

## **PATRICK HARDY TALK**

### **The need for adventure**

I was particularly pleased to be asked to give this talk as I was actually published by Patrick Hardy many, many years ago. The Devil's Door-bell and The Night of the Scorpion...just rewritten and relaunched as Raven's Gate and Evil Star. Patrick published these books with perhaps the worst covers I've ever had to suffer – and that's saying something – but at the same time he was one of the most brilliant editors I ever worked with and taught me how to write precisely and economically. He tidied up my work to such an extent that in Scorpion I created a cleaning lady called Patricia Hardy...I don't think he was amused. But I'm very grateful to help keep his memory alive.

This talk is called "The Need for Adventure" and seeks to address two questions which have puzzled me for some time. What do we expect from children's literature? And – more specifically – do my books provide it or – to put it another way - are they any good? I know I've sold millions of copies but children have also bought millions of units of Sunny Delight perhaps to enjoy whilst reading my books leaving them thus breathless and toothless.

"Children and reading" seems to be a hot topic. Do boys read? Are they reading less than girls? I always find it very puzzling, by the way, that anybody thinks this distinction really matters. As far as I'm concerned, they might as well be asking do tall boys read more than short ones. And I do wonder why it is that nobody ever asks the far more pertinent questions – are white children reading more than children from ethnic minorities. How about children in the north against children in the south of the country? Do English kids read more or less than French or German kids.

Anyway, that's not my point here. Do boys read? That's the question that's being asked more and more often – and recently the government in the guise of Education Minister Ruth Kelly climbed dutifully on the bandwagon. We'll come to her later. But I'm tempted to add something of my own. Who cares?

Does it really matter who's reading what – and at a time when more and more children's books are being launched with ever larger fanfares, what is it that we are all chasing? Culture, literacy, civilisation and enlightenment? Or film deals and six-figure advances?

I have to say from the start, and this is the whole point really, that I'm not sure I'm at all qualified to be talking to you tonight. After all, I'm not what you'd call a serious writer. I hope my books do less damage than an over-sugary drink, but I have to admit that there's no real depth or morality to them. I don't tend to promote any particularly serious views...apart from violence in children's books. I feel strongly about that. There isn't enough of it. But if you look at my work...I've written, I guess about twenty-something adventure stories. Spy stories. Detective stories. Magic and mystery and even horror stories. On television, there's Foyle's War, Midsomer Murders, Murder in Mind... Adventure in one form or another is the locomotive pulling most of my work.

I would like to try my hand at other genres. For example, I'd very much like to write a romance, but as my wife recently said to me, how can I write about something I've never experienced. But in truth, this is without question the Golden Age of children's literature and I sometimes wish I was writing something as poetic and life-changing as David Almond, something as challenging as Philip Pullman or as moving and as beautifully written as Geraldine McCaughrean perhaps but something always pulls me back into guns and chases and kids in peril.

If I do have one role in the UK, it seems to me to be the writer for kids (boys in particular) who don't want to read. I've lost count of the number of adults who have come up to me and told me that if it wasn't for me their children wouldn't be reading. I remember very vividly a French mother who came up to me at Montreuil. "Mr Horowitz," she said. "My children never read anything until they read your books. And now they've read everything you've written and they've begun to read good writers."

I am, in short, an adventure writer – and adventure was crucial to me when I was young. Those of you who have heard me talk before or who have failed to avoid the endless pieces in the press will know about my vaguely unhappy childhood and in particular my time at Orley Farm Preparatory School from 1963 to 1968. I'm not going to go through it all again. The beatings. The cold showers. Disgusting food. Compulsory homosexuality on Thursday afternoons. I know I've embroidered it all over the years but the truth is I was unhappy and adventure was my only escape.

We slept in dormitories. I began to tell stories at night after lights out. I can't remember how many times I was made to stand in the corridor for talking after lights out – but this was the start of my career and I can still remember the stories. They were about two boys (Jimmy & Edward) who ran away and went to America. And every night they had adventures. In 1963, they were at Dallas with JFK. In 1964, they were sent to Viet Nam. In 1965, they took their first walk in space.

