

Recent older children's fiction: a new golden age?--Part 2

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This is the second in a three-part series reviewing recent older children's fiction. Part 1 was published on September 7.

No Angels (2003) by Robert Swindells, Puffin Books (ISBN 0 14 131462 1)

Junk (1996) by Melvin Burgess, Andersen Press/Penguin Books (ISBN 0 14 038019 1)

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night time (2003) by Mark Haddon, David Fickling Books/Jonathan Cape/Vintage/Red Fox (ISBN 0 224 06378 2)

A Little Piece of Ground (2003) by Elizabeth Laird, Macmillan Children's Books (ISBN 0 330 43679 1)

No Angels by Robert Swindells is the tale of Nikki Minton and Nick Webley, both of them 14-year-olds but living in different centuries.

Nick is the son of a dead carpenter living in the mid-19th century and struggling to keep his family out of the workhouse. Nikki is a homeless teenager living in the present day, who has run away from home to escape the sexual advances of her mother's boyfriend.

After sleeping rough, Nikki eventually befriends some squatters and becomes embroiled in a world of petty crime. Nick manages to save his family from the workhouse when he begins working for an altruistic doctor, but his past soon catches up with him.

The story uses alternate chapters tracing the narratives of the two main characters, which are spoken in the first person. Both stories are interspersed with fictional courtroom proceedings and newspaper reports that act as commentaries on widely held views amongst the judiciary, penal system and right-wing press.

Swindells was born in Bradford and lives in the Yorkshire Moors, around which some of his stories have been set in the past. After publishing a number of historical novels in the 1970s, he became a full-time writer in 1980 and proceeded to tackle serious social and political themes he felt were coming to have a greater significance in young people's lives.

In the mid-1980s, as Reagan's America provoked an ever more belligerent arms race with the USSR and countries like Britain were gripped by popular anxiety of a possible nuclear conflict, Swindells wrote the anti-nuclear war story *Brother in the Land* (1984).

Towards the end of the decade, as it became increasingly clear that the economic policies of Thatcherism had socially polarised Britain, Swindells looked into the not too distant future to speculate on the eventual fate of the country's cities, writing the remarkable *Daz 4 Zoe* (1990)—a Romeo and Juliet story set in Britain in 2051. British society has broken down into a police-state where the mass of the population lives amidst endemic poverty packed into large cities that are surrounded by cordoned off suburbs where the affluent few reside.

It was *Stone Cold* (1993) that brought Swindells to prominence, and won him the Carnegie Medal. This is the story of a 16-year old boy called Link who leaves home after his mother's boyfriend begins to drink and becomes violent. Link tries to survive on the streets of London, but

homeless children are disappearing. The book deals with issues such as loneliness, begging, sleeping rough, hunger as well as abduction and murder.

Elaborating on what inspired him to write the book, Swindells said; "There is absolutely no reason for homelessness to happen in Britain. It's needless; it's being done deliberately, and that really is what *Stone Cold* is all about. It was originally called "Leaving the Opera" because of a comment by our (then) housing minister, Sir George Young, who said 'the homeless are the sort of people you step over when you come out of the opera'. My anger about that triggered the book.... It was the thought that in two, three or four years' time some of the children reading it now could be sleeping on the streets of London that made me write it."

Against the charge that children should be "protected" in their fiction from some of life's harsher realities, Swindells once replied; "It's not a good idea to keep things from young people. They should know what's happening out there, that some of their contemporaries live less privileged lives than they do, to bear this in mind and perhaps do something about it one day."

Commenting more generally on his attitude towards his writing, Swindells has said; "I am dedicated to the idea that we are all responsible for one another, and that we ought to conduct ourselves accordingly, doing no harm to any being. My work reflects this belief."

Swindells is one of only four authors to have won the prestigious Children's Book Award twice. For young adult readers in recent years the author has written *Smash!* (1997), a story about racial intolerance inspired by the Bradford riots of 1995, and *Wrecked* (2001), which is about four sixteen-year-old boys who develop a growing fondness for alcohol while they await their GCSE exam results.

In the *No Angels*' character of Nicki, we see the harsh reality confronting many British teenagers today. In recent years the figures for under 25's living on the streets of Britain have been calculated at anything up to a quarter of a million.

