Morpurgo will visit Dublin on November 13th and Cork on 15/16th – check www.childrensbooksireland.com for details of times and venues.

The Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature's fifth annual conference will be held on 23–24 February 2007 on the theme 'Re-Evaluating Gender in Children's Literature'. They are presently calling for papers; the deadline is December 1st. More information is available on www.isscl.com.

Children's Book Festival 2006 runs from October 4th to 28th. It will include events and activities in

Humungous happenings at CBI

libraries, schools, bookshops and arts centres all around the country. Full details of all events will be published in a festival event guide from mid-September and will be available on the CBI website: www.childrensbooksireland.com.

Award-winning illustrator Annie West has been specially commissioned to create a unique image for the Children's Book Festival 2006, which is also the cover image for this issue of *Inis*. Taking inspiration from *Alice in Wonderland*, Annie has created a celebratory image full of characters and humour.

BookFest, the Recommended Reading Guide will be available, free of charge, in mid-September from bookshops, libraries, schools and the CBI office. It is an invaluable, year-round resource for teachers, librarians, parents and children, with recommended titles through a range of ages, 0–4 up to 15+, and with Poetry and Information sections as well. This year each section will feature an introduction that varies from helpful tips when buying for toddlers to interviews with teen fiction authors.

This year's MS READaTHON will run from October 13th to November 13th. Find out more from www.msreadathon.ie. Kids love doing it and it's a very worthwhile cause.

I recently did a little informal research and asked a number of 20-somethings what their favourite children's book was when they were growing up. Not surprisingly Dahl's *The Twits*, *Matilda* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were all mentioned. To celebrate Roald Dahl's birthday (he would have been 90 on September 13th), his wonderful and memorable collection of books and his influence on a generation of readers, David Rudd has written an article about his work, see Dahl's marvellous medicine, page 5. Hoping you have a flushbunkingly glorumptious time reading this issue of *Inis*.

Paddy

Paddy O'Doherty

Dahl's marvellous medicine

David Rudd

ROALD DAHL's work will always hold a special place for me, not because he was part of my childhood reading (even his first successful children's work, *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) came a bit after my time) but because it was a study of Dahl that led to my first publication in children's literature: a monograph that grew out of an MA course I was undertaking. I naively called the publication *A Communication Studies Approach to Children's Literature* (1992), which probably accounts for its relative obscurity. Why did I not get Dahl's name into the title, or even mention the main work of his that I had analysed? And why does the word 'twit' come to mind as I reflect on this? It was also as a result of my Dahl work (on *The Twits*, strangely enough) that I subsequently went on to study Enid Blyton, as many of these young Dahl readers were simultaneously enjoying her work, I was surprised to learn.

DAHL – 16 YEARS ON

It is interesting to contrast these two massively celebrated writers, for it was Dahl who knocked Blyton off the top slot in polls of most-popular children's writer; Blyton, whose popularity, it was claimed, would soon fade after her death (in 1968), yet who continues to go from strength to strength. What, then, of Dahl, who was himself subsequently toppled by J.K. Rowling (whose fictional



Taking stock some sixteen years after his death, in the year that would have been his 90th birthday, it is clear that Dahl is rudely healthy, both in terms of sales and public recognition



Dursley family would itself seem to have been influenced by such Dahlesque creations as Aunts Sponge and Spiker from *James*, and the Wormwood family in *Matilda*? Is he sliding gently out of sight, as so many children's writers have done (Malcolm Saville, W.E. Johns, and BB come to mind)? Or will he be a survivor, alongside Beatrix Potter, E. Nesbit, and Arthur Ransome?

Taking stock some sixteen years after his death, in the year that would have been his 90th birthday, it is clear that Dahl is rudely healthy, both in terms of sales and public recognition. And, in common with the above survivors, it is of note that this reputation extends way beyond the literary texts themselves. All these survivors have had TV or film



adaptations of their work, and/or been successful in terms of merchandising. In Dahl's case, the author himself instigated this process. Besides being an excellent self-publicist he was instrumental, for example, in adapting the original film version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) – as *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971). Forty years on, this, Dahl's most successful novel, has put him centrally back in the spotlight with Tim Burton's revised version, starring Johnny Depp as Wonka (apparently one of the 50 highest-grossing films of all time). And sandwiched between these two, rich, cinematic confections have been many other successful adaptations, most notably of *James and the Giant Peach*, *The BFG*, *The Witches*, *Matilda* and *Danny, the Champion of the World*.

But it would be wrong to attribute Dahl's continued success to these spin-offs alone; it would be to have the tail wag the dog, denying the intrinsic power and energy of Dahl's stories which, according to a range of teachers



Roald Dahl in his Writing Hut, circa 1990. Photo © Jan Baldwin.

and librarians I recently consulted, are still enjoyed and sought out by children. According to UK Public Lending Right statistics, he remains in the top five children's authors; and, in terms of individual titles, Dahl held the top seven slots in 2004-5! In the forthcoming, updated NCRCL (Roehampton University) survey of children's reading habits, preliminary results indicate that Dahl is second only to Jacqueline Wilson. I also know at first hand that, amongst undergraduates, Dahl remains a key choice of topic for English Literature dissertations.

THE DAHL PHENOMENON

So, what does account for his popularity? In order to understand this, I think we first need to note the context from which his children's work emerged. This far on, especially in the wake of the gross Dursley family and the cynical narrations of Lemony Snicket, it is perhaps difficult to recall the safer, more refined world of children's literature at the beginning of the 1960s. British fantasy was approaching its apogee, with

“ British fantasy was approaching its apogee, with Philippa Pearce, Alan Garner, William Mayne, Lucy M. Boston and others all producing beautifully crafted, intricate works, firmly rooted in a knowable and dependable England. Into this environment crashed Dahl with his loud and brash slapstick ”

Philippa Pearce, Alan Garner, William Mayne, Lucy M. Boston and others all producing beautifully crafted, intricate works, firmly rooted in a knowable and dependable England. Into this environment crashed Dahl with his loud and brash slapstick – a giant peach squishing people and eventually ending up spiked on top of the Empire State Building. It is, perhaps, notable that Dahl had lived in the USA for a number of years (where Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* might be seen as part of a more energetic tradition).

Melvin Burgess has often pointed out how children's fiction

is strangely out of touch with the rest of children's culture and, although he speaks more on behalf of the young adolescent, a parallel can be seen with Dahl's attempt to reconnect children's fiction to some vibrant traditions with which it has always had an uneasy alliance. These are the worlds of nursery rhyme, of folk and fairy tale, of chapbooks, pantomime, music-hall and slapstick, of comics, cartoons and jokes (both practical and scatological). Often these areas are seen as inappropriate, but they have energised children's literature from the beginning, although at

certain periods there have been attempts to suppress them; usually, one might add, to little avail – in fact, suppression has often had the opposite effect, making descriptions like the famous depiction of George's grandmother's mouth being 'puckered-up ... like a dog's bottom' (*George's Marvellous Medicine*), all the more piquant.

Critical reaction to Dahl's work has certainly proved this, with many finding that his books did not sit comfortably alongside more traditional literary fare. Eleanor Cameron's objections (speaking specifically about *Charlie*) have been particularly widely

quoted: 'the book's tastelessness, expressed through its phoniness, its hypocrisy, its getting laughs through violent punishment ...' Obviously such critics' wishes to have children exposed to the best that has been thought and written are laudable. But an awareness of the wider culture of childhood, connected to many of the alternative traditions above, seems lacking. Nowadays it might seem curiously myopic to object to the malevolent Aunts Sponge and Spiker being squashed by a giant peach, when children are earlier likely to have chanted rhymes about blind mice having their tales chopped off, or giants grinding human bones to make their bread – or, indeed, watched Tom and Jerry flattening one another (let alone seen, or read, about the Wicked Witch of the East being squashed by a house). Likewise, someone eating wormy spaghetti might seem tame fare alongside playground rhymes about 'great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts' – I won't go on.

Interestingly, Cameron goes on to say that 'Dahl caters for the streak of sadism in children who ... are not experienced enough to know what sadism is'. While Cameron is undoubtedly right about the sadism in Dahl's work (especially given his subsequent output), once again, it is strange to think that children won't have encountered the 'real thing' in schools or elsewhere, from bullies of one sort or other. This was certainly Dahl's own experience, which he makes explicit in a number of his non-fictional works, seeing it as, indeed, one of the things that made him a writer ('Lucky Break: How I Became a Writer' in *The Wonderful World of Henry Sugar*, and *Boy*).

THE ABUSE OF POWER

However, I'd argue that Dahl is always out to expose and punish sadism in his books, rather than endorse it. Thus, besides Sponge and Spiker there are the Twits, Miss Trunchbull, the cannibalistic giants (e.g. Bonecruncher, Blood-bottler and Fleshlumpeater), the Witches, the Enormous Crocodile – to name just a few – all of whom receive their due. In fact, it is this concern with the sadistic practices of bullies that is a key part of Dahl's main theme: the abuse of power, usually by the physically big and strong over the small and weak. Clearly, one can see how this theme is likely to appeal to children, faced on a daily basis by a world of relative giants who dictate the rules. And, as in the world of fairy tale, there's a very simple economy of good and evil, with the former being excessively rewarded (by inheriting a chocolate factory, for example) and the latter given the red-hot shoes treatment of *Cinderella* (squished, glued upside-down and decomposing, put into orbit, turned into mice, and so on). It is therefore hardly surprising that Dahl's characters, representing either the powerful or the powerless, are often little more than types (only in *Danny, the Champion of the World* is there a move towards moral complexity). So one should not look for subtlety or psychological motivation in his characters – indeed, it would slow things down (accounting for Willy Wonka's behaviour by giving him a troublesome father-figure seems the one weak and unnecessary point in Tim Burton's adaptation).

I have deliberately termed Dahl's key theme an *abuse* of power for it is actually a very moral universe that underpins his fictions. Power, used wisely, is shown to be quite

“ It is this concern with the sadistic practices of bullies that is a key part of Dahl's main theme: the abuse of power, usually by the physically big and strong over the small and weak ”

acceptable, as Wonka's crazy *deus ex machina* tactics show. The chocolate factory is the testing ground for the gluttonous, media-obsessed and the brattish, and these children fail accordingly, getting their just desserts (if you'll pardon the pun); whereas, the paragon of meek and mild children, Charlie – the only one in control of his appetites, the only one not to overdose on chocolate – is the one shown fit to manage society, now cleansed of its bad elements. Likewise, it is the equally polite and demure Matilda, keen scholar and library-goer, rather than a TV watcher, who is celebrated in her eponymous novel.

As a number of commentators have noted, the rectifying of the wrongs of society is often accomplished by the protagonists moving into a 'carnavalesque' period; that is, a time when the normal rules of society are held in abeyance – as at a carnival – when the body and bodily functions take centre stage, and where excess becomes the norm. Dahl writes gleefully about such excesses, but he also shows that they are

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Like many successful writers of popular culture, then, Dahl cleverly mixes the traditional and conservative with that which temporarily subverts or upsets the normal order

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preludes to the reaffirmation of a very orderly world, one where the bad are expunged (the Twits and the Witches are removed, or the duck-hunting Greggs in *The Magic Finger* are reformed).

Like many successful writers of popular culture, then, Dahl cleverly mixes the traditional and conservative (of a stable society where there are fixed and proper rules) with that which temporarily subverts or upsets the normal order (licensing talk about bodily functions, using naughty words and criticising adults, particularly those in authority).

The pleasures, as a result, are mixed. On the one hand there is the assurance of everything in its place, of a safe, dependable world; on the other, there is the playful subversion of what might seem staid and correct. *The Twits* provides a good example. The two main characters obviously do not fit into the normal cultural categories. Mr Twit is overly hairy (hence associated with nature), trying to make the imprisoned family of monkeys (who are rightfully hairy and natural) into cultural beings by having them dress up. The Twits also encroach on what is, properly, bird behaviour, with Mr Twit eating worms and Mrs Twit being made to fly; simultaneously, they abuse nature by spreading their dead tree with glue, in order to harvest the stuck birds like fruit. The two confound other categories too, playing tricks like naughty

children when they are meant to be responsible adults. In general, then, the Twits invert the normal order of things, an inversion that becomes literalised when the obnoxious couple try to make Muggle-Wump and his family, their captured monkeys, perform upside-down. As a consequence, the Twits are themselves inverted, and the rightful order is reinstated.

The abuse of power is the main element of appeal in Dahl's children's books, which itself means that the rightful order of things has been upset. The re-establishment of this order is then achieved through a period of carnivalesque play, when the normal rules and conventions of society are set aside (including, often, the laws of nature, such that supernatural, or fairy-tale events occur – magic fingers, telekinetic powers, and

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But attention to the wild and wacky elements of Dahl's appeal often leads to neglect of one other aspect. This is Dahl's overt celebration of close relationships; the ability to 'connect'

”

the like). Finally, the point has been made that the 'rightful order' usually involves endorsing the status quo – a quite traditional view of society (in which quiet, well-behaved children can thrive, under the jurisdiction of 'proper' adults). But, even given this restoration of order, it must be recognised that the rambunctious attention paid to the period of carnival, its wildness and anarchy, are far better remembered, and loved, than the sometimes anti-climactic endings. For example, in my research I found that hardly any children remembered the arrival of Fred, the gasman, at the end of *The Twits*; they also either had Muggle-Wump and his family returned to Africa (which is only mooted) or moving into the Twits' old house.

But attention to the wild and wacky elements of Dahl's appeal often leads to neglect of one other aspect. This is Dahl's overt celebration of close relationships; the ability to 'connect', as E.M. Forster put it. Sometimes this is between humans, as with the middle-aged apartment neighbours (in a late work, *Esio Trot*), Danny and his father, Miss Honey and Matilda, or the Norwegian grandmother and unnamed boy protagonist of *The Witches*, clearly evoking that between the young Roald and his Norwegian mother, Sofie (to her, Roald was also known simply as 'boy'), as detailed in Dahl's wonderful autobiography, *Boy*. At other times this sense of connection is not simply between humans, but across species, as with the inhabitants of the Giant Peach in *James*, or between a boy and a giant turtle in 'The Boy Who Talked with Animals' (in *The Wonderful World of Henry Sugar*) – or, most dramatically, in *The*

Witches, where we learn that the hero is to remain in the form of a mouse for the rest of his life, which is just long enough, he surmises, for him and his aged grandmother to 'die together'. She comments, 'That would be perfect', making him feel 'at peace with the world'.

The ideal, in other words, is to find a relationship that is based on love rather than on one party having power over another. And in such a union, differences in age, physical size or ability, are irrelevant. In some of his works this

directness and, often, its vulgarity. He likes to hale his reader, as though he were addressing 'you' in person. Thus, as he confides to us in *The Twits*, 'When the very hairy ones wash their faces, it must be as big a job as when you and I wash the hair on our heads'.

It is also a very sensual style, whether he is depicting the puckered mouth of a grandmother or a farmer's earholes, 'clogged with all kinds of muck and wax and bits of chewing-gum and dead flies and stuff like that' (describing Bean in

match Dahl's own swift narration, simultaneously making some of the more grizzly scenes (as of the particles in Mr Twit's beard, or of the cannibalistic giants) more light-hearted.

Finally, this sensual mix is brought to fruition in Dahl's zesty play with words, whether in his acerbic verse (*Revolting Rhymes* and *Rhyme Stew*) or his prose, going back to his very first book, *The Gremlins* (1943) which was for children rather than adults. However, this verbal licence is given most free rein in *The BFG*, where the Big Friendly Giant, like Dahl himself, admits that he likes to 'gobblefunk around with words'; and these catchy neologisms – of 'rotsome snozzcumbers', 'frobscottle' and 'wizzpoppers' – are still to be heard recycled by children and adults alike.

In short, Dahl's writing is as potent a mix as *George's Marvellous Medicine*, and destined to be popular for quite a while yet.

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David Rudd teaches Children's Literature in the Dept of Cultural & Creative Studies at the University of Bolton, England; in a former life, he was a librarian. He has published some 100 articles and two books on the subject: the ill-fated *A Communication Studies Approach to Children's Literature* (Perpetuity Press, 1992) and *Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature* (Macmillan, 2000). Most recently he has written about cultural studies approaches to *Teaching Children's Fiction* (Palgrave, 2006) and a chapter on 'Theories and Theorising' for the new *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (Routledge, 2005). He is currently researching a chapter on 'Beast Tales' for the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (2007).



connectedness becomes almost mystical, invoking a sense of being at one with the universe – as with the boy in *The Witches* above, and in Dahl's posthumously published *The Minpins*, where the hero, Billy, is taken on magical flights at night by a swan.

GOBBLEFUNKING AROUND WITH WORDS

However, Dahl's popularity cannot be accounted for simply by a thematic analysis of his work. After all, many other writers cover similar ground. It is Dahl's style of narration that lifts his works beyond the mundane; his ability to convey character and situation with a few deft strokes of his pen. It is certainly not a traditionally literary style; rather it seems a more oral way of writing, akin to someone narrating a joke or a shaggy dog story, both in its

Fantastic Mr Fox). The oral manner of speaking is perfectly captured here with the repeated 'ands' and the vague catch-all category at the end. He also uses a number of graphological techniques to emulate a speaking voice, such as italics and capitals for emphasis. These visual elements are then perfectly complemented by the illustrations, to which he sometimes draws our attention. For example, after lamenting Mrs Twit's lack of a beard (which would hide her ugliness), the reader is issued with a directive: 'Take a look at her.' An illustration of her face follows, then Dahl asks us: 'Have you ever seen a woman with an uglier face than that? I doubt it.' This is why the partnership with Quentin Blake was so successful, commencing with *The Enormous Crocodile* in 1978. Blake's zany, energetic cartoons perfectly

Chatting with Terry Deary

Ruaidhrí Ó Báille

TERRY, looking at all the accolades you have received: 'Outstanding Non-Fiction Author of the 20th Century', 'Most Borrowed Author Of Non-Fiction in Britain' – millions of sales in scores of languages ... have you got to the stage now where you take it in your stride, or do you still pinch yourself sometimes?

I pinch myself every time. I get up in the morning, walk to my room, sit down at my word processor and think (a) I love what I'm doing, and (b) I'm getting well paid for it. And it's very very hard to accept. Especially with my background. I know this sounds as if I've got a chip on my shoulder, which my wife says I have, but I came from a very deprived, very working class background in the northeast of England; born just after the war into slum housing. And it is extra difficult for people from that area to get on in any field. So now I'm an ambassador for Sunderland, where I was born. So yes, I still sometimes think I am dreaming all this.

And did your Dad live to see your success? I know your new novel *The Fire Thief* is dedicated to your Mum...

My Mum died last year. My Dad died when I was 19 years old. He died because he smoked 50 cigarettes a day, which in those days was not unremarkable. And he was proud of my ability to play the clarinet.

“When we were given essays to do, I was always about top of the class. Nobody ever told me 'this is because you have a talent and you should develop it'”

He taught you, didn't he?

He taught me ... and [he was proud of] my ability to play football – not to a very high level, but, you know, that was the height of his ambition. Oh, he was proud of the fact I passed the 11+. I went to grammar school which was hideous because we were drilled to pass exams; we weren't introduced to literature, except as a sort of thing which we had to study in order to analyse and pass exams in. And when we were given essays to do, I was always about top of the class. Nobody ever told me 'this is because you have a talent and you should develop it'. And that is the evil of the exam system and the school system – which is still going on today. It's getting bad again. You know children are not developed for the skills and the talents they possess, they're developed in order to pass exams.



When did you discover you could write?

I didn't. It was just a natural ability and I never valued it. I became a professional actor and what I discovered was – because we were improvising plays – there were no plays written for four actors in the middle of Wales so we started to improvise and put them together, but it seemed that I was the one that gave them shape.

And this is where your first work of fiction *The Custard Kid* came from, isn't it?

Yes. And in the end, the company just turned to me and said: 'Terry, go away and write us a play.' And it was as natural as falling off a log. And it was after *Custard Kid* was a huge success that I thought: 'Ah, what a shame that great story has vanished. What can I do to preserve it? Write a book!' And I was blessed with ignorance. Nobody told me unpublished authors don't get published.

That's another thing. You had 23 rejections with *The Custard Kid*.

How did you sustain yourself?

Because I was ignorant. I thought this is what you do. You just keep sending it till you find one that accepts you. And you don't, actually. Because the lucky stroke was finding a publisher at the right time looking for that sort of manuscript. With my humour.

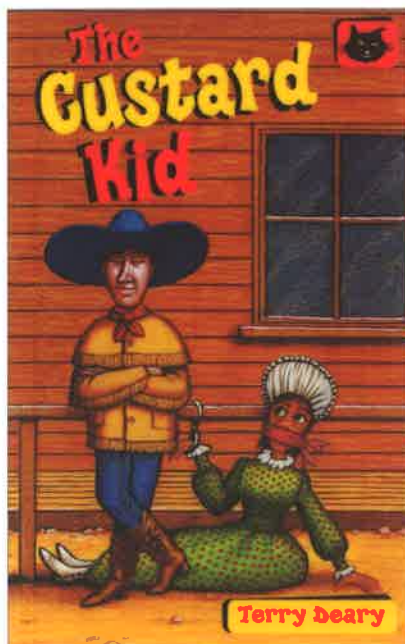
And it was a different kind of humour, wasn't it? It was new.

Even that far back you were flouting convention. You turned the 'Cowboy' genre on its head.

Yes. And I created a character who was neither good nor bad, not like John Wayne, black or white, you know.

He wasn't 'The Cincinnati Kid'.

No. He was a mixture. He was human. And a very far-sighted publisher accepted it. And my great luck was that the second book I wrote was rejected 73 times! And when I got the 73rd rejection, I had one of those illuminating moments. I thought 'I know why they don't like it. 'Cos it's rubbish!' And that is such a valuable lesson to learn. Just because you've published one book doesn't mean you can get



away with publishing any old junk. You've always got to be on your game. Great lesson.

You are still flouting convention in your latest novel *The Fire Thief*. You have chapters that are 'omitted' and reinstated for instance. You address the reader in footnotes...

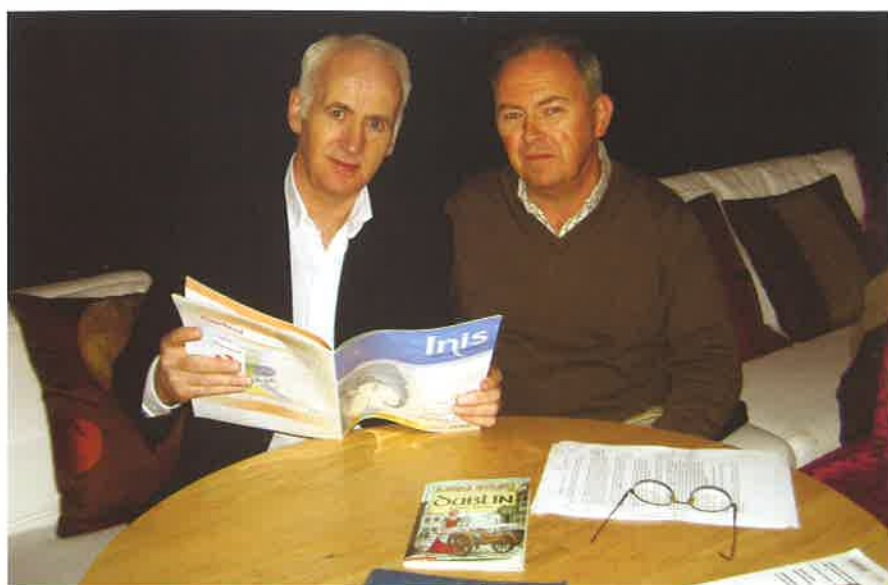
Yes, I like to play with my reader. I like to feel that my reader is almost alongside me and I'm taking him into my confidence. In a radio interview, someone said 'These footnotes that you put in work very well. Why did you put them

“ I like to feel that my reader is almost alongside me and I'm taking him into my confidence ”

in?' And I didn't know! – until I started answering her question. Being an actor, I just improvised. I said 'They're asides, and I put them in because I'm taking the reader into my confidence: "Hey! This is a story, but you'll never guess what happened."' And I suddenly realised this was the truth! I never even consciously verbalised this before.