At the same time, a wonderful thing happened. I discovered books. I started with Tintin. Then Willard Price. Then CS Lewis and Narnia...the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. When I visit schools, I often say that books are shaped exactly like doors. They even open like doors. And you can go through a book just as you can go through a door and there's a whole world on the other side. And when I say that, I'm thinking of the wardrobe in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the wonderful secret passages I found in the Tintin books...doors in pyramids, doors even in trees...The Secret Garden hidden behind a door in the garden wall, the many secret doors in another childhood favourite, Alan Garner's Weirdestone of Brisingamen. In a way, I feel that I've been trying to open doors and to escape all my life.

The other big event in my childhood and the one thing I looked forward to every Christmas was the release of a new James Bond film. In those days, you didn't get worldwide releases like you do now. If you wanted to see the movie, you formed a line outside the door of the one, single cinema in London

where it was showing. I don't know what the collective age is here – and it's probably wiser not to ask – but we can all probably remember a time when there was no computerised booking system. For me, that meant queuing in the wind and rain to be the first to see *From Russia with Love*, *Goldfinger*, *Dr No*...and later on *You Only Live Twice* (with a screenplay by another hero of children's literature: Roald Dahl).

Has there been a greater adventurer than Bond? Has there ever been a character in fiction who has spanned fifty years and at least two generations? My two children are as much Bond fans as I am. OK - it's Pierce Brosnan they go for rather than Sean Connery but they can't help it if they have no taste. Bond has survived - in part, I think - because he appeals to the adventurer in all of us.

Adventure in children's books is thriving. I mentioned a childhood favourite of mine - Willard Price - earlier and I have to say I'm so pleased by the fact that all those years later, he still seems to be thriving. Forgive me for making a brief digression but it does seem to me sometimes that as we look for the next "star" writer – the next celebrity almost – we're sometimes in danger of forgetting some of the really great writers who helped get us where we are. So here's a brief, personal tribute.

Willard Price wrote fourteen adventure stories including *Amazon Adventure*, *South Sea Adventure*, *Underwater Adventure*, *Volcano Adventure* and so on all the way up to *Arctic Adventure* which he finished in 1980 at the incredible age of 83. The fact that his books are still in print today – and not only that but still widely read – is remarkable for two reasons.

Firstly, the adventures of the two brothers, Hal and Roger, capturing wild animals for their father's zoo, might be considered out of keeping with the spirit of our time. But also we're talking here about a writer who was actually born in the nineteenth century. It really does say something about the energy of his writing that he's still around today.

Willard Price was himself a true adventurer, travelling around the world – Indiana Jones style – for the National Geographic Society and for the American Museum of Natural History. He also spent time in Japan before the Second World War and it's possible he may have acted as a spy for American intelligence.

His books have so much action in them that they make Alex Rider look like a slouch. In *Gorilla Adventure*, for example, the two brothers are attacked by an infuriated gorilla, a black mamba, a spitting cobra and a leopard, they survive a fire at sea, come up against diamond smugglers, rescue a bush hospital and collect twenty-two animals.

“My aim in writing the “Adventure” series for young people,” he said. “Was to lead them to read by making reading exciting and full of adventure.” This was October 1983 and Willard Price was 96 years old.

Well, one child he got to read was me and I wasn't the only one. Last year, I was delighted by the success of Michelle Paver's brilliant debut novel *Wolf Brother* and by its even more outstanding sequel, *Spirit Walker*. Two visceral, full-blooded adventures if ever there were any. And I was thrilled to learn (in a BBC radio interview) that she too had been inspired by Willard Price. Although I could have guessed.

Adventure in books is certainly thriving.

Eion Colfer and Darren Shan are both turning a whole generation of children onto reading with wonderful adventures – even if they are of a very different colour...blood red in Darren's case. JK Rowling of course. Lemmon Snickett, even Charlie Higson...there are plenty of us out there, batting away. And whatever you may think of her even Enid Blyton is still out there selling her *Castle of Adventure* and *Island of Adventure* to yet another generation of young readers.

But what about adventure in the real world?

I can't speak for the other authors, but I sometimes think that the main reason why my books have taken off is because we're rapidly moving towards a society in which the only place where children will be able to have adventures is in books. When I was a kid, we played in the street. Well, actually, with my privileged upbringing, I played in the mews. These days, nobody in their right minds plays in the street and if they do, under this present government, they'll probably end up with an ASBO. Forgive me if that sounds horribly simplistic – it also makes me feel horribly old – but it's a different world.

