



The Dog That Kept Barking and the other top titles of 2003

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Children's books experts look back at the previous year's publishing.

Mark Haddon's 2003 novel, **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**, has won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award (only the second time the overall prize has been won by a children's book) and appears set to become one of the top selling fiction titles of 2004. Since publication it has also won The Guardian Fiction Award and the Booktrust Teenage Prize. Haddon's success, following on from the paths blazed by J K Rowling and Philip Pullman, underlines the extraordinary quality and range of books currently being published for young readers. With such an *embarras de richesses*, which titles of 2003 should not be missed? **BfK** invited nominations from experts in the field.<!--break-->

Malorie Blackman, winner of the Young Telegraph Award and the WHSmith Mind Boggling Book Award,

Julia Eccleshare, Children's Books Editor of *The Guardian*, and

Elizabeth Hammill, Artistic Director, The Centre for the Children's Book, choose?

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon

David Fickling Books, 0 385 60387 0, £10.99 hbk (Red Fox, 0 09 945676 1, £6.99 pbk, April 2004)

I'm all for hearing different voices in fiction and I got my wish with this book. The story showed just how someone with Asperger's might view the world. Christopher finds a dead dog and sets about trying to find the dog's killer, but the book is much more than a mystery story. Social interactions and conventions, which most of us would take for granted, are beyond him. The complexities of 'the truth' and what people say and why they say it, are brilliantly observed. And I loved the way Christopher tries to bring order to his world by using Maths which he finds far easier to understand than people. **MB**

It is easy to pull at the heart strings of an audience especially when children are done down but my choice, **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**, is so genuine that there is no doubt about the authenticity of the response. There are no false torments and no judgements about norms. This novel asks questions about how we see each other and ourselves. It is chillingly heartbreaking and passionately positive in equal measure. In addition to its many other claims, it is also the only book that can honestly be given the ridiculously overused phrase, crossover novel. **JE**

Of all the narrative voices I encountered in 2003, it is the flat emotionless voice of a 15-year-old with Asperger Syndrome that lingers. Living inside Christopher Boone's head is an extraordinary experience. Christopher reads the world without the lens of feeling. Facts, truth, order are what matter. Haddon's achievement lies in creating this dramatic layered perspective, allowing us to see what Christopher sees and what eludes him. **EH**

Doris Breitmoser, General Secretary of the German IBBY Section Arbeitskreis für Jugendliteratur in Munich and editor of the German children's book review **JuLit**, chooses?

Tintenherz by Cornelia Funke

Cecilie Dressler Verlag, 3 7915 0465 7, 19.90 euros. The English language edition, **Inkheart**, trans. Anthea Bell, is published by The Chicken House, 1 904442 09 9, £12.99 hbk.

German children's literature is hardly ever translated or distributed in the English speaking countries. The more unusual is the story of the 2003 success, **Tintenherz** or **Inkheart**. Cornelia Funke's first book, **Herr der Diebe (The Thief Lord)** was only translated in English because the editor's daughter read it in German and was full of enthusiasm. After this acid test, also English readers waited eagerly for Funke's new book, **Inkheart**, which was published simultaneously in Germany, in the UK and the US. It is, of course, a fantasy story – an after-effect of the Potter phenomenon? Cornelia Funke is telling the story of 12-year-old bookworm Meggie who has to discover an astonishing family secret when, one evening, a stranger appears at her house. And here we are: the beginning of an adventurous, magical journey which thrills the reader from the first page on. At the end Meggie will find her mother again. A great reading pleasure, light fiction at its best. At the same time a homage to the charm of reading and books! **Inkheart** has certainly paved the way for German children's literature abroad.

Clive Barnes, Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City, chooses?

The Wolves in the Walls by Neil Gaiman, ill. Dave McKean

Bloomsbury, 0 7475 6953 3, £12.99 hbk

This is the first children's picture book from a partnership that already has several adult graphic novels to its credit. It's a stunning debut. Gaiman provides a quirky text in which the domestic and the bizarre are cleverly orchestrated in a pseudo folk-tale in which the heroine rallies her family against the wolves that have driven them from their home. Gaiman's story is compelling, but McKean's illustrations are a revelation. He paces the visual drama perfectly. His spiky pen and ink drawn wolves gorging themselves on jam and toast have exactly the right mixture of menace and absurdity. The text relies on the ambiguous relationship between fantasy and reality, and McKean plays brilliantly with the idea of layers and surfaces, changing shapes, and different ways of recording reality and imagination. He uses distorted photography, silhouettes and collage. His pictures are at turns sombre and gleaming. The faces of the family are almost geometric, like masks made from folded paper. The walls themselves are ridged and crumpled like textured paper, visually matching the 'crumbling and crackling' noises that the wolves make behind them. Solid objects become elongated and hard edges blur. Not since the work of Charles Keeping have such powerful images appeared in a picture book.

