

Recent older children's fiction: a new golden age?—Part 3

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9 September 2004

This is the final article in a three-part series reviewing recent older children's fiction. Part 1 was published on September 7 and Part 2 was posted September 8.

Private Peaceful (2003) by Michael Morpurgo—Harper Collins (ISBN 0 00 715006 7)

Lord of the Nutcracker Men (2001) by Iain Lawrence—Harper Collins (ISBN 0 00 713557 2)

Match of Death (2002) by James Riordan—Oxford University Press (ISBN 0 19 271879 7)

The First World War continues to inspire children's fiction. In fact, given the state of international events in recent years, this defining moment in world history has attained a burning actuality for writers and children alike. As a result, there have been many fictional accounts published recently concerning the events of what became known as "the Great War," and a number of notable ones.

One such book is *Private Peaceful* by Michael Morpurgo. It is a story recalled through the course of one night by Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful as he watches the hours tick toward the early morning execution of his older brother on the charge of cowardice.

From the terrible battlefields of France, Tommo is recalling his childhood, and we are led along with him to that quieter, more peaceful time. He remembers his big brother Charlie taking him to his first day of school, the death of his father, his mother working hard to make ends meet for the struggling family. He remembers his brother Joe, whom some called simple, but who to Tommo was very special. He also recalls the only girl in his life, Molly, and how Charlie somehow took her away from him.

But as the world turned to war, Tommo had to grow up fast. Together, Charlie and Tommo enlist and are sent to France. From the happy cheering crowds back home they are thrust into a hell on earth. We hear of the bombs and the death, the terrible noise, dirt, disease, rats, and stench of the trenches. The courageous Charlie and Tommo fight to stay alive and to stay together. But it seems they cannot do both.

Michael Morpurgo is the third Children's Laureate, a post that he was instrumental in creating with the support of Ted Hughes, and is one of the most well known and best loved of children's authors. He has written more than 90 books, short stories, and screenplays and two musicals, and has won many prizes, both in the UK and in Europe.

In Morpurgo's stories, two themes predominate. The first is the triumph of an outsider or a child on their own (*Long Way Home* (1975), *The War of Jenkins's Ear* (1993)). The second is relationships between older and younger characters or between characters and nature (*Farm Boy* [1998], *Kensuke's Kingdom* [1999], *Toro! Toro!* [2001]).

Morpurgo and his wife run Farms for City Children, a charity that brings inner-city children to live in the countryside for a week at a time.

In June of this year, the Red House Children's Book Award—the only literary prize to be judged entirely by young people (25,000 children across the country) was awarded to Morpurgo for *Private Peaceful*.

Morpurgo commented, "It seemed to me that this was history, it was a long time ago and a pretty grim subject. I hoped for some children it would resonate, but was taken by surprise by this vote.... I'm all the more convinced of the ability of children to rise above what we expect of them. They have a very strong sense of what is well-written, not as literary critics, but what carries them along."

The author alluded to the war in Iraq and the D-Day commemorations and how they will have contributed to the children's response: "War is in the consciousness at the moment."

He was inspired to write *Private Peaceful* after visiting Ypres to speak at a conference on writing about war for young people. While there, he discovered that about 300 British soldiers—some still teenagers—had been executed, mostly for desertion and cowardice, when they were traumatised by their ordeals and in deep shock. He was motivated to write the book after being "outraged" at the recent government decision to acknowledge the injustice of these executions, but not to pardon the slain men. "A country that does not acknowledge its faults and deal with its shame cannot be called civilised," Morpurgo said in a recent Royal Society of Arts lecture.

The "Postscript" to the story informs the reader that between 1914 and 1918, more than 290 soldiers of the British and Commonwealth armies were shot for "desertion" and "cowardice" (two for simply being asleep at their posts). It is now understood that many of these men were suffering from shell shock.

Private Peaceful is a beautiful, but often painful, account of a boy growing into a young man amidst the crumbling realities of a familiar world. The simple and eloquent style of the author creates a startling image of a world of almost surreal innocence being overtaken by the horror of war.