How much are you a slave to the story? I know you plan of course, but there comes a time in fiction when you don't control it anymore. It controls you.

Absolutely. That's the joy of writing fiction. I know I make a good living from *Horrible Histories*, but the fiction is just an absolute joy. Because I never know quite what's going to happen next. A good example was the character of the Cymera who is three headed. And suddenly – out of the blue – I discovered these three heads don't actually like each other, and they squabble. And I don't know where that came from. And in Book Two which isn't published yet, the monsters – and this is from myth – decide to gang up on the gods of Zeus to avenge the death of the Typhon. So they all rush to Olympus and the gods run away! And that's in the myth. But what happened to me was: I got my monsters together to plan the attack and it turned into a communist meeting. You know. 'Monsters of



Terry Deary (left) with Ruaidhrí Ó Báille

the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains!' It turned into a hilarious parody of Arthur Scargill and I *don't* know where it came from! I never planned that.

You're famous for having an amazingly punishing work schedule. 'Six days a week. Thousands of words a day.' Do you still do that?

Oh, yes. I always have a word target. I always try to write – if I'm writing scripts. I can write a radio or television script in two days: 30 minutes. I can write two thousand words a day non-fiction. Fiction I can write eight thousand words a day. If I *want* to. I don't always want to, you know.

And you don't like to rewrite.

I never rewrite. Editors make me. I hate them! They bully me. Because of my background I understand children of the sort I'm writing for. Many editors don't! They come from middle-class Southern female homes. I'm Northern working-class male. I'm the opposite. I know my audience. I'm not a historian, I'm a children's author. And my main aim is to engage the reader. And sometimes I come up with opinions which are a bit extreme.

But you are written about as a historian. One commentator wrote 'It must niggle Simon Schama et al that the most popular historian in the country prefers to think of himself primarily as an entertainer'.

“

I can write a radio or television script in two days: 30 minutes. I can write two thousand words a day non-fiction. Fiction I can write eight thousand words a day ”



I am. It's partly the fact that I come from an acting background and I've always got an audience in front of me. I've always got to engage them. Because if the reader is not engaged, they're not listening. And whether I'm entertaining or teaching, whichever aspect I'm going for, or both together, engagement first. Grab their attention. Look at this picture. Look at this story. Listen to this character. And when I've got their attention, then I can do something with them.

How does the History establishment deal with you? I've read two sides. For instance, your *Bloody Scotland* book, you got into a bit of trouble...

Yeah, that was the extreme nationalists who said I was insulting their national dish by calling it *Horrible Haggis*, and they took me to the Commission for Racial Equality and got massive publicity on the back of

it for themselves, but my book went straight to number one in Scotland, thank you very much. If anyone wants to attack me go ahead!

But, on the other hand, in his book *King Arthur: Myth Making and History*, the author N.J. Higham speaks in glowing terms about the underlying 'historicity' of your treatment of Arthur in *The Smashing Saxons*. Do you consciously look for historical truth?

I'm looking for truth. And historical truth, if it represents today's truth, and we can look at it and compare ourselves, then that's fine by me. And if I can see to the heart of a particular situation which a historian can't because they're too wrapped up in facts, then that's fine by me.

I was conscious of the Scottish reaction as I read your latest *Horrible Histories: Dublin*. It was a bit scary to have somebody from the outside cast a cold eye on our own history. You see, we got one picture of 1916 in school. The notion that they could have been 'villains' as opposed to 'heroes' is anathema to many in this country. I'm wondering has anybody attacked your Dublin book yet.

Not Dublin, 'cos *Dublin's* only released. But British Empire, I get hate mail from the right wing and they say: 'If you hate Britain that much why don't you get out?' They say 'You write very anti-white stuff and we're going to explore your books for anti-white racism.' And when I upset them, I just know I'm doing something right.

To be honest, at the end of the *Horrible Histories: Dublin* I almost felt my own hackles rise. You were putting both sides, and

I found myself reacting to the people on the page. And I think that's very healthy.

It is. I would hope so. Because, honestly, I am neutral. I really did try to balance it. To give my readers every chance. 'Cos I hate preachers who say 'I know something. Listen. I will tell you.' I say 'Look, these are the facts. What do *you* think?' And yes, I'm going to upset somebody, I'm sure. And they'll write to me. And if they write to me nicely, I will acknowledge and give them respect. If they write to me nastily, I will reply in kind.

How do you come up with the stuff? I had never heard the story of Robert Emmet and the handkerchief, but my daughter found it on the net.

I use my own researchers. But my job is to filter. You know, if you imagine it's a lucky dip barrel, in the middle of all that sawdust, which historians have to have, are the little gems and my job is to pluck out the gems. Unfortunately, that gives a distorted picture of any history, however I do it. And my only defence against that is to say that, well, for the past thousand years, historians have been giving people the sawdust. I'm giving the people the little lucky dip prizes. And the two between them balance.

Of course there's also the notion that history is written by the victor...

It certainly is and the more I go into it the more I become a historian and start to be far more selective and I say 'This is said, but remember who said it.' So I am starting to think like a historian. It's time I shot myself!

The act of writing itself, you don't have a shed like Roald

“ You know, if you imagine it's a lucky dip barrel, in the middle of all that sawdust, which historians have to have, are the little gems and my job is to pluck out the gems ”

Dahl. You've converted your attic. How much of a 'No Go Area' is the attic when you are working?

Oh, my family live in terror of knocking on my door and disturbing me even when it's important, and I feel very guilty about this. But I do like to focus. I know I say writing is a natural talent which I do easily, but I do get into a rhythm and I do like it to be a 'No Go Area', I'm afraid. But I must say, I've got worse in recent years. When I was working in schools, I would do a day's work in school, I'd go to the bus stop, get on the bus, and have a notebook on my knee and be writing as the bus drove from Sunderland to Durham. And I would knock out a couple of hundred words on a half-hour bus journey. So I haven't always been this precious about having to have silence. Somebody clever said 'A writer can write at any time if they set their mind to it'. And people who say 'I can't write unless I've got the right circumstances' are being pompous and pretentious. And if I say it to my family, I'm being pompous and pretentious and I apologise to my family.

You must find the internet helpful in your work.

It's transformed research. A researcher can give me a little gem and I think: 'That's a good little story.' And rather than go back to the researcher, I just go into the internet and find out a bit more. They've done the basic research and given me the clue, and I can go and explore it.

And how much of your experience of teaching would you bring to your writing?

A lot. You see, I was a drama teacher. I didn't have to teach the facts, the dross. And I made a huge discovery. That schools whinge about lack of resources, and there's one vast resource they never ever touch – which is inside the heads of 30 kids in that class. And I want to turn teaching on its head. I'm not saying 'I know everything, and I'm going to fill these kid's heads.' It's 'what have these kids got to give?' And what I learned most from teaching was the vast resource and wealth of knowledge that children bring when they read my books. They are not passive. You know, I just want to jump on the table and shout this! Kids are not passive learners, they are active. They react to what I write and they bring their own thoughts to it, and that is so important. And even some writers do not always appreciate this. They tend to preach. And there are some writers these days who have gone too far the other way.

What to you think, then, of the notion of 'crossover literature'. JK Rowling, Philip Pullman, etc. Adult editions of Harry Potter, for instance. Does that seem strange to you?

No, no. Because I get emails from all over the world. From adults

who apologise and say 'My kids enjoy your books, but I like them too'. Why are you apologising? I don't write for children, I write for people. You see we've got this artificial concept in our minds that education ends when you leave school or college. It doesn't. Education ends on the day you die! So why should I cut my readers off and say: 'When you're 15, you stop reading my books.' So, no. Crossovers: fine. No problem.

Is it true that you turned down invitations to meet both Tony Blair and the Queen of England, or is it exaggerated.

Absolutely true. I'm sorry. Tony Blair had this wonderful idea. Let's invite the one hundred top British authors to Downing Street to shake his hand. Why? To make him look good. Right? And there he was on the six o'clock news. You know, I binned my invitation. No way am I in business to make politicians look good. And, so, I was disappointed that my fellow writers didn't see through the exploitation of their names and reputations.

Do you identify with Ireland in any way?

Oh yeah, I do identify with Ireland, because my parents' parents came from Donegal. I don't do autobiographical stuff! But they came from Donegal to work in the shipyards of Sunderland. My father's Catholic family of five lived in a two-bedroom, very small cottage which I still remember from my childhood. And with it came their attitudes. My father worked his way out of it by setting up as a butcher, but you know he brought attitude with him. And even though he died when I was 19, that's my

“ And what I learned most from teaching was the vast resource and wealth of knowledge that children bring when they read my books. They are not passive learners, they are active

inheritance. Irish blood. You know, the Celtic ability to tell stories, and my Dad's attitude: don't let them grind you down ... I feel at home in Ireland.

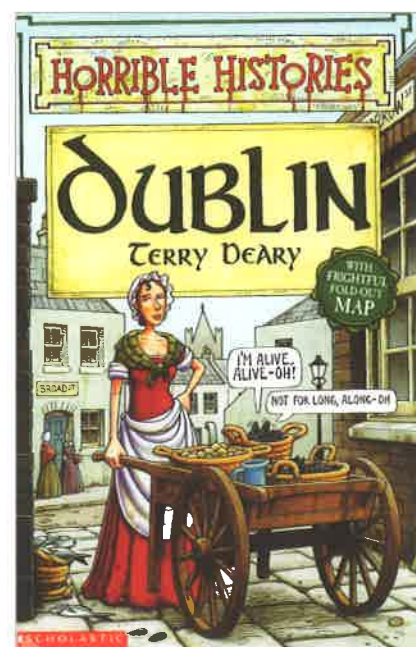
Is it really true that Ireland is the furthest you have been from home?

I don't have a passport. I have been to Jersey for my honeymoon 30 years ago.

And never to Europe?

No. There's so much in Britain I haven't explored. I'm doing a television series called *Terry Deary's*

“ So which is the truth? It's only a few months old, that history! And already there's two versions. In five years' time, there'll be 50 versions ”



Twisted Tales and I'm just going round the north of England, as only three regions, Granada, Yorkshire and Tyne Tees have come in. And it is absolutely packed with too many legends to fit into six episodes! And I didn't know half of them before. You know? Why do I need to go out into the rest of the world? I've got to find out about my own world first. Who was it said: 'You can travel the whole world, but in the end you have to come back to yourself.' That's an eastern philosopher called Krishna Murti, and he is spot on. When I find out who I am, then I'll start travelling and find out about the rest of the world.

You are interested in travelling in time, though, in a lot of your fiction. Now I know you didn't deign to meet Tony Blair, or Queen Elizabeth. If you could time travel, is there some big historical figure that you would be fascinated to meet?

Yep! Guy Fawkes. My hero! You know, there he was in the most persecuted society, the most persecuted section of society, and he



There is only one primary rule which is 'Writers don't matter. Readers matter'. Always *always* have the reader in the forefront of your mind

didn't lie down. He said: 'I'm gonna risk the most horrific tortures, risk my own life in order to make a stand against these people. And he bloody did it! And he suffered for it. The only honest man to go into parliament in Britain amongst all those other crooks.

That's a fascinating period of English history.

Oh, Guy Fawkes is a villain! They burn him on bonfires, for God's sake. Nobody looks at Guy Fawkes and why he was so desperately driven to do this. And when you look at why he was driven to do it, you say. My God, you know, the total unreasonableness of Queen Elizabeth I. It was Elizabeth who tried to nail the Catholics and persecute them out of existence – torture them. She invented witchcraft laws just to persecute the Catholics. Now my Dad was a Catholic. I wasn't. But I still feel angry for the Catholics.

It's funny, we talk here about the Hidden Ireland, a period in Irish history where a lot of things were underground, but that period of oppression doesn't seem to be as well known in England. It was

almost like the Spanish Inquisition in reverse.

It was! But, I'm sorry, Elizabeth is portrayed as a heroine. Because she was a strong leader. And, hang on, you know, you think: somebody's got something wrong here. And do I have a duty to just try and balance out the other side. People are being force fed and wrongly fed for years. I was told, Henry VIII was a great king. Fine, because he was *powerful*. He stood up for England. He was a *swine*!

I'm reminded of the titles of your books in the Tudor series *The Thief, The Fool and the Big Fat King, and The Actor, The Rebel and The Wrinkly Queen*. (Henry was the Big Fat King, and Elizabeth the Wrinkly Queen) Your approach is a bit like *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

It is. But all through school, they dress these emperors in clothes. They try to make out that a ruler, if they are powerful, they are a positive force.

Well even to get back to *Horrible Histories* and 1916, for instance. We had riots in Dublin a few months ago, and they were inextricably linked with 1916. The marchers wanted to march past the GPO and the Garden Of Remembrance...

Yes, you see, I've heard two versions of this. I wasn't there right? One version was that actually a group of youths out to make a bit of trouble just saw a public display as an excuse; it was not politically motivated at all. The other version is: these people who were trying to do something which show how liberal and tolerant Ireland is, got it wrong. So which is the truth? It's only a few months old, that history! And

already there's two versions. In five years' time, there'll be 50 versions. So what chance have we got of telling the truth about 1916? Or 1798?

Do you ever get a chance to read?

I read very low brow ... I love thrillers. Murder mysteries. You know the Agatha Christie era. And when I read non-fiction, I like to read history – very boringly!

Finally, do you have any advice for younger writers, maybe in terms of setting about writing, discipline, getting published...

There is only one primary rule which is 'Writers don't matter. Readers matter'. Always *always* have the reader in the forefront of your mind. If you are writing a book for yourself then ... some writers do get somewhere ... but generally it is a disaster. Always say 'I am writing for a real person.' And imagine them. That is the number one rule: writers don't matter, readers matter.

OK. That's a great note to finish on. Terry, thanks for your time. I really enjoyed talking to you.

It's been fun. I've never known anybody to do quite so much research, to know so much and bring it to the interview.

Ruaidhrí Ó Báille is a teacher and author. Ruaidhrí presented *Anois is Arís* on RTÉ television and was editor of the Irish language teenage magazine *Mahogany Gaspípe*. His published work includes the novels *Dúnmharú ar an Dart*, *An Tobar*, *Imithe* and *Aililiú Bop Siúaidí*, which are widely read in second level schools. He is also the author of many textbooks for Junior and Leaving Certificate Irish, notably the *Scoil Amach É!* and *An dTuigeann Tú?* series. He has taught in Cabinteely Community School for 27 years.

Looking back at the Summer School

Margrit Cruickshank

THE CBI Summer School 2006 took place in May at Belvedere College: an excellent choice of location, being central, with its own parking, and having a large lecture theatre and a good 'communal space' for the bookshop, chat and refreshments.

There was a great buzz about the place and everyone I talked to was positive about the choice of speakers. The standard was universally high. By not keeping to a theme, the talks were varied and all very interesting. Nearly all of the speakers had a great sense of humour – which is never a bad thing. The 'in conversation with' format worked well most of the time and added very positively to some of the sessions. The Saturday evening get-together at Brooks Hotel was a good chance to talk to fellow aficionados and quite a few of the stars.

“His defence to those who accuse him of corrupting the morals of the young is that everything in these books does happen, though not to all children, and truth is unassailable”

FRIDAY

Melvyn Burgess opened proceedings on Friday evening. Pacing like a caged lion, brushing back his mane of hair, I almost expected him to snarl at us, but he kept his most savage remarks for the tabloids. He gave a somewhat rambling but impassioned, energetic, and controversial keynote speech.

His belief in the widespread unhappiness of teenagers and the empowerment of knowledge led him to write his most controversial books, *Junk*, *Doing It* and *Lady*. His defence to those who accuse him of corrupting the morals of the young is that everything in these books does happen, though not to all children, and truth is unassailable.

His latest novel, *Sara's Face*, deals with our obsession with appearance: another up-to-the-minute (and in his hands gruesome) subject which needs tackling.

There followed, unsurprisingly, an animated discussion.

SATURDAY

Alan Gibbons had to fill the early morning slot – not the easiest challenge. But, as his second career could easily be that of a



“The bulk of his speech was an impassioned plea for the importance of reading to children”

stand-up comic, he was a winner.

He talked of how, growing up in a non-bookish family of very modest income, he came to reading, giving us a lovely anecdote of seeing his father smuggling a book home and hiding it in his bedroom – his father not one for reading! – and it turned out to be

Lady Chatterley's Lover. Like Melvyn, he is a writer engaged with and deeply concerned about teenage boys. He mentioned his latest books, *The Defender* (dealing with loyalism) and *Caught in the Crossfire* (about race riots in Manchester), but the bulk of his speech was an impassioned plea for the importance of reading to children.

His enthusiasm was catching and his use of language exhilarating. He led us time and time again to different authors and their books. He must have been an inspiring teacher.

After coffee, **Herbie Brennan** and **O.R. Melling**, discussed fairies with **Gabriel Rosenstock**. This was a lively discussion, with Gabriel taking a back seat.

They considered whether fairies belong to myth, fantasy or science-fiction. Herbie believes there is a huge hunger for mythic experience and seemed surprised that so few of us confessed to believing in fairies or other-world beings! The point was made that fantasy fills the gap that organised religion has left, and involves reality, not escape.

They talked about commercial pressures from publishers to lower the targeted age range for their books. (Melvyn had also mentioned this problem.)

[Editor's note: The content of **Liam Ó Muirthile's** interesting talk is featured in his article 'É a chur i bhfocail' on page 20.]

TWO-MINUTE FAVOURITES

A very interesting slot, despite the fact that many of the participants had had guns held to their heads in the coffee break. All praise to those who had prepared!

The books chosen were:

- *The Aleutian Sparrow* by Karen Hesse (one of my own particular favourites – find it and read it!)
- *The Dark* by John McGahern
- The 'Alfie' books by Shirley Hughes
- Frank O'Connor's short stories
- *Holes* by Louis Sachar
- *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman
- *Watership Down* by Douglas Adams
- *The Giggler Treatment* by Roddy Doyle
- The books of Robert Cormier
- *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean
- *The Shadowing* by Marcus Sedgwick
- *This is All – The Pillowbook of Cordelia Kenn* by Aidan Chambers
- *The Call of the Whale* by Siobhán Parkinson
- *A Single Shard* by Linda Sue Park.

After lunch **Mary Murphy** and **Mark Oliver** discussed their collaboration on *Foley and Gem*. Mary showed us slides of how she tried out various visual ideas until one 'clicked' (and oh, the talent!), then researched the background for the artwork and played with the palette and style until she found one that fitted. She learns her characters by drawing them – an enviable gift. Relationships, to her, are the start of a story.

Mark Oliver, who had illustrated her text, also gave us a fascinating account of how he finds his characters, then his first picture, and then moves to the storyboard.

They discussed how the intermediary of an editor could be useful (as one could perhaps be more honest to an editor than to a collaborator, unless one knew them well). Mark, who has

“ Mary showed us slides of how she tried out various visual ideas until one 'clicked' ... then researched the background for the artwork and played with the palette and style until she found one that fitted ”

worked in advertising alongside writers, favoured working directly with the writer. A really interesting session.

Julie Hearn's first novel, *Follow Me Down*, arose from her MA in Victorian sociology.

Her second novel, *The Merrybegot*, deals with witchcraft in the 17th century and her latest novel, *Ivy*, is set in the world of pre-Raphaelite artists. Her excitement and enthusiasm for writing came across strongly.

She stressed the importance of research (and showed us her notebooks: *very* neat and organised, compared to how some of us collect ideas!) but, when she read an excerpt from this novel, her research was totally subsumed in her art. Her reading was a tour de force and will no doubt send those of us unfamiliar with her books straight to them.

After lunch we heard **Frank Cottrell Boyce** in discussion with **Pádraic Whyte**.

Frank started writing for children after interviewing a survivor of ethnic cleansing in Sarajevo



Frank started writing for children after interviewing a survivor of ethnic cleansing in Sarajevo who had found hope through reading the book *Heidi* ”

who had found hope through reading the book *Heidi*. As he said, when people are under real pressure, what they want is something beautiful.

His book *Millions* started life as a film, then became a book, and this then influenced the final film. Interesting! He believes that film has dictated the way we tell stories, but it was good to hear him laud the importance of the written word: his claim that ‘any old nutter can write a book’ was disproved totally.

Another interesting and amusing talk – although I felt the ‘discussion’ format was not necessary here.

SUNDAY

Joe O’Brien opened the day. He is an inspiring man indeed. A gardener who gardens with young people in Ballyfermot, he found this a therapy after the death of his son Ethan. In the winter, he turned to writing. He talked feelingly about the Ethan Trust and SOFT, the support group for the chromosome disorder Ethan suffered from.

His *Alfie Green* series was only published last October, and he is at present working enthusiastically on the eighth volume!

Then **Kanako Usui** discussed her picturebooks with **Adrienne Geoghegan**.

The discussion format really worked in this session as the two artists compared notes.

Kanako read her book, *The Fantastic Mr Wani*, a hilarious tale whose illustrations were influenced by old picturebooks with their faded colours. (This would have more easily been seen on the screen.)

Like Mary Murphy, she starts by ‘messing around’ with sketches of various dramatic situations – and eventually a character, story and style emerges. She described her technique in detail: pen and ink, pencil, collage, acrylic wash. Unlike Mark Oliver, she uses photoshop to colour in her drawings.

Meg Rosoff came to writing via advertising and gave a hilarious account of how she started her writing career. She wrote *How I Live Now* in three months after a chat with her agent, was advised to write her second book before her first came out and wrote *Just in Case* (which needed a huge amount of rewriting, having been turned down by her editors in both Puffin and Random House)

A self-characterised ‘cheerful depressive’, she read an excerpt from the start of *Just in Case* which demonstrated style, vision, characterisation, humour – yet huge tension and potential for disaster. It made me itch to read the book.

Her family, who had come across the Atlantic with her, must have been proud.

Zizou Corder is the pen name of the mother and daughter partnership of Louisa Young and

Isabel. They were in conversation with **Debbie Thomas**.

Louisa explained the genesis of *The Lionboy Trilogy* as a bedtime tale and how it grew through accretion, turning to her daughter Isabel continually for confirmation or comment. Their vivid imaginations were obvious even in the way they answered questions. Everything is grist to their mill, social problems, ecology, health, technology – with a fundamental belief in the good, the useful and the right.



She decided to be a writer when she was nine and saw *The Railway Children*, where the mother makes money from writing and buys cream cakes for her children ”

There appears to be a real collaboration between the two, although Louisa did the writing whilst Isabel kept a child-centred ‘reality-check’ on the story.

