

KATHERINE RUNDELL

Why You Should
Read Children's
Books,

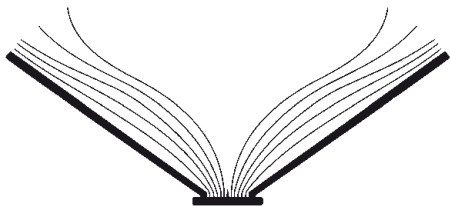


Even Though You Are
So Old and Wise

BLOOMSBURY

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Why you should read children's books

The place I loved most as a child was the public library in Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe. The children's section had seemingly not been restocked since the 1950s, and it smelt of the leaking roof and the ferocious sun which flooded, impeded only by dust, through the glass doors. The spines of the books were sun-bleached, and some had been taken out so rarely the fines on the returns slip were listed in shillings. It was there that I read my way through almost every book on the two dozen shelves: shelves which contained profoundly unlikely adventures, an enormous quantity

of mediocre horse stories, and a book which had been shelved there by mistake in which the heroine has sex in a gondola. And, too, some of the greatest fiction ever written for anyone of any age at all.

Children's fiction has a long and noble history of being dismissed. Martin Amis once said in an interview: 'People ask me if I ever thought of writing a children's book. I say, "If I had a serious brain injury I might well write a children's book."' There is a particular smile that some people give when I tell them what I do – roughly the same smile I'd expect had I told them I make miniature bathroom furniture out of matchboxes, for the elves. Particularly in

the UK, even when we praise, we praise with faint damns: a quotation from the *Guardian* on the back of Alan Garner's memoir *Where Shall We Run To?* read: 'He has never been just a children's writer: he's far richer, odder and deeper than that.' So that's what children's fiction is not: not rich or odd or deep.

I've been writing children's fiction for more than ten years now, and still I would hesitate to define it. But I do know, with more certainty than I usually feel about anything, what it is not: it's not exclusively for children. When I write, I write for two people: myself, age twelve, and myself, now, and the book has to satisfy two

distinct but connected appetites. My twelve-year-old self wanted autonomy, peril, justice, food, and above all a kind of density of atmosphere into which I could step and be engulfed. My adult self wants all those things, and also: acknowledgements of fear, love, failure; of the rat that lives within the human heart. So what I try for when I write – failing often, but trying – is to put down in as few words as I can the things that I most urgently and desperately want children to know and adults to remember. Those who write for children are trying to arm them for the life ahead with everything we can find that is true. And perhaps, also, secretly, to arm

adults against those necessary compromises and necessary heartbreaks that life involves: to remind them that there are and always will be great, sustaining truths to which we can return.

There is, of course, 1 Corinthians 13: 'Now that I have become a man, I have put away childish things.' But the writing we call children's fiction is not a childish thing: childish things include picking your nose and eating the contents, and tantruming at the failure to get your own way. The 45th President of America is childish. Children's fiction has childhood at its heart, which is not the same thing. Children's fiction is not written *by*

children; it stands alongside children but is not of them.

(That children's fiction isn't written by children is probably for the best. I completed my first novel when I was about eight years old, as a birthday present for my father. I sewed a cover for it in blue silk and embroidered it with stars. It was called *Sally's Surprise*. The titular surprise, I find on rereading it, is presumably that there was no plot. Nothing happens. It was, in this sense, avant-garde and *Waiting for Godot*-esque. It had, though, a *lot* of descriptions of horses, which is less so.)

There is, though, a sense among most adults that we should only read in one

direction, because to do otherwise would be to regress or retreat: to de-mature. You pass Spot the Dog, battle past that bicephalic monster PeterandJane; through Narnia, on to *The Catcher in the Rye* or Patrick Ness, and from there to adult fiction, where you remain, triumphant, never glancing back, because to glance back would be to lose ground.

But the human heart is not a linear train ride. That isn't how people actually read; at least, it's not how I've ever read. I learned to read fairly late, with much strain and agonising until, at last and quite suddenly, the hieroglyphs took shape and meaning; and then I read with the same omnivorous

un-scrupulosity I showed at mealtimes. I read *Matilda* alongside Jane Austen, Narnia and Agatha Christie; I took Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* with me to university, clutched tight to my chest like a life raft. I still read Paddington when I need to believe, as Michael Bond does, that the world's miracles are more powerful than its chaos. For reading not to become something that we do for anxious self-optimisation – for it not to be akin to buying high-spec trainers and a gym membership each January – *all* texts must be open, to all people.

The difficulties with the rule of readerly progression are many: one is that, if one

followed the same pattern into adulthood, turning always to books of obvious increasing complexity, you'd be left ultimately with nothing but *Finnegans Wake* and the complete works of the French deconstructionist theorist Jacques Derrida to cheer your deathbed.

The other difficulty with the rule is that it supposes that children's fiction can safely be discarded. I would say we do so at our peril, for we discard in adulthood a casket of wonders which, read with an adult eye, have a different kind of alchemy in them.

*

W.H. Auden wrote: 'There are good books which are only for adults, because their comprehension presupposes adult experiences, but there are no good books which are only for children.'

I am absolutely not suggesting adults read *only*, or even primarily, children's fiction. Just that there are some times in life when it might be the only thing that will do.