Research published in March by the Children's Society, *Thrown Away: Young People Forced to Leave Home*, suggested that around 15,000 under-16s (an estimated one in every 50 UK youngsters) are forced to leave their homes every year. Added to this are recent estimates, by the charity Crisis, of a population numbering 380,000 people (almost the size of the city of Manchester) who constitute "the hidden homeless", overwhelmingly made up of young people (See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jul2004/home-j28.shtml>).

The homelessness charity Shelter has pointed out that the number of families forced into temporary homes has increased by 135 percent since the New Labour government came to power in 1997.

As Nicki discovers in the story, living on the streets is not as she imagined, bringing her into close proximity to many dangers that she was never aware of before. Swindells deals with the fear of this new and scary environment and explores the many doubts and difficult decisions that Nicki has, such as contacting friends or relatives or trusting strangers.

Her story is paralleled by that of Nick; a loveable young urchin who always tries to do his best for his family. But the circumstances of his situation continually conspire against him. The single best news for his impoverished family is Nick meeting Dr Snow, a maverick philanthropist researching the possible link between cholera and bad drinking water, almost by accident he begins to provide Nick with an education.

Dr Snow acts as the voice of reason throughout the story, counterbalancing the reactionary tracts from the magistrates and the newspapers. In the parallels of both stories *No Angels* illustrates that although a century and a half apart, the circumstances of the two youngsters and the reactions of authority and official society have barely changed.

All this, Swindells accomplishes with a much needed compassion and originality that treats his audience with the seriousness they deserve.

Junk by Melvin Burgess tells the story of Tar and his girlfriend Gemma—both 14 years of age. After trying to support his alcoholic mother while being regularly beaten by his alcoholic father, Tar finally abandons them and runs away to the city of Bristol. Following a few weeks of begging on the streets and sleeping in derelict buildings, he falls in with a friendly group of squatters.

Burgess has attracted a significant amount of controversy for a number of recent works which some critics have viewed as inappropriate for school-age children, while others have welcomed his books for the “difficult” pre-adolescent male audience.

Lady: My Life as a Bitch (2001) sparked a great deal of publicity for its frank exploration of the sexual behaviour of Sandra, a 17-year-old girl who turns into a dog. *Doing It* (2003), which the US network ABC is interested in turning into a series, is perhaps Burgess’ most daring book yet, portraying the often crude sexual behaviour and conversations of teenage boys, teacher/pupil sex and graphic descriptions of “heavy-petting”.

But it was the appearance of *Junk* in 1996 and its adaptation for UK television that brought Burgess to the attention of a wider, older audience. It is an honest and disturbing account of teenage homelessness and heroin addiction on the streets of Britain’s big cities (although the latter has since spread to many smaller communities around the country).

Burgess largely succeeds in the challenging task of conveying to younger readers just how “good” heroin can initially make the user feel, while uncompromisingly tracing the appalling consequences of addiction. The feeling of things spiralling out of the control of the two protagonists, Tar and Gemma, is vividly depicted.

Burgess said recently; “I think that writing for children is blossoming in all sorts of directions at the moment, and it’s a very exciting area to be involved in. My work for teenagers comes about because I feel there is a great, big hypocritical gap between the kinds of media they are officially supposed to have access to, and what they actually do have access to, which means that in your teen years, you can hear or see almost anything, so long as you poach, steal or eavesdrop it, but very little that is real is addressed directly to you. I want to address people directly.”

Responding to accusations of titillation and inappropriate language and descriptions in his books, Burgess explained, “I do believe that we have let young men down very badly in terms of the kinds of books written for them—more or less none, with very few honourable exceptions, such as Aidan Chambers. This is changing these days, and *Doing It* is my go at trying to bring young male sexual culture into writing. The boys in *Doing It* are, in my opinion, nice boys—not sexist, not bullies ... they may make the crudest type of jokes imaginable, but only amongst themselves. Sex is enormously important to them, but it is certainly not a leisure activity—it’s far too important. They treat their girlfriends by and large with respect.”

It is high time that someone within children’s fiction tackled issues such as drugs, casual sex and prostitution in a serious and reflective manner. But in *Junk*, and other later works, there is a certain detachment and lack

of empathy and an unfortunate creeping cynicism. It would be a sad outcome if Burgess continues to drift in this direction.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night time by Mark Haddon is narrated by 15-year-old Christopher Boone, who lives with his father in a small town in England called Swindon. One day Christopher discovers the neighbour’s dog lying dead on their front lawn. Christopher decides to find out how the dog died.

