



# Ron Heapy ? An Appreciation

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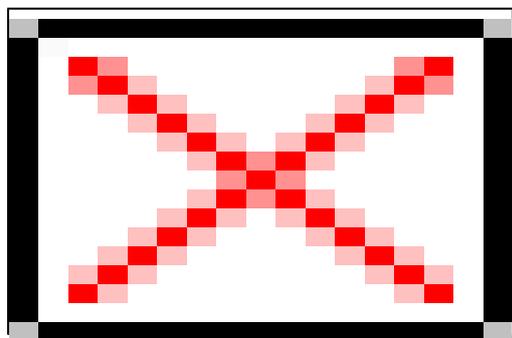
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Obituaries

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**David Fickling** remembers the great children?s editor **Ron Heapy**

**David Fickling** remembers the Impresario of Children?s Books, **Ron Heapy**, who has died at the age of 82.



Three separate short, sharp bursts of Liverpoolian, bitten off, like a pattering machine gun. The voice seems to come from everywhere but the man himself, like a ventriloquist.

?Dav?d!?

?Children?s books!?

?What about it?!?

All this barked to a bemused very young ELT editorial assistant in Ron Heapy?s utterly inimitable quick-fire delivery. No time wasted on self-regarding discussion. It was get up and let?s get on with helping to create the best possible books for children, or don?t bother, it?s up to you. Without waiting for an answer he pads off down the corridor firing out savage doom laden remarks on the parlous state of the universe in all directions as he goes. ?We?re all going to the dogs!? Wherever he goes he is met with smiles, grins and laughter from his OUP colleagues, sometimes frank bemusement, always love. What did he just say?! Did he really say that?! But everyone knew that Ron knew exactly what he was doing. He was intent on creating and helping to make brilliant books out of the best ingredients: marvelous poems, wonderful stories and extraordinary illustrations.

In 1979 the prestigious position of Managing Editor Children?s books had fallen vacant at Oxford University Press. Structural changes within the Press meant that Children?s Books now fell under the patronage of Oxed, the Educational (Schoolbook) Division. Thatcherism was in the air, and patrician condescension and donnish whimsy were giving way to an unwonted and growing capitalist earnestness. Children?s books belonged with schools and teaching, didn?t they? Children?s books must be good for literacy and make a good profit and earn their keep. Perhaps just enough respect for the inviolable joy of childhood, with which those blessed eccentric dons had set up the OUP children?s book department in the first place, still remained for them to offer the post to the distinguished left-leaning English School Book Editor, didn?t it? Two birds with one stone! They would be able to manage him, wouldn?t they? They?d be able to

keep him to the financial straight and narrow. Luckily for all children everywhere, these highly responsible senior managers were getting more than they bargained for, way, way more. Ron Heapy, aged forty-three, was at the peak of his editorial powers. He had already edited and published some important books, **The Dragon Book of Verse**, **The Oxford School Shakespeare**, not to mention the great labour that was **The African Encyclopedia** and editorially speaking he knew exactly what he was doing when it came to design, typography and marking up a manuscript ready for printing. His editorial standards were OUP trained and OUP high. He had been out in the world since college managing books and OUP branches as far afield as Karachi to Hong Kong. There probably wasn't a practical publishing problem that he hadn't already met in the field, considered and solved in the simplest most effective most local pragmatic fashion.

The one thing about Ron that those senior OUP managers knew perfectly well but maybe didn't factor into their deliberations was that Ron had another life, a not so secret life outside of books. With his roots in university theatre Ron had for many years produced and directed the OUP Christmas panto every year to an almost professional standard. Ron wasn't just an editor. He was a secret super hero of theatre. He exuded drama and dramatics from every spoken word or artful gesture, he positively fizzed with mischievous show business. He was an impresario to his fingertips! In another world he might even have been a Ziegfeld or a Busby Berkeley. And he was about to become The Impresario of Children's Books!

