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Children's literature: cool but undervalued?

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE has become cool. You spend a lifetime shouting about it, proclaiming its literary excellence, its cultural value, its vital social role, its importance in producing articulate, literate, educated, creative-thinking citizens and in developing an audience for grown-up literature—and then one day you turn around and children's literature is on offer (sometimes mandatory) in pretty well every university's English department in the country and there are TWO postgraduate degree courses devoted to it: people walking around with *doctorates* in it.

The truth, however, is that children's literature is very much undervalued in the most literal sense—in other words, it's underpaid, and getting worse. Pretty well all literary endeavour is underpaid, of course, but children's books particularly so. *The Guardian's* survey of UK author incomes (8 July 2014) reported, for example, that the well-known, award-winning and excellent UK children's writer Mal Peet has experienced a severe drop in income: 'In the past he received royalty cheques of up to £30,000 for a six-month period. In the last half of 2013, his royalties for all his novels were just £3,000.'

There is a perception that children's books are selling well, but that's not really the case. Nielsen's Book Scan Newsletter (December 2013) had the headline 'The children's category is faring better than others in the Irish market', which is an odd way to announce an 11% *decline* in sales of children's books in Ireland last year. The truth is that children's book sales have been declining steadily for some time—not as badly as adult fiction sales, perhaps, but it's extremely difficult out there in the bookshops and there's no special pass for children's books. Moreover, the

decline in physical children's book sales is not offset by e-book sales.

Traditionally, schools formed an important part of the market for children's publishers and writers, but the schools market has virtually collapsed. The complete withdrawal of all dedicated funds for primary school libraries has led to a severe drop in revenue for everyone involved in children's publishing and bookselling—and children are reading the same old dated books, year in, year out, and the same old tattered copies too. The excellent Writers in Schools scheme, which has always provided small but welcome supplements to writers' incomes, especially for children's writers, has had to curtail its activities because of restricted funds. And the children are losing out as well as the authors, of course.

Children's books have always been, and continue to be, underpriced by comparison with novels for adults, so children's publishers are working with even tighter margins than other publishers, and children's authors, even if they are on the same royalty rates as their adult counterparts, earn proportionately less, since royalties are pegged to retail price. There are doubtless commercial and cultural reasons for this. Parents expect to pay less for children on the bus, going to the zoo, in a restaurant, when buying shoes. So why not also when it comes to books? That's understandable, but the fact is that it costs as much (if not more) to produce a children's book as an adult one, and children's writers have to pay the same rents and bills as everyone else. We don't live on cupcakes and use a magic wand instead of a credit card, you know.

This bargain-price effect is not confined to the bookshops either. It is not quite so common for children's authors to be offered lower fees to par-

ticipate in festivals and events as it used to be, but it does still happen, and awards and honorific posts for children's writers tend to be remunerated at a *much* lower level than the adult-writer equivalents.

So why do we do it and go on doing it? I suppose the answer is that we'd stop if we could. There is no doubt that it is addictive. Writing itself, publishing, making books happen—all these activities are fascinating and fatally attractive.

And in the case of writers for children, there is the added bonus that we are writing for the best readers in the world. Children are the most demanding, the most critical, the most easily bored, the least socially inhibited readers in the world. They are the most uninterested in what adults have to say, the most wearied by school subjects and rules and homework and exams, the most distracted by TV, computer games, smartphones, social media, constant instant entertainment. But they are still the world's best readers. If they are readers at all, once they have made that leap from the finger-under-word, read-aloud, sound-it-out, oh-here-I'm-fed-up stage to skimming along, skipping the hard words, turning the pages, breath-in-fist, they will just DO it. They will come with you, they will enter the imaginary world, *become* your hero/heroine; they will really believe it (not really, but *really*), they just *know* how it goes, what a story is *for*, and in no time at all they will be (oh, magic words) Reading for Pleasure, under the bedclothes with a torch (OK, on a backlit screen maybe). Adults will rarely gobble up a book like that. They take a lot more persuading. But with children, all you have to do is give it to them straight—and they just *get* it. And that's why we go on doing it. ■