These days, we're scared for our children. No. It's worse than that. Our children inspire fear. We're scared for them. We're also scared of them. We're scared all the time.

It seems to me that something has happened to children in England. Something has changed and I personally believe that the switch was thrown on February 16<sup>th</sup> 1993 - eleven years ago when two small boys walked out of an English supermarket with a third, even smaller boy - Jamie Bulger - and killed him. I think on that day we saw something very close to the death of childhood. The manner of the killing was so monstrous...how could it have happened...what had happened to our children? It was as if our very belief in children - their innocence, their innate goodness, their hope for our future - took a terrible bashing and we have never fully recovered. Because, after all, what are children but the unpolluted, the unsullied reflection of the society that creates them? Somehow we created Jon Venables and Robert Thompson and at the time we cast around for someone to blame - video nasties, bad parenting, inner city poverty - but we still had to end up blaming ourselves.

I don't think our view of children has ever been quite the same again. We suddenly realised that we couldn't control our children any more. We couldn't control what might happen to them. And we couldn't control what they might become. Of course, there have been all sorts of other social changes throughout the last dozen years. The internet. Violent computer games. The

growing power of the news media. But...February 16<sup>th</sup> 1993. I still believe that was the day we began to get afraid.

And that fear is still prevalent. Some of you may have read an article that I wrote for the Times earlier this year, touching on the government and ASBO's being dished out to young people – a rise of 116% last year alone. Obviously, from my ivory tower in London I can't comment on what is happening on estates in the north but is it really as bad as we're led to believe? I quoted some individual cases. The boy with Tourette's syndrome banned from swearing. Another boy banned from using the word "grass". Two brothers aged ten and twelve, banned from "making rude gestures". Collectively, they add up to create a cumulative vision of a Britain full of yobs – "yob culture" as the media would have it – with crack houses on every inner city estate, drunken louts running amok in provincial towns, terrified pensioners and so on. Is it a true picture? I also quoted Shami Chakrabarti, the director of Liberty, who called all this "a recipe for the stigmatisation and alienation of a generation of deprived kids."

Afraid of our children. Afraid for them.

When a child goes missing, it's front page news. The High Street is full of dangers: drug dealers, drunk drivers, thugs out to get our kids' mobile phones. The countryside is no better. Ian Huntley has taken the place of Myra Hindley in the national consciousness. And in cyber space...the Internet, of course, is groaning with child pornography – but it's sad, isn't it, that we as parents even have to think carefully what sort of photographs we take of our children, at least if we're going to get them developed at Boots.

I think we all know in our heart of hearts that there are no more paedophiles now than there ever were, but government and the media would suggest otherwise. I was astonished that on the set of Stormbreaker, everyone in the crew had to be checked out for a police record before they could start work – because they'd be working with a child. And it wasn't that long ago that the News of the World almost caused a riot when it published a list of known

paedophiles. This reached its nadir when a mob got together and attacked the home of an eminent paedologist!

I don't know if this actually happened but some time ago I seem to remember that Microsoft announced that they were planning to close down all their chat rooms in order to protect children. This followed a much publicised case in which a child ran away with an American marine...you may remember it. I'm afraid to say I found the whole story extremely entertaining. The child was, to start with, rather dumpy and grown-up. And then there was the tearful mother going on TV to explain that she had only allowed her daughter to surf the internet for seven hours a day and she made her do it in the kitchen so she could keep an eye on her. My feeling was that the daughter was probably better off with the marine.

But there's an even more insidious sort of fear at large. The fear of our children hurting themselves. Part of the reason for this is that at last we have inherited the litigation practices of the United States. If you trip on a pavement you sue the council. Recently, a friend of mine – a wealthy, intelligent woman – was playing with her son in a playground. He fell off a swing and hurt himself and to my astonishment she did the same. She sued the council. I have to say, I was completely shocked. She seemed to be chasing the money because she could, because it was there to be had. And it never occurred to her that this might be just one more step along the way until the time when there are no playgrounds.

