

# Where Readers Rule...



Chris Powling on writing for Barrington Stoke – voted 2007's "Children's Publisher of the Year".

When asked who they write for, authors often fall back on the time-honoured formula "Oh...for myself, of course." Children's authors tend to offer a variant along the same lines: "Oh...for the child I once was."

Well, fair enough.

As an acknowledgement of that secret, oddball impulse which leads us to fiddle around with words for hour-after-hour, it's a response that can't be faulted. At root, all storytelling is powered by autobiography – provided it's recognised that our imaginative use of our first-hand experience is also enriched, validated and conditioned by the second-hand experience we've encountered through books, through other media, through jokes and gossip.

And yet, isn't there a contradiction here? Writing for yourself, or for the child you once were, requires a single text, the one that's appearing word-by-word in front of you, not the multiple copies we call – for a reason that's built into its very name – 'publication'. If, as we write, we aren't also shaping and imagining on behalf of someone *other* than ourselves then surely daydreaming would do just as well (and require a lot less bum on chair).

Beware, though. Who knows where this might end? Once we've admitted another person into the magic circle – a person who may not share our preoccupations, our preferences, our skills – we may have to cut and trim our stuff accordingly. A year or so ago, for instance, I was minded to write a ghost-story called *Gremlin* for Barrington Stoke. It was based on a plane-trip I'd once taken which included a near-death experience (or so it felt at the time). Here's how the type-script I submitted first kicked off:

*I was going to die.*

*We were all going to die – every one of us.*

*That's what was on my mind when the chief steward came stumbling along the gangway. He bent down beside my seat.*

*"Are you Glenn Jago?" he whispered.*

Patience Thomson, Barrington Stoke's founder and senior editor, had some doubts about this. So, at various stages as the story progressed, did Dalton Cracknell, Will Crisp, P.A. Douglas, Josh Ham, Stella Isaacs, Sam Lawrey, Richard Long, Ryan Marshall,

Alex McCann, Josh Pinkham, Tom Ramwell, Joe Sewell, Luke Tompkins, Stuart Watson, Jacqui Wilson, Cath Wolverson and Zachery Wright.

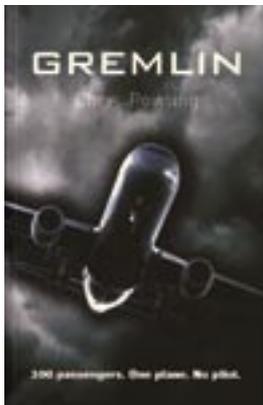
Here's how the story opens in its published version:

*I was going to die.*

*We were all going to die – every one of us.*

*That's what was in my mind when the Chief Steward came stumbling past the other passengers. He bent down beside my seat. "Are you Glenn Jago?" he said, softly.*

Spot the changes? They're not exactly glaring. Both, though, may be crucial if the readers for whom Barrington Stoke was set up – reluctant, dyslexic and struggling readers, that is – are to get through the very first page of the book and into the story itself. Hence the input of Patience and her team of young advisers.



Later, Patience says, once the story has got a grip, such changes become less and less necessary. Of course, there are pitfalls which are always best avoided for such readers – abstract nouns like 'intensity', for instance, or adjectives like 'sombre'. These, however easily de-coded in theory, fall outside their everyday verbal practice. Not that the latter is as limiting as this might suggest. Concrete nouns like 'Chief Steward' can be coped with...so can adjectives like 'paranoid'. Paranoid? "All our Mums are paranoid, Miss," came the grinning reply when Patience queried this. As ever when writing for a readership which only partly includes oneself – and isn't this what *all* published children's authors are doing? – one of the chief on-going requirements is that delicate and demanding awareness we call tact.

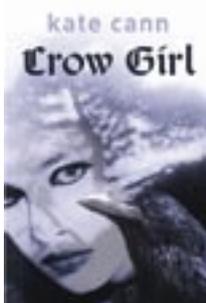
Barrington Stoke is good at tact. It's there in the special type-face which was designed by language specialists to minimise the mixing-up of letters. It's there in the cream-coloured paper – easier for dyslexics than black print on white. It's there in the text-size, the spacing and the lay-out calculated to maximise clarity and readability. By now these are a Barrington Stoke trademark. Wait, though. Could this be too much of a good thing – even isolating its core readership? I wondered this myself for a while. A recent author-visit greatly reassured me. At the signing session afterwards, a boy who was clearly a good reader opened *Gremlin* and asked "Hey, why doesn't this look like your other books, Chris?" Before I could answer, the girl next to him said

# Barrington Stoke

“Oh, I love that. It feels like reading a long poem...”