But Tommo's earliest memories are not of a rural English idyll, but of a harsh place that is cruelly class-ridden—a land of gentry and servants, of tyrannical teachers and hardworking labourers like his father. Tommo's father was a forester who was killed trying to save his son from a falling tree. The family falls on bad times but manages to pull through.

Yet these are viewed as happy memories for Tommo. Then comes the war. Charlie is now 17, and the colonel (owner of the estate) threatens to eject the Peaceful family from their tied cottage unless he joins up. And although underage, Tommo insists on accompanying him.

A defining moment is Tommo's complete loss of faith in a god while on the front. Like many who saw the horror of the trenches, he simply cannot believe anymore. Tommo contrasts his feelings with those of his brother Joe who imagines heaven resides within a church spire: "I envied him that. I could no longer even pretend to myself that I believed in a merciful god, nor in a heaven, not anymore, not after I had seen what men could do to one another. I could believe only in the hell I was living in, a hell on earth, and it was man-made, not god-made."

Private Peaceful is a moving and compassionate tale that is as important for younger readers as for those from Morpurgo's generation. In the

characters of Thomas and Charlie Peaceful, the reader can appreciate the sheer waste of young lives that were cut short by the First World War and the huge injustices endured by men like them before and after they entered the trenches. The story also chimes a protest against the inhumanities exercised on people through the institutions of school, law and government in a way that is subtle, but all the more powerful for it.

Lord of the Nutcracker Men by Iain Lawrence is about Johnny, a 10-year-old boy who lives in London with his parents. He enthusiastically plays at war with the army of nutcracker soldiers that his toymaker father whittles from wood and fights imaginary foes. But in 1914 war looms, and all too soon Johnny's father is swept up in the "war to end all wars." He proudly enlists with his British countrymen to fight at the front in France. The war, though, is nothing like what anyone expected.

Johnny is sent to live with his aunt in a small town outside of London called Cliffe, while his mother finds work in the munitions factories. Johnny reluctantly attends school during the day and plays with his soldiers while awaiting his father's letters in the evening. The letters that arrive from Johnny's father reveal the ugly realities of the fighting at the front, and the soldiers he carves and encloses with his letters begin to bear ugly scars.

Johnny continues to add these soldiers to his armies of "Huns," "Tommys," and "Frenchmen," engaging them in furious battles. But soon he begins to suspect that his nutcracker men are not just part of a game. Johnny thinks he possesses godlike powers over his wooden men. He fears he controls his father's fate, the lives of all the soldiers in no-man's land, and the outcome of the war itself.

Lawrence has said that he began the book as a simple Christmas story, but that it grew into much more. Although the story deals with the disturbing facts around war and depicts some gruesome images, the author has employed a large amount of symbolism and an almost playful style, making this book suitable even for younger readers.

Although the First World War continues to be well covered by writers for older and younger children, the horrific events of the Second World War have enjoyed less prominence in children's fiction. A few books have appeared recently that are beginning to seriously address this crucial area for young people.

Match of Death by James Riordan is told from the standpoint of 15-year old Vova.

Vova lives in Kiev, in the Ukraine, and is normally only interested in playing football. But it is 1941, and the Nazis invade the Ukraine. Kiev is bombed by the Luftwaffe. For a few days everything is quiet. Vova and his sister, Vera, scour through the rubble of the city only to discover their home has been blown up, killing their parents.

The German army takes Kiev. Soon Vova and his sister join the partisans and are doing what they can to harass the enemy. Vova is given the chance to play football again, against a German side—only this time the stakes are high: if Vova's team wins, they will be shot.

Riordan has worked as a translator in Moscow and held the seat of professor of Russian Studies at Surrey University. He has written more than 20 academic books on Russian social issues and on sport, several collections of folk-tales and a number of picture books. In 2000, Riordan published *When the Guns fall Silent*, which retells the story of the Christmas truce of 1914.

