



Robert Leeson (31 March 1928-29 September 2013)

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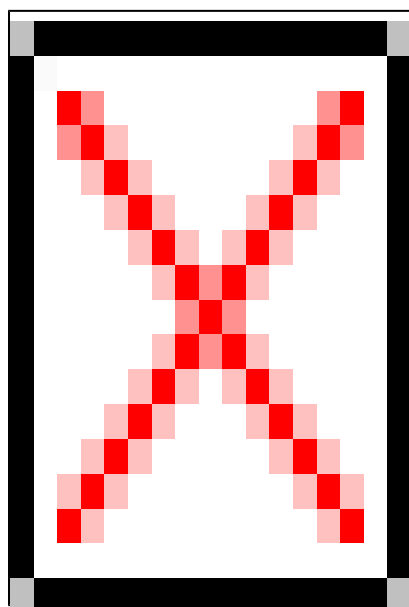
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Robert Leeson remembered by Dennis Hamley

Robert Leeson (31 March 1928-29 September 2013)



The death of Robert Leeson robs the children's book world of a popular and prolific novelist, a tireless fighter for children's rights and a fairer society for them to grow up in. Perhaps, despite the roll call of wonderful books, his most influential work was **Reading and Righting** (1985) a magnificent polemic which identified books as means of human ? and especially children's ? liberation and empowerment in a society which denies voices to many of its members. Sadly, this is still a message which needs to be heard: I would like to see a new, updated edition of this important book.

Bob believed that books are both symbols of a restrictive culture and potent agents of change. The tension between the two defines the variety and energy of his work. His narratives show both understanding of and discontent with the literary tradition. His characters, through social position, ethnic origin or gender, weren't then the sort usually seen taking central roles.

Bob was born in Barnton, Cheshire. After army service he became a journalist on what was then **The Daily Worker**, now the **Morning Star**. His first full-length works were working-class histories, of which **Travelling Brothers** (1979) is the best known. His first children's books appeared between 1974 and 1976. **Maroon Boy**, **Bess** and **The White Horse** were about the Cimaroons: a little-known historical episode concerning unacknowledged, despised and deprived people. This series broke new ground. His next books showed his gentle humour; first, **The Demon Bike Rider** (1976) and then the Genie series: **The Third-Class Genie** (1975), **Genie on the Loose** (1984) and **The Last Genie** (1993). The Genie books exemplify his sharp literary understanding by reworking a traditional convention to contemporary effect. **Never Kiss Frogs** (1988) and **Idle Jack** (1995) do the same. Familiar now, then it was new. **Smart Girls** (1994),

shortlisted for the Guardian award, and **Smart Girls For Ever** ((1996) showed strong female characters in traditional tales from many cultures.

He also delighted in revisiting established classics, with **Karlo's Tale** (1992), a surprising reworking of **The Pied Piper**, and **Silver's Revenge**, a subversive continuation of **Treasure Island** (1978).

Most people will remember him for his five **Grange Hill** novels, but his central achievement must be his young adult novels. These include the magnificent **It's My Life** trilogy (1981-90), **Slambash Wangs of a Compo Gormer** (1987), an imaginative tour de force, **Red White and Blue** (1995), a moving tale of a boy finding the truth about his father missing in the Falklands War, **Candy for King** (1981), based loosely on his own army days, and **Liar** (1999).

Subsequently, Bob wrote little, though to the end of his life he published an annual poetry collection, beautifully illustrated by his wife, Gunvor. Those privileged to receive them recognised another of his remarkable talents

Bob's activities were prodigious. He regularly visited schools, mentored writers and tutored on creative writing courses (I cherish the memory of his work on the Teachers as Writers courses I used to run in Hertfordshire). He worked tirelessly for IBBY. His huge contribution was rewarded in 1986 with the Eleanor Farjeon Award.

But for me, one vignette which typifies his whole life stands out. During the Miners' Strike, he, Robert Swindells and Jim Riordan (another children's writer who sadly died recently), combined to give author visits to schools in mining villages throughout the country. This selflessness and care for the underprivileged defines his philosophy, both as writer and man.

Bob was a good friend, wise mentor and significant writer. His loss will be keenly felt.

Dennis Hamley

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