A long *illustrated* poem, she might have added. Because that's another aspect in which the gr8reads series is distinctive. How often, writing for older children and beyond, do you get the chance to work with an artist of Alan Marks's calibre? Quite apart from the verve and the drama of his pictures for *Gremlin*, the way in which he moves the story along while pinpointing a telling detail here and there (Scott Jago's pipe, for example), he took care of almost all the technicalities. I don't have to describe the plane, thank goodness. Alan does that for me.

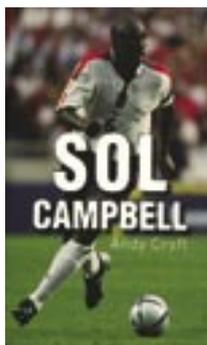
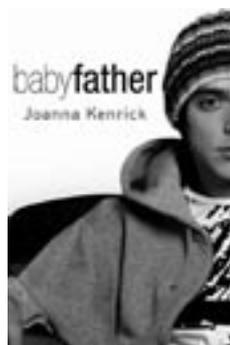
So far, so good then. Writing for Barrington Stoke – at any rate at its gr8reads end – brings a storyteller the sort of back-up that more than compensates for any 'literary' restrictions. That's if they are restrictions. Kate Cann's Barrington Stoke book *Crow Girl* was shortlisted for the Birmingham Book Award. About this, she wrote “when I was a kid I thought good writing was complicated writing. If you were a good writer you wrote in complex, convoluted sentences full of incredibly obscure long words that no one understood. Now I know that's rubbish writing. Good writing is *clear* – it says what has to be said as simply and vividly as possible.” Amen to that, say I. If only our National Literacy Strategists thought the same...they'd have spared today's primary schoolteachers and their pupils a lot of classroom grief and a lot of rubbish writing.



This said, let's not get carried away. For a children's author, or any author probably, nothing can beat the satisfaction of mobilising *all* your narrative resources on a particular project – of meeting the needs of readers who, at least potentially, are as skilled as you are (and may even be more so).

Yet the lure of Gr8reading remains.

Below: *More gr8t reads*



Perhaps the curious lift of the spirits I always feel when I begin a story for Barrington Stoke is the sense it always gives me of getting back to basics. Somehow, as with a painter exploiting a restricted palette or an athlete honing a particular technique, it can be wonderfully liberating to strip down your professional repertoire – especially if the focus of your attention is not just personally challenging but fundamental to your craft. So let me 'fess up. What I like best, and what scares me most, about writing for disadvantaged readers is the pressure it puts on me to devise, shape and pace an irresistible and immaculate *plot*.

Scary, did I say? It's absolutely terrifying. As Patience Thomson points out, her team of advisers are gimlet-eyed on this aspect of a story. “Because they read so slowly – sometimes spending five minutes or more on a single page – they don't miss a thing. They may have difficulties with reading but not with understanding.” She can give numerous examples of this. Not that I need convincing. I've already been told about a character in a forthcoming story who simply couldn't have done what I said he'd done – not starting from there, anyway. As for the ending of a book due to be published next year, a young adviser instantly came up with a better one (and very happy I was to dump mine).

No wonder I had the heebie-jeebies about *Gremlin*. The whole tale turns on how the reader perceives the 'ghost', you see. To my relief, Dalton Cracknell, Will Crisp, P.A. Douglas, Josh Ham, Stella Isaacs & Co nodded it through without a single adverse comment. I've never been so flattered in my life.



Titles by Chris Powling published by Barrington Stoke in their gr8reads series

*Gremlin* ISBN: 978-1842994764 £5.99

*Blade* ISBN: 978-1842993385 £5.99

*Fight* ISBN: 978-1842994146 £5.99

*Thing* ISBN: 978-1842994405 £5.99

Chris's pirate story *Flint* is published by Barrington Stoke in May, 2008.