He eventually solves the mystery, but along the way he discovers many secrets about the world around him and his family that he had never before suspected. What makes this story especially interesting, however, is that Christopher has Asperger’s Syndrome (a form of autism) and as the book is narrated by him, it reflects how he sees the world.

Christopher is astonishingly adept at certain mental feats which would leave much older children far behind. But at the same time he has tremendous difficulties with everyday things which many children will have learnt in infancy. He knows all the countries of the world and their capitals, he can map every prime number up to 7,057 with the ease of someone reciting the alphabet, and can speak about the origins of the universe with the confidence of a trained physicist. But he has some very basic problems in interacting with people.

He has great trouble figuring out other people’s feelings, and he doesn’t understand why they use metaphors or why they tell lies. Strangers, noise, red and brown objects coming into close contact and unfamiliar situations terrify him, but he is curiously detached about things like illness and death.

The Curious Incident ... won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award for 2003.

Haddon has written 15 previous books for children. He has worked as a live-in volunteer for someone with Multiple Sclerosis and held part-time positions with Mencap and several other organisations, working with children and adults with a variety of mental and physical handicaps.

He said that he never set out to write a book about autism, or even about a child like Christopher. “It came from the image of the dead dog with the fork through it. I just wanted a good image on that first page. To me, that was gripping and vivid, and it stuck in your head. Only when I was writing it did I realise, at least to my mind, that it was also quite funny. But it was only funny if you described it in the voice that I used in the book.

“So the dog came along first, then the voice. Only after a few pages did I really start to ask, Who does the voice belong to? So Christopher came along, in fact, after the book had already got underway.”

In deciding to make Christopher his narrator, Haddon created a story which is both defined and limited by the central character’s very logical, literal-minded point of view. Christopher’s devastating honesty about the events he is recounting and his inability to sentimentalise his actions or the actions of others lend the story a stripped-down power that allows Haddon to talk about issues such as mortality, love and loss without sounding trite.

Because the author never condescends to his narrator, nor does he romanticise the boy’s condition, he can show how Christopher can be childlike at times but can also take on an almost chilling detachment. His monotone voice is surprisingly compelling.

Haddon had consciously tried to move out of children’s writing, and wrote *Curious Incident ...* for an adult audience. But ironically, the book has been as well received by both adults and children alike. As a result the book was published in the UK simultaneously in two imprints; available for young adult readers from David Fickling Books and for adults under the Jonathan Cape imprint. It has also sold co-editions in over 15 other countries.

Any book with a diverse audience will inevitably excite differing interpretations, and *Curious Incident ...* is no exception. Readers have written to Haddon saying that it’s a desperately sad book and they wept

most of the way through it. Other people say it's "charming" and they kept laughing all the time. Haddon believes that so many different reactions are possible, only because Christopher doesn't force the reader to think one thing or another.

In a recent interview, Haddon alluded to the fact that in the end; there is something far more "wrong" with the people around Christopher than with him. By the end of the book, although Christopher hasn't changed in any real way, he has at least managed to restore some kind of order to his life. But the reader can see that the people around Christopher are still struggling with their problems. "Their story," Haddon says, "is going to go on. They're the people who in some sense have something wrong with them." This is an interesting observation and certainly one of the reasons why so many people have felt touched by the story in different ways.

A Little Piece of Ground by Elizabeth Laird is the story of 12-year-old Karim Aboudi and his family who live in Ramallah, on the West Bank. Karim desperately tries to play football wherever he can, while coping with his love-sick older brother and annoying younger sisters.

Israeli tanks have badly damaged the local school and playing fields, as well as areas throughout Ramallah. As a result, Karim has precious little space to play. And there is so little time to play, or buy groceries for the family, as everyone in the town dodges the Israeli curfews as best they can. The typical Palestinian family is trapped in an apartment for days and weeks at a time, without being able to step outside for a breath of fresh air from fear of a sniper's bullet.

The book takes the reader on a journey into Ramallah during moments when the city is free to breathe before residents are once again locked down.