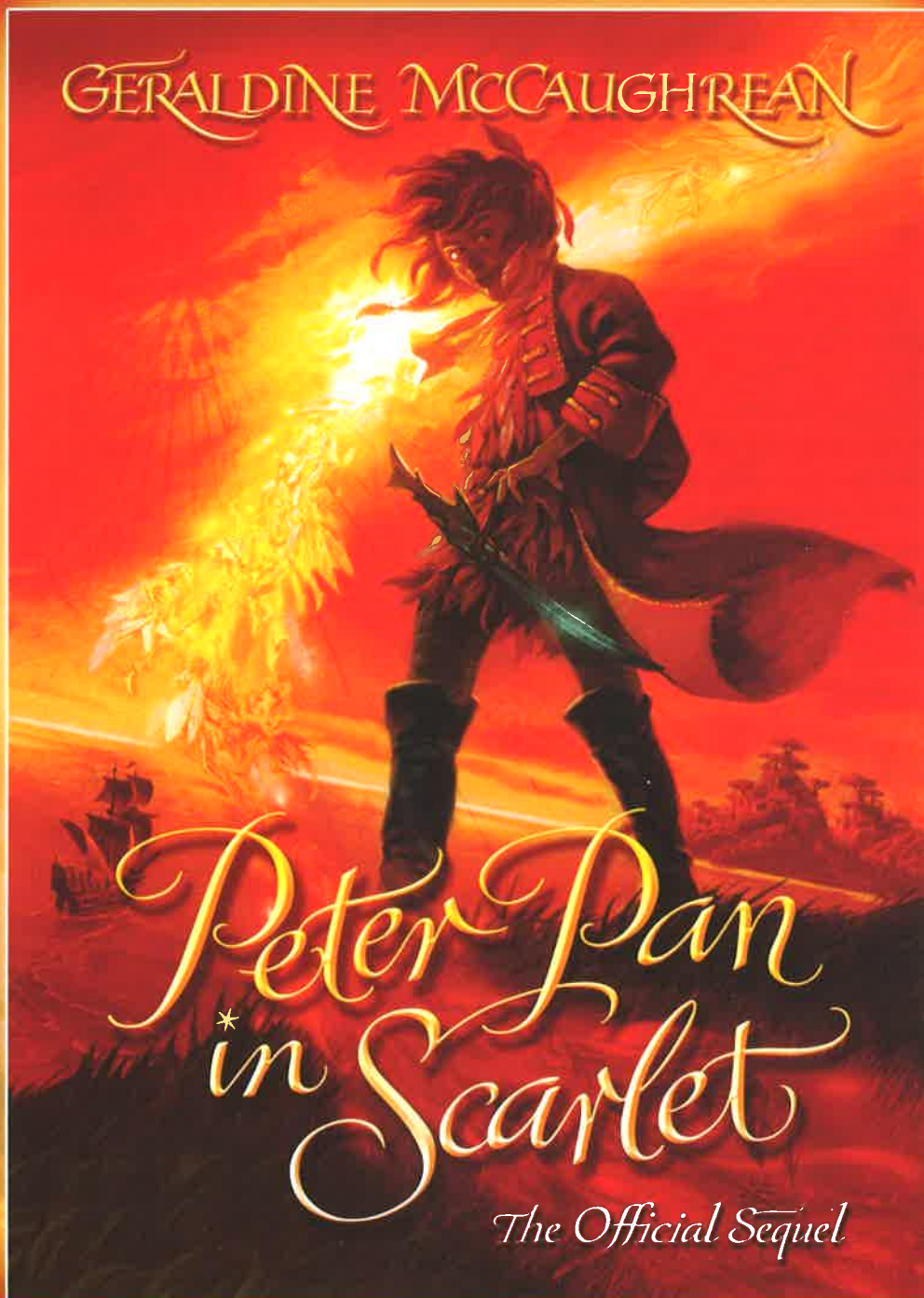
Cathy Cassidy led us in after lunch. She claimed she decided to be a writer when she was 9 and saw *The Railway Children*, where the mother makes money from writing and buys cream cakes for her children. But she also cited the influence of her Fermanagh, storytelling grandmother.

Like many authors, she was a dreamy child. (I heard her remark that ‘day-dreaming should be on

continues on page 25

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É a chur i bhfocail

Liam Ó Muirthile



AN fhreagairt a dheineann na leanaí sa rang do na focail a chuirtear rompu, do na scéalta beaga, do na rannta, a thugann sásamh. Mura bhfuil ann ach cúpla duine a dhúiseacht, a spreagadh agus a chumasú. An cur chuige ná seasamh os a gcomhair, dánta a chur ina mbeatha dóibh, cuma cén teanga, agus iarracht a dhéanamh ar an sásamh, an gliondar agus an greann is féidir a bhaint as teanga a chur in iúl dóibh. An spéis i bhfí agus i gceol agus i bhfuascailt na bhfocal a roinnt leo. An spéis dá réir i bhfuil agus i bhfeoil na filíochta.

Dánta as *The Faber Book of Beasts* a léigh mé do na ranganna i gceantar Gaeltachta Mhúscraí. Bhí tionscadal ceaptha agam chun dánta ar ainmhithe a dhéanamh le ranganna 5 agus 6. Scríobhfaimis féin na dánta, i bpáirt le chéile, nó neamhspleách ar a chéile. Léigh mé dánta dóibh as a dtraidisiún cumadóireachta féin – mura raibh i gceist ach tagairt a dhéanamh don dán álainn le Séafraidh Ó Donnchadha, an Ghleanna ar an gcoileán spainnéir a tachtadh nuair a shlog sé luch, nó don amhrán nuachumtha bunaithe a chuaigh isteach sa traidisiún áitiúil, ‘Tá Madraín sa Bhaile Agam’. Bhain leanaí an-sásamh as cnuasach Uí Dhonnchadha, a cuireadh in eagar ag tús an Fhichiú hAois, a *láimhseáil*, é á chur ó dhuine go chéile acu mar a bheadh ciseán uibheacha órga.

D’iarras ar na leanaí féin dánta a

scríobh ar ainmhithe, cuíosach luath sa tionscadal. Fuaireas tríocha dán ar Spot, agus fiche dán ar Daisy an bhó agus scór eile ar Brandy an cat. Thuigeas go gcaithfí pé obair a bhí le déanamh a chur i gcrích ó bhonn sa rang.

Bhí cnuasach beag do dhaoine óga, *An Seileitleán agus Véarsaí Seilí Eilí** curtha amach agam, bunaithe

“Tá *créole* nua tagtha chun cinn sna Gaelscoileanna, teanga a bhfuil a rialacha aici chomh hiomlán ina slí féin le *créole* Guadeloupe

ar mo thaithí theoranta ar Ghaelscoileanna cathrach. Tá *créole*

nua tagtha chun cinn sna Gaelscoileanna, teanga a bhfuil a rialacha aici chomh hiomlán ina slí féin le *créole* Guadeloupe. De réir mar a thréigearn an teanga stairiúil, tá an Ghaeilge nua ag teacht ina háit nó ag fás aníos ar thalamh bán nár phréamhaigh Gaeilge riamh ann. Tá an scéal seo amhlaidh i gcás na gceantar Gaeltachta stairiúil, chomh mór céanna agus atá i mBaile Munna nó i mBaile an Easpaig. Micreachosma uirbeach is ea an baile mór agus an sráidbhaile tuaithe ar mhórán slite. Ach i gcás na scoileanna Gaeltachta, tá rianta fágtha fós, dá thréigthe féin iad, den teanga stairiúil.

Bhí ‘An Seileitleán’ – ‘*snailplane*’ an t-aistriúchán Béarla is dócha – bunaithe cuid mhaith ar ghreann a bhaint as imirt focal, ‘seileafón’ ar ‘*cellphone*’, ‘seileacom’, ‘seilifís’,



'seileaphost' agus mar sin de.
Sampla den chineál dáin atá i
gceist ná an dán teidil féin:

AN SEILEITLEÁN

'Bhfuil éinne istigh?'
arsa an cág ag cnagadh,
gíob geab ar an seilide.

'Táim istigh liom féin,'
arsa an seilide mar fhreagra,
'Gread leat a éin.'

'Tá ocras im bholg orm,'
arsa an cág ag preabadh
go hard sa spéir.

'Ní maith liom seil-eit-ilt,'
arsa an seilide ina ghob aige,
'Tá mo chroí im bhéal.'

'Tá paraisiút ar do dhrom agat,
ná bí ag plobaireacht,
seo leat, léim.'

'Á, tá tú ag magadh fúm,
níor oscail sé cheana dom,
sin é mo bhlaosc.'

'Tabharfaidh mé rogha duit,
bogadh nó slogadh,
amach nó isteach?'

'Tabhair dom leathshoicind,
go ndéarfadh mé paidir
sula léimfead amach.'

Níl a fhios ag éinne críoch an
tseilide
má líon sé goile
má tháinig slán,

Ach an chéad uair eile a thiteann
duille
bí cinnte gur duille é
is nach seileitleán.

Tuigeadh dom gurbh fhéidir
cúpla casadh a bhaint as an
teanga stairiúil fós sna scoileanna
Gaeltachta, agus shocraíós nach é
an créol a bheadh againn mar
mheán cumadóireachta.
Misneach agus muinín a thab-
hairt do leanaí as a gcumas



Bhí *An Seileitleán* – '*snailplane*' an
t-aistriúchán Béarla is dócha – bunaithe
cuid mhaith ar ghreann a bhaint as imirt
focal, 'seileafón' ar '*cellphone*',
'seileacom', 'seilifís', 'seileaphost' agus
mar sin de



cruthaitheach teanga féin a
chuireas romham. Síneann an
cumas cruthaitheach sin go dtí
gach gné dá saol samhlaíochta
agus go dtí *teangacha* i gcoitinne.
Is fuirist, tar éis an tsaoil, milleán
a chur ar an nGaeilge mar gheall
ar easpa cumais i dteangacha,
agus lasc a thabhairt di. Fiú má
tá staid na géarchéime sroichte
ag teagasc agus ag sealbhú na
Gaeilge sa chóras oideachais,
agus gan tóin ná ceann ar a
bhfuil ar siúl, is teanga
lánacmhainneach í inti féin
– teangacha lánacmhain-
neacha a déarfainn féin –
agus athmhachnamh pola-
saithe agus beartas ó bhonn
dlite di. Ní sa bhfadhb atá
an réiteach ach ina réiteach.
Ar nós mórán rudaí eile sa
tsaol, is fusa maireachtaint
sa bhfadhb ná maireach-
taint sa réiteach. Níl aon
rud is mó a chuir as dom
féin os comhair ranganna
ná an mharbhántacht a
bhraitheas mar ghoin bheo
ar mheanmna leanaí
áirithe. Ní bhaineann sé sin
le cúrsaí teanga.

Na leanaí a ghabháil sa
phróiseas cruthaitheach féin
an réiteach. A chur ar a
gcumas a gcumas féin a
aimsíú agus a fhuascailt. B'io-
nann an rang agus seisiún beo
cumadóireachta. Ag brath ar a

gcumas agus ar a n-acmhainní
teanga féin, línte agus smaointe a
mhealladh uathu, nó mo chuid
féin a chaitheamh chucu. Gan géil-
leadh don leimhe, don
spadántacht. Casadh a bhaint as
dréachtaí a bhí déanta acu féin
agus iad a tharraingt aníos ó thal-
amh le hiallacha na runnéirí dá
mba ghá. Dheineas an dán 'An
Tarbh' ** le leanaí i scoil áirithe:

AN TARBH

Dhá thonna trom-mheáchain
agus lasc iarainn ann
mar atá ag dornálaí
a raghadh an bealach ar fad,
agus a shúil ag at
le cnap fola, fuáilte,
ach ná caithfeadh isteach
ar sparán na Bó Finne
cúinne tuáille.

Tá cnapán leis ina shúil sin
ón lá a léim sé thar an bhfál deil-
gneach
is bhris amach;
d'fhág sé súil amháin ar sileadh
le buile leis an sceach.

Ní féidir le héinne beo
dul ina chró
gan é a cheangal
le slabhra ancaire dingthe;
fós bíonn a shúil
ag glinniúint as an gceo deirge
a luíonn anuas ar a mhullach
ina scamall feirge.

Leag sé mo sheanathair go
talamh lá,
luigh ar a chliabh lena ghlúine,
chaith triúr teacht i gcabhair air
le pící is le gunna;
thuig sé ina dhiaidh
rún an duine
a thiocthadh slán as smionagar
foirgnimh fiche urlár
a thit air i gcrith talún.

Cloisim é ag búirtheil
mar a bheadh ceobhuinneán
ag fógairt dainséar carraige.

'Fááág, fááág an áit uaim'
i nglór doimhin na farraige.

Cailín amháin os mo chomhair a dúirt 'wow' nuair a léigh mé é sin dóibh an chéad lá, agus ba leor sin de theist ar an ngníomh cruthaitheach féin. Nochtas cúpla rún dóibh – nach raibh a leithéid d'ainmhlí miotasach ná eile ann agus 'sparán na Bó Finne', ach go bhféadfaidís féin í a chruthú dóibh féin, agus gurbh ionann ceobhuinneán agus fáághorn.

Nuair a léigh mé cuid den stuif i gcruth véarsaíochta a bhí á fhoghlaim ag na leanaí chuir sé alltacht orm go scaoilfí truflais mar é isteach i seomra ranga ar bith. Bhain cuid de le Ré Athbheochana thús an Fhichiú hAois, gan an chéad aois eile a bhac. Sa mhéid nach ag múineadh teanga a bhíos, níorbh aon chuid dem ghnó é, ach bhain sé le gnó na cumadóireachta. Ceann de na botúin a mheasaim féin a dheintear i gcás na filíochta, a cheapadh go gcaitheann an teanga a bheith an-bhunúsach agus i leith na simplíochta chun go dtabharfaidh leanaí leo í. Is díspeagadh é seo, dar liom, ar chumas agus ar éirim nádúrtha leanaí ar choincheapanna agus ar mhothúcháin choimpléaxacha a ghabháil chucu go hinstinniúil. 'Bheadh sé ró-

dheacair dóibh' a chloisim á rá ag daoine, ach is baolach go minic gur leisce is bun leis an meon sin, tromshuan éigin is bun le marbhántacht. Tá dánta casta go leor tagtha chun cinn de thoradh an phróisis ina rabhas féin gafa, agus tá a fhios agam go dianmhaith go dtaitníonn siad leis na leanaí. Braitheann siad gur leo féin iad, go raibh páirt acu sa ghníomh cruthaitheach.

Bheadh ceist ann maidir le ról na filíochta in ao'chor i gcomhthéax iomlán na Gaeilge. B'fhearr liom féin féachaint ar shlí eile ar an scéal.

Athmhachnamh ó bhonn a dhéanamh ar ról na Gaeilge sa chóras oideachais agus modúil éagsúla teanga a thabhairt chun cinn. Sa chéad áit, an teanga a mhúineadh mar théanga dhúchais do chainteoirí dúchais sa Ghaeltacht, cuma cén áit ina bhfuil an Ghaeltacht sin, cathair nó tuath. Bheadh litríocht áirithe fós i gceist anseo. Ar an dara dul síos, an teanga a mhúineadh mar dhara teanga agus na modúil chumarsáide ar fad a bheith i gceist laistigh den réimse sin. San áireamh ansin bheadh an créól Gaelscoile mar mhodúl teanga inti féin. Agus sa tríú háit, an teanga a mhúineadh mar theanga each-

trach, do mhuintir na hÉireann féin más rogha leo, ach a leithéid a bheith ar aon dul le teanga eachtrach ar bith eile, Fraincis, Spáinnis, agus mar sin de.

Seans go mbainfidh an fhilíocht i nGaeilge, amach anseo, le scéal iomlán na filíochta in Éirinn, seachas le cúrsaí teanga na Gaeilge. Is fada ar a cosa í, an fhilíocht chéanna, más cosa céirís ar leac oighir féin iad. Chuireas clabhsúr ar an gcnuasach *Dánta Déanta*^{**}, in éineacht le leanaí scoile Mhúscraí, le leagan nua de dhán álainn ón luathré Chríostaí in Éirinn, 'The Blackbird over Belfast Lough'. Ní miste buille scoir a thabhairt anseo leis chomh maith:

AN LON

An t-éan beag
a lig fead
as rinn ghoib
ghlanbhuí,

D'ardaigh
an díon dá nead
os cionn linn
na Carraige Duibhe

* *An Seileitleán agus Véarsaí Seilí Eilí* (Cois Life)(Léaráidí le Olivia Golden) ISBN 1901176495

** *Dánta Déanta* (Cois Life) (Léaráidí le Olivia Golden) ISBN 1901176606



Liam Ó Muirthile is a poet and writer. Born in Cork City in 1950, he learned Irish at school and in the Irish-speaking region of West Kerry. His first collection of poetry was *Tine Chnámh* in 1984 which received the Irish-American Cultural Institute's literary award and the major Oireachtas prize for poetry.

He received the Butler Award in 1996 for his novel *Ar Bhruach na Laoi*, and both the Arts Council Prize and Gradam Chló Iar-Chonnacht for his third collection of poems *Walking Time agus Dánta Eile*.

Liam has also written for the stage. His play *Tine Chnámh* was produced in 1993, *Fear and Tae* in 1995 and *Liodán na hAbhann* in 2000.

Two collections of his poetry, *An Seileitleán agus Véarsaí Seilí Eilí* (2004) and *Dánta Déanta* (2005), were written as a result of an educational project with children.

The books that brought me here...

Claire Hennessy

I was that nightmare child that parents and doting relatives hate to read to before bedtime. If a word was left out, or a page skipped over, I knew, and would happily point it out to the reader, who no doubt wished that I would just get to sleep. So I read to myself (often when I was supposed to be doing something else, though it is actually entirely possible to manoeuvre cutlery with one hand and a book with the other), and continued ignoring the input of the adults as far as reading was concerned. Teachers who tried to nudge me towards a certain kind of book were wasting their time. I wasn't listening.

I read plenty of books. I devoured them. They just weren't the sort of books that a good reader was supposed to be reading. (There is still a part of me that

“I wanted to be a part of Mr Galliano's Circus, I wanted to meet fairies and goblins. But most of all I wanted to go to boarding school”

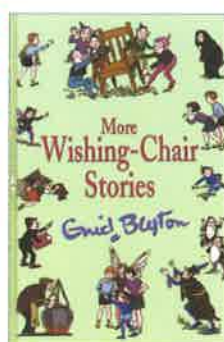
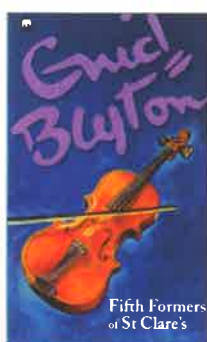
feels hopelessly inadequate because Roald Dahl's *Matilda* has, by age 5, read all of the great literature that I'm only getting around to now.) Books with talking animals bored me. I had no interest in them. Fantasy was sometimes tolerable, though I wasn't as obsessed with it as many children are. My reading material was always much more interesting



when I chose it myself – either at the local library or in bookshops with my parents, usually when we were on our summer holidays in Devon. I picked up countless Buntz, Mandy and Judy annuals and comics – stories about everything from guide dogs saving their owners to superhuman teenage girls battling witches to tales of teenage infatuation. There were robots and ghosts alongside stories like the Four Marys or The Comp, a great mix of stuff.

Then there was Enid Blyton. I'm still a Blyton fanatic – who hasn't wanted to climb up the Faraway Tree and visit whatever magical land might be up there today? Or take a trip in the Wishing-Chair, or solve a mystery with the Five Find-Outers, or have an adventure with the Famous Five, or have a cool clubhouse with an ever-changing password like the Secret Seven? I wanted to be a part of Mr Galliano's Circus, I wanted to meet fairies and goblins. But most of all I wanted to go to boarding school.

It's strange, really, that out of so many books in which children get



“Books with talking animals bored me. I had no interest in them. Fantasy was sometimes tolerable, though I wasn't as obsessed with it as many children are”

to roam free without the interference of adults, get to have all these magical adventures without Mummy and Daddy ever intervening, that it's the books which are closest to the everyday that appealed to me most. There isn't much suspension of disbelief when you're reading about a school (at least, until you go back to reread them at a later stage and realise that teenage girls simply could not have been that naïve and probably wouldn't have said 'golly' quite as much as they did). It seemed more likely, more plausible. It wasn't set in an otherworldly realm; I wasn't being asked to accept the existence of goliwogs or believe in grown-ups who could be outwitted by children every single time.

These were everyday adventures. Elizabeth of *The Naughtiest Girl in the School* struggled to come to terms with ending up at a boarding school, liking a place she was so determined to hate, and finally realising the strength it takes to change one's mind. The O'Sullivan Twins (St Clare's) faced a similar dilemma while Darrell Rivers (Mallory Towers) was utterly determined to love her school. Darrell is considered Blyton's most autobiographical character – she goes on to develop an interest in writing and was named after Blyton's husband – but as a school story

“These girls faced exams, rivalries, quarrels, and moral dilemmas – and I was riveted”

heroine she's fantastic, a girl who wants to do the right thing but is thwarted by her impatience and most of all her temper. These girls faced exams, rivalries, quarrels, and moral dilemmas – and I was riveted. They played practical jokes on their teachers, competed in sporting events, and – best of all! – had spectacular midnight feasts. The everyday can be just as fascinating and compelling as the wildest fantasy, I learned.

I was willing to suspend disbelief for books like *Sweet Valley High* (how was it possible that so many good things could happen to the Wakefield twins? And hadn't a prince tried to get Jessica to marry him earlier in the series?) and the *Babysitters Club* (why hadn't any of them realised that this was the tenth summer they'd experienced as a 13-year-old?) on the grounds that they were fun and they were comforting. Besides, moral messages are much more palatable hidden inside stories than delivered upfront. Nancy Drew was another series that I adored, and

unlike the teenage romances that I was also fond of, they had a heroine whose life didn't entirely revolve around her boyfriend. Like the *Babysitters Club* and *Malory Towers*, friendships were just as – if not more – important than one's love life.

The Poetry Girl by Beverly Dunlop sneakily introduced me to the works of William Blake, which meant that my contribution to a group project on tigers in third class consisted of handing up his poem 'The Tyger' and not doing much else. Even though his spelling and rhyming were a bit wonky, I thought, it was good stuff. I had a look at some Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Percy Shelley after that – there were a few poetry collections alongside all the Great Writers editions on the shelves at home, territory I mostly avoided. It wasn't until I was about 15 that I really got into poetry but I still think Blake is one of the greats. English classes in school introduced me to poets like UA Fanthorpe and Carol Ann Duffy, and I was thrilled (in an unashamed-English-nerd sort of way) when Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson were on the curriculum for my Leaving Cert.

As far as Irish writers went, there was Siobhán Parkinson, Martina Murphy, Jane Mitchell, June Considine and Margrit Cruickshank, all writing about a modern Dublin that was much more familiar than 1940s England or 1980s California. So exciting things could happen in Irish secondary schools too! Who knew? The three contemporary writers I loved the most were non-Irish, though – Paula Danziger and Judy Blume, both American, and Jacqueline Wilson, queen of British children's

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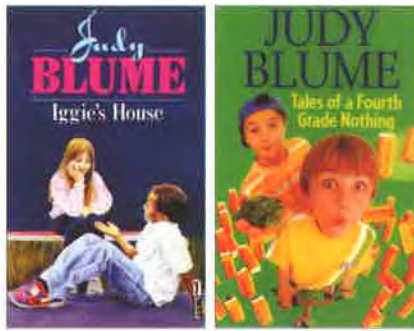
“

Danziger's books are short and sweet, but with a lot of heart and humour. I

credit/blame her for my addiction to the first-person present-tense method of telling a story

”

fiction. Danziger's books are short and sweet, but with a lot of heart and humour. I credit/blame her for my addiction to the first-person present-tense method of telling a story. Blume and Wilson write about kids in difficult



situations, often concerning family break-ups. Some of the stuff – Blume's *Tiger Eyes* (dealing with a father's violent death) and Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* (dealing with a mother's mental illness), for example – is surprisingly dark for anyone who tends to forget that children's books often deal with tough and scary stuff.

I think what all of these books have in common is that they took kids seriously – by giving them a voice, by making them the heroes. In a world that's designed for

adults, and children have to do what they're told *or else*, it's a wonderful comfort to have a shelf full of books about people your own age, people with stories to tell you. A story doesn't have to be about a magical creature or someone destined from birth to be a great hero – it can be about the ordinary, everyday people in the world whose adventures and escapades can turn out to be just as wonderful and gripping.

