



BfK Profile: Sonya Hartnett

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Created *Oct '09*

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Nicholas Tucker on Sonya Hartnett.

Nicholas Tucker on Guardian Children's Fiction prizewinner, **Sonya Hartnett**<!--break-->

Redemption through Endurance

Winning the Guardian Children's Fiction prize at the age of 34 is fairly unusual, especially when this involves a first publication in the UK. But nothing else is usual about Sonya Hartnett either. Small, dark, plainly dressed and a little spiky, she looks about as at home in the posh hotel where I interviewed her as would a wombat in a Surrey garden. Talking to her is a concentrated experience; this is an author with an utterly individual voice following her own rules.

Thursday's Child, the Guardian winner, is a half-realistic, half-allegorical story, written in prose that maintains a consistent rhythmic pattern throughout. All redundant adjectives and adverbs ? those invariable signs of a children's writer trying too hard ? are absent. Some have described this distinctive, mesmerising style as poetic, but for Hartnett ? whose first novel was published in Australia when she was only fifteen ? it is more a matter of following the flow. First she has to create the characters who are going to populate her story and then discover their particular voice. After that she tries to produce a book that reads perfectly to her own ear. At one stage, for example, Tin ? a four-year-old boy who eventually takes to living underground ? looks up at his seven-year-old sister Harper Flute ?quizzically through tangles of dandle hair?. Hartnett's American editor objected that since ?dandle? means to swing a child up and down it can't possibly refer to hair as well. But for Hartnett because the word still sounded right, it stayed ? at least in the current British edition.

Like Harper in the story, Hartnett had a tough upbringing. One small house with two bedrooms had to accommodate five children plus parents never successful in earning a living. While her other brothers and sisters were boisterous and sociable, Harnett was the opposite, given to disappearing ? like Tin ? for hours on end. When she returned, it was often to find that no-one had noticed she had even gone. Now Hartnett herself lives in a rural area of Australia. It was when she was watching some ants burrowing under her garage that she got the idea of a child doing the same thing. After all, humans are animals too, with the same need to survive often against the odds. During the inter-war depression in Australia ? the time when this story is set ? poor people living in the outback were also sorely up against it. Harper herself sees clearly enough what is going on when her generally inept father also starts drinking, but is powerless to intervene. Fortunately kindly neighbours are at hand to help, otherwise this disturbing story might have turned unbearably depressing as well.

So what about Tin, the silent, child mole whose tunnelling eventually leads to the destruction of the family house? Half-human, half-goblin he is also a plot device whose undermining activities reflect the way that society too at that difficult

time was facing collapse from inside. But in his chosen darkness, Tin finds a sense of safety absent from life above ground. He also provides moments of wild humour, which means that while **Thursday's Child** is a serious, intensely felt novel, it is never a depressing one. Written in the tradition of the American Southern Gothic novel made famous by writers like Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers, Hartnett reproduces in her own fiction the way that, as she puts it, 'the melodrama which infuses such literature often transforms into a black and outrageous sense of humour.' There are further resemblances in her chosen cast of characters, who are also often 'individuals alienated from a modern world, each of them seeking redemption through the only defence they have, a desperate ability to endure.'

To anyone suggesting that this recipe might be somewhat heavy for young readers, Hartnett gives no quarter. 'I have spent a great deal of my time defending my work against those who see it as too complicated, too old in approach, too bleak to qualify as children's literature. This has been the bane of my life.' This is because she does not set out to be a moralist or even specifically a children's novelist. She writes the books she has to. Her next title, **What the Birds See**, published in Britain this month, is a case in point. It is a powerful description of a nine-year-old boy battling for his emotional survival against the backdrop of a recent child abduction. Hartnett says that she did not always welcome what was going to happen in this book, yet the story itself insisted. But although it will be aimed at an adult market, many older children could well read it too. For Hartnett has the sort of power and talent that will eventually find readers of all ages once they have discovered this sensationally good storyteller writing so tellingly and enigmatically within their own midst.

Thursday's Child (0 7445 5996 0, £4.99 pbk) and **What the Birds See** (0 7445 9093 0, £7.99 hbk) are published by Walker Books.

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