



The Children's Books of the Decade

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Rosemary Stones reflects on the first ten years of the new millennium.

For children's publishing the first ten years of the new millennium was a decade to celebrate for the sheer quality, richness and inventiveness of the best of its output. And this during a period bedevilled by reductive literacy strategies, stringent cuts in library provision and the channelling of marketing budgets to promote a few favoured authors at the expense of the many. **Rosemary Stones** comments on some of the highlights.

The children's books industry could be forgiven for feeling anxious at the start of a decade that would see some inevitable endings. Most notable among them were the publication of **The Amber Spyglass** (2000), the final volume of Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' and the end of Harry Potter with **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows** (2007). Could the market survive without record breaking Harry? (**Deathly Hallows** sold three million copies in the first *weekend* after publication.) What could replace the boy wizard?

New series

Panic turned out to be premature as American Stephenie Meyer's vampire romance **Twilight** (2008) hit the shelves and went on to sell 17 million copies worldwide. There were sequels of course. The appeal of this new blockbuster (a 'love story with a bite') to teenage girls in particular appears to be the libidinal symbolism of fangs penetrating and blood being sucked. Other writers have scrambled, more or less successfully, to jump on the vampire bandwagon... How soon before we are vampired out?

Meanwhile successful standalone titles were being developed into series. Eoin Colfer's eponymous fairy with attitude, **Artemis Fowl** (2001), went on to have further adventures and Anthony Horowitz's **Stormbreaker** (2005) became the 'Alex Rider' series of thrillers credited with turning many a reluctant boy into a reader.

Younger series fiction, a difficult area to get right, fared pretty well in this decade. Francesca Simon's splendid **Horrid Henry**, published as a one-off title at the end of the '90s, grew into a publishing phenomenon with dozens of titles which effectively bridge the transition for younger readers from picture books to fiction. For middle age range readers Cressida Cowell's **How to Train Your Dragon** (2003) became a range of titles featuring the wild adventures of the young Viking Hiccup Horrendus Haddock III. Humour also played its part in making Andy Stanton's **You're a Bad Man, Mr Gum!** (2008) a word of mouth success leading to further Mr Gum titles.

The outstanding series of the decade, however, was indubitably Philip Reeve's 'Mortal Engines' quartet, a brilliantly sustained account of the rise and fall of Municipal Darwinism whose eponymous first volume was published in 2004. 'Witty and thrilling, serious and sensitive, the 'Mortal Engines' quartet is one of the most daring and imaginative science fiction adventures ever written for young readers,' wrote Clive Barnes in **Book for Keeps**. I'll second that.

Stand alone fiction

But what of stand alone fiction titles ? now so hated by marketing departments who want, vampire-like, the promise of a series into which they can sink their fangs?

Mark Haddon's **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time** (2003) was a maverick and unexpected cross-over bestseller but, for my money, the outstanding stand alone fiction titles of the decade are those of two writers whose impressive debut novels were then followed by equally impressive subsequent work ? they are Meg Rosoff's **How I Live Now** and Frank Cottrell Boyce's **Millions** which were both published in 2004. Both writers have a distinctive and original voice and their narratives are richly multi-layered.

Picture books

Despite concerns about patchy rights deals and the diminishing market for picture books with lists being trimmed, this sector more than held its own as the new century continued. New picture book talent kept coming with innovative standalone titles: Mini Grey (**Traction Man is Here**, 2005), Emily Gravett (**Wolves**, 2005) and Oliver Jeffers (**Lost and Found**, 2006) amongst others hit the ground running, bringing rich intertextuality and a confidently witty use of the picture book medium.

Lauren Child's **Clarice Bean That's Me** had been published at the end of the '90s but this was Clarice's decade as it was Charlie and Lola's with a wealth of witty, anarchic titles from the innovatively stylish Child. Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's **Gruffalo** continued into the new century with the **The Gruffalo's Child** (2004) to become a 'property' with merchandising opportunities resulting in Gruffalo toys, mugs, stationery and so forth.

Non-fiction and poetry?

But what of non-fiction, that much ignored but vital sector of children's publishing? Relatively few non-fiction writers are the household names that creators of fiction and picture books can become. Mick Manning and Brita Granström's high original and distinctive non-fiction for younger readers over the last decade (eg **Roman Fort**, 2004 amongst a heap of enjoyable titles) has made them exceptions to the rule.

A decade that saw pitifully few single poet volumes published ended well with the appointment of Carol Ann Duffy (known as much for her poetry for children as for her poetry for adults) appointed Poet Laureate.

And the next decade?

The threat, or promise, of technological change loomed over the decade. Now at the beginning of the next decade the transition from print-on-woodpulp to e-readers may still be at its beginnings but it has become a reality that will have to be accommodated. And who knows, the digital age may find new ways to encourage creativity in publishing for children.

Rosemary Stones is editor of **Books for Keeps**.

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