The story of the Dynamo soccer club of Kiev, upon which Riordan's *Match of Death* is based, forms one of the legendary events of the World War Two. After Kiev was occupied, members of the Dynamo team found work in Kiev Bakery No. 1 and started to play soccer in an empty lot. The Germans offered them the opportunity to train in the Zenith Stadium, after which they suggested a "friendly" game with a team picked from the German army.

The Ukrainians accepted the offer, named their team "Start" and posters on June 12, 1942, announced "Football. Armed Forces of Germany versus

Kiev city Start." The Germans, who were in good physical shape, scored the first goal, but by half-time Dynamo was two goals up. A German officer visited the Dynamo dressing room and ordered them "not to play so keenly"; he threatened to have them shot if they did not obey. Still, Dynamo won the game 4-1.

The Germans then fielded a stronger team on July 17, but it lost 6-0. The Nazi administration was outraged and decided that they had to teach the Dynamo "Untermensch" (subhumans) a lesson. The powerful Flakelf team was invited, but this German team also lost to Dynamo, and not a word about it appeared in the newspapers.

The Ukrainian team was given three days to think about their position, and on August 9 there was a "friendly" rematch. In spite of the pressure, Dynamo again defeated the German team. Most of the Ukrainian team members were arrested and executed in Babi Yar. A monument to the players' heroism stands in Kiev.

Riordan undertook extensive research, travelling to Kiev to interview the sons of those who took part in the fabled match. Out of these investigations, he has produced a magnificent story.

Although the book is largely Vova's account, the story occasionally digresses to fill the reader in about the general political situation at the time. One of these vital instances is when a Politburo discussion is taking place between Stalin and his closest functionaries. As Stalin makes a display of mastering the situation—a Nazi invasion that he had refused to accept could happen only a few weeks before—Molotov, Beria and Zhukov seek to undermine the credibility of others while manoeuvring themselves into their leaders' confidence.

The disastrous policies of the Stalin clique are once again revealed to the reader with the slaughter and fall of Kiev.

One of Riordan's triumphs is in creating characters like Vova. From being an average boy more concerned with the next football match than with world events, suddenly through the intrusion of those same events, he undergoes a remarkable transformation. Words, phrases and battle cries that Vova had learnt by rote at school suddenly start to mean something.

Ivan Ivanovich, the team coach, is one of Riordan's giant characters—in both stature and personality. A veteran of the fighting in the First World War, Ivanovich then joined the Red Guards during the Russian Civil War. Now, as Political Commissar at the club, he is a father figure to many of the younger players. Ever resourceful, Ivanovich organises search-and-rescue parties after the German bombing raids. But he is also a man capable of great sympathy. When Vera and Vova tell him of the two children that have been hanged by the Nazis for working for the partisans, the brother and sister are surprised to see Ivanovich weep. He replies, "Never be afraid of tears. As Karl Marx said of prayers, they're the heart of a heartless world, the soul of a soulless life, the sigh of the oppressed. There's no shame in tears."

The story also tackles the ambivalence of the Ukrainian population towards the Nazi invasion. A people having long suffered under a cruel and merciless despot are now being told that they are to be liberated by the German army. The contradictory responses, particularly amongst the Ukrainian peasantry, which led to many willing recruits for Nazi collaborators, are present in Vova and Vera's own family. Their father, a committed communist, comes from a family of poor peasants who had done well out of the collective farm system. Their mother, who is religious and given to cynical outbursts against Stalin's orders, is capable of rightly pointing out the criminal beheading of the Red Army in 1937 but then concludes, "Who knows, maybe the Germans will treat us better than Stalin: they are Christians at least!"

There are some shocking scenes in the book, with perhaps the worst being the rounding up and shooting of the Jews in the football stadium. But other fleeting depictions have their own chilling resonance. Vova's mother's comments about the Nazi being Christians foreshadow later events, when from the half-cheering crowds that greet the official Fascist

entry into Kiev an old woman runs forward to kiss the cross daubed on the side of a Nazi tank.

Riordan has developed a cast of powerful characters to depict one of the most inspiring moments from the darkest days of a horrifying conflict. In remaining loyal to the facts and avoiding unnecessary embroidery, the story stands as a testament to the human spirit.

Concluded



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