And there's a new force at work in our schools. The risk assessors. My sister-in-law is a maths teacher and recently took a group of children to visit Cardiff. It was a beautiful day but she wasn't allowed to take them for a walk on the beach because the risk assessors had told her it was too dangerous. At other schools, teachers have told me that school skiing trips may soon become a thing of the past. For the same reason. The risk assessors won't allow them.

In my desk, I keep a piece from the Spectator, written some time ago by a man called Nick Butt who had been the head of St Edmund's a school in

Norfolk. He'd resigned and this is why. He'd been sent on an EVC course...EVC stands for Educational Visits Co-Ordination and it's responsible for school trips. This is what he wrote:

"We were shown a slide of a group of children beside a river downstream from a waterfall. They were sitting or standing near the water's edge, barefoot. We were asked to identify all the risks in the picture, and how this activity might be conducted safely. It was a sedate, shallow river with many stones in the bed and crystal-clear water. They seemed to be happy. Appearances were deceptive. These children should have been fearing for their lives. First of all the waterfall was a real and present danger. They should not be shown waterfalls lest they were tempted to fall down them. The rocks were sharp and slippery, and that water was teeming with leptospirosis; their feet should have been shod. And what were they doing so far from the main road? A suitably qualified wilderness expert should have been in attendance. Perhaps, our tutor grudgingly admitted, once all cuts and abrasions had been plastered over, they might be permitted to kneel at the water's edge in a stationary position. But that was all. Have fun? Dear oh dear! I recalled a trip last year to the Dales, and a similar waterfall and river. How our children loved splashing about between the rocks and letting the water slip through their hands, getting wet and dirty and jumping from stone to stone. No more. As EVC, I am required to put a stop to all that. I have just handed my deputy a stash of 30 full-page risk assessments to fill in for a trip to Derbyshire. They will then have to be approved by the governors and by the LEA before the trip is allowed to take place. In the meantime, the hostel where they are staying will have to fill in a 16-page questionnaire covering every aspect of health and safety, which will also have to be approved by the LEA. Except I have resigned."

Not surprisingly, British children themselves seem to be picking up on this general sense of dread. Only yesterday there was a story in the newspapers which caught me eye.

"Nearly 70% of children avoid walking or cycling on the roads through fear of fast traffic, a major survey revealed today. ..."

I can imagine children being nervous of cycling. It's a good argument for less traffic and more cycle lanes. But are children really now too traumatised to consider walking to school? The weird thing is that the article concluded – "The RAC Foundation and the children's charity 4Children...said the number of child road casualties was falling in Britain." Once again, the reality is going down – not up.

Of course I don't want to see children injured or killed but the question I want to ask is this. What are we doing to our future if our children are so over-protected, so wrapped in cotton wool, that they have no understanding of endurance, danger or physical hardship? When I write Foyle's War, I think of the young pilots who endured so much in 1940 and 41. Where did they come from? I've written a play about Shackleton and his amazing journey on The Endurance. Look at the great heroes of British history...Drake, Raleigh, Scott, Livingstone...where did they come from and where will the next heroes begin?

Because if we take away the spirit of adventure from our children, if you're afraid for them, if you cosset them, protect them and keep them locked indoors...we surely deaden and neutralise our own future. And where do we stop? If we worry about children hurting themselves physically, maybe we should worry about any damage that can be done to them psychologically.

And maybe that's why everyone now gets an A in their GCSE's. A star. A plus. A double star. A smiley face. And maybe that's why many schools are now banning sports days. How much more unthreatening to have what they call "a day of activity-based events."

But there is one place where children do still suffer. And that's in my books. And Alex Rider, of course, suffers more than any of them. I'd like to talk briefly about his genesis and in doing so, I'd like to mention an earlier book of mine - even though it's one of my least known. It's called The Switch and I want to read just a few extracts from it because it is at the heart of everything I write about and the truth is that Alex couldn't have existed without it.

The hero of The Switch is a boy called Tad Spencer. He's the incredibly rich, cocooned and cosseted son of a businessman living in Snatchmore Hall. Here he is with his mother, just as he gets back home.

"How was school, darling?" she asked.

"It was fine, thank you, mother. I came first in French, English, Chemistry, Maths and Latin. Second in..."

"Ah - here's Mitzy with the tea!" his mother interrupted, stifling a yawn. "Just what I fancied. A teensy-weensy tea!"

