



# Hal's Reading Diary - November 2010

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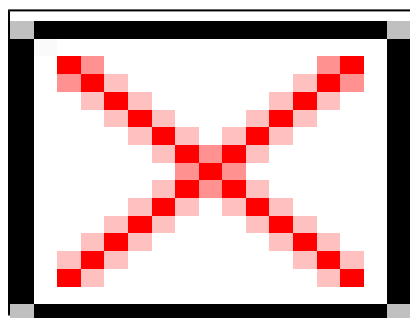
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Article Category:

Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

Byline:

**Roger Mills** on how Hal dislikes loose ends in stories.



Hal is nearly ten and while he loves suspense, he doesn't like loose ends. His father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains.

Here's a recent conversation in our household.

**Me:** ?Hal. What is the best book you have ever read or had read to you??

**Hal:** (almost instantly):?Frozen Fire.?

**Me:** ?Frozen Fire... why did you like it so much??

**Hal:** ?Because it was really cool.?

**Me:** ?What made it cool??

**Hal:** ?It was so mysterious.?

**Me:** ?How do you mean mysterious??

**Hal:** ?It was just everything... You didn't know what was going to happen next and you just wanted to read on.?

**Frozen Fire**, Hal's new favourite book of all time, is not really a title that I would recommend for a nine-year-old. It contains some moderately unsuitable language ? words that young children are going to know but which you don't really want to read out in case pronouncing them comes across as some kind of endorsement. There are also references (though not descriptions of) very adult themes like suicide and rape. Again not an ideal literary diet for the early reader. In my defence I started reading the book to Hal a couple of months ago almost by accident. My wife Jo had been doing a programme for Teacher's TV on children's authors and had done a piece with Tim Bowler, the writer of **Frozen Fire**. Various Bowler titles had come into the house while Jo was preparing her programme and I had picked one up and started reading it, unaware of the fact it was really targeted at older kids.

**Frozen Fire** opens with the heroine, a teenager called Dusty, alone at home and getting a mysterious call from a boy

who tells her that he is about to kill himself. What hooks Dusty, and the reader, is that the caller seems to have an extraordinary knowledge of Dusty's brother Josh who disappeared two years earlier. In the ensuing chapters Dusty tries to track down the boy, who turns out to be a mysterious, otherworldly creature with strange powers (mind-reading and knowing people's histories and inordinate physical strength the pre-eminent ones). Dusty isn't alone in hunting for the boy. A group of vigilantes is after him as well as he has been accused of raping at least two teenage girls. The drama hinges on Dusty's oscillating feelings about the boy (is he a force of good or ill?), the tight corners she gets into with the vigilantes who think that they can get to the boy through her, and the mystery of Josh's disappearance.

Themes like these, I am pretty certain, would not have been of that much interest to Hal if the writing style had been more plodding. But as Hal pointed out, one of Bowler's great gifts is his capacity to generate tension. Again and again throughout the book you are left on the edge of your seat, desperate to know what is going to happen next. Pretty much every chapter ends with a cliff-hanger. You think Dusty is safe from the vigilantes when a menacing van pulls into sight in the final paragraph. She's in hospital about to go to sleep when the boy is suddenly there with her. Final paragraph again. These agonisingly poised chapter endings started to be a bit of a problem. Being a semi-ordered sort of person I usually like to end a reading session at the end of a chapter. But each chapter end left Hal so much on the edge of his seat that there would be loud protests. 'You CAN'T stop there Dad. You just CAN'T.' In the end I started scanning ahead to the end of the chapter to see where the inevitable suspenseful note was going to fall so that I could stop reading just before.

Hal may have loved the suspense, but he didn't love the several loose ends you are left with when the book closes. In the final chapters Josh's body is found but the boy disappears. He appears to have undergone some kind of ascension (though this is not Christian imagery of any kind). Bowler is clearly deliberately leaving you in a state of not knowing here. A final, rather less gripping, tension perhaps. To Hal's nine-year-old mind however, this was **Frozen Fire**'s one big flaw. 'Didn't like the end. You never know what really happens. Really disappointing.' Here perhaps we reach the way in which **Frozen Fire** really is unsuitable for a young reader/listener like Hal. The older reader might enjoy the uncertainties of the end. They may find in them the embodiment of a quasi philosophical point about the amount that we can't know about life and death. But this kind of thing is of no interest to a nine-year-old like Hal. Mystery is great. But you have to have it resolved. You have to know what is what at the end. Imagine a **Scooby Do** where Freddy, Daphne and the gang didn't get round to unmasking the villain in the final five minutes.

**Frozen Fire** by Tim Bowler is published by Oxford (978 0 19 272715 2) at £6.99 pbk.

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