The once prestigious OUP Children's list was foundering in the late seventies, but under Ron's idiosyncratic and theatrical leadership the next twenty years would see a tremendous re-flowering of talent and energy. He took the OUP list by the scruff of the neck and sent it into cultural orbit on behalf of children everywhere. From inspiring and reviving picture book greats such as [Brian Wildsmith](#) [3], Charles Keeping and Victor Ambrus, to some of their finest work, discovering prize winning novelists such as [Geraldine McCaughrean](#) [4] and Rachel Anderson, and allowing the doors to be open to unknowns such as, [Korky Paul](#) [5], [Nick Sharratt](#) [6], [Ian Beck](#) [7], Jacqueline Wilson and Philip Pullman. The whole world of UK children's authors seemed to flow through the OUP children's department in those days. No one was too junior or too new to be helped by Ron. He ran unprompted a training program for all new entrants to the OUP, giving his time to teaching the most junior members of OUP the basics of publishing. His colleagues admired him, his senior bosses couldn't lay a finger on him, and the junior staff revered him even if he was lining them up for parts in the Panto. Ron nurtured down and baffled up!

It will have to remain to others, and Ron's beloved authors in particular to outline all of Ron's publishing achievements. However, there is one vital quality of Ron's that is perhaps obscured by all the others. In 1979 that young editor taking his very first steps in publishing followed Ron to a senior publishing meeting where new projects would be given the green light and others would be stopped in their tracks.

"But Ron?", the young assistant anxiously enquired as they made their way down yet another OUP corridor, "But we haven't got any books! We don't know what we are going to publish. What shall we say at the meeting?"

Ron said not a word, he didn't even bother to reassure. The two of them reached the editorial meeting room. The meeting was well attended and being held around the most enormous mahogany table. Ranged around that table were all the commissioning editors all courteously competing for attention and budgets. Everyone presented their lists in turn to the senior managers. Finally, it is Ron's turn to announce the children's list. His young assistant is still most anxious.

"Autumn nineteen seventy-nine," says Ron brightly to the meeting, "Wave One! Six books." The publishing managers have beetle brows but they say nothing.

"Spring nineteen-eighty," continues Ron imperturbably, "Wave Two, six books."

"Autumn nineteen eighty," Ron rolls on, "Wave Three! Six books." The managers begin to nod sagely.

"Spring nineteen eighty-one," says Ron, "Wave Four!"

"Thank you, Ron," says the senior manager. "That sounds splendid." Ron hasn't suggested a single actual title but

everyone is happy, including the nervous assistant children's editor.

'Wave Theory!' barks Ron as we leave the room, 'everyone a winner!' He is not taking himself seriously. It takes but a moment to realise what Ron has achieved in a twinkling. Now we all know what we are doing. We shall have to find six books to publish in the autumn of nineteen seventy-nine and twelve more for the next year. The future is fixed and yet still wide open with possibility. Ron has created all the empty slots, now all we have to do is fill them. Publishing order has come from chaos. This is the kind of confident publishing plan that it is actually very difficult to pull off. Everyone in that editorial meeting knew that Ron would find books of sufficient quality, worthy to be published by OUP and popular with young readers to fill the slots. The budget would be made available. And Ron had not bitten off more work than we could chew. Everyone trusted his editorial judgement. What do publishers actually do, if anything? Mostly they try to do what Ron did so lightly but effectively here. They conjure a coherent list of books out of nowhere into existence. Ron provided this kind of hidden framework for colleagues in everything he attempted from books to pantomimes. He did the same for authors, and provided a strong confident framework in which they could do their finest work. To be a junior editor working with Ron was to be given an armchair ride into editing, so supportive was he that you couldn't even tell you were being supported. Could we fill those slots? Yes, we could.

Recently, at the overflowing and very moving memorial service to Ron we all learned if we didn't know already that Ron's world was wider, and his acquaintance broader than any of us realized. We also learned that he had been a practising Catholic all his life. He had worshipped every week and taken the fullest part in his religious community from handing out the hymn books on Sundays to running the Sunday School. (Of course he had!) At work Ron never really evinced any religious belief or made anything of his personal beliefs at all. Ron had spent all his publishing life working for one company, the Oxford University Press. The motto of the university press is Dominus Illuminatio Mea. The Lord is my light. Nobody I ever met has ever encapsulated that motto in his person more. Ron Heapy. A very good editor. A good man. The Lord was his light.

Back in 1979 that young editor got up and followed Ron down the corridor. Of course he did.

'We're all going to the dogs!' Ron cried. And we laughed.

Ron Heapy, editor, born 9 May 1935, Liverpool, died 16 May 2017, Oxford.

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