The front of the house had opened and a trolley, piled high with cakes and sandwiches had appeared, seemingly moving by itself. As it drew closer, however, a tiny woman could be seen behind it, wearing a black dress with a white apron. This was Mitzy, the family's servant for the past forty years.

"Hello, Master Tad!" she gurgled breathlessly as she heaved the trolley to a halt. It was so heavy that it had left deep tyre-tracks across the lawn."

"Hello, Mitzy!" Tad smiled at her. "How are you?"

"I can't complain, Master Tad."

"And how is Bitzy?" This was Mitzy's husband. His real name was Ernest but he had been given his nickname after he'd been blown to pieces by a faulty gas main."

Tad is not the most attractive of boys, and although he lives in the lap of luxury, he makes the mistake of wishing he was someone else. Unfortunately for him, his wish is granted and he wakes up to discover that he has swapped bodies with another boy - Bob Snarby - who's a world away from him. Bob is thin and scrawny and lives with his repulsive parents, Eric and Doll Snarby, in a caravan in a funfair. Bob has to work for his living, helping set up the crooked stalls that his parents run at the fair. Here he is again, discovering his new home life...

Eric Snarby was at the stove, a new cigarette between his lips. He had a bad cough. In fact he was spluttering as much as the bacon in the pan.

“So you’ve come back in, ‘ave you,” Eric coughed. “Just like you to shove off when it’s your turn to do the cooking.”

“Don’t be cruel to the boy!” Doll Snarby shouted. She reached out and jabbed Tad hard in the ribs. “That’s my job.”

“I suppose you want some bacon,” Eric asked.

“Yes, please,” Tad said.

“Oh. *Please!*” Eric sang the word in a falsetto voice. “‘aven’t we got airs and graces today.” He coughed again, spraying the bacon with spittle. “‘e’ll be saying *thank you* next, an’all.”

“Leave the little maggot alone,” Doll said. She slid an empty plate in front of Tad.

Tad looked down. The plate was coated in grease and dried gravy from the night before. “This is dirty,” he said.

Doll scowled. “Well, there’s no point washing it, is there!” she said, reasonably. “You’re only going to put more food on it.”

Tad’s new life goes from bad to worse, particularly when he discovers that he’s expected to be an accomplice to Finn, a vicious but incompetent thief and house-breaker. But he quickly discovers - and this is the whole point of the book - that he actually enjoys his new surroundings. He’s actually happier being Bob Snarby than he ever was as the rich and cosseted Tad Spencer.

Here’s a brief extract with Tad a few chapters later. He’s now on the run from the police...in the middle of an adventure that seems to be spiralling out of control.

“Tad bit into his sandwich and actually found himself enjoying it. He should have been terrified or in despair but the truth was that he was neither. He felt confident - even calm. As he sat in the café with his elbows on the table and his long hair falling over his eyes, Tad wondered if he was changing in some way that he couldn’t understand.”

Tad’s change was simply this. He had gone from being the rich, spoiled kid that I was, to the hero that I finally managed to create in Alex Rider. What

changed him was adventure. And this is the point I'm trying to make. I believe that adventure is somehow central to the whole experience of being young.

Look at Alex Rider.

Why have these books been so successful? Well, I think that part of the reason is that, unlike Spy Kids or Agent Cody Banks, Alex doesn't actually enjoy his adventures...which is to say, he experiences the full reality of them. Take a kid out of school, give him SAS training and ask him to save the world and it won't be a barrel of laughs. So here's Alex training in the Brecon Beacons in Wales...

"Alex hurt. The 10-kilogram Bergen rucksack he had been forced to wear cut into his shoulders and had rubbed blisters on his back. His right knee, where he had fallen earlier in the day, was no longer bleeding but still stung. His shoulder was bruised and there was a gash along the side of his neck. His camouflage outfit - he had swapped his Gap combat trousers for the real thing - fitted him badly, cutting his legs and under his arms, but hanging loose everywhere else. He was close to exhaustion, he knew, almost too tired to feel how much pain he was in. But for the glucose and caffeine tablets in his survival pack, he would have ground to a halt hours ago. He knew that if he didn't find the rendezvous point soon, he would be physically unable to continue. Then he would be thrown off the course. "Binned" as they called it. They would like that. Swallowing down the taste of defeat, Alex folded the map and forced himself on."