Claire Hennessy is author of *Afterwards*, *Girls on the Verge*, *Dear Dairy*, *Being Her Sister*, *Memories*, *Stereotype*, *Good Girls Don't*. Claire was born on 24 February 1986, and lives in Knocklyon, Dublin, with her parents, a younger brother, a cat, and too many books. Her favourite authors include Marian Keyes, Cathy Kelly, Patricia Scanlan and Martina Murphy.

Claire is currently studying psychology in Trinity College Dublin. Visit Claire online at www.clairehennessy.com

CBI Summer School

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the school curriculum' quoted to a large school group by Larry O'Loughlin the following week in Galway, to great applause!)

She read us a section from her new book *Scarlet*, set in the West of Ireland – complete with passages *as gaeilge*. We heard a very believable account of a child uprooted from her home and put into a strange environment.

John Boyne had the end slot.

John, an established adult novelist, is another person who always knew he wanted to write. *The Boy with the Striped Pyjamas* started with a picture of two boys at a fence, and came into his head practically fully-fledged.

He talked about the power of having the scary, violent stuff off-stage (Shakespeare would have



Ger Meade presents Robert Dunbar with his Lifetime Achievement Award.

approved), so as to leave his readers 'more disquieted than terrified'.

He also talked about the problem of writing on such a difficult subject when the writer was not personally involved – which was partly why he decided to put the words 'a fable' in the title. His aim was to stay true to the 'emotional honesty' of the story and to open up this subject to children, so that we did not forget. As he said, he

doesn't understand how the camps happened any more than Bruno does.

This led to a lively discussion. He fielded questions about the age and credibility of his main character and his use of almost-actual terms like 'Outwith,' in what was ostensibly a fable, with charm.

He was a good choice as final speaker in a very interesting conference.

And, of course, this year two awards were made to two very deserving gentlemen. **Michael O'Brien** was given the *Summer School Award of the Decade* (unfortunately in his absence, but his son, Ivan, was there to accept on his behalf) and the *CBI Lifetime Achievement Award* went to **Robert Dunbar** who, justifiably, was given a standing ovation. No better man!

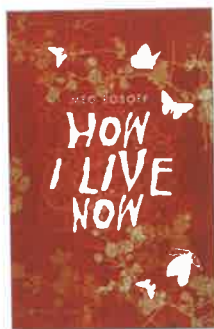
Our woman in London Prizes and Parties

Mary Byrne

It's prize time again and *Fly by Night* by Frances Hardinge has won the prestigious *Branford Boase Award*. The BBA, whose sponsors include Children's Laureate Jacqueline Wilson, is an award for debut children's fiction. Last year's winner was Meg Rosoff whose acclaimed novel, *How I Live Now*, went on to become a bestseller. Let's hope for the same for Hardinge's wonderful tale of book-loving revolutionaries, set in an alternative 18th century. Clever, exciting and a joy to read for the sheer beauty of the writing (and because one of the main characters is a homicidal goose), *Fly by Night* is an excellent choice. Highly commended was the Book Trust Teenage Prize winner, *Century* by Sarah Singleton, an atmospheric, gothic tale that lingers long after the final page.

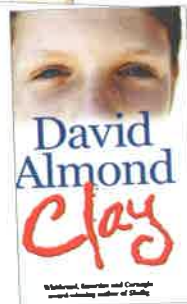
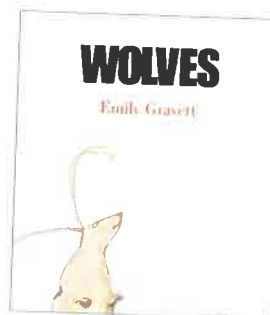
The Carnegie and Greenaway winners have not, at the time of writing, been announced. The judging meetings are famously 'heated' and I'd love to eavesdrop as the librarians do battle to select

The judging meetings are famously 'heated' and I'd love to eavesdrop as the librarians do battle to select the winner



the winner. The shortlists for both are so strong that it would be foolhardy to try to pick the winner, though I can't help but root for Mal Peet, whose multi-layered and engrossing novel of World

War II, called *Tamar*, I highly recommend. Given that his competitors include David Almond and Geraldine McCaughrean, both beloved of librarians, he must be an outsider but by the time of reading you will know if I got it right.



Emily Gravett's *Wolves* has found its way into the heart of readers in a very special way, although any of the talented illustrators on the list would make worthy winners



I wonder if anybody has yet compiled a list of Books that Didn't Make the Carnegie Shortlist but Should Have? I could come up with quite a few all by myself. Suggestions by email please! As for the Greenaway, no announcement yet but Emily Gravett's

Wolves has found its way into the heart of readers in a very special way, although any of the talented illustrators on the list – Mini Grey, Oliver Jeffers, Dave McKean, David Roberts and Tony DiTerlizzi – would make worthy winners. Watch out for *The Incredible Book Eating Boy* by Belfast's Oliver Jeffers, coming in September.

An author can only win the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize once, but it still comes as a great surprise to me to see David Almond on the longlist. Why hasn't he won it already, for *Skellig*, or *Kit's Wilderness* or *Fire Eater*? We shall have

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Kate and her books

Annie O'Doherty

KATE is now 15 months old and walking confidently. She sleeps in her own bedroom, and there are always a few books left in her cot when she is asleep, so that she might have a read when she wakes up. This is for the benefit of sleeping parents, and it seems to work, occasionally!

Having an older sibling means that there are already quite a number of children's books in the house, so Kate had a head-start in terms of availability of books. Some of the older books would have been acquired up to 16 years ago! One example is *Old Mother Hubbard*, by Colin and Jacqui Hawkins (Little Mammoth). This is one that needs to be read aloud and has definite appealing rhythm and rhyme. Kate also has this on CD and enjoys listening to it in the car. This is one of those books where the amount of text is

“She enjoys the pictures with the tiger pouring the tea into his mouth, eating out of the pots and drinking the bath water. She makes appropriate tiger noises throughout.”

“Kate had her first trip to the zoo recently and was absolutely stunned by the giraffe. When she came home she went straight to her books, to look at animal images”

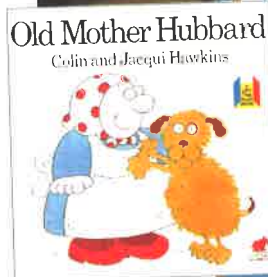


just perfect for each page opening, so that the pace of the reading exactly matches the time required for her to take in the image.

One of Kate's favourite books at the moment is *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* by Judith Kerr. What probably appeals is the combination of the familiar home setting (although very 60s!) juxtaposed with the absurdness of a strange big tiger. She enjoys the pictures with the tiger pouring the tea into his mouth, eating out of the pots and drinking the bath water. She makes appropriate tiger noises throughout.

Kate loves a visit to the bookshop. Some shops are more toddler-friendly than others. Bookshops need to be accessible to the very young, and to reflect a welcome attitude for beginner purchasers – who may want to browse beyond the books for their own age-group! For example Dubray Books in Rathmines has a special area for young children with toddler-sized chairs; Kate enjoys spending time there and invariably it results in a purchase.

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St Patrick's Centre for Children's Literature and Culture Studies

Celia Keenan



“The basic academic question we ask is ‘what are we saying to children when we write or make television programmes, films, animation or computer games for them?’”

disability in literature for young people. Her findings should be vital to writers, publishers, educators and it should result in benefits to children, both able-bodied and with disabilities.

Our centre will interest itself in every form of text for children. The basic academic question we ask is ‘what are we saying to children when we write or make television programmes, films, animation or computer games for

IN an exciting new development, the St Patrick's Centre for Children's Literature and Culture Studies was launched at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, on Monday, June 12th by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern TD. It will build on the work which the college has already pioneered with Ireland's only taught MA in children's literature (almost ten years in existence) and our expanding doctoral programme in children's literature. We in the English department at St Patrick's College are very proud of our MA students, graduates, and doctoral students. They take the fruits of their studies out into the larger community and share their expertise in a variety of ways. A cause for great satisfaction is the continuing engagement of graduates of the course with children's literature both in academic and wider educational and social domains. Hence the present chairperson of Children's Books Ireland, the present editor of *Inis*, and the education officer of Poetry Ireland are all graduates of the course. Two graduates now operate as Department of Education and Science curriculum support advisers for

the primary English curriculum. Another has joined the Department of Education and Science inspectorate, one has become a lecturer in English in a fellow college of education and one has written and published a very successful series of children's books. One is a journalist who regularly writes about children's literature and another has made a very valuable contribution to the library in St Patrick's College. Two of our MA graduates are at present engaged in doctoral research in children's literature in St Patrick's College. Many of the graduates have published research papers and articles arising from their research for their theses.

The Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature was founded as a result of an initiative from St Patrick's College, because it became clear that such a society was needed to cater for the growing number of such students.

We study children's literature and culture as a discipline in its own right, but what we do is of benefit to the wider community. For example, one of our doctoral students has just embarked on her researches into the treatment of

“[The Centre] will build on the work which the college has already pioneered with Ireland's only taught MA in children's literature and our expanding doctoral programme in children's literature”

them?' However our centre will also interest itself in what children say to us and to each other. So it will engage with what children write. Young people today probably write as much if not more than in the past, much of it in the form of text messages, email and internet chat rooms. A large part of many children's leisure time is spent writing. We frequently react with fear and anxiety to this use of electronic media by young people. We read articles in our newspapers warning about Bebo and other youth-friendly websites, and how parents need to be watchful, particularly for things like bullying. Of course this anxiety is natural and correct, but we forget that young people said even more horrible things to each other in playgrounds long ago, before they had access to technology. In the 1950's Iona and Peter Opie published *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, a collection filled with bullying rhymes, racist rhymes, sexist rhymes and rhymes of religious bigotry that would be shocking even today. These rhymes were for the most part recited in the street or schoolyard, out of the hearing of adults. The difference with today's lore and the biggest danger to young people is that adults can access the contemporary sites. Children have good reason to fear adults, but why are we adults so afraid of children? If we listen to them openly, give what they say and write the kind of close critical attention that we, especially in English departments, pay to adult texts, then maybe we could begin to break down the barriers.

Children are not the only people who need to learn to read. We adults must learn to listen attentively and read what children



L to R: Pauric Travers, President of St Patrick's College, Mary Shine Thompson, Celia Keenan, An Taoiseach Bertie Aherne and Brenna Clarke, Head of the English Department.

“If we listen to [children] openly, give what they say and write the kind of close critical attention that we pay to adult texts, then maybe we could begin to break down the barriers”

write, not simply to measure skills or help with literacy, important as these are, but more importantly to learn to understand what young people have to say. If we really did that we would probably find lots to delight us but lots to trouble us too. It might help us to focus on the important things and be less troubled by more superficial things like dress or hair-length. To do that is part of the task of this centre.

The St Patrick's Centre for Children's Literature and Culture Studies provides a new focus for the study of children's literature and culture in Ireland. Its multi-

disciplinary nature will enable scholars to focus on all aspects of children's and young people's literature and culture, from classic stories, poems, games and rhymes, to comics, graphic novels, film, video, rock music and lyrics, computer games, blog sites, and text messages.

It will host seminars, symposia and conferences. It will build on its record of publications in children's literature and culture, and will welcome visiting scholars, experts and students from abroad.

It will offer an archival home to children's writers, illustrators and publishers for their manuscripts and papers.

It will offer teaching and research fellowships and scholarships. It will engage in joint projects with other institutions at home and abroad. A dedicated physical space will be devoted to the centre as part of the college's new building programme.

The centre will facilitate the engagement of young people in taking ownership of and evaluating their own culture. We are looking forward to our children's launch which will take place in the 2006-07 academic year.

Analysing Alice

Debbie Thomas

HOW better to evoke childhood memories than by rereading a favourite book? The air-punching joy when Charlie finds his golden ticket, or the grief when Beth dies in *Little Women*: certain passages can recreate the mood, mindset, time and place of a first reading. Such nostalgia is a common starting point for the growing number of adults who are choosing to deconstruct Dahl and critique Carroll.

Children's literature is slipping deeper into the mainstream, with more and more universities running courses, either as part of a formal degree or as extra-mural studies. It is now offered as a BA module both at Trinity College and University College Dublin (UCD) – and not just for English students.

Professor Declan Kiberd, chair of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama at UCD, says the Children's Literature module introduced this year has attracted students across the board, from medics to mathematicians. 'We've had to turn people away. It's the most popular first year module ... perhaps partly because students are just beginning to look back on their childhood. It's an area they can all relate to.'

The subject's rising profile – not entirely unconnected to a boy with a wand – is reflected in bookshops, where the children's shelves are heaving.

Robert Dunbar, who has taught children's literature in Dublin since 1980, applauds the growing

“Children's literature is as worthwhile to study as Shakespeare or metaphysical poetry”

interest. 'Until recently in Ireland you'd go to social functions and people would ask, "What's your speciality?" If you said, "Children's literature," they'd look at you as if you were some sort of strange beast. But over the past few years it's begun to creep into the fold of respectability.' He says the development of the BA module has helped enormously. 'It's bound to sow the notion that children's literature is as worthwhile to study as Shakespeare or metaphysical poetry.'

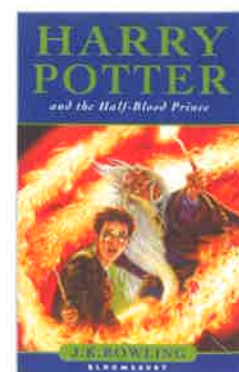
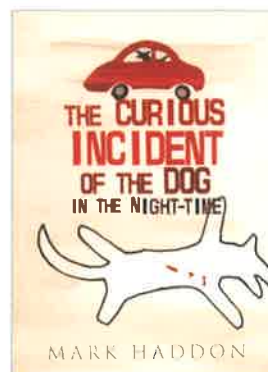
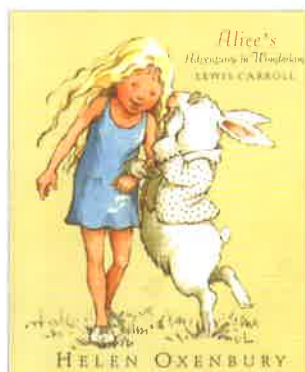
Pioneers in the study of children's literature are staff at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Following the college's linkage with Dublin City University (DCU) in 1994, they established Ireland's



first MA course in the subject.

Nine years after the first students embarked on the part-time two-year degree, it is still the only such MA course in the country. 'DCU was open and flexible in its approach,' says the director Celia Keenan. 'Other more conventional institutions in Ireland had yet to see the value of children's literature studies as an academic discipline.'

While children's literature happily gains street cred, its study raises some thorny issues. Most obviously, what exactly *is* a children's book? Not such a silly question with the emergence of 'crossover' books – those appealing both to children and adults – such as the Harry Potter series and *The Curious Incident of the Dog*



in the *Night-Time*. While it is a whole debate in itself, the general definition is any book deemed by its publishers to be suitable for their children's list.

Whatever its designation, what can be gained from studying children's as opposed to adult literature? Celia Keenan believes its study offers specific challenges. 'There is always a problem related to possible condescension when an adult writes for children. Why do we do it? Is it right? Should we be as honest with children as we are with adults? Adult writers don't feel they must shield their readers from cruelty or violence or bigotry. Children's writers do. So can writing for children really be literature? The best context to study it in seems to be alongside adult literature in the broad cultural context.' And like any literary study, warns Robert Dunbar, it requires discipline. 'I've met people who've abandoned their study in children's literature because they felt it was coming between them and the books.'

But for most students the rewards are huge. Kieran Fanning, a primary school teacher, chose the MA at St Patrick's after he found himself returning home every day 'to an apartment of bored teachers who'd resorted to Ricky Lake and Judge Judy for afternoon entertainment.' Passionate about children's books, he was also toying with the idea of writing something himself. Besides the delights of revisiting his childhood he found the course helped him in the classroom, both in teaching and encouraging his pupils to read. And to top it all, a creative writing project on the MA led him to write a very successful series of educational puzzle books for children.

As well as teachers and writers, the MA course has attracted lecturers, librarians, journalists, business people and parents. Some have returned to their jobs with a broader understanding and more to offer children and colleagues; some have changed career, and several have acted as advisers to the

and scholarships as well as hosting seminars and conferences.

For those keen to pursue the literature without the letters after their name, there are extra-mural options, such as the recent Fairytales in Contemporary Culture course at UCD. And for those attached to their armchairs there

Should we be as honest with children as we are with adults? Adult writers don't feel they must shield their readers from cruelty or violence or bigotry. Children's writers do

Department of Education and Science on the new curriculum. Other MA graduates have continued their academic studies, pursuing doctorates at St Patrick's, other Irish universities or abroad. To support students in their research the Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature was established a few years ago. And the Centre for Children's Literature and Culture Studies, which opened in June at St Patrick's College, provides a new focus for study in Ireland. From classic stories and poems to videos, rock music and even text messaging, the centre covers all aspects of young people's literature and culture. It will offer teaching and research fellowships

is of course distance learning. Useful websites are:

- www.ucd.ie/adulted/
- www.ncrcl.ac.uk/distance_learning/intro_to_ccl.html
- www.spd.dcu.ie/main/index.html
- <http://www.isscl.com/>
- www.roehampton.ac.uk/pg/cldl

Whatever the level of study, whatever the goal, children's literature provides a rich opportunity to re-examine and reconnect with childhood.

But beware a soft and cuddly approach, warns Celia Keenan. 'I think it is a mistake to think of children's literature as reassuring or cute or easier than adult literature. If you set out to study it like that you will be very disappointed. You need to be tough.'

And also, perhaps, still a youngster at heart. 'I've never totally understood why certain people should choose to specialise in children's literature,' says Robert Dunbar. 'Perhaps it means you're some sort of delayed adolescent yourself, still hoping to learn something.'

For those keen to pursue the literature without the letters after their name, there are extra-mural options

A puc fo eeffoc with Dave Donohue

Paddy O'Doherty

THE character of Walter Speazlebud comes from the imagination (or *noitanigami* – don't worry, you soon get used to it...) of Dave Donohue. Walter Speazlebud first made an appearance in an eponymous novel in 2002, published by The O'Brien Press, and received much critical acclaim. It's about a boy who can spell backwards and has special powers which let him travel backwards in time. Now Walter features in another novel, *Moon Man*, to be published by Egmont later in September.

“I would automatically just turn the words around in my head, and spell them backwards. Kids love the sound of their names backwards”

A few months ago a proof copy of *Moon Man* landed on my desk. I met the author at a CBI event shortly after and we arranged to have a chat about this spelling backwards thing. (Reliable sources tell me that as a little girl I used to drink *klim* and eat *shif*, so I had a natural curiosity about this linguistic skill...)



Dave told me that ever since he can remember he enjoyed saying and later spelling words backwards. 'I would automatically just turn the words around in my head, and spell them backwards. Kids love the sound of their names backwards.' Dave uses this skill when he visits kids in schools: '... within the space of 30 or 40 minutes they all learn to spell backwards. Most kids of that age can do it, once they get how it works, then they'll have a shot at it. It's something that teachers may feel is a little bit subversive at first ... they may feel, "look, we're trying to teach them to spell forwards!" ... but they very quickly understand that in order to get it backwards, you've got to know it forwards. I had a really



nice experience in a school in Kent last year, where a boy spelt "hippopotamus" backwards and won the competition; I asked him if he was the best speller in the class and he said that he was dyslexic. He never put his hand up to get involved in anything. The teachers wrote about it in the local paper, suggesting that backwards spelling could be used as a literacy tool.'

Dave doesn't label Walter Speazlebud as dyslexic, but he believes that Walter '... has a relationship with words that is different from the others in his class. He's got strengths, like his imagination, and he's got weaknesses too, things that hold him back. As the opening line from the book says, "Walter Speazlebud was an ordinary boy but there were some things about him that were extraordinary".'

I asked Dave if the character of Walter was based on his own experience: 'I wasn't an ideal pupil, I was distracted easily. I was a dreamer – so very much the Walter character.'

Dave has been involved in various careers before turning his experience and his *noitanigami* to children's books and sending a draft of *Walter Speazlebud* off to The O'Brien Press. He studied graphic design at art college in Waterford. However, his interest in music and songwriting

“

Go to www.moonmanonline.com for fun asteroid and spelling backwards games”

brought him to New York where he worked as a music journalist and documentary film-maker and released three critically acclaimed albums with his band, The Floors. He later worked as a music supervisor for film, an area he still works in from his native Carlow.

Recently Dave has been working with some classes in a local primary school in Carlow on the process of writing a book, from first draft to finished product. The children were interested in everything from the rejection letters to the cover design of his new book, *Moon Man* (reviewed on page 46).

“

Moon Man explores, among other things, the idea that the famous moon landing of 1969 could have been faked”

Moon Man explores, among other things, the idea that the famous moon landing of 1969 could have been faked – a popular conspiracy theory based on the fact that some of the moon photographs show shadows that couldn't have existed in space. The proof copy that I read did not have any illustrations, so I was interested to hear that the book will feature real NASA



photographs taken at the time but with some Photoshop manipulation. An original idea and one that will probably make the young reader take a closer look at what's real, imagined and 'manipulated'.

I particularly liked the relationship between Walter and his Grandad, but Dave told me this was not from his personal experience: 'My grandparents were dead long before I was born ... I

liked reinventing Grandad – exploring what the relationship might have been like ... and the complex issues around such a connection. How does the Grandad introduce or explain to the boy that he's dying and what can he give him to

strengthen him? These are things I like to explore as a writer, things that are important to me... Your brief as a writer is to try and crystallise complexities like these and simplify them – and in a way that doesn't interfere with the adventure and excitement and entertainment value.'

Dave Donohue will be taking part in a CBI event at Farmleigh House on September 10th. And in October, 'Space Week' takes place from 4th to 10th [www.spaceweek.org] when you might catch him before he flies off to events for the CBI Book Festival (Oct 4th–28th) – www.childrensbooksireland.com for more info.

If you meet Dave in singing form he may give you his rendition of *Danny Boy* – backwards, fo esruoc.

Our woman in London

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to wait till October to find out if he wins this time around for *Clay*. Also on the longlist is debut novelist Siobhan Dowd, author of *A Swift Pure Cry*, a heartrending story inspired by the Kerry Babies Case, and *Framed* by Frank Cottrell Boyce, who, like Almond, appears on both the Carnegie and Guardian lists.

“

Also on the longlist is debut novelist Siobhan Dowd, author of *A Swift Pure Cry*, a heartrending story inspired by the Kerry Babies Case”

The big party of the summer was the Queen's 80th Birthday Party. Why on earth One would wish to invite thousands of children into One's garden at all is a complete mystery, let alone on One's birthday. PR for the Palace, perhaps? (An idea that could be adopted by Leinster House?) Reports suggest that the real queen as far as the children were concerned was either Jacqueline Wilson or JK Rowling. Mention of JK Rowling reminds me, horror of horrors, that she harbours homicidal tendencies towards Harry and she may actually kill him off. She hinted at it on the *Richard & Judy Show*, so it must be true. Richard & Judy are often said to be the most powerful people in UK publishing today. Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction...

Forgotten books

Robert Dunbar

In the first of an occasional series of articles Robert Dunbar reconsiders some 'forgotten' children's novels; he starts with John Rowe Townsend's *Forest of the Night*.