Philip Pullman, winner of the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award, chooses?

The Summer Book, by Tove Jansson

Sort of Books, 0 9542217 1 0, £6.99 pbk

Whether or not this is a children's book seems to me neither here nor there. What it is, in my view, is a great book which is simple enough to be read and enjoyed by the young, and profound enough to be cherished and wondered at by the old. Six-year-old Sophia and her grandmother spend the summer alone on an island in the Gulf of Finland, exploring, talking, playing games, getting cross with each other, sulking, and thinking about life and death. Wisdom is the quality that shines out of this extraordinary, limpid, and utterly delightful book. As if inventing the Moomins was not enough! The woman was a genius. And, what's more, this edition is beautifully produced, illustrated with marvellous photographs, and printed on good paper.

Valerie Coghlan, Review Editor of **Inis: the Children's Books Ireland Magazine**, chooses...

Beegu by Alexis Deacon

Hutchinson, 0 09 176829 2, £10.99 hbk

In a flat empty landscape rimmed by dark mountains a flying saucer lies partially embedded in the ground. In front lies a yellow figure, four-legged, with three eyes and thin dangly ears. This is Beegu, lost and unable to communicate. Deacon's figures are solid and darkly limned; colours are flat and sombre, bursting into brightness when Beegu finds companionship in a box of unwanted puppies outside a dog's home and with a group of children. Beegu's loneliness is almost palpable: she is an outsider, effulgent against an impenetrable forest of dark legs on a street where the proximity of a drain hints at how she may just sink away. And in the concluding pages when rescue does come for Beegu we find we can at last understand what she says as the ideographs in her speech bubbles are translated into identifiable symbols telling of her encounters on earth. Rich visual metaphor and striking artwork encourage many return readings of this delightful picture book.

Michael Thorn of the Achuka website chooses?

Feed by M T Anderson

Walker, 0 7445 9085 X, £4.99 pbk

There were some books of quite exceptional quality in 2003. By and large they received their just measure of praise. But the young adult novel that really blew me away did not get the exposure it merited. **Feed** is a freefall nightmare vision of a Western world in thrall to technology and consumerism, and a youth culture enervated by a febrile pursuit of the bizarre. 'We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck,' says Titus, opening the story. In this frighteningly believable future, babies are fitted with hard disk receptors soon after birth for wireless downloads of entertainment and knowledge. Teenage characters show off ominous skin lesions in a masquerade of fashionable chic. Violet, a girl fitted with a faulty 'feed', attempts to steer Titus back towards an appreciation of simple pleasures. The permanently affronted voice of the main character is a narrative triumph which Anderson uses to lampoon, warn, and empathize in a novel of staggering vision and passion.

Geraldine McCaughrean, Carnegie Medal winner, chooses?

The Fire-Eaters by David Almond

Hodder, 0 340 77382 0, £10.99 hbk (0 340 77383 9, £5.99 pbk, April 2004)

With themes as large as Armageddon and as small as a kiss, **The Fire-Eaters** scorches itself on the memory. I know I'll remember it all my days. The gentle, sensitive boy narrator is beset by problems - a vindictive teacher, sick father, jealous friend, first love and the very real threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis ending the world. All these rest with equal weight on his narrow, eleven-year-old shoulders. And all of them are somehow bound up with the scary, sad, marvellous, damned McNulty, who mortifies his flesh in public places for the price of a drink. Different readers, depending on their age and sex, will find themselves identifying with different subsidiary characters; Almond demands your sympathies like a highwayman demanding money. For years we've tried to woo boy readers with horror, poo, high-tech, monsters and violence. Why didn't we just speak to their souls, like this, about the things that matter?

Nick Sharratt, winner (with Kes Gray) of the overall Children's Book Award, chooses...