I'm afraid it doesn't quite stop there. When I was preparing this talk, I suddenly realised that in the six books so far, Alex has been beaten up three times, knocked out four times, locked up five times, injected and left paralysed on a conveyor belt moving towards two giant grindstones I(once), gored by a bull, mauled by a tiger, bitten by a shark, thrown into a tank with a giant jellyfish, chased and shot at in a real-life computer game, forced to drink snake blood, threatened with the severing of his little finger, threatened with live vivisection in a biology class, poisoned with deadly nano-particles, shot in the chest and

left for dead on a London pavement and almost strangled in outer space. And this is a character I like!

Although you may not believe it, I should point out here that I'm not some sort of English sadist with a dislike of children. Despite all his traumas, Alex is generally quite a well-adjusted boy and we shouldn't forget that he has managed to save the world six times. What happens to Tad Spencer at the end of *The Switch* is a little more bleak, but even here the message is the same. Tad Spencer and Bob Snarby eventually meet. They both end up without parents, locked up in a grim institution in Stourbridge, near Birmingham... coincidentally where my mother-in-law lives. This is their conclusion.

"It's only two years," Tad said, "And then we'll be on our own. No parents. No Finn. Nobody to tell us what to do or turn us into what they want us to be. In some ways, maybe that's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Yeah? And what then?" Bob wasn't convinced. "What do you think will happen to us? You say you're the same as me now. Well, what chance do you think people like us will ever have?"

"I think we can be anything we want to be," Tad replied. "If we stick together. And if we want it hard enough. With what you know and what I know...together we can take on the world."

Bob smiled for the first time. "Listen to you!" he said. "I bet you was never like this before you was me."

"I bet you've changed too."

"Yeah. Maybe..."

This sounds horribly like a message and I've always tried to avoid messages in my writing...but it seems to come down to this. Children need adventure if they're going to achieve their full potential but with adventure come hardship and risk because without hardship and risk it wouldn't be an adventure. And the more modern life turns against adventure, the more important adventure becomes in modern fiction. I write my books simply to entertain. But perhaps they do have that built-in value too.

But do they have anything else?

When I began this talk, I touched briefly on what might be called the value of reading - why children read at all and what we expect them to get from their books. And I want to round this off by looking briefly at the whole business of reading and the way it seems to be touching right now on our national consciousness. I'm the writer for boys who don't want to read. But why should they bother reading – will it make them better human beings?

So let's go back to Ruth Kelly and her announcement last July that she was launching a £27m government initiative to distribute nine million books to children aged up to the age of four. "Every child deserves the best start in life," she said. "And there is no better time to get parents into the habit of reading with their children than when they are little." She was in essence embracing the work of Booktrust, an independent educational charity founded as long ago as the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in particular their Bookstart programme which has indeed managed to place millions of books into the hands of very young infants and children.

I hope it goes without saying that I admire and support the work of Booktrust. Even so, I was surprised that nobody showed the least concern about this new alliance. Because it seemed to me that, at a stroke, the entire agenda had changed. We had moved from pure altruism – the sharing of an enthusiasm, indeed a passion – to the simplistic attitude of another new Labour tick list. Reading is good for you. We're giving kids books. So the government is good for you.

I ask you now to consider some of the hidden dangers. If politicians and their advisers become involved in this project, who will end up choosing the books? And how long will it be before certain rules – of political correctness and good citizenship - set in? We are, after all, talking about a government that is currently making it a crime to tell jokes – if the jokes are considered likely to offend a religious group and which arrested a seventy-year-old man who was

carted off under Protection of Terrorism laws for shouting “nonsense”. That’s the government we now have. And I ask you – are we quite sure that it’s a healthy thing for these people to have anything to do with the minds of our children at their earliest and most formative stage?

Once the government is involved, what will happen to publishers who entertain writers like me? Would my own publishers, Walker Books, be happy for me to be so critical of Ms Kelly and her friends if, at the same time, they were negotiating a contract for several million copies of “Maisie’s Bathtime”? Perhaps I’m being paranoid but I think we should all be wary of lines getting crossed. Let’s not forget that the last time the government got involved in showbiz, we ended up with the Millennium Dome.