FIRST published in 1965 and appearing in various subsequent editions, John Rowe Townsend's *Written for Children* seems certain of a permanent place on the reference shelves of all students of children's literature: it remains, as Humphrey Carpenter has commented, 'one of the most useful books on the subject'. Equally valuable is his later collection of essays, *A Sense of Story* (later revised under the title *A Sounding of Storytellers*), while his entertaining *Trade and Plum-Cake for Ever; Huzza!*, makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of John Newbery, one of the key early figures in the history of children's books. While, however, the scholarship and insights of these Townsend works continue to have a lasting value, the twenty or so children's and young

adult books which he also wrote have not survived quite as well. (The one principal exception to this is his 1969 novel, *The Intruder*, shortlisted in its time for the Carnegie Medal, and now classified by some as a 'contemporary classic'.) By far the most neglected of his novels – and in my opinion the most under-rated – is his 1974 title,

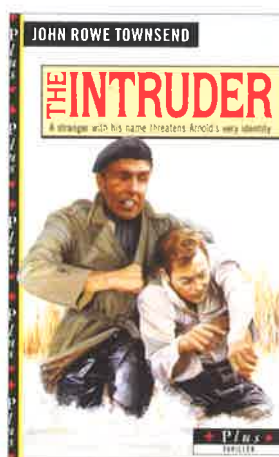
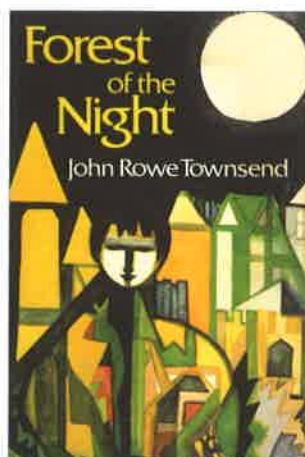
“By far the most neglected of his novels – and in my opinion the most under-rated – is his 1974 title, *Forest of the Night*”

Forest of the Night. When this first appeared it was seen as marking a change of direction for Townsend, in that his previous novels such as *Gumble's Yard*, *Widdershins Crescent*, *Hell's Edge* and *The Hallersage Sound*



had focused, in strongly realistic terms, on the less privileged aspects of contemporary British working class life: his creation of the North of England town called Cobchester and, in particular, its slum area known as 'The Jungle', were seen as introducing a new voice and emphasis to the children's fiction of the 1960s. With his 1970 novel, *Goodnight, Prof Love*, Townsend moved into a deeper exploration of inter-relationships among the young, still beset by adults who seem unyieldingly prevaricating and still, ultimately, placed in situations where their intrinsic inadequacy would seem to militate against their ever attaining definitive resolution of their dilemmas.

The Fairground traversed by Graham and Lynn, the young protagonists, in a key sequence in *Goodnight, Prof Love*, may be seen as a forerunner of the phantasmagoric landscape which the anonymous boy-hero of Townsend's *Forest of the Night* has to journey before his transition from boy to man can be successfully made. The astringency of style which characterises *The*



Intruder and *Goodnight, Prof Love* has been chiselled here even further so that the boy's wanderings in search of the mysterious 'Buildings' are thrown into stark relief against the sinister and threatening background of echoes from Blake's poem, 'The Tyger', a starkness which is emphasised by the enigmatic personages, typified by their gnomic utterances, whom he encounters on his quest. In this context, the notion of 'quest' is to be taken altogether more literally than in the earlier more naturalistic novels, for the boy's search here is hauntingly reminiscent of ancient mythical and legendary journeys and, like them, consists largely of a series of steps to be taken, of dangers to be faced, before he can claim to have successfully proved himself worthy of entry to manhood. The novelist here operates on a symbolic level, a device which, while perhaps having the effect of diminishing the immediacy of his earlier books, has the supreme merit of universalising the protagonist's experience: the result is to impel a sense of recognition on the reader's part rather than, perhaps, of identification.

Aware that he is at the stage where some form of change is imminent – 'There was something that told me it was time. I went from home because I am not a child. I am myself, I told them. I am myself alone, I am not yours' – the boy embarks on his nightmarish tour of the rapacious city. His only mentor is the vaguely recalled voice of the equally anonymous girl who has been with him at some point but who now remains in his consciousness merely as an agent of support when his will momentarily wavers and particularly when he is being confronted by the series of temptations met on the path of his initiation into selfhood. These

temptations assume human form but their precise identities are blurred and inter-merging; what they have in common, however, is that they offer a series of visions of adulthood, the hollowness of which has to be recognised by the boy before he can hope to forge an identity for himself. Just as some areas of the city will offer appar-



These temptations assume human form but their precise identities are blurred and inter-merging; what they have in common, however, is that they offer a series of visions of adulthood



ently soothing physical gratification of his senses, a woman, capable of various disguises, will offer a smiling face and enfolding flesh; an old, starving man, partially rejuvenated by being fed, will afford macabre glimpses of incipient monstrosity, signalled by an accentuated heartbeat which eventually passes over to the boy. Yet neither of these is a delivering vision, for the boy's needs, while still only dimly perceived, still drive him further through the ranks of people who threaten to block his progress.

A momentary escape to the 'chimney tree-tops' enables him, as he surveys the city beneath, to appreciate its paradoxical fusion of danger and beauty, the attributes symbolised in the personages of his tempters; and it is here that baptism, in the form of a rainfall and a vital element of his ritualistic pilgrimage, offers a new perception. The man with the poised calmness whom he next encounters, in the book-lined walls of his swaying room, thus offers a kind of omniscience, but it is an omniscience which, spider-like, wants to entrap the boy.

Escape is only possible because of the momentary transmutation of the bookman's assistant into the girl whose voice is always at his ear and because of the arousal in him of the innate warmth, liveness, power and sexuality which overthrow the bookman's guile. Another kind of knowledge, the knowledge of aesthetic, intellectual and creative

awareness, is proffered by a younger tempter who also, however, enlightens the boy as to the true nature of the 'monstrosity' he has glimpsed earlier: by having fed the old man, the boy has, at least partially, himself created that monstrosity and must accordingly come to terms with it, since, being his own creation, it will continue to pursue him until manhood, now impending, is upon him.

The final scenes of the book see this monstrosity assuming a more explicitly bestial, tigerish shape as the boy becomes increasingly lured to sensual spectacles and attractions. But such is his growing awareness that he can now tread through these with much less danger, even if still a prey to worries about possible betrayal by those who seem to offer him their warmth. It is the reappearing girl who directs him from these spurious shadows to the genuine warmth of flesh-and-blood by recommending that he seek reality in the market of the city. Here, in a sanctuary for the homeless, he encounters quintessential humanity

in the form of the aged and destitute woman whom he clasps in an embrace, a gesture which finds his heart beating vigorously once more, but with a heartbeat that is now truly his own. When dawn approaches, the old woman has become transmuted to the girl, whose words, 'I have always been here. You had to find me, that is all', signal the ultimate departure of the tiger beast, likewise now transmuted to a pad of great soft paws. The time is now ripe for a return to the Buildings, to the black scarred hulk of the boy's first encounter with the starving man turned monster. But on this return visit, the force which earlier threatened to engulf him has now, by virtue of his pilgrimage, been assimilated: the intensely fierce beauty of blazing sexuality has assumed the fearful symmetry alluded to in Blake's poem and the boy, transformed by his new consciousness into a young golden man, can come to terms with it. In time, his own son will follow similar initiatory paths to manhood and independence, just indeed as his own father had done; but in the meantime, in the book's closing words, 'all is well'.

In the overall development of Townsend as a writer, it is tempting, as already suggested, to see, in *Forest of the Night*, his move away from the naturalism and realism of his earlier work as a indication of dissatisfaction with these earlier genres. The departure from the strictly earth-bound contemporary setting obviously liberates the writer from the area of particular truths to, possibly, general ones, though this view needs to be immediately qualified to the extent that, given the increased stylistic sophistication, the compression and the symbolism inherent in the 'allegory' or 'fantasy' novel, these truths may

“The final scenes see this monstrosity assuming a more explicitly bestial, tigerish shape as the boy becomes increasingly lured to sensual spectacles and attractions”

well be expected to lie too deep for those readers for whom the books are ostensibly intended: in a memorably succinct appraisal of *Forest of the Night* Carpenter describes it as 'a symbolic exploration of adolescent sexuality...which seems to have baffled most of its readers'. But its 'general truths' are definitely there, visible beneath a poetic, romanticised perception of adolescence, a perception which gives some meaning to Philippe Aries' identification, in *Centuries of Childhood*, of the prototype of the 'typical' adolescent as Wagner's Siegfried. By excluding naturalistic detail and reducing his characters to anonymity, Townsend creates what is in effect a fable

that, significantly, is the only one of his early stories which allow for a happy resolution. For the literate adolescent who is experiencing bouts of self-questioning and who needs to be assured that his or her search for meaning will finally lead to understanding, *Forest of the Night* would seem to be a valuable book. Whether its highly coloured vision of the adolescent experience reaches nearer 'reality' than, say, the *Jungle of Cobchester* is problematic, but the novel deserves, at the very least, some new recognition as one of the most adventurous of the young adult (or, as we called them then, teenage) fictions of its time.

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Robert Dunbar has recently retired from his post as Head of English at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin. For some 40 years he has taught children's literature at primary, secondary and tertiary level, in addition to giving numerous talks and papers on the subject both in Ireland and abroad. He has edited, or co-edited, five anthologies for children and is also the author of a large number of widely published academic essays.

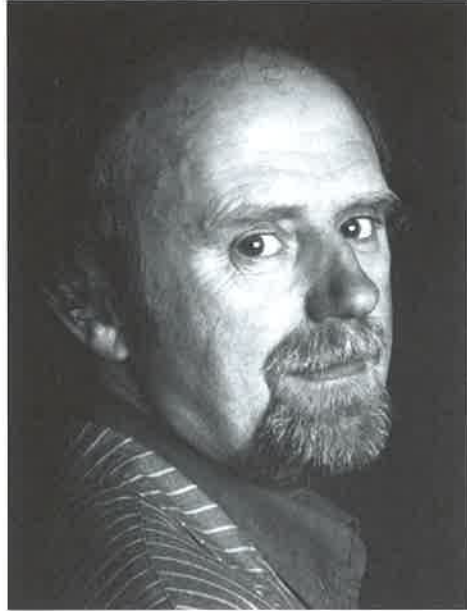
Among the more recent of these are ones on subjects such as the 19th century writer Flora Shaw, the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde and the questions of 'ownership' arising from the use made of intertextual reference in selected young adult fiction: a forthcoming essay will deal with some of the particular thematic and linguistic features of Ulster children's literature.

He has contributed articles to various academic reference works, including the forthcoming *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature*. He is a regular children's book reviewer for a range of publications, including *The Irish Times*, *Books for Keeps*, *The School Librarian*, *The Times Educational Supplement* and *Inis*. He is a frequent contributor to several radio programmes and has conducted public interviews with such children's writers as John Boyne, Kevin Brooks, Eoin Colfer, Siobhán Parkinson and Kate Thompson.

Three prize-winning first-time children's authors



Deirdre Madden



Kevin Kiely



Eileen O'Hely

IT was unusual to see three first-time children's authors on the CBI Bisto Awards shortlist this year. It was even more of a surprise when each of them went on to win a prize! Deirdre Madden won the prestigious Eilís Dillon Award for her first children's book with her novel *Snakes' Elbows* (Orchard); Kevin Kiely won an Honour Award for his first children's novel *A Horse Called El Dorado* (O'Brien Press) and Eileen O'Hely, along with illustrator Nicky Phelan, also won an Honour Award for their book *Penny the Pencil* (Mercier Press).

I asked three aspiring writers to ask some questions and write a piece – in their own style – to let *Inis* readers know a little more about these prize-winning first-time children's authors. And I have a feeling we'll be hearing more about them in the future. *Ed.*

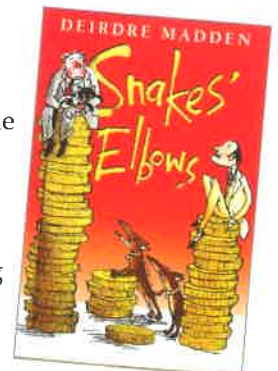
DEIRDRE MADDEN

'I loved the [Awards] reception. There were lots of kids and it was less stuffy than others.' Deirdre Madden, winner of the Eilís Dillon Award for a first children's book, should know. Her six adult

“While some adult authors who turn to children's writing can sound forced, Madden has a natural, relaxed voice that appeals across the generations”

novels, which between them have won the Somerset Maugham Prize, the Kerry Book of the Year, and been shortlisted for the Orange Prize, have taken her to a good few ceremonies. But only at the Bisto Awards did she get down to the real issues. 'Several children said they liked the chocolate bits.'

Her book, *Snakes' Elbows*, is a whimsical tale of telepathic animals, magic fudge and hats with bats. Beneath the fun lie such themes as greed, the vanity of fame and true friendship – not to mention arms dealing and media intrusion –



handled with brilliant lightness and sensitivity. You wonder if, as is often the case, such effortless writing resulted from huge effort.

'Not at all,' says Madden. 'This book was recreation. It was great fun writing it. I would have thought it would be hard but it came instinctively. I didn't think about it too much.'

The book's gentle tone evolved from letters she wrote to her niece. 'I'd write jokey things and stories... like about a pencil I sent her that grew on a tree. A lot of it was just amusing myself.' The serious themes emerged as the book progressed. 'The only idea I remember starting out with was to include something about art. My last book was about the art world and I suppose some of that carried over.'

While some adult authors who turn to children's writing can sound forced, Madden has a natural, relaxed voice that appeals across the generations. The scenes in which a man and lady fall in

love beneath a lamp post have won praise from parents, while their children love the descriptions of outrageous parties thrown by villainous Jasper Jellit and the tantalising references to food.

Madden has also gained some new insights from young readers. 'One girl liked Wilf [who cooks for the main character, Barney] and said she imagined him as a boy. I'd thought of him more as a plump parent figure, but I could see what she meant.'

The childlike portrayal of adults is one of the great strengths of the book, although the absence of child characters did raise some professional eyebrows.

'It wasn't deliberate,' says Madden. 'And I found some people in the book trade were put off because they thought kids need a child character with whom to identify.' My own children, however, delighted in Wilf's trusting devotion, felt deeply for Barney as he cringed with

shyness in the supermarket, and chuckled with smug superiority at Jasper's tantrums on being served over-crunchy cornflakes.

The book's success has delighted Madden. 'It's a huge encouragement.' Her second children's book, completed in between lecturing on the Creative Writing MA at Trinity College Dublin and writing her next adult novel, is due for publication next May. 'It's similar in tone but not a sequel. I would find that very hard. I've said all I have to about the characters in *Snakes' Elbows*.'

One question still hangs over the second book: its title. 'That's so important. Apparently children usually choose a book first for its title, then the blurb and then the jacket. We've got a working one but can't quite finalise it.' After *Snakes' Elbows*, it is not hard to see why. But whatever the title, I know of fans aged 4 and 44 who will be queuing up to buy it.

Debbie Thomas

KEVIN KIELY

Where did the idea for *A Horse Called El Dorado* come from?

A real-life story gave me the essential plot line. I am rather limited in my belief as to the effectiveness of invented storylines and also tend to spot their ingenuity, or in many cases the lack of true life circumstances in them. For me, story-telling is one of the great arts, more powerful than painting, sculpture and often film.

What research, if any, did you have to do for the novel?

Not much. Research is a kind of threat to fluency and especially to the imagination. Too much

“Story-telling is one of the great arts, more powerful than painting, sculpture and often film”

research tends to be 'fallen in love with' and the writer, in trying to find a place to make it fit in, may spoil the story or storylines.

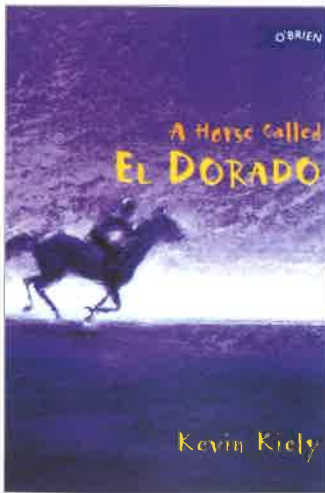
How did you react when you found out you were on the Bisto shortlist?

Being shortlisted was terrific, of course, and a validation but I had a funny feeling about *El Dorado* once O'Brien Press accepted it –

and especially since I sent it in under a made-up name: 'H. Keeley' with my mobile number. I am not sure how I would have felt if I had not got an award but there you go – toughness is always required in life where possible, even in competitions.

You have had collections of poetry published, what brought you to writing children's books?

Yes, poetry is my main line. If I may boast, it was my partner and one of my sons, Eanna (aged 24), who suggested I try writing for children. Secretly, I always wanted to write for children because of my own childhood, I feel very much in contact with the child's mind through myself.



Are you working on another children's book?

For some reason *El Dorado* and its progress has come at a time of busy-ness and advance in my life but I am definitely pursuing another children's book, armed with much to think about from my promotional visits to schools and libraries where children's questions increased my knowledge about their reactions to the book. These meetings with young readers have been a total enchantment, enlightenment and joy.

How do you work? What is your writing method?

'Method' means nothing to me at all. Terms like 'technique' never enter my consciousness at the writing stage or should that be scribbling stage. Why I write is a complete mystery. There seem to

These meetings with young readers have been a total enchantment, enlightenment and joy

I am definitely pursuing another children's book, armed with much to think about from my promotional visits to schools and libraries

be as many reasons as the opposite in times of despondency. However, having weathered some ups and downs I seem to be resolved that writing is an imperative. I also wonder how I find the go and excitement to write and rewrite, edit and amend. It must be something to do with a passion for language but besides this, writing connects me to a sense of order, to understanding my chaos and gives a sense of identity which is actually private.

Why do you like writing? What inspires you?

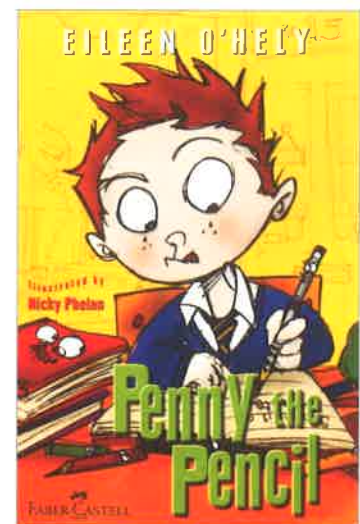
I know myself through writing and believe that it is nutritive for me in a variety of ways. In some respects it is all I can do, but life can be cruel and I had to take many part-time jobs away from writing, and more so reading, for reading is involved utterly with my obsession with writing. I read a lot. Perhaps, even too much, but it is an intoxication that an addict like me cannot resist. What inspires me is the miracle of life and besides the great tragedies of existence, the miracles abound and many of them must come from humans if we are to consider ourselves human.

Ashe Conrad Jones

EILEEN O'HELY

Eileen O'Hely was borne and raised in Melbourne. With a strong sense of logic and rigour (she has a PhD in astrophysics) and an Irish sense of humour (inherited from her father), she was armed and dangerous when she left Australia for Europe. First in Germany, then in Italy, she made a living teaching English and editing websites. In her spare time, Eileen writes short stories and tries her hand at novels, but for a while she feared that she might have been 'wasting her time' producing stuff that 'isn't very good'. It was not until she entered a writing competition and came third in it that she finally felt reassured that she 'had a little talent'.

The idea of Penny came to her while she was living in Munich. She used to teach two South American girls who loved drawing and colouring. The story of a talking pencil was just a chirpy way of learning the words for classroom objects. Except that it wasn't just that. As the story took shape, Eileen soon realised there was 'something unique and exciting about [her] work' and that it



“The story of a talking pencil was just a chirpy way of learning the words for classroom objects. Except that it wasn't just that. As the story took shape, Eileen soon realised there was ‘something unique and exciting about [her] work’”

was ‘of all the things [she] had written, the one that was worthy of sending to a publisher’.

However, it took a little longer to convince the publishers themselves, especially as she didn't have an agent. ‘A few told me point-blank’, she remembers, ‘that they couldn't consider a talking pencil – talking animals, yes, but pencils, no. That really shocked me – I thought an original idea would be accepted quickly.’

Fortunately, Mercier Press had no objections to the imaginative idea

of writing implements gifted with speech – quite the contrary! Not only did Eileen sign for *Penny the Pencil*, but she also contracted for a sequel – *Penny Goes Undercover* (due to be published soon). Delighted as she was, Eileen ‘still didn't relax when the publishers said “yes”. Even when the book came out’, she explains, ‘I was still thinking *Okay, it's published, but will it sell?* Only when I got the contract for my second book did I relax and think that maybe I was at the start of a writing career.’

And her career got the best beginning possible as *Penny the Pencil* was awarded a CBI/Bisto Honour award in May. ‘It was exciting to have *Penny* on the shortlist,’ Eileen recalls, ‘and [it] did generate a few fan letters, as the school shadowing programme brought the book in contact with lots of children.’

Nothing seems to stop the quirky little pencil who will become a TV star and an Olympic athlete in the future.

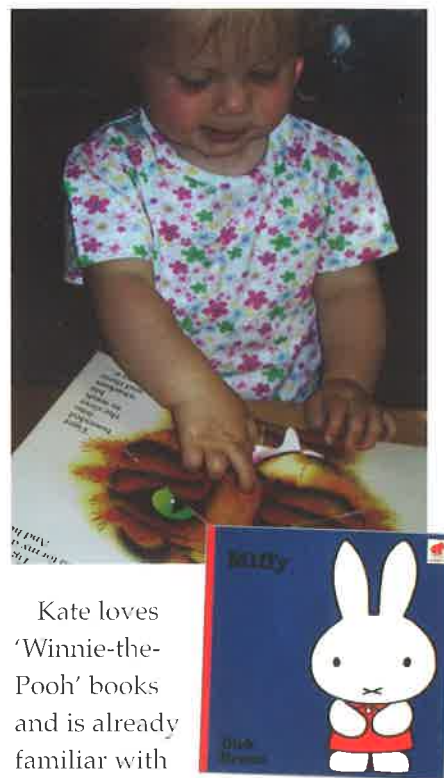
Juliette Saumande



Nicky Phelan is away travelling in another hemisphere at the moment. However *Inis* sends congratulations on his CBI Bisto Honour Award and looks forward to finding out more about him and his work in the near future. *Ed.*

Kate and her books

continued from page 27



Kate loves ‘Winnie-the-Pooh’ books and is already familiar with the characters and their names. She also enjoys books like *Miffy* by Dick Bruna that have very simple ‘readable’ images which don't require an adult to interpret them.

Kate had her first trip to the zoo recently and was absolutely stunned by the giraffe – such a striking animal and not like any other. When she came home she went straight to her books, to look at animal images. Having seen the real thing she needed to match up those images that were familiar to her.

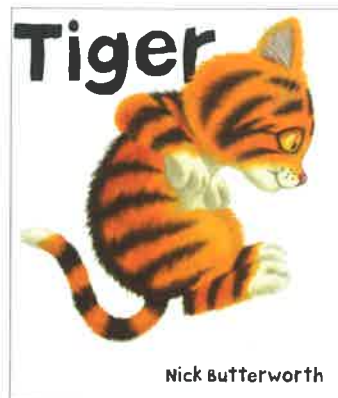
Kate now has more patience while a familiar story is being read, she knows what's coming but is now more able to wait until the page she wants comes along. It is noticeable that Kate is less inclined to dip into the middle of a book, and is not ‘flicking’ backwards to look through the pictures any more. Now she is more inclined to begin at the beginning as if ‘reading’ the images to herself; sequencing is beginning to make sense.

0-4

Nick Butterworth

Tiger

HarperCollins 2006 (hbk) 32pp £10.99 0007119747



Tiger is a very gentle book that deftly captures the inner world of an infant.

It centres on a defenceless kitten who bolsters himself up to be a capable, daring, fearless and strong tiger. This imaginary tiger makes an impact on all

around him and has the distinctive notoriety a small kitten would certainly desire. It's a reminder to all adults of the strong yearning little children have to assert themselves and be noticed. Butterworth's illustrations are simple yet striking and express the various moods of the tiger and the smaller creatures in his environs. For the 0-4 age group.

