



# Classics in Short No.74: Johnny the Clockmaker

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**Brian Alderson** on Edward Ardizzone's **Johnny the Clockmaker**.

**Brian Alderson**

The hour strikes for the return of?

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**Johnny the Clockmaker**

*?What about Diana??*

came the cry when this instalment was being discussed ? she being the saviour and lifelong companion of that rhinoceros who turned up so inexplicably at 43 Queen?s Road, Richmond (the Surrey one) many a year ago.

*For last November,*

with laudable wisdom, Messrs Frances Lincoln had brought back into print ?the classic story? of **Diana and her Rhinoceros** as first recorded and pictured by Edward Ardizzone in 1964. (He had surely come by what must have been an authentic account of the matter from his daughter, who at that time resided with her family at the very address where the celebrated friendship began.)

*But also last November,*

with even more laudable wisdom, the Lincolns brought out a companion Ardizzone picture book, **Johnny the Clockmaker**, first published in 1960 but lost from view about twenty-eight years ago when the last reprint was run off. Unlike **Diana**, which was the first of Ted?s books in an oblong ?landscape? format, **Johnny** followed the design of the post-war ?Little Tim? series, but with its hero, who might well be one of Tim?s cousins, located in a domestic setting rather than venturing out on the high seas.

*That departure from expectations*

may explain why **Johnny** fell so soon from favour while Tim sailed on through almost a dozen voyages (all of them now also chartered under the Lincoln imprint). The public ? and publishers too, I fancy\* ? do not care for such a breaking of ranks (?Who is this johnny? What?s he up to, insinuating himself here, when we are all agog for the next episode in the "Tim" saga??), and indeed it?s almost as though the poor boy brought upon his book the rejection that he encounters in its story. He is berated by his parents for his devotion to upstairs carpentry ? there is a repeated majuscule chorus of JOHNNY IS UP TO HIS NONSENSE AGAIN ? and he is mocked and bullied by everyone at school when he announces that he is going to construct a grandfather clock. ?Silly boy?, says his teacher, telling him that he is ?too much of a baby to do anything so difficult?.

[image:CLASS Main Pic.jpg:left]

***But therein lies his story's strength.***

For Johnny, like Tim, is a tenacious hero. Lifted from despair by little Susannah, his schoolfriend, and by a fresh perusal of **How to Make Grandfather Clocks** ? his original inspiration ? he settles to his task. Up in his bedroom a handsome clock-case is soon hammered together (?Oh dear! Johnny is up to his nonsense again?) but there are problems over metalware for the works. Neither Bill Evans at the garage, nor Mr Bunner at the ironmonger?s ? an Ardizzone self-portrait? ? can help him, but Susannah suggests Joe the blacksmith and there the necessary cogs are found and a suitable ?penjulung? fired at the forge, with Johnny pulling the bellows. The erstwhile Baby Bunting, the purveyor of Stuff and Nonsense, is triumphantly vindicated and a glorious career in the horological trade opens up for him and for Susannah. (She, it must be observed, also happens to be an Ardizzone grand-daughter and she turns up not only as the dedicatee of this volume but as one of the three for whom **Diana** was composed, since she and her siblings all lived on site at the Queen?s Road address.)

***Like Tim, and like Diana,***

Johnny is a hero who might almost be the invention of a child storyteller. Whether as the one who joins the brave sea captain on the ship?s bridge as they head for Davy Jones?s locker, or the one who feeds a disgruntled pachyderm with hot-buttered toast beside the sitting-room fire, or who puts together the innards of a timepiece, these children display a self-belief which overrides the small practicalities of adult logic and convinces as much as anything through the brisk but unemphatic way in which their adventures are recounted.

***And that goes for the pictures too.***

Look at Johnny in repose: hunched over his clockmaker?s manual, with the height of his chair seat augmented by another fat tome, or gazing at his finished handiwork as he begins to test it. Look at the scenes of action: the tangle of movement in the playground, or Johnny coming dolefully downstairs or clambering over a fence. The perceptive drawing persuades the reader that all things are possible in this fully-rounded reality.

***I suppose I may be biased***

in favouring **Johnny** here rather than **Diana**, for it is a story that I read inexhaustibly to my own children night after night and I have been rooting for its reissue for many years ? see for instance the back page of **BfK** 120 in 2000. (Incidentally, my son John was inspired by the book to construct a cardboard clock with hands driven by a sort of escapement. It used to run regularly for all of ten seconds.) How grateful I am therefore that Frances Lincoln are allowing the book a fresh chance to claim its place in the pantheon, not least, with the help of their Singaporean printers, by more than matching the quality of production of the earlier editions. What we must now do though is to persuade them to give us a revival of the adventures of another of Tim?s cousins, **Peter the Wanderer**.

***\* I discuss the significance of **Johnny the Clockmaker*****

*in Ted?s career in the 1960s in my bibliography of his work, published by the British Library in 2003.*

The illustrations are taken from the 2008 edition of **Johnny the Clockmaker** by Edward Ardizzone, published by Frances Lincoln (978 1 84507 914 7, £12.99 hbk).

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children?s Books History Society and a former Children?s Books Editor for **The Times**.



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