And there’s one other thing that disgusts me. When Ms Kelly is gift-wrapping The Very Hungry Caterpillar to slip into some cot somewhere in the UK shouldn’t we remember that she is part of a government that has – perhaps illegally - killed and maimed children...hundreds of them or maybe even thousands in Iraq? Speaking as a children’s writer myself, I just find it almost surreal to imagine the same minds coming up with “Shock and Awe” one moment and the so-called “treasure’s chest” of kiddy’s books the next. Frankly, it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth. I just wish Ms Kelly had simply given Booktrust the money and left them to get on with it. I don’t think children’s publishers should be doing business with them.

But what I most dislike about the government’s take on literacy is this nanny state feeling that reading is good for you. I just hate the idea that if you read you’re going to be all right, that books can act like vitamins or diet supplements to make a healthier, happier human being. This is not, incidentally, anything I’ve detected in any press release or publication put out by Bookstart.

I love books. I love reading. I can’t imagine my life without it. But I do resent the idea of reading being some sort of virtue, a sort of gold medal that you can pin on the lapel of some pink-faced, grinning little kid. I hate parents that tell

me that their little Gemma is only nine but already she's half-way through War and Peace. It all seems so Victorian – and it's hypocritical too.

Maybe it would be fun to go round the room and ask what everyone here is reading. Or we could play that wonderful game invented by David Lodge where you score points for every great masterpiece you haven't read.

Because this is the point, isn't it. Are adults reading? And what are they reading? And how bad does a book have to be before it's not worth reading at all? Step forward Jeffrey Archer, perhaps. Does reading Hello magazine count as reading? How about Mills & Boon? Where do you draw the line between literature and (not to put too fine a point on it) crap. When does reading become good for you?

Let me read you the first page of a huge bestseller. I'm not doing this to be malicious but because I'm still trying to make the point about what we expect from books. I'm offering a prize for the first person to identify the author and title.

#### EXTRACT

Personally, I can't help giggling at this really terrible writing with its clichés ("savage splendour"), its melodramatic bombast ("nothing could prepare him..."), its weird constructions ("looking skyward", "urgent intent"). Do we really think a geologist would talk to his dogs in this way? I love the way the helicopter hugs the glacial peaks with "military dexterity". This is obviously the only helicopter in the world that has fingers.

And what about that opening sentence? Could death really come in countless forms? Personally, I could only think up six or seven – including polar bears and homicidal penguins although to be fair none of the deaths I thought up included being chucked out of a helicopter, huskies, sled and all, from four thousand feet...which is the ever so slightly ludicrous fate that befalls Mr Brophy a few paragraphs later.

Well, its easy enough to sneer at Dan Brown from whose earlier novel, Deception Point, this is taken. But however critical you want to be, you have to admit that his stories – and in particular, of course, the Da Vinci Code - are wonderfully readable. That’s what’s made Dan Brown richer than JK Rowling. People like his books. They like reading them. And however snobby you want to be, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.

My conclusion is this. Reading is enjoyable. Hugely, massively enjoyable. I can’t imaging life my life without books. All my work has been informed by my love of Dickens, Hardy, Austen, Gissing, Orwell and so on. I like Stephen King too. And of course, Ian Fleming. When I visit schools, it’s an enthusiasm I try to share. I would go further and say that a human being who does not read isn’t complete.

Reading is also an adventure. When you open a book, any book, you’re opening a series of endless possibilities – and who knows where they will take you? Even Dan Brown might encourage you to visit the Louvre in Paris, or perhaps further afield to “the savage splendour” of the Arctic ice. Maybe it’ll take you to other books and better writers who can offer you more than a pack of huskies being thrown out of a plane.

But reading is not necessarily a quick fix and we delude ourselves if we think that. The boy who reads is not necessarily better than the boy who doesn’t. Did Beethoven read? Did Mozart? Does Bill Gates or Richard Branson? I sometimes think we’re tying to turn reading into a universal panacea. It’s many things – but it isn’t that.

And what is my role in all this? I’m not improving children. I’m not informing them or educating them but I am getting them started. Maybe at the end of it all, that French mother was right – and my role is to introduce children to better writers than myself. As far as I’m concerned that’s the greatest adventure of them all.