Halibut Jackson by David Lucas

Andersen, 1 84270 218 1, £10.99 hbk

Halibut Jackson is the tale of the acutely shy Mr Jackson who just can't bear to draw attention to himself so he wears a variety of special outfits that let him blend in completely with his surroundings. When he gets an invitation to a royal party he designs a particularly ingenious costume to camouflage himself nicely, only he doesn't realise that it's a garden party and of course he sticks out like a sore thumb. It all turns to his advantage however and the story is delightfully

resolved. The beautifully coloured illustrations conjure up a gently exotic world where there's lots to look at and they complement perfectly the charming text.

Françoise Ballanger editor of **La Revue des Livres pour Enfants**, chooses?

On n'aime guère que la paix edited by Jean-Marie Henry and Alain Serres, illustrated by Nathalie Novi, photos by Magnum

Rue du Monde, 2 912084 75 X, 17 euros, available from www.amazon.fr [2]

This ambitious and well realised poetry anthology reduces the force of the poetic voice by constructing a resonant dialogue which takes in the very form of the book (with its flaps) and the languages of the images which illustrate it. The chosen poems (about thirty from such poets as Paul Eluard, Apollinaire, Prévert, Cocteau, Victor Hugo, Abdulah Sidran and Yehuda Amichai) sometimes speak of the horror of war and of hate and sometimes celebrate peace and the possibility of happiness – whether dreamt of, yearned for or savoured. The images which intensify this contrast alternate tellingly between black and white press photographs and luminous colour illustrations. Flaps open out wide panoramas or reveal hidden images intensifying the permanence of the confrontation between death and life, violence and gentleness, hatred and brotherhood, darkness and light.

Geraldine Brennan of **The Times Educational Supplement** chooses?

No Shame, No Fear by Ann Turnbull

Walker, 0 7445 9090 6, £5.99 pbk

This very strong novel about an apparently doomed relationship in post-Civil-War England crept up on me, with much to think about after love finds a way for Quaker Susanna (whose family is persecuted for refusing to know their place, doff their hats and pay tithes to the established Church) and wool-merchant's son Will (whose father is a product of the values that the Friends seek to overthrow). The texture of everyday life in a small market town in the 17th century is beautifully conveyed with the voices of Susanna's plain-speaking people and their social superiors kept distinct. Although the reader is likely to empathise most with Susanna as she strives for pacifism without passivity, even Will's father invites compassion as much as condemnation for his baffled frustration at the Quakers' apparently deliberate martyrdom, and his fear of losing his son.

Anne Marley, Head of Children's, Youth and Schools Service, Hampshire Library & Information Service, chooses?

The Tears of the Salamander by Peter Dickinson

Macmillan, 1 405 02051 2, £9.99 hbk, 0 330 41540 9, £5.99 pbk

After the death of his family, Alfredo is adopted by his mysterious uncle who takes him to live in the family home on the smouldering slopes of Mount Etna. His uncle is Master of the Mountain, and far from being his saviour, he turns out to be a powerful magician and alchemist who is seeking the secret of eternal life and intends to use Alfredo and the salamander of the title to achieve it. This is a brilliant portrayal of the desire for power which corrupts, on the one hand, and the innocence and honour that will defeat it, on the other. Peter Dickinson effortlessly evokes a world of magic, music and fire, where salamanders swim in the molten veins of the volcano, and whose tears can cure all mortal ills. This is storytelling at its very best – exhilarating, compelling and immensely satisfying.

Anne Johnstone of **The Herald**, Glasgow, chooses?

Follow Me Down by Julie Hearn

OUP, 0 19 271927 0, £9.99 hbk

This is a breathtakingly accomplished first novel. Tom, a typically awkward young teenager, is staying at his grandmother's house in East London with his mum, who is recovering from a mastectomy. Things aren't what they seem and leaping across a gap in the cellar floor, Tom lands in the eighteenth century. Here he meets new friends, including the entrancing Astra, a tiny 'changeling child' paraded as a freak at Bartholomew Fair. A worse fate threatens as the evil Rafferty Spune promises to deliver her body to anatomist Dr Flint for public dissection. Tom has to use some modern technology to foil the plan in a nail-chomping climax. The mix of love and physical distaste he feels for his vulnerable mother intensifies the normal emotional turmoil of adolescence. Hearn cleverly uses both strands of her narrative to show how Tom learns to look beyond appearances to discover what is truly important in life. She points up uncomfortably our continuing fascination with the grotesque and also shows how the work of men like Flint, though repulsive, has aided understanding of illnesses such as breast cancer.

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