



John Rowe Townsend May 1922 - March 2014

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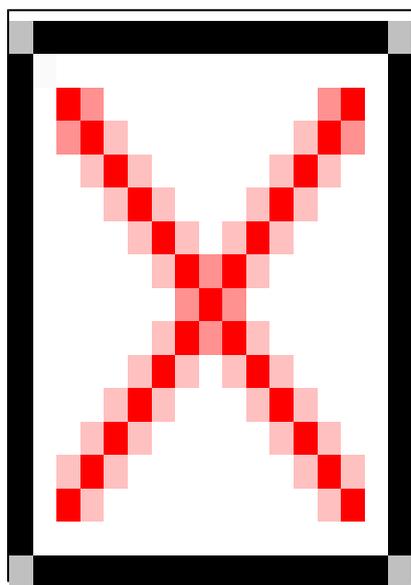
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An appreciation by **Clive Barnes**

Clive Barnes on the influence of John Rowe Townsend, who has died aged 92.



I first heard John Rowe Townsend speak nearly forty years ago at one of the last of the Exeter Children's Literature Conferences. Then, when I started out as a children's librarian, Exeter in summer was the main gathering place in Britain for the celebration of children's books, and John Rowe Townsend was already one of the major figures in British children's literature, as a journalist, author, reviewer and critic. His **Written for Children**, the first critical historical survey of British children's literature for thirty years, was published in 1965 and, if it did not invent the notion of a contemporary Second Golden Age of children's literature, was the most extended and convincing argument that something extraordinary was happening. The only other figure of a similar stature as both author and critic was Aidan Chambers. This was perhaps the most striking feature of the self-confident and ambitious children's book world of the 1960s and 1970s, that here were writers of books for children and young people who were interested in more than the writing itself: interested in exploring, for instance, what it meant to write for children, what made a good book for children, and what were the particular responsibilities of a children's writer. And to argue vigorously that what they were doing deserved to be taken as seriously as writing for adults, a position that needed to be established and strenuously defended back then. As children's books editor of **The Guardian**, John Rowe Townsend had the best platform of any writer or critic to get his views across and he used it with skill and energy, bringing together a body of committed reviewers, many of whom were children's writers and, in 1967, awarding the first annual Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. The prize was judged by children's writers and, unlike the Carnegie, the only other significant prize for a children's book at the time, could be awarded only once to an author. He became the principal spokesperson for the notion that what mattered above all in a children's book was its literary quality, and, as such, by the time I heard him for the first time, was coming under fire from a group of younger critics, who argued that children's books largely

reflected white middle class life and values and needed to change to include children from all backgrounds and cultures and to give greater and equal roles to girls. For a time, battle lines were drawn behind banners inscribed with terms that Townsend himself had coined: 'book people' and 'child people'. But, in time, as the smoke cleared, it was apparent that what divided them was less a matter of principle than of emphasis. If his opponents were not the thin end of the wedge of Soviet Socialist Realism, nor was he the complacent, patrician, establishment figure that was sometimes implied. His own early children's books, beginning with **Gumble's Yard** (1961) were remarkable at the time for their northern working class settings and drew on his own childhood. Nor was his interest in children's books exclusively literary. The last time I heard him speak at a conference, twenty years ago, he was talking about changes he had seen in children's publishing and its economic determinants and constraints. If those same economic imperatives have meant that many of his more than thirty books for children are now out of print, his own conviction that the best children's books will last is perhaps borne out by those that remain in print or are available as e-books, including **Gumble's Yard**. Perhaps his greatest achievements, however, were the inauguration of the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and **Written for Children**, both still in rude health and coming up for their 50th anniversary. Later extended to include books from the USA and Australia, and now in its ninth edition, **Written for Children** has become a classic introduction to its subject. Since its publication, and with the recent explosion of academic children's literature studies, as yet no single author work has displaced it. Its clarity of style, breadth and depth of knowledge, and consistency of critical approach combined with a generosity of spirit, make it both approachable to the general reader and still valuable to the new children's literature scholar. It remains, and long may it do so, as a memorial to someone who played a major part in establishing the importance of children's books not only as the field of academic study which it has become in the last twenty years, but as a force in British cultural life.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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