Anne-Marie Kelly

Jane Clarke (Mary McQuillan illus)

Dippy's Sleepover

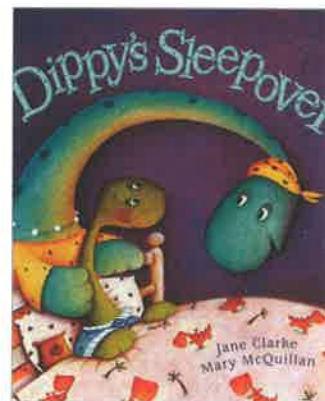
The Bodley Head 2006 (hbk) 32pp £10.99 0370328442

Dippy Diplodocus has been invited to Spike Triceratops' house on Friday and is very excited until he realises that he cannot go. He cannot go because he wets the bed. The story builds up over several days as Dippy becomes more and more anxious that Spike will find out. Dippy optimistically hopes that 'I'll be dry by Friday!' When Friday comes around, Dippy and Spike enjoy the evening and try in vain to stay

awake all night. The following morning each discovers the other's secret. Mrs Triceratops reassures them that they will grow out of it and of course Dippy does – on Saturday!

A reassuring tale about the build-up to Dippy's first sleepover, this picturebook presents a comforting world in which Dippy's worry is discussed with him and is eventually resolved. This sense of security is increased by the warm colours used in the illustrations. Some humorous references in the artwork will reward close investigation. Suitable for the very young reader.

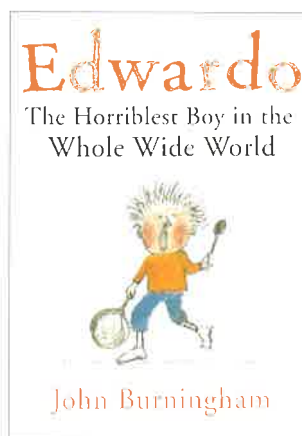
Eileen Phelan



John Burningham

Edwardo – The Horriblest Boy in the Whole Wide World

Jonathan Cape 2006 (hbk) 32pp £10.99 022407041X



Edwardo really does look like a bit of a nightmare on the front cover. In the endpapers we can read the title repeated in fifteen different languages (Edwardo, El Peon Niño de Mundo) which are actually fun to read (Edwardo, der Schrecklichste Junge auf der Ganzen Weiten Welt) and a great introduc-

tion to how languages sound (Edwardo, le Garçon le Plus Horrible au Monde) – and a nice, inclusive touch.

Page one tells us that he is an ordinary boy, with a butter-wouldn't-melt portrait. Then page after page, the adults in his world reprimand him, telling him he is the roughest (noisiest, dirtiest, etc.) boy in the whole

wide world, which he duly becomes. There is wonderful repetition of both phrases and rhythms which we all know as John Burningham's appealing style. One day Edwardo begins to get positive feedback from everyone he encounters: 'Look at Edwardo's room, why can't you all be as neat and tidy as he is?' And so he becomes transformed. This is a story of hope, reminding us that all children may have horrible tendencies occasionally, but how their personality will develop depends on the responses of adults. The illustrations, also by John Burningham, are scribbly loose drawings with child-like colouring. They are minimalist and at the same time funny and full of movement and character.

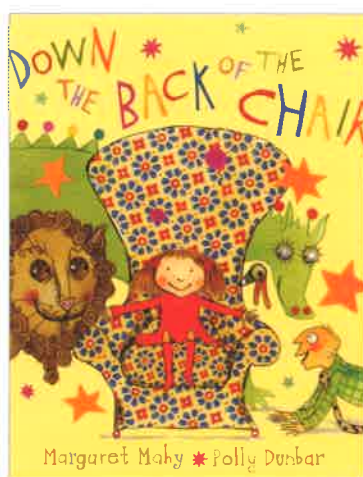
Suitable for 2-6 age group – and parents of any age.

Annie O'Doherty

Margaret Mahy (Polly Dunbar illus)

Down the Back of the Chair

Frances Lincoln 2006 (hbk) 26pp £10.99 1845074408



When Mary's dad loses his keys the family watch in wonder as his frantic search becomes a surprising and fantastic discovery of forgotten treasures including one of the twins and a long lost will. (I must remember to check down the back of my sofa!) 'A

crumb, a comb, a clown, a cap, a pirate with a treasure map, a dragon trying to take a nap – down the back of the chair.' Mahy's clever suggestion transforms the family's fortune, as well as increasing it in size. Readers of all ages will enjoy this ebullient rhyming tale and its bright spirited illustrations, a perfect complement to this lively story. Margaret Mahy is this year's winner of the Hans Christian Andersen Author Award. IBBY describes Mahy's language as 'rich in poetic imagery, magic, and supernatural elements.' *Publisher's Weekly* named Polly Dunbar as 'most promising new illustrator, 2004'. *Down the Back of the Chair* is the result of a dynamic and winning partnership. This book would make a wonderful gift for book lovers of all ages. Suitable for ages 2-6.

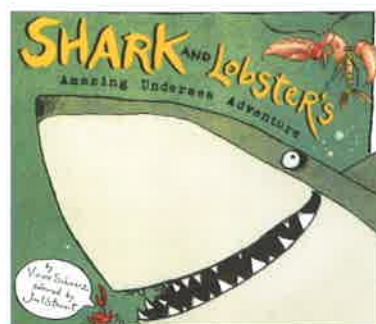
Síne Quinn

Viviane Schwarz (text and drawings)

Joel Stewart (colouring)

Shark and Lobster's Amazing Undersea Adventure

Walker Books 2006 (hbk) 36pp £10.99 0744588995



Shark and Lobster are a quirky pair of friends who build themselves a fortress in the sea (initially consisting of three rocks but eventually even including a piano!) because

Shark has some crazy notions about monsters called tigers, who are 'full of teeth and stripes'. Schwartz's text captures the language, mood and madcap humour that is a feature of small children's play. Her illustrations are inventive and 'printerly', as opposed to painterly and incorporate some images that could have been taken from 19th-century engravings, such as the imagined Tiger, who happens to have a wing-like fin growing out of his back. To protect them, the friends find a real scary monster, which they aren't afraid of at all, except when it roars and chases them, but then it gets tired and returns to the deep sea and all is well.

The illustrations are coloured by Joel Stewart who, unusually, is credited, and rightly so, for the subtle and exciting effects he adds to Viviane Schwartz's line. But this is not the only unusual feature of this picture-book. We are used to illustrators and designers making use of double-page spreads for the expanse of landscape but here the book is turned on its side with the spine horizontal so you open it like a calendar and the spread becomes the vertical depths of the sea.

This is perfect for having some fun with the notion of monsters without adding to the fears of what might be lurking at bedtime. Suitable for ages 2-6.

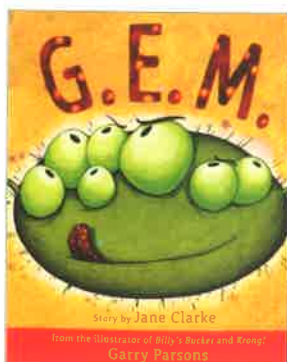
Lucinda Jacob

Jane Clarke (Garry Parsons illus)

G.E.M.

Red Fox 2006 (pbk) 32pp £5.99 0099480123

As Royd becomes increasingly jealous of his friend Gark's birthday party and presents, his G.E.M. (Green Eyed Monster) gets bigger and bigger and gobbles him up. Happily Royd is regurgitated and comes to realise that Gark is jealous of Royd's attentive parents and little sister. This book would be useful as a discussion book for junior and senior infant classes, in which the



message that 'no one has everything' is made very clear. The real attraction of this book is its setting in a space-age city. Birthday parties that include a magician from Mars who conjures up a dragon from ancient China to light the candles on the birthday cake, a trip

around the rings of Saturn and the creation of words such as 'scoff pod', 'nannybot' and 'home-made reddie' are bound to stimulate imagination. The bright, inventive illustrations perfectly extend the text. *G.E.M.* has real personality and 'hands on hips' attitude.

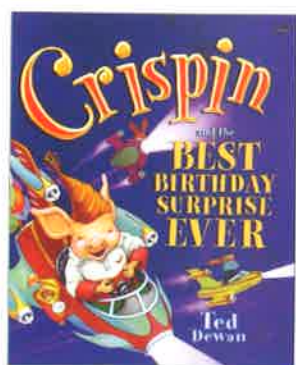
Age 3-6

Rosemary Hetherington

Ted Dewan

Crispin and the Best Birthday Surprise Ever

Doubleday 2006 (hbk) 32pp £10.99 0385607040



Crispin Tamworth is a pig with unimaginative parents who spoil him rotten, particularly on his birthday. There is an Orwellian quality to this book where the author uses a piggy profile to promote excess and the sloth of people who have too much money and too

little sense. It seems more a picturebook for adults which should carry a warning: 'Sensitive types avoid this book.' All sorts of messages abound about parenting styles in a consumer age where everything can be bought, including a child's feelings.

The book depicts adults who on the face of it, try their best but lack the essence and spirit of life. The reader may feel pity or outrage for the characters and at times for the author who seems a little smug.

Detailed and skilfully illustrated, Ted Dewan has jostled the storyline along – the scenes of the traffic jam and breakfast mayhem in the Tamworth's kitchen are particularly good. The Irish or English reading market may find the use of Americanisms a bit strange.

Suitable for all ages.

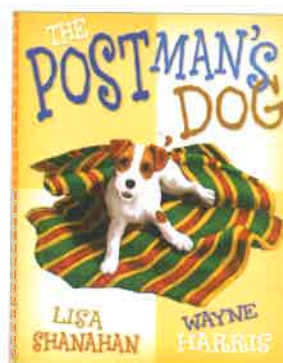
Anne-Marie Kelly

4-6

Lisa Shanahan (Wayne Harris illus)

The Postman's Dog

Allen & Unwin 2006 (hbk) 32pp £10.99 1741142520



Charlie the village postman claimed he had 'the best job in the world'. He loved to rise before the sun to start his day's work but most of all he loved his customers and their pets. He patted their dogs, helped to hang out Miss Zielinski's washing and assisted with a little garden-

ing. He was the most 'well loved and well licked postman in town'. So when Charlie became ill and very sad his friends decided that what he needed to help him feel better was a dog to give him 'lots of licks and hugs'.

This is the story of a warm and caring community of people, young and old, who come together to help their friend Charlie. Lucy the terrier is the solution – but she has a secret.

Lisa Shanahan's story is poignant, yet full of humour and fun with words. Wayne Harris's digitally created illustrations complement the narrative. The rich vibrant colours of the figures, many of which seem like pieces of appliqué, would encourage a child to touch and feel the hair and clothes. The sadness of Charlie is wonderfully illustrated in a vast autumnal clearing where he sits alone.

This is a story of love, sadness, commitment and friendship in a multicultural community. The combination of beautiful language, a great tale and outstanding illustrations have created a truly wonderful picturebook. Recommended for 4-6 age group.

Terrie O'Sullivan

Jessica Souhami

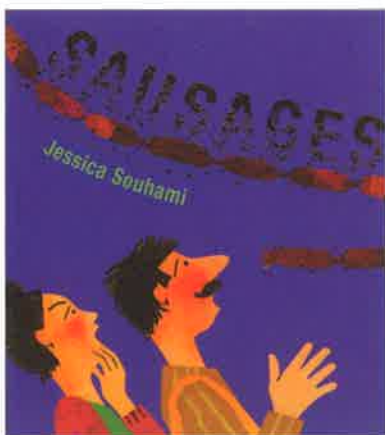
Sausages

Frances Lincoln 2006 (hbk) 32pp £10.99 1845073975

Sausages is a cautionary tale of wishes granted and the problem of a couple deciding what is vital to their happiness. A version of a European folktale, it tells of a

woodcutter who has been granted three wishes by a grateful elf whom he rescues from a thorn bush.

The story of John and Martha is a simple tale which focuses on John's hasty wish, which has created a major problem for the couple, how to detach a large string of sausages which have become attached to John's nose.



The author/illustrator uses the text with great skill to create tension in the story as words stretch and enlarge across some double pages to emphasize the effort and movement involved in the struggle. A child would also have great fun with the use of the tongue twister a 'string of sizzling succulent sausages'. Phrases like 'GUESS WHAT' in large lettering on one page leading to the next are clever and are a fast page-turner.

Jessica Souhami's background in puppetry is reflected in the three-dimensional vibrant figures of Martha and John. The double-page spread as the couple battle for the sausages is pantomime-like and a reminder of slapstick comedy figures. This contrasts with the two pages of their figures in silhouette which seem to reflect the growing frustration of Martha and John.

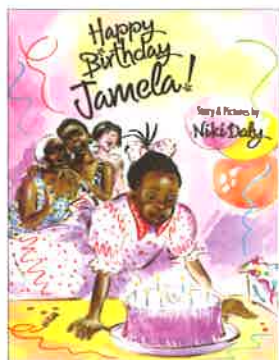
This is an imaginative and funny story which a young child will love as the excitement builds and she/he follows the tale to its conclusion. Age 4-6

Terrie O'Sullivan

Niki Daly

Happy Birthday Jamela!

Frances Lincoln 2006 (hbk) 32pp £10.99 1845074025



This is a happy positive story about a birthday party, which also introduces a child to the concept of affordability – an unusual theme for a young child's picturebook. Jamela goes shopping for birthday clothes and shoes with her mother. The shoes with the sparkly 'Princess' buckles really appeal to Jamela, however, her mother thinks

that school shoes will also be needed, and is concerned about the price. The message is not preachy, but is delivered indirectly and with flair!

Shoes are often the first purchase where the child is likely to assert a preference against that of the parent, whose pragmatic concerns about suitability for everyday wear and tear also need to be considered. As the story progresses Jamela finds her sense of style, and shows her creativity and an enterprising spirit.

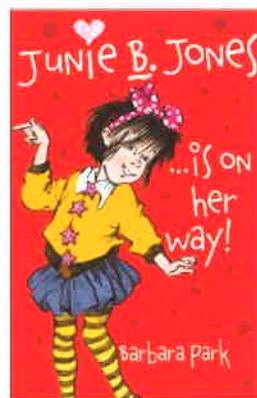
The illustrations are loose watercolours with great individualistic characterisation. Set in South Africa, Jamela's family is black and we also see plenty of white people interacting throughout the story. In this sense the community depicted is very inclusive. It is clearly a culture with a strong sense of family, and we can see that Jamela has a positive, supportive extended family. This is a book that could be used by teachers or in preschool as a read-aloud book to encourage the development of positive attitudes to diversity. Children will enjoy the level of detail in the illustrations and the red hen pecking around the house will not go unnoticed. For 4-6 age group.

Annie O'Doherty

Barbara Park

Junie B. Jones ... is on her way!

Chicken House 2006 (pbk) 92pp £0.99 1905294069



Five-year-old Junie B. is very much a modern child. Full of vivacity and highly capable of speaking up on her own behalf, some would almost call her precocious. As a point of information, the B in her name stands for Beatrice, which Junie dislikes immensely. She just likes B and that's all. Much to Junie B.'s annoyance her new

teacher has either chosen to ignore or has merely forgotten this fact. Not a very good start to her first day at school! Amusingly Junie B. cannot even remember her own teacher's name and calls her 'Mrs' throughout the story. Despite Junie B.'s self-assuredness, she is still a very young child. She tells her story of the trials and tribulations of starting school, in the first-person narrative, and this very quickly endears her to the reader. Unfortunately for Junie B. she encounters many problems on her first day at school, not least of which is the big smelly yellow bus full of meanies. Junie B.'s adventure really picks up pace

when she decides to hide in the art supply cabinet after school hours, rather than go home on the dreaded, aforementioned bus. Needless to say lots of merriment ensues. Author Barbara Parks maintains a consistent humorous tone throughout the story, and her work is highly complemented by Denise Brunkus' quirky illustrations. *Junie B. Jones...is on her way!* would be an ideal book for reading out-loud and for building early reading confidence. For age 5-8.

Caitriona Magner



Paul Stewart

Dogbird and Other Mixed-up Tales

Corgi Pups 2006 (pbk) 192pp £4.99 0552553514



This is a first 'chapter' book – but with three stories in one and 186 pages, it is rather bulkier than the normal fare for this age group. This is only a problem if it intimidates a tentative soul with just an experimental toe in the water, otherwise it's good value for money. The three stories have the same theme: a problem caused

and solved by an unusual animal. So we meet a dogbird, a were-pig and a watch-frog. This is worthwhile fare which doesn't patronise its audience (and gives grandparents great press). References to 'dinner ladies' and 'numeracy-hour' may need explanation.

Here we have a first 'chapter' book and also an introduction to the familiarity and comfort of series fiction. My class of 7-year-olds really liked it. They thought it was funny, original and well written and liked the children in the stories. They also liked the way the text was broken up with lots of black and white sketches and the cover design, particularly the lettering, appealed to them. *Dogbird* may not set the world on fire but it may fan the flame that will. Age 6+

Irene Barber

Anne Fine (Katharine McEwan illus)

"It Moved!"

Walker Books 2006 (hbk) 64pp £7.99 1406300136



As the author of the hugely popular *Diary of a Killer Cat* and over 40 other novels, Anne Fine is no stranger to children. A former Children's Laureate, Anne's latest book *"It Moved!"* is written for younger children, aged 5 to 8-years-old. Despite its younger content it contains all of the hallmarks of an excellent Fine novel – wit and irony,

alongside her consistently clever style of writing. Lily didn't know what to bring in for her turn at Show and Tell. Worried that her classmates will eat her chocolate bunny or tangle the strings of her puppet, she decided to bring in a stone. And when they asked her what was special about an old stone, she told them, 'It moves.' Well, does it? Can it? And will it again? Fine acknowledges that one of the most valuable things an author can do is to show how very complicated life is. In the microcosm of the schoolyard, she presents the array of personalities that are present in any class grouping: sceptical Peter, sarcastic Sarah and gullible Tariq, who 'was staring and staring and suddenly he thought he saw it move a little'. By the story's conclusion, the class who were initially unimpressed by Lily's grey, lumpy stone, are now mesmerised by its powers. *"It Moved!"* is an immensely appealing book, thanks also to Katharine McEwan's magnificent illustrations. My own particular favourite illustration on page 23 captures with exact precision the puzzled faces of the children as they stare at the stone for what seems like an eternity. That is ... before it moved!

Caitriona Magner

Kathy Henderson (Jane Ray illus)

Lugalbanda – The Boy who Got Caught Up in a War

Walker 2006 (hbk) 78pp £12.00 1844287467

Lugalbanda is an epic tale that was buried on clay tablets for thousands of years in the land of Sumer or Iraq as we know it today and what a marvellous achievement this retelling is! Kathy Henderson and Jane Ray have excelled themselves in this stunning version of the story. Henderson gives this traditional tale an authentic voice by retaining its strong poetic qualities: it was originally in poetic form and the

imaginative simplicity of Henderson's style is both striking and memorable.

Lugalbanda is the youngest of eight princes who follows his brothers to war but due to illness is abandoned by them. The story deals with his struggle to survive and the unearthing of his heroic ability. It explores universal themes such as abandonment, identity and the power of the gods. The illustrative style adopted by Ray depicts breathtaking scenes of natural beauty evoking the magic and mystery of this ancient land. Complemented by sumptuous colour and lavish detail, her illustrations pay tribute to the beauty and sophistication of the Sumerian culture but also poignantly evoke the loneliness of Lugalbanda as he journeys alone.

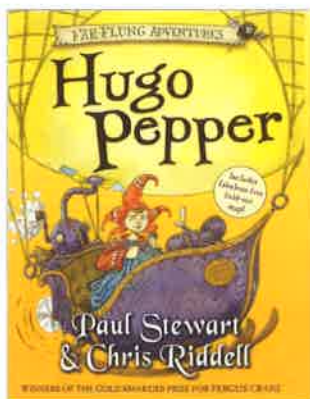
This is an important tale, a significant addition to our culture of shared stories. Children from the age of 7 will delight in this rewarding tale but it is equally attractive to adults.

Áine Nic Gabhann

Paul Stewart & Chris Riddell

Hugo Pepper

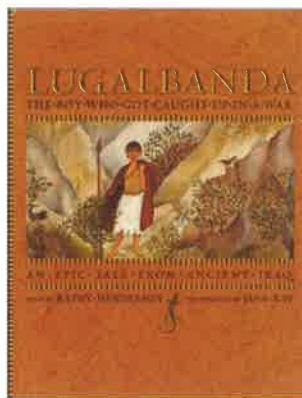
Doubleday 2006 (hbk) 272pp £8.99 0385607253



Hugo Pepper is an orphan adopted by reindeer herders and raised as their own in the Frozen North. When he is 12, he discovers the wreck of a snow sleigh in the shed and his adoptive parents tell him the terrible truth.

As a baby, Hugo and his parents crashed in the snow sleigh and his parents were eaten by polar bears. Wanting to find out more, Hugo repairs the damaged snow sleigh, sets the compass for 'Home' and heads off to find out where he came from. Hugo lands with a thud in Firefly Square and the discovery of his parents' past begins. But, Firefly Square holds more mystery than he imagined...

Hugo Pepper is the latest in the 'Far Flung Adventure' series from the creative team of Chris Riddell and Paul Stewart and it is a wonderful addition.



The reader is pulled into the story of Hugo Pepper as each chapter reveals to you a new story, enticing you to find out how all these characters are connected. In a sense, the reader becomes a 'Story Collector' like the core character Wilfred McPherson.

I love the 'common sense' magic of the book (of course mermaids can walk!) and you have this same sense of the characters. They have a practicality about them which makes the magical elements seem more realistic. And the intricate details of Chris Riddell's pen and ink illustrations are beautiful. You finish this book feeling that the story has come full circle; you feel satisfied as a reader and what else do you want from a book? Age 7+

Ashe Conrad Jones

David Donohue

Moon Man

Egmont 2006 (pbk) 274pp £4.99 140521998X



Moon Man is the second title written by David Donohue about the remarkably gifted Walter Speazlebud. A likeable and engaging hero, Walter possesses the gift of Noitanigami ('imagination' spelt backwards). In layman's terms he has the power to send people and things backwards in time. In this latest installment Walter

travels back in time to 1969 to prove that the moon landing happened. Unfortunately for Walter his beloved grandfather, who shares in the power of Noitanigami, suffers from Alzheimer's and is no longer a reliable partner in crime. To make matters worse, Walter is only coming to grips with his newly found powers and he still has a lot to learn! He must therefore rely on the able assistance of his friends – plucky, Kung Fu expert, Annie Zuckers and gentle Levon, in order to complete his task. *Moon Man's* strong appeal lies in the fact that it is brilliantly written: credibility and pace is sustained throughout. The scene where Walter and his heroes, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, land on the moon is excellently crafted. Donohue is also very adept at developing the characters without departing from the evolving storyline. For instance, in the course of Walter's visit to NASA, we learn a lot more about the impetus behind Walter's father's desire to create new inventions. *Moon Man* is uproariously funny in many

places and children will delight in the antics of Walter's grandfather as he attempts to send Walter and his friends backwards and forwards through time. Set largely in America in 1969, there is a persistent American tone to Donohue's writing, a tone that will no doubt appeal to younger readers because of its instant familiarity. Suitable for readers aged 8 to 10, *Moon Man* will delight and enthrall younger and older readers alike.

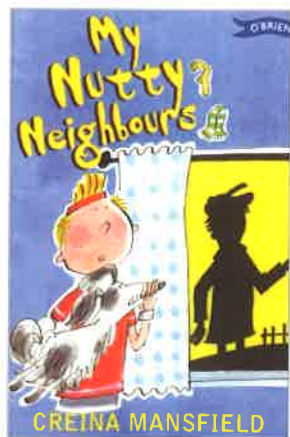
Caitriona Magner

9+

Creina Mansfield

My Nutty Neighbours

O'Brien Press 2006 (pbk) 192pp £5.99 0862787882



My Nutty Neighbours is a long overdue rural sequel to the urban-set *My Nasty Neighbours* (1995). It tells of the highs and lows of the Stirling family as they settle into life in the countryside. For David, the 13-year-old protagonist, the move from the city to 'the back of beyond' is an entirely negative one. No friends, no cinema, no pavement!

