



# Stories, Smiles and Smarties

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**Chris Sutcliffe** describes accompanying Young Judges from The Hereford School in Grimsby to the 1990 Smarties Book Prize presentation.

## Chris Sutcliffe

The lift-doors on Level 5 of the Barbican Centre in London move swiftly and silently.

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On the day of our visit to London they moved too swiftly and too silently for me. They shut at exactly the wrong time. Inside were ten children, the Smarties Young Judges; outside were Julie and me, the two teachers who had accompanied the children from The Hereford School in Grimsby to the 1990 Smarties Book Prize presentation in London.

So it was that instead of being carried slowly but decorously up to Level 8 under the watchful gaze of their teachers, the children were whisked down to the basement, up to Level 8, and back down to the basement. And again. And again.

Caught in a smooth, fast, internal roller-coaster, they did what all 11-year-olds do. They screamed. Loudly. After all, they were having fun.

The neighbouring lift-door opened. A lady swathed in fur stepped out, frowning with acute distaste.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'I wonder if you've seen any children?' I asked. 'They are in uniform,' I added hopefully.

'I have not seen them, young man,' she replied a la Bracknell, 'but I have *heard* them.'

And she swept off ...

The story had begun, as some stories do, with the gift of a book. My mother had given my daughter a copy of the 1989 Smarties Book Prize Winner, **We're Going On a Bear Hunt** by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury. I had written a short pastiche (never a parody) of it as an entry in a competition run by Book Trust to find a school to read all the shortlisted books, travel to London and present their own awards. In short, to be Young Judges.

I posted my entry and then forgot all about it. So I was astonished, some weeks later, to discover I'd won.

Matters were now a little complicated as I was to start working at a new school in September. Yes, my new headteacher knew of the Smarties Prize. Yes, he was delighted for his students to be Young Judges. Yes, we could take the books on visits to Junior schools. Yes, we could go to London.

It was when I told him the final part of our prize that he balked slightly. Every student in the school would receive a free tube of Smarties. Did I know how many students were in the school? I wasn't quite sure. 1,040. I promised I'd tell

Book Trust.

I think it was at this point he decided to let me get on with it.

Whilst only ten Young Judges would go to London, they would be representatives of the 240 children in Year 7. After the twelve short-listed books arrived (bright, shiny hardbacks - an unheard of luxury these days), it soon became apparent they shouldn't just be used with Year 7 classes.

Thus, I've seen strapping 16-year-old lads entranced by Inga Moore's tale of **Six Dinner Sid**; watched sophisticated 16-year-old girls fall under the spell of Peter Collington's exquisite pictures in **On Christmas Eve**; and heard both groups join together to delight in the rhymes of Quentin Blake's **All Join In**.

People were talking about the books. I was cornered in corridors and told the story of Roald Dahl's **Esio Trot** a hundred times. Did I have a recipe for star-gazy pie? (After Antonia Barber and Nicola Bayley's **The Mousehole Cat**.) Where could you buy a Fidchell set? (Catherine Fisher's **The Conjuror's Game**.) Can you really fill a hot-air balloon using smoke? (Pauline Fisk's **Midnight Blue**.)

I was in danger of becoming carried away on the wave of excitement.

On our first visit to a Junior school, I took five of the Young Judges. Each Young Judge sat at a round table with six Juniors. They introduced themselves and then spread out the books, twelve of the best of the three hundred entered for the biggest prize in the country. Still bright and shiny - surely irresistible.

All of a sudden I stopped worrying about which particular books might win. That wasn't really important any more. What was important was that I'd sold the idea of being a reader; the enchantment of books.

So we read and discussed and argued and enjoyed. Classes throughout the school voted. Teachers contributed their opinions. The Young Judges made their trophies, a perspex H on a wooden S, embellished with Smarties. Finally they made up their minds. Then we went to London.

And, after the children had escaped from the lift and walked up every step from the basement to Level 8, what a day we had!

Some hours later I stood next to Helen on the concourse at King's Cross. She had lost her purse, made a speech to 300 adults, chatted to a succession of famous authors and illustrators, been pushed into a pond on the roof garden by her best friend, been photographed, discovered a liking for fishy things wrapped in vine leaves, been interviewed for Radio 5 and television, and presented Paula Danziger with an inflatable haddock (but that's another story). 'You know,' she said to nobody in particular, 'it's been a memorable day trip.' For an 11-year-old, she had a remarkable power of understatement.

Another memorable day was to follow. We had an extra prize. Three weeks later we were visited by three of the shortlisted authors: Inga More, Jamie Rix and Pauline Fisk.

Once again the school was alive with talk of books. All the excitement and enthusiasm generated by an author visit was ours, threefold.

At the end of the day we had our own, much shorter and less prestigious presentation in the school hall. But it was, perhaps, just as important. Instead of presenting trophies to winning authors, the Young Judges presented sets of the twelve shortlisted books, even now still bright and shiny, to other children from eight Junior schools. These books have enchanted us, they said, may they now enchant you.

Then the moment passed, the bell rang for the end of school and 1,040 tubes of Smarties were opened.

The first presentation? The Hereford School Young Judges Awards were won by **Six Dinner Sid** (0-5 years), **The Mousehole Cat**

(6-8 years) and **Grizzly Tales for Gruesome Kids** (9-11 years and the overall winner). I don't think that matters very much. Books, all books, had won. That's what counts.

**Details of the Young Judges' winning books are:**

**Six Dinner Sid** by Inga Moore, Simon & Schuster, 0 7500 0297 2, £6.99; 0 7500 0304 9, £3.50 pbk

**The Mousehole Cat** by Antonia Barber and Nicola Bayley, Walker, 0 7445 0703 0, £9.99

**Grizzly Tales for Gruesome Kids** by Jamie Rix, ill. Bobbie Spargo, Deutsch, 0 233 98531 X, £5.95

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