



Classic in Short No.23: Elidor

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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on Alan Garner's **Elidor**.

Dobbin ousted by Findhorn. Can it be?

Elidor by Alan Garner <!--break-->

Consternation at Lee!

Sitting behind their roll-top desks, green eyeshades at the ready, the **BfK** team have been impatiently awaiting copy for the back page about a little wooden horse (1). And now they get this.

Why?

He was confessedly a quiet little horse and he's suddenly been flung aside by Night Waves. Fourteenth of July it happened ? first night of the Proms. The back-page man had been listening to the Glagolitic Mass, and when he went to turn off the radio, behold! an excited lady (2) was beginning to talk about children's books. Cor! what condescension in so posh a programme. But we are, it seems, living in thrilling times. ?Something has happened in children's literature,? she cried, and wheeled on ?the usual sources? to tell us that the subject had come of age. Dumbfounding? Do queues round the block for Harry Potter IV, or journalists all agog to read **The Amber Spyglass** (3), betoken a New Age? Surely the little wooden horse must be temporarily re-stabled in favour of some lustier beast and a sharper rebuttal.

So why ?Elidor??

It's a pivotal book. Published in 1965 it marks the summation of a period far more thrilling than the present, when intelligent experiment in books for children (rather than for teenagers) was rife, encouraged by creative editors who were not ham-strung by normative edicts or the demands of conglomerate tradesmen. Pivotal too in its author's career: a high Romantic tale, separating those two beginner fantasies that Alan Garner has more or less disowned: **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen** (1960) and **The Moon of Gomrath** (1963) from the contorted narratives of **The Owl Service** (1967) and **Red Shift** (1973).

High Romantic?

Not ?alf. Admittedly four children, marked down to save a Tolkienian secondary world from desolation, may seem a corny plot, but it is underpinned by the verities of myth and folktale: Childe Roland and Elidurus who both broke through to ?fairyland?; the heroic fairies of Ireland and their Treasures; and Findhorn, the unicorn ? emotional centre of the book ? dying in the lap of the ?mayde that is makeles?. (4) The mystery gains potency through contrast with the everyday environs of suburban Manchester (?even the toadstools are made of concrete?), and the fractious children set against the Blyton-esque caricature of parents and neighbours.

And also ?Classic??

What gives the fantasy its classic status (enhanced by Charles Keeping's tremendous pen drawings) is the manner of its crafting. Garner's quick prose attunes itself to both of the worlds that you encounter: Elidor, with its 'air as thick as water', and Dad's back garden, where a startled bird 'braked in the air, shot sideways, and flew back to the chimney'. Undemonstrative quotes perhaps, but declaring a command of diction which convinces right through to the moments of tense drama. Strange to say, the book was only 'commended' in the Carnegie Stakes for 1965 (and who now remembers the winner?) but the fashioning of its story and the energy of its writing stand in happy contrast to the laborious, self-reflexive plod of some of the edallists *de nos jours*.

And That Goes for Night Waves Too.

A too-limited knowledge of her subject ? or malign vibrations emanating from Hogwarts ? may account for that lady presenter's distorted understanding; but if such arbiters of culture can bring themselves to attend to children's books with some regularity who knows if they will not improve? And if, before long, they send a microphone down to those hornbeam trees on the Oxford ring road (5) they should remember that that isn't the first place where 'the shadows broke through'.

(1) **The Little Wooden Horse** was to have been featured? (Ed)

(2) Sarah Dunant.

(3) The third part of Philip Pullman's trilogy, 'His Dark Materials?', which is published in November.

(4) Thank you to Neil Philip whose book on Garner, **A Fine Anger** (Collins, 1981), is one of the best ever written on a contemporary author. Naturally, it is out of print and I have rarely met anyone who knows of it. (BA)

(5) A significant location in Pullman's trilogy.

Elidor is published by Collins, 0 00 184202 1, £9.99 hbk, 0 00 674291 2, £4.99 pbk. The cover illustration is by David Wyatt and other drawings by Charles Keeping.

Brian Alderson is Chair of the Children's Book History Society and the chief children's book consultant for **The Times** .

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