David remains absorbed in his own world and the 13-year-old's hilarious wisecracks continue until he is faced with the potential loss of his sister due to a car accident. The hitherto unknown neighbours rally round, offering help. Once his sister is out of danger, David begins to recognise the advantages of living in the countryside, not least the proximity of the beautiful Andrea!

Creina Mansfield successfully combines eccentric characters, laugh-out-loud humour and a sometimes serious storyline.

This book should appeal to 10-year-olds and over. Partly because of its humorous look at adult behaviour, it may well be enjoyed by adults too. However, the use of the American spelling of the word 'practise' may prove a little distracting for some readers.

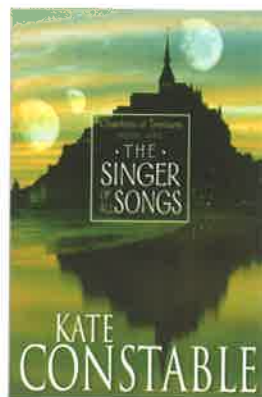
Eileen Phelan

Kate Constable

Chanters of Tremaris – Book One:

The Singer of All Songs

Allen & Unwin 2006 (pbk) 268pp £5.99 1741145325



The Singer of All Songs is the first book in a new fantasy series, the Chanters of Tremaris, by the Australian writer Kate Constable. Although unlikely to capture the imagination of children in the same way as the Harry Potter series, and not surprisingly featuring a few of the clichéd traits of fantasy novels,

there is still much to admire about this opening book in the trilogy.

The central character is a teenage girl, Calwyn, an apprentice ice priestess who has spent her whole life living behind the walls of Antaris, which she works hard to protect from outsiders through the magic of the chantment of ice-call. But Calwyn is restless, curious about the rest of the world of Tremaris and when she rescues a strange young man called Darrow who has made it through the wall, a dangerous quest begins that takes her far away from her homeland in an effort to thwart the plans of the wicked sorcerer Samis who seeks the ultimate power of the Singer of All Songs.

Constable's characters, although likeable, are typical of such fantasy novels. The plot is predictable, yet enjoyable, as good strives to triumph over evil. However, it is the setting of the magic world of Tremaris and its mysterious history that makes this novel a must-read for fantasy fans. Tremaris is a world divided and the magic of the Nine Powers of Chantment are under threat. Constable uses wonderful imagery and unique ideas to create the various cultures that exist in Tremaris and her concept of magic being performed through the medium of song is certainly original.

Although *The Singer of All Songs* stands alone, the story also poses a lot of questions about how and why Tremaris was torn apart and about the various characters, most notably Calwyn herself, as little is known about her father, which leaves the reader eager to find out more in the remaining two books of the trilogy. Fantasy fans from the age of 10 upwards will devour this novel.

Amanda Fennelly

Kate Thompson

The Fourth Horseman

The Bodley Head 2006 (hbk) 256pp £10.99 0370328906



Following hot on the heels of her success with *The New Policeman* (winner of the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, the Whitbread Children's Book Prize, the Dublin Airport Authority Prize and the CBI/Bisto Book of the Year Award 2005–6) comes Kate Thompson's new novel, *The Fourth Horseman*, an exciting adventure in the world of

science, exploring the potential dangers of genetic experimentation and viral warfare.

The story opens with a drama involving a laboratory fire, flashing blue lights, sirens, ambulance, and police interrogation. Fifteen-year-old Laurie then narrates the background and build-up to this frightening event.

Laurie's parents are wonderfully unconventional. Her father is a 'nutty as a fruitcake' scientist and atheist; her mother a sports physiotherapist with the English cricket team who, by necessity, travels a lot. Laurie's Dad, keen to get involved in some pure scientific work, accepts a top-secret job to create a virus that will work on one particular variety of squirrel. Laurie, being good with animals, is sworn to secrecy and helps her Dad in the lab after school. But together they see a vision of a terrifying and threatening horseman that has a mesmerising and powerful effect on her father. What does it mean? Is it connected to his work? When other visions appear with two, then three horsemen, Laurie thinks they could be forewarning a greater danger. But will anyone believe her?

These surreal events happen against a backdrop of normal domestic life: potatoes are peeled, sausages are fried, rows happen. Thompson's dialogue is, as ever, spot-on; her characters, however unusual, are totally credible. Laurie has a close relationship with her younger brother, Alex, and his friend Javed, a Shaktani who shares the family's love of cricket. A deep affection for cricket pervades *The Fourth Horseman* – and it's infectious; the reader is left not only understanding more about the game, but wanting to play. The description of the annual family cricket day would make any young reader want to hone their batting skills.

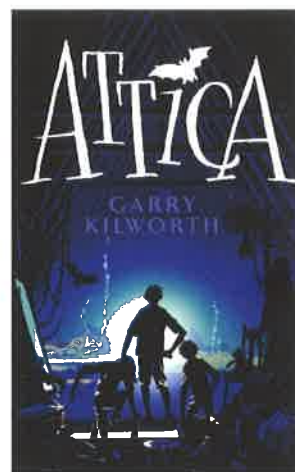
At times I found the narrative voice too mature for 15-year-old Laurie, but this is a small quibble in a well-structured novel that successfully blends science, sport, philosophy, Islamic politics, atheism and biblical imagery, into an exciting, and important, adventure for 11–15 year olds.

Paddy O'Doherty

Garry Kilworth

Attica

Atom 2006 (hbk) 334pp £12.99 1904233554



Chloe, Jordy and Alex aren't entirely pleased when they move into Mr Grantham's converted house. They have just become step-siblings, aren't sure how to relate to their new parents, and to top it all off, grumpy Mr Grantham doesn't seem happy to have children underfoot. Yet when he sends the children up to the attic under the guise of

looking for an old watch, he has actually sent them on the adventure of a lifetime. The children manage to find the special trapdoor, and the special moment in time that transports them to the vast, crazy land of Attica. Mountains of old musical instruments, forests of hat stands and skies of mirrors delight them, but more sinister items are just waiting to take their revenge for being neglected in the attic. Will the children be able to find the old watch in this confusion? And more importantly, will the children be able to survive Attica to return home?

Obvious parallels can and have to be drawn between *Attica* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, as well as with *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Borrowers*. Though the new kid on the block, *Attica* holds up well to these comparisons. The world that Kilworth creates is imaginative and enchanting. Readers will lose themselves in this world just as Chloe, Jordy and Alex literally get lost. A number of threatening characters add an element of risk to the adventures, and several challenges keep the plot well paced. Highly recommended for fantasy lovers aged 11+.

Beth Morrissey

Lesley Howarth

Calling the Shots

Oxford Press 2006 (pbk) 176pp £5.99 0192753312



Such is the attraction of reality television that it was only a matter of time before it featured in popular children's fiction. In *Calling the Shots*, the three young people of the Reilly family are the English participants in a new reality television show, *Kids Rule UK*. ShouldaCams are attached to Nick, Alex and Indie for 12

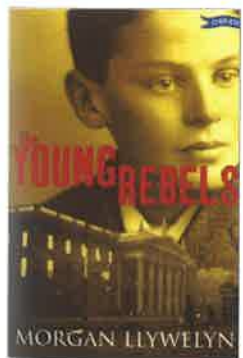
hours each day and edited highlights of their lives are broadcast live. This of course has an impact on how they act but also on how others react to them. Initially they use this powerful weapon to improve school life and to secure children's rights. But the fall-out from their mother's departure from the home just prior to final auditions begins to impact hugely on their behaviour. All the elements of a stormy soap opera surface: family breakdown, violence, bullying, adolescent angst, eating and drinking disorders. The unscrupulous and manipulative behaviour of the production company finally brings matters to a head and eventually all is resolved. This book should suit both an experienced and also a reluctant reader. It is short, engaging, has short chapters with lots of dialogue, is fast paced and tightly plotted and has the nod to popular culture as a hook. But it also explores the complexities and ultimately the exploitative nature of reality television. As the wise Alex and her erring mum conclude: fame and faraway hills are just a pipe-dream, an illusion. Age 10+

Irene Barber

Morgan Llywelyn

The Young Rebels

O'Brien Press 2006 (pbk) 208pp €7.95 0862785790



The hero of this novel is John Joe, a pupil of St Enda's school run by Patrick Pearse in the Hermitage at Rathfarnham to the south of Dublin city. The action of the novel extends from the Dublin Lockout in 1913 to the Rising of Easter 1916. It is written in a first-person narrative in a continuous present tense, as if it were a diary

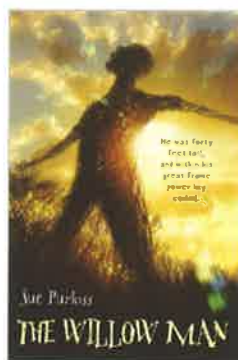
of events. As a pupil at St Enda's school, John Joe learns to be a republican rebel and becomes involved in the preparation for the 1916 Rising. As Pearse always maintained that the education question was at the heart of the Irish question, using his school as a setting to explore one boy's pathway into revolutionary republicanism is valid. However John Joe is not a successful character. He has no agency in the action and is simply an observer of events. There is too much use of the clumsy device of overheard conversations to convey the movement of events and the looming confrontation. The use of the continuous present tense, instead of generating tension, is wearying for the reader. Although John Joe repeatedly assures us that St Enda's is a unique school unlike any other, we are never shown how that is so. This is surely a missed opportunity. St Enda's was indeed special and unique in its curriculum, staff and teaching and a young reader would enjoy a more sophisticated exploration of these topics. Other interesting topics that might have merited further exploration are Pearse as a substitute for John Joe's own brutish father or the relationship between John Joe and another pupil, Roger, who is Protestant and therefore culturally a Unionist. In the absence of a strong central character or complex themes, the novel depends entirely on the accuracy and immediacy of its narrative of the period leading up to the Rising. Despite the odd jarring note, which include children playing on the stoop (Dublin houses do have stoops), wailing ambulances, or confused topography that has Westmoreland Street leading into Kelly's Corner, the novel is refreshingly committed to the heroic interpretation of 1916 and has none of the doubt nor irony that are the hallmarks of the revisionist perspective.

Martin Maguire

Sue Purkiss

The Willow Man

Walker 2006 (pbk) 176pp £4.99 1844281159



In Sue Purkiss' story, *The Willow Man*, the female character, 8-year-old Sophie has had a stroke. This is a rare occurrence, one child in 50,000 being victims. Tom, her 12-year-old brother, is feeling neglected, as his parents cope with hospital and treatments. Then we meet Ashley, a classmate of Tom's whom we

later find out comes from a troubled home and also has a learning disability. Now factor in 'the willow man': a huge sculpture alongside the M5 near Bridgewater where the story takes place, which seems to have a supernatural effect on the three children.

According to Purkiss, the willow man 'symbolizes the physical, mental and emotional barriers which can sometimes get in the way of young people living their lives as they should be able to live them'.

Unfortunately, I felt the author didn't manage to get a focus or flow to the story. It starts out as a story about Sophie and her struggle to recover, but ends up as a story about Ashley and his relationship with his father, and Tom hops back and forth between the two. The willow man of the title seems to have an allegorical presence, but again, for me, it was not convincing.

There is a lack of continuity in the story. Each character's story seemed separate, and any connection between them seemed contrived just to include their particular difficulty in life. This book is worth a read for 10 to 12 year olds, but don't expect to put it on your favourites list.

Judy Deacon

Cat Weatherill **Snowbone**

Puffin 2006 (pbk) 340pp £9.99 0141381183



Snowbone for me was one of those rare books that you occasionally come across – one that takes you a matter of hours to read but that leaves something with you long after you've confined it to the bookshelf.

Cat Weatherill is a gifted writer whose words and phrases appeal to every sense and allow the reader to really feel that they are 'alone on the butterfly-blue ocean' or in the midst of a burning fire '...a rich, smoky, tongue-tingler of a taste'. Part of her genius comes from the fact that she is a magnificent storyteller, her plot starts out slow and as it gathers speed takes the reader on a wild, turbulent and often dangerous adventure.

Snowbone deals with the world of the Ashenpeakers, wooden people who hatch from eggs. Snowbone is a young pale girl that possesses a steely determination from the beginning and is a natural leader. When she realises the tragic history of slavery that has become a part of the Ashenpeakers' heritage, she vows to find a

way to stop the cruelty-enforced life that has affected her people.

This book is suitable for advanced readers from age 10+ who welcome a challenging and thought-provoking read. Many issues are raised in this book including slavery, justice and personal moral choices. There are also some scenes that could be described as violent and may upset younger readers – so I would advise teachers/parents to consider this when giving it to a child. The illustration on the cover by Sarah Dearlove adds to the magical feel of the book and complements the story wonderfully.

An absolute joy to read and I for one will be reading her previous novel *Barkbelly* ASAP!

Lorraine Foster

Helen Dunmore **The Tide Knot**

HarperCollins 2006 (hbk) 336pp £12.99 0007204892



The Tide Knot is the middle book of a trilogy by Helen Dunmore. In part one, *Ingo*, she tells the story of Sapphy (shortened to Sapphy) and Conor growing up in an idyllic Cornish village. One day their seafaring father disappears without a trace and Conor begins to spend more and more time on the rocks with a mysterious girl. Soon Sapphy

discovers his secret and a wonderful world beneath the sea where Mer-people live. Gradually the children are drawn into this alluring but sinister place as they search to make sense of their father's disappearance.

In *The Tide Knot*, the story resumes. The family has moved to try and get on with a new life but Sapphy refuses to give up hope. As Conor grows into adolescence he struggles with letting go of the past and the magical Mer-world, while the younger Sapphy becomes dangerously drawn into its depths.

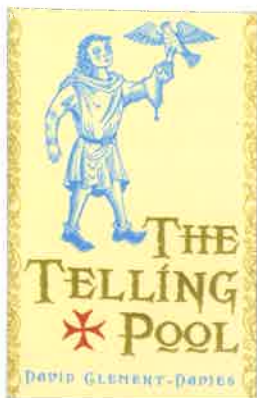
This is a wonderful fantasy story dealing with grief, loss, teenage angst, myth, magic and families. The author moves seamlessly from the concerns of the Mer-world to the Earth-world to the inner world of a young girl in turmoil. Characters are well rounded and edgy – no cutesy magic here – and Sapphy can be a real pain! *The Tide Knot* has made me want to read more about Ingo and I look forward to part three. Suitable for confident 10-year-old readers or older.

Jan Winter

David Clement-Davies

The Telling Pool

Bloomsbury 2006 (hbk) 360pp £12.99 0747572887



Set during the magical time of the Third Crusade and the reign of King Richard the Lionheart, *The Telling Pool* promises us an epic fantasy, which combines the story of a boy's coming-of-age with a quest full of familiar legend and magic. Rhodri is a falconer's son who finds his life turned upside down when his father departs on the Crusade

and he is told that a great destiny awaits him. After looking into the magical pool he sets out on a journey to save his family, his country and everything he knows. With such a well-known legend as a backdrop, this book promises much and David Clement-Davies' beautifully descriptive writing transports the reader evocatively back to the sights and sounds of the time of the Crusades. Yet, while we struggle along with Rhodri on his journey of self-discovery and growing maturity, the plot slows, dragging along as we wait for the main adventure, the quest itself, to begin. At times, the descriptive style becomes overly burdensome, crowding the reader with so many images that it takes from the imaginative journey that all great adventure stories should involve. The unique perspective on the Arthurian legend is refreshing and will be enjoyed by readers aged between 10 and 12. It is a shame that the lack of a more ruthless edit and a woefully ill-advised cover take from a book that is, at times, beautifully written.

Ruth Coleman

Terry Deary

The Fire Thief

Kingfisher 2006 (hbk) 256pp £7.99 0753411482



Prometheus, dragging his rock up a hill, manages to escape his chains and the monstrous eagle which daily tears out his liver. This is his punishment from Zeus for giving the gift of fire to the human race. Zeus agrees to let him go free only if he accepts the challenge to find one heroic human somewhere in the world, somewhere in time.

Prometheus flees into the future, and collides with a boy called Jim in the year 1854 in the ironically named Eden City, a version of the worst of Victorian London. Jim and his 'uncle' are performers of magic and dramatic shows – but are really con artists tricking their way into the houses of the rich to rob them. Their ensuing adventures include a robbery, a coffin, a hanging and a great escape.

This is Terry Deary's great talent – telling a good yarn using reality and myth, setting a fascinating scene, which whets the appetite of the reader to learn more. While this book could be considered a fairly difficult read, with unfamiliar names and words, the format of a large clear typeface and compact size more than compensates. In addition, the conversational, humorous tone of Jim's first-person narrative creates an intimate relationship with the reader, which keeps the pages turning. The irreverent asides at chapter headings and footnotes are used to explain events more fully (a bit like Lemony Snicket), but Deary also uses them to make his own points, and often speaks through Prometheus, who is appalled at what the humans have done with the gifts he has given them. Does Prometheus find his hero? Of course I can't give that away – we can only hope that both he and us 'hairless human creatures' survive the whimsy of the gods and our own foolishness.

Age 10+

Mary McLaughlin

12+

Lee Weatherly

Them

Barrington Stoke 2006 (pbk) 96pp £4.99 184299364X



This book is from the already critically acclaimed stable of Barrington Stoke, a publisher dedicated to the production of fiction for 'reluctant, dyslexic, disenchanted and under-confident readers'. This quote is of course from the website and not the blurb, as this book looks and feels every bit as cool as regular

teen reads. The only difference is that it can be accessed by a reader with a reading age of 8. The book however is very definitely not for 8-year-olds with some mild language and subjects such as alcoholism, physical abuse and self mutilation. While this novel may have a large, easy-to-read font on cream pages, simple language and short chapters, the reader will not feel that they are reading below their reading age because the content is so engaging.

Them tells the story of Kylie who has moved into a new neighbourhood with her mother and stepsister to escape her abusive and alcoholic stepfather. In her efforts to be accepted by 'them' (the 'cool' people) in school, she gets caught up in a plot to victimise the school 'nerd', Adam. The scheme gets out of hand and Adam suffers a humiliation in front of the whole school, filling Kylie with shame and regret.

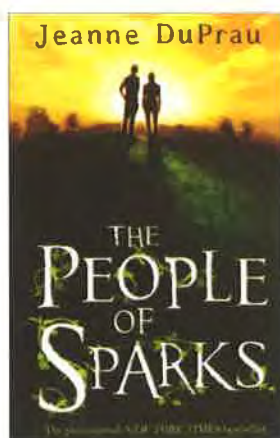
Apart from the slightly saccharine ending, the story is realistic and appealing. The language is simple but never condescendingly so and the dialogue is sharp and edgy with plenty of street lingo. I gave this book to Shanelle, a 5th class 'reluctant reader' and this is what she wrote: 'I do not personally enjoy reading but I couldn't put this book down, it's really good. 10/10'.

Kieran Fanning

Jeanne DuPrau

The People of Sparks

Corgi 2006 (pbk) 336pp £5.99 0552552399



'Don't worry,' said Maddy. 'People didn't make life, so they can't destroy it. Even if we were to wipe out every bit of life in the world, we can't touch the place life comes from.' This interesting and often provocative tale is frequently ill served by a lack of pace and the author's determination to cling to the banal. It raises a number of

issues about who survives a major disaster, how they survive and where.

This is the sequel to *The City of Ember*, about how some post-holocaust survivors went underground and made a life for themselves, giving rise to a generation who had never seen daylight. *The People of Sparks* opens with the Emberites arriving above ground as their resources for survival run out. Led by two teenagers, Doon and Lina, they arrive at an above-

ground community, Sparks, and initially are given food and shelter. Inevitably, tensions arise through misunderstandings and the complete inexperience of the Emberites to grasp the complexities of this new kind of life. The Sparks fear that their meagre resources will be depleted beyond repair. DuPrau beautifully illustrates how it is possible to avoid total conflagration and reach a kind of redemption where both sides are united by a determination to co-exist peacefully. Age 12+

Clodagh Corcoran

O.R. Melling

The Chronicles of Faerie* *The Summer King

Amulet Books 2006 (hbk) 260pp \$16.95 0810959690



This is a terrific story which will undoubtedly captivate the reader with its riveting plotline, great characters and unrelenting pace. It is a tale which adeptly handles the present and the fantastical world, blending myths, folklore, romance and tragedy with consummate ease. Set in Bray and Achill Island, the author breathes new life and

drama into many of the ancient Irish tales in a thoroughly contemporary way. It is the second book in The Chronicles of Faerie series, recently included in the American Library Association's Top 10 Fantasy Books for Youth. It easily stands on its own but I guarantee that it will encourage readers to seek out *The Hunter's Moon* at the earliest opportunity if they haven't already read it!

This series was first introduced in the early 1990s with *The Hunter's Moon* published by HarperCollins (Canada) in 1993 and an Irish edition by The O'Brien Press in the same year. *The Summer King* was first published by Penguin Books (Canada) in 1999 but the author has substantially revised and updated her work and it is now published by Amulet Books, an imprint of Harry N. Abrams in New York. The shimmering cover with its haunting image will certainly attract new readers to The Chronicles of Faerie.

Fantasy books with an Irish twist have enjoyed a veritable renaissance in recent years. Authors of the calibre of Kate Thompson, Eoin Colfer and of course O.R. Melling delight audiences worldwide with their

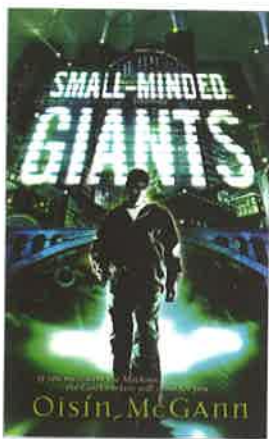
take on that intriguing realm just beyond our own dimension. *The Summer King*, with its particularly atmospheric sense of place, whether it is Hy Brasil, Bray Head or the wilds of Clare Island, genuinely connects with its readers, bringing magic and suspense in equal measure. Age 12+

Marian Keyes

Oisín McGann

Small-Minded Giants

Doubleday 2006 (hbk) 304pp £12.99 0385610513



Life in the 'gigantic vacuum flask' that is Ash Harbour is tough and demanding – only an immense dome protects the citizens from below-freezing temperatures outside, beyond the city built into the hollowed-out mountain survival is impossible. And if some adults remember a more vital world, and believe their lives now manipulated by

those in authority, by industrialists and corporate monopolies, they are only too well aware that they live in a machine and depend on it for continued existence. The teenagers waiting for the giant crane to swing the luxury carriage towards them have their own concerns: schoolwork, parties, rebellious songs, hormones and illegal substances. But when their eagerly awaited school tour turns into a nightmare and they witness the 'accidental' crushing to death of two men nearby, Sol, Cleo and their young and idealistic teacher encounter those who will do anything to maintain the system and to prevent any interference with the Machine.

Those with power and money lead lives of relative luxury, with contacts in the security forces and in the media, organisations that show little inclination to question the increasing number of 'accidents' or to investigate the ever-growing number missing people, one of whom is Sol's father. As he endeavours to prove his father innocent of the murder of a fellow-worker, Sol's hitherto uncomplicated life changes utterly and becomes a desperate struggle to survive in the underbelly of the city, built by those who now live 'beneath its feet, under the gutters and machinery'. In this claustrophobic and menacing world of corruption and fraud, Sol and Cleo remain credible teenagers, though thoughtful and complex ones. Both are aware that

their exposure to, and participation in, this dysfunctional and disturbing world may affect their own humanity and sense of justice.