At a checkpoint, on the way to the village where the family's relatives live, Karim's father is forced out of the car and made to strip at gunpoint. In the young boy's eyes, his father is humiliated along with a long line of Palestinian males. Later at the farm, the family attempt to harvest olives amongst groves that have belonged to the Aboudi family for generations, but they are shot at by Israeli settlers.

Originally from New Zealand, Laird began traveling as soon as she finished her education. She lived and worked (as an English teacher) first in Malaysia, then in Ethiopia. Later she taught at a summer school in India, and then went to live in Iraq, where she got a job as a violinist in the Iraqi Symphony Orchestra and where her husband, David McDowall, was working for the British Council. They moved on to Beirut (during the Civil War), and were evacuated to Vienna. They settled in England with their two sons in 1979, and both began to write. Laird has lived and worked in England ever since, though she makes frequent visits abroad, especially to Ethiopia, where she has set many of her stories and with which she professes a close affinity.

Within days of *A Little Piece of Ground* being launched at the Edinburgh Book Festival in August last year, the publishers had three demands for it to be withdrawn. A number of Jewish pressure groups, mainly centred in North America called for the book to be pulped. Phyllis Simon, the co-owner of the Canadian children's bookshop *Kidsbooks*, made the first complaint to the publisher, describing the book as a "blatant piece of hate-fomenting propaganda". Linda Silver, of Jewish Book World said Laird's book portrayed Israelis as "mindless killing machines".

Laird denied accusations that the book was anti-Israeli or biased; "I did expect comeback, but to say that any criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic is doing Israel a disservice. This is an important story that should be told. It shows a child under military occupation. It's terrible for the occupiers, and terrible for the occupied. I hope I have shown how awful it is for the soldiers too."

Against accusations of one-sidedness, Laird cited the response to an earlier book, *Kiss the Dust*, "about a Kurdish family who escape from Iraqi Kurdistan and are interned in an Iranian refugee camp under very

harsh conditions. Nobody has ever said to me that I should have shown the point of view of the Iranian guards in that camp. I would very much have liked to have put in that story a sympathetic Israeli character and, indeed, I tried to see how that could be done. But there's no point in making a sentimental attempt to show a half-truth when the whole truth is there in front of me."

There have been many voices of support for the book, including the current Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo. He urged parents to encourage their 11 to 14-year-olds to read the book. "Read it, and we know what it is to feel oppressed, to feel fear every day. And we should know it, and our children should know it, for this is how much of the world lives" he said.

The book was released to publishers worldwide at last year's Frankfurt Book Fair, although problems were encountered in gaining access to the US/Canadian market, which has usually welcomed Laird's previous books.

Laird's collaborator on *A Little Piece of Ground* was Dr Sonia Nimr, a Palestinian university lecturer who teaches at Bir Zeit University and lives in Ramallah with her young son.

The book captures well the tense, claustrophobic atmosphere within Ramallah and makes an effective use of Karim's growing youthful energy—just to stretch his legs—as a metaphor for the inhuman conditions being suffered by the populace who inhabit some of the most cramped conditions anywhere on earth.

The story tries to explore the contradiction of a young boy striving for a childhood (in the form of football), but faced with the crushing reality of conflict. Laird also explores some of the class difference amongst the Palestinian population. Karim comes from a family of means (even if modest) and his mother always tells him to avoid the children from the poorer side of town, so when he meets Hopper, a child from the refugee camp whose brother is languishing in an Israeli jail; it is something of a shock.

Karim's sudden burst of anger at the checkpoint is momentarily powerful, but is not followed through—becoming a wasted opportunity to take the reader further into some of the anxieties, fears and hopes of so many Palestinian youngsters. Karim later tells his family: "We should be like the bombers and kill as many as we can." But we never find out what his family feel about this, nor Karim for that matter. This chance again resurfaces when Karim sees his brother throwing stones at the Israeli tanks and he is wounded, but once again nothing deeper is retrieved from the situation.

Also unconvincing is Karim's interaction with his older brother and conversations amongst the adults, which while at times fluid and realistic, almost always slips into sound bites.

Despite its weaknesses, however, the fact that *A Little Piece of Ground* was published in the face of considerable opposition and has gained an appreciative audience is a significant event and will hopefully spur on other writers to chronicle the lives of children living in similarly difficult conditions around the world.

To be continued.



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