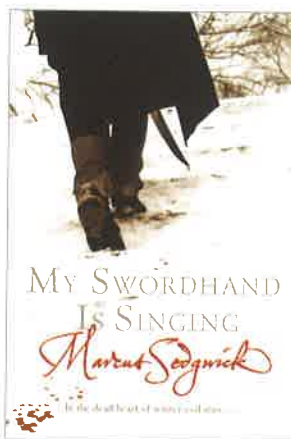
McGann continues to develop as a writer of political fantasy, and those many teens (and adults) who loved both the Archisan Trilogy and his *Gods and Their Machines* will find in this book an accomplished thriller, a genuine page-turner shot through with anarchic humour and the occasional tender moment, with serious environmental and political issues to consider long after the action and adventure has been enjoyed.

Liz Morris

Marcus Sedgwick

My Swordhand Is Singing

Orion 2006 (hbk) 200pp £9.99 1842551833



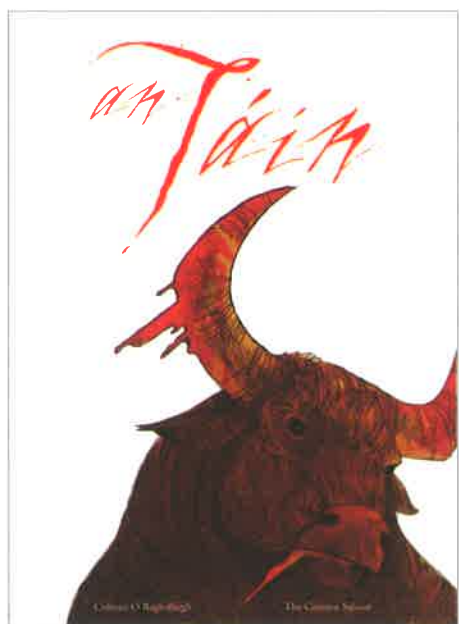
At the start of a bitterly cold and harsh winter, Peter and his father, Tomas, arrive at the small and eerie town of Chust. The pair settle on the outskirts by the edge of the forest and provide wood for the townfolk. Peter soon befriends Agnes and tries to integrate into the town's ways. Tomas hides a secret from his son; he is distant

and spends most of their earnings on rakia, but soon his past creeps up on him. Set in Eastern Europe in the 17th century, the story tells of a rural community ruled by folklore and superstition. Just as the town prepares for St Andrew's Eve, strange and gruesome events occur. Peter is curious when a band of gypsies arrive at the town, and is taken aback when he discovers that they know his father and seek his help. Things take a supernatural turn when bizarre deaths occur. The town acts in fear and prepares a *nunta mortului*: a wedding of the dead. Peter is horrified when he discovers that Agnes is to be the 'bride'. Can Peter help her? Can his father disclose his secret and save the village with the aid of the gypsies? *My Swordhand Is Singing* is a beautifully written, atmospheric, gothic fantasy. By cleverly delving into vampire myth and Eastern European superstitions, Sedgwick maintains tension, pace and mystery throughout the book. A recommended and somewhat scary read for over 12s.

Síne Quinn

Colmán Ó Raghallaigh (The Cartoon Saloon illus)
An Táin

Cló Mhaigh Eo 2006 (pbk) 42pp €10 1899922288



The story of the Táin has more modern contemporary resonance than almost any of the other classic Irish stories, with its materialism, greed, promiscuity, drunkenness and boastfulness. Many of its happenings would not be

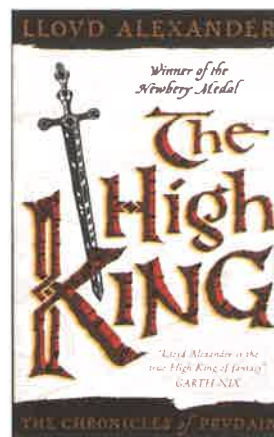
out of place after contemporary weekend revelries in Ireland: and the results are equally tragic, particularly for the young. Conflict begins because a woman wants a bull as great as her husbands. War is inevitable because of drunken boasting. A youth fights his best friend and dies because of a misreported insult. A woman in labour is forced to race against horses. Scant respect is shown to young or old. The resulting brutality is terrible indeed. None of these hard facts is shirked in this tough retelling in Irish in graphic novel form. *An Táin* represents a challenge to this form because of its length and its complexity. It contains many stories within stories. It also has a large and varied cast of characters who must be clearly differentiated from each other. It is a dark and bloody story. There is not much to lighten the sense of doom that pervades it, which means that contrast cannot easily be incorporated into the images. The illustration is dominated by dark tones. They are appropriately the reds of fire and blood, and the browns and blacks of battle and night. The first opening, depicting Méabh and Ailill's fort in Chonnacht, sets the tone. It is a grim place, hard, dark and angular, both primitive and strikingly modern. Ó Raghallaigh's economy of language and mastery of direct speech, so essential to the graphic novel form, work superbly here, both in setting the plot in motion and propelling it to its inevitable tightly controlled conclusion. The hard angular shapes of Barry Reynold's drawings are perfectly suited to the harsh uncompromising nature of the story. The decision to include the story of the

death of Cú Chulainn was a sensible one in that it answers a question that would be a pressing one for young adult readers. Most suitable for readers between 12 and 16 years.

Celia Keenan

Lloyd Alexander
The Chronicles of Prydain
The High King

Usborne 2006 (pbk) 308pp £5.99 0746068387



Lloyd Alexander is a master storyteller of the fantasy genre, but is sadly not as recognised in Ireland as Tolkien or Lewis. *The High King* is the fifth and final book in his outstanding series *The Chronicles of Prydain*, which includes the better-known *The Black Cauldron* that was adapted into a Disney animated film. This newest edition of *The High King*

is presented with an attractive new cover, chapter illustrations in black and white (tastefully executed by Alison Read), a map of Prydain, and a pronunciation guide first published in 1999. The writing, however, happily remains the very same that won the Newbery Medal in 1969, despite the makeover the book has received.

The High King is the end to an epic journey for Taran, the protagonist, who has grown tremendously in wisdom and strength over the course of the series, from an assistant pig-keeper to a great warrior. Taran comes of age and makes the most important decisions of his life, and the book culminates in a mighty battle between the forces of good and evil. The presence of an excellent heroine in Eilonwy gives female readers a strong character to identify with. Alexander's writing is graceful in dealing with serious themes of death and destruction, juxtaposed with the inner turmoil in Taran's mind. The characterisation is rich, allowing for still more development of Taran and Eilonwy, and the descriptive passages are lyrical as always. There is subtle humour in Eilonwy's delicate observations, and the battle sequences are full of excitement. Readers of 12 and older who enjoy fantasy will lap up this wonderful piece of writing; but while *The High King* stands alone as a superb book and is capable of being read as such, readers will enjoy the series best in sequence, beginning with *The Book of Three*.

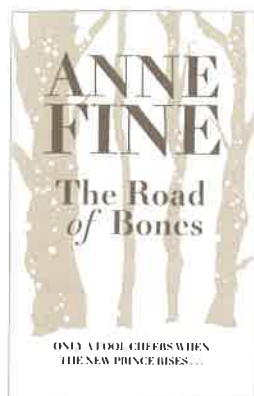
Donal Cumiskey

older teens

Anne Fine

The Road of Bones

Doubleday 2006 (hbk) 244pp £10.99 0385610637



Yuri has a great thirst for truth and is curious about the vast country, the 'Motherland' in which he lives. Suspicion and betrayal surround him and it is safer that 'there [are] never any words at all' and 'pitilessness is [the] only right, and pity [the] only wrong'. In school Yuri is taught about the importance of the 'Great March to Our Glorious Future'.

At the age of 12, Yuri and his friend, Alyosha are 'dismissed from school' by 'Diktat', and are assigned work on a building site as hod-carriers. Yuri's outspoken comments about site safety bring the guards in search of him. He escapes but a moment of 'inattention' some months later sentences him to ten years' hard labour in a northern prison camp. Yuri's instinct for survival is very strong and again he escapes. But who is Yuri now and will he be able to 'walk away' from the cruel and almost de-humanised person he has become?

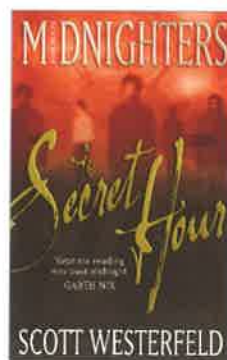
This is an unusual book from Anne Fine, as her 'message' is usually disguised with humour. One can't help wondering what the inspiration for the book might have been. Though memorable, this is not an enjoyable story – Yuri's life is one of almost unmitigated misery – but it is an extremely thought-provoking book, challenging the young reader to examine the fundamental rights and freedoms we take for granted in a democracy. It is difficult to gauge the readership for this novel – teenage certainly, perhaps even 15+? At a very superficial level it is an adventure story about a boy surviving in a very harsh environment, yet the writing is powerful and the themes are important. (For example could 'faith' as described on page 160 cause such disregard for human life? Is Yuri's experience replicated in any society today?) A book to read and read again.

Rosemary Hetherington

Scott Westerfeld

Midnighters: The Secret Hour

Atom 2006 (pbk) 298pp £7.99 1904233821



This fast-paced cross between thriller, science fiction and horror genres will appeal to teenagers with a taste for the dark side. Its conventional new-girl-in-school story format rapidly becomes a dark tale of good vs evil, with the reluctant heroine, Jessica Day, emerging by novel's end as the Buffy of the piece, a girl with

special powers who must learn how to use them to save her world – and herself.

Bixby, the town to which she moves from Chicago with her family, seems like Normal, Middle America. But at the stroke of midnight in the town, the regular world freezes and a lost 25th hour emerges, peopled by terrifying shape-changing 'darklings' (vicious panthers, snakes and the like) from man's evolutionary pre-history. Only the Midnighters – four teenagers who by day are the school weirdos – can enter this world, because they were born at midnight. Jessica, to both her and their surprise, discovers she is one of them.

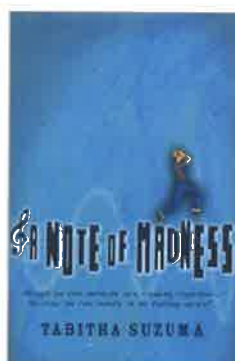
The book's blurb describes author Scott Westerfeld's vision as 'dystopian' and indeed it is: his nightmare world is vividly imagined, powerfully described and horribly convincing. The first of a trilogy, *Midnighters* should appeal to any young adult who likes Harry Potter or Buffy – and to boys who scorn conventional teen high school dramas. Age 14+

Frances O'Rourke

Tabitha Suzuma

A Note of Madness

The Bodley Head 2006 (hbk) 306pp £10.99 0370328698



Flynn, a gifted young pianist studying at the Royal College of Music, has two best friends: Harry, a cellist, and Jennah who plays the flute. Flynn has been picked to represent the college at a competition in the Royal Festival Hall; Jennah is going out with the non-musical Charlie; coursework is mounting up.

His life becomes a big-dipper ride of manic phases (where he stays up all night, composes a whole opera, jogs non-stop) and days when he loses all

belief in himself and can't get out of bed. Eventually, he sees a psychiatrist and is put on lithium. He has missed the big competition, but his life does settle down – so he stops his lithium. When he is asked to play Rachmaninov's Third at the London International Piano competition – Flynn's ultimate ambition – his life begins to unravel again.

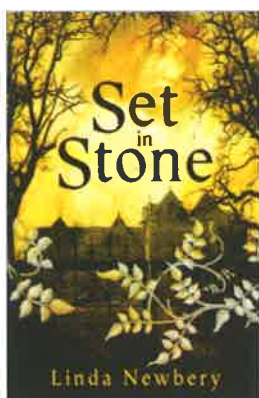
All the characters are basically good (a nice change in teenage novels), although Flynn's professor seems somewhat slow on the uptake. The prologue is unnecessary (I found it off-putting rather than enticing) and there are some glitches in the writing. However, by exploiting the hooks of Flynn's mood swings and his relationship with Jennah, Suzuma has created a (first) novel about bi-polar depression which is a page-turner. Recommended for older teenagers.

Margrit Cruickshank

Linda Newbery

Set in Stone

David Fickling Books 2006 (hbk) 358pp £12.99 0385607482



This is a plot-driven, exciting thriller for older teenagers. Linda Newbery tells a good story, full of mystery with some unexpected twists. It is set in the late 19th century although the main characters are very much more informal and liberal in outlook, especially regarding sexual morality, than would be expected for the time.

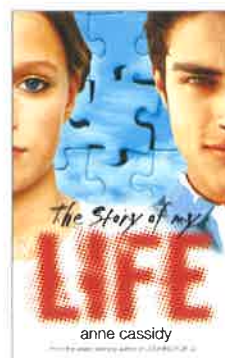
Samuel Godwin, an artist, is employed by Mr Farrow as an art teacher for his two teenage daughters. A governess, Charlotte Agnew, is already resident there and acts as a companion as well because the girls' mother has died recently. The story focuses on these three women plus Godwin and it is narrated in more or less alternate chapters by Godwin and Charlotte. He is intrigued by both the people and the house: 'Fourwinds'. It is an unusual piece of architecture commissioned by Mr Farrow, with a mystery attached. On three of the four walls is a statue depicting the appropriate wind but the fourth, the west wind, is missing. Godwin sets out to solve this mystery and to find the sculptor who had created such exquisite work. But there are other secrets, some horrifying and dangerous.

Audrey Baker

Anne Cassidy

The Story of My Life

Scholastic Press 2006 (pbk) 206pp £12.99 0439954746



The Story of My Life is a dark thriller about Kenny, a 16 year old whose life descends into nightmare following a chance meeting with Mack, a thug with a dark past, on a London railway platform. This fateful meeting with Mack, who initially saves Kenny from a beating by local thugs before dragging him into his own

underworld, also coincides with Kenny bumping into his brother's girlfriend, Natalie. It's not long before Natalie and Kenny fall in love, thus providing the two dramatic strands that give this novel its edge.

Anne Cassidy tells her violent tale through a series of flashbacks and sideward hops, echoing the style and obsessions of one of Kenny's favourite directors, Quentin Tarantino. It is to the author's credit that the jagged narrative never misses a beat as it weaves its way through the murky world of mindless violence and forbidden first love to a thoroughly satisfying conclusion. If I have one gripe it's that I never laughed, or even smiled, once, and would like to have seen the author give Tarantino a nod in that direction also.

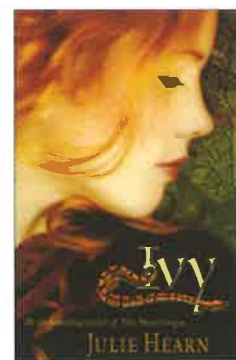
The Story of My Life is a thoroughly satisfying page-turner that will appeal to teenagers. It is also worth a glance by aspiring writers for the ease in which the author spins her tale while keeping the readers on the edge of their seat.

David Donohue

Julie Hearn

Ivy

Oxford Press 2006 (pbk) 332pp £5.99 0192754319



From the wonderfully earthy depiction of witchcraft in the 1600s in her novel *The Merrybegot*, Hearn turns her attention to Victorian England and what seems in the childhood section of the novel to be a pastiche of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, albeit in a feminised form. It is Ivy, an orphaned girl, who, like Oliver, is exploited by a cruel and uncaring adult world. As an extremely junior partner in a criminal duo, Ivy helps to steal the clothes off the backs of her middle-

class counterparts, yet it is in this den of thieves in which she finds herself that she experiences the only true affection of her childhood. Her familiarity with the middle class is re-established when, as a stunningly attractive adolescent, she poses for a Pre-Raphaelite painter. During her time as a model, and after a lifetime of acquiescence, her growing maturity and emerging feminine consciousness allow her to relinquish her dependence on the drug which has kept her compliant since childhood.

Although the novel is entertaining, containing as it does an element of the authorial wit and idiosyncrasy which suffused *The Merrybegot*, it is neither as memorable nor as convincing as its predecessor. The ending does nothing to enhance it. For what appears to be didactic reasons, Hearn propels her readers from the 19th-century countryside to a 21st-century school trip to an art gallery, a transition which does much to shatter the spell wrought by the previous 47 chapters.

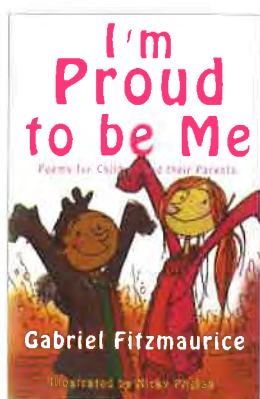
Carole Redford



Gabriel Fitzmaurice (Nicky Phelan illus)

I'm Proud to be Me

Mercier 2005 (pbk) 96pp €7.99 1856354741



Gabriel Fitzmaurice's new collection of poems bears the subtitle 'Poems for Children and their Parents', a phrase which sends at least two messages: here are poems which children and adults can enjoy separately, here are poems which children and adults can enjoy together. Add these to the book's dedication – 'For the

child in all of us' – and a fairly definite suggestion comes across that these poems (some 80 in total) are intended to have a dual appeal. In many respects, and certainly where this (adult) reviewer is concerned, the poems which seem to have been written with an eye particularly on the adult are the strongest and often, in fact, extremely touching. There is a more serious Fitzmaurice here than we have seen in previous collections,

a sense of longing and melancholy, especially for a childhood which is slowly coming to an end as new vistas and challenges beckon. There is, for example, a poem simply (but deceptively simply) called 'Growing Up', in which the poet reflects on the phenomenon (familiar to all teachers) of those secondary pupils who insist on returning to their primary school securities: 'They want their days of childhood, / They want them back again – / Reluctant to leave childhood, / Grow to women, men, / They want the days of childhood / They thought would never pass...' Even in those school poems where there is a lighter theme than there is in 'Growing Up', it remains the case that it is in his school settings that Fitzmaurice is at his most comfortable and, in stylistic terms, at his most assured. He is resolutely, but never sentimentally, pro-child; his is very much a New Curriculum, child-centred, 'I'm Proud to Be Me' stance. (For anyone needing a reminder of how different our classrooms used to be – and not so long ago! – the poem 'The Bad Old Days' will serve admirably: 'And though I am an old man now / I still remember him / Who marched us saying 'I'm a dunce' / And hit us on a whim / For all of us were hurt by it / And we're hurting yet. / When you treat a child like that / He never will forget. / NO!': that note of 'hurting yet' haunts a number of the best of the poems here).

But Fitzmaurice fans (and especially, perhaps, his younger fans) who want him in more traditional Fitzmaurice vein need not be disappointed that he would seem, in places, to have changed key. There is in the book's closing pages a very useful (and in many ways very humorous) appended list of themes represented in the collection: this informs us that topics covered include, among much else, 'Diarrhoea', 'Farting', 'Loo', 'Poo' and 'Scratching', the last of which has no fewer than three different treatments. While these poems do not speak to me as an adult or to the child in me (and that, of course, may say as much about me as it does about the poems), it is undoubtedly the case that they will speak to many children: they should prove extremely beneficial in helping to diminish the embarrassment such totally normal activities often provoke, whether in home, classroom or playground surroundings. They provide a local, updated dimension to what the Opies meant by the lore and language of schoolchildren.

In toto, then, a very welcome addition to the Gabriel Fitzmaurice oeuvre – very considerably enhanced here by Nicky Phelan's witty and exuberant black and white drawings.

Robert Dunbar

re-issued

John Gordon

The Giant Under the Snow

Orion 2006 (hbk) 200pp £9.99 1842555227



In the work of John Gordon, ancient conflicts and terrible dangers lie just below the surface of ordinary life, usually in East Anglia. In this revised version of *The Giant Under the Snow* (first published in 1968), there are four elements: teenage

protagonists; ancient underground magic buried threatening to awaken; a fight-back from the air, involving flying; and an implied suggestion that there is a kinship between the magic and the feminine.

Three teenagers – Jonk (short for Jonquil), her boyfriend Bill, and their friend Arf (Arthur) – find themselves caught up in an ancient conflict in and around Norwich. Jonk takes the lead in their adventures, supported by Bill and the sceptical Arf. Throughout, the protagonists see the mundane doings of ordinary life – shopping, eating meals, planning for Christmas – as little more than irrelevant nuisances getting in the way of their intense private business. Without ever saying so, the narrative suggests that there is a connection between this ancient power struggle and the disruptive, secretive and finally healing energies of adolescence.

None of this would work if the writing were pallid or the narrative uncertain. Neither is true. The pace of the narrative is rapid and there is a fierce and precise vitality in the descriptions. It is worth reading this novel if only for the totally compelling account of the protagonists' flight and ascent through a snow-storm to the weather-cock on Norwich cathedral. And the account of the Green Man rising from underground – at first menacing, ultimately benevolent – is stunning.

Victor Watson

information

Gillian Clements

The Picture History of Great Explorers

Frances Lincoln 2006 (pbk) 94pp £7.99 1845074645



This attractive and compact history picturebook tells the story of some 80 explorers in the past. It gives details of land, sea and space explorations in chronological order. Young readers will find the short biographies engaging, particularly since they are accompanied by colourful illustrations, maps and compact

information text boxes. Attractive story-board timelines with additional key dates, pictures and information are added to the bottom of each page. The book places a focus on many familiar explorers from the West, particularly those from England and Scotland, as well as explorers of America and Australia. Many less well-known explorers are also included, such as Bering, a Danish seaman after whom a strait is named, and women such as Gertrude Bell. Some explorers from non-Western civilizations are also included like Ibn Battuta the great Arab traveller, but more might have been made of their endeavours, particularly in the context of European explorers. It might have been noted, for example, that Battuta is estimated to have travelled some three times the distance of Marco Polo. Attention might also have been drawn to how Western explorers often benefited from the inventions of others, for example, from the compass invented in China and the ship design of other areas of the world. More emphasis might have been placed on how explorers were helped by local inhabitants to find suitable food, routes and shelter.

It would have been useful had the introduction made more distinctions between the many categories of travellers presented. Diverse motivations such as trade, interest in plants and animals, or the desire to 'discover' and colonise might have been linked to the explorers later described. This would have helped children to understand more the concept of exploration, 'discovery' and travel and their related and different consequences. A large timeline on each end page would have helped young readers to find travellers from different periods and regions at a glance. Children might make such a timeline for themselves. This book is full of interesting information for young readers and will help children to connect history, geography and science in a very natural way. Suitable for 10+.

Geraldine O'Connor

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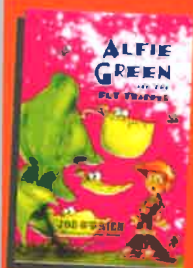
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Kate

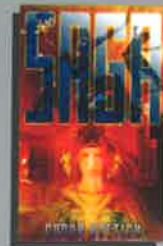
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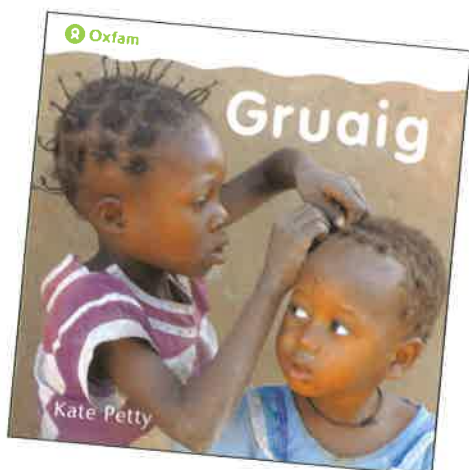
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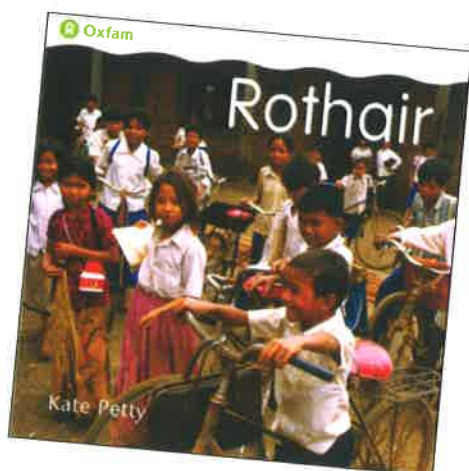


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