

Shakespeare

AND HIS WORLD



Ask almost anyone to name a dramatist and Shakespeare will probably be the first name uttered. Yet we know little about the man. He is a strange combination of the best known and least known literary figure. We have a notion of what he looked like mainly from the engraving in the First Folio published some seven years after his death. We all agree how his name should be spelt – but (in the signatures that have survived) he never spelt it twice in the same way. Oddly enough, as Bill Bryson says in his entertaining and splendidly concise biography “*Curiously one spelling he didn’t use was the one now universally attached to his name*”. His date of birth is uncertain. His sexuality a much pondered mystery. Then there are the Lost Years between 1585 and 1592 when he was in his twenties. By the time he is first mentioned in print in 1592 his life is more than half over – he died in 1616. We know little of his private life, who his friends were (we do know some of his rich patrons and fellow actors), whether he ever went to France or Italy. People have spent years poring over the archives in the hope of finding some of the answers...some have gone mad in the process! And then there are the wretched “who really wrote the plays” theorists. Frances Bacon was a popular choice as was the seventeenth Earl of Oxford (despite the difficulty of having died in 1604). Christopher Marlowe was put forward for a while with the assumption that he wasn’t murdered in Deptford but fled abroad to Italy or somewhere and spent the next two decades in hiding but producing the plays. All this provides rich fodder for novelists – the most recently heavily promoted paperback being *The Shakespeare Secret* a preposterous and in my view deeply tedious book by an American academic, putting forward (within a modern murder mystery) theories of who wrote the plays and also that intriguing missing play *Love’s Labours Won*. This missing (or mistitled) play has also appeared in a detective story by Edmund Crispin – *Love Lies Bleeding* – and in *Dr Who* in an episode in 2007 called *The Shakespeare Code*.

The brilliance of the plays and the mystery about the author makes a rich ground for novels. There are some extremely enjoyable children’s books set in this period and they can act as a counter-balance to the massacring of the texts

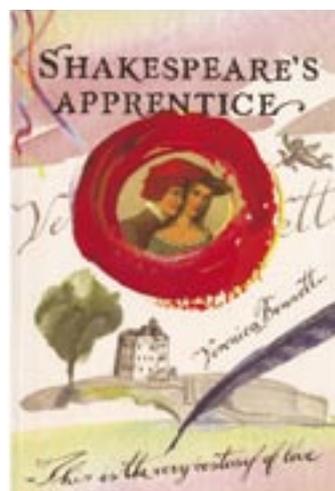
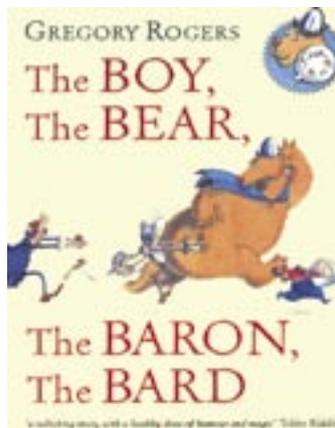
through reading-round-the-class and the dead hand of books of notes on the plays. Notes may help pass an exam but they can put a student off Shakespeare for life.

Elizabethan England was a place of turmoil. The country was going through the process of changing from a Catholic to a Protestant state. And although during Queen Elizabeth’s reign less than two hundred Catholics were executed many thousands of Huguenots were dying in France, giving English Protestants cause for alarm. Conspiracies against the Queen were rife. And then there were the diseases: plague, smallpox, fevers and many other deadly illnesses. This fevered atmosphere is well shown in *Cue for Treason* (1940) by Geoffrey Trease. Peter Brownrigg finds himself on the wrong side of the law and flees to London, joining forces with another runaway, Kit. They become apprentices first

to a company of travelling players and then to Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Shakespeare’s theatre company. Boys then played the female parts and – this is another twist in this tale – for Kit is a girl in disguise. Shakespeare, Burbage and the Court of Queen Elizabeth the First are all prominent players in the fast-moving and exciting plot. Although written over sixty years ago the book has considerable appeal and freshness of tone.

The Boy, the Bear, The Baron, The Bard (2008) is a splendid, wordless time-slip story with wonderfully detailed illustrations. It tells of a curious boy, a grumpy Shakespeare, a captive bear and a baron whose head is bound for the chop. Packed full of historical detail – the birds on the heads on London Bridge are all too real – Australian Gregory Rogers has created a glorious romp of a book.

Life in the theatre is spiritedly portrayed in *Shakespeare’s Apprentice* (2007) by Veronica Bennett. Sam Gilburne, a farmer’s son, is an apprentice actor in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, and falls in love with Lucie Cheetham the niece of Lord Essex. The fictional account of their love combines with documented events: the building of the Globe theatre; the frenetic



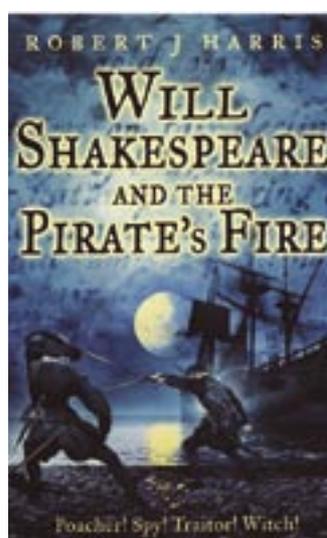
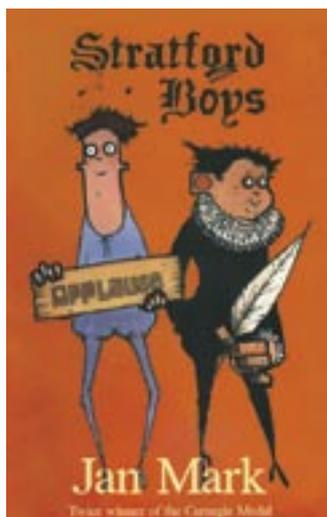
life of the players (plays were usually performed daily at 2pm, with several different plays being produced in one week, and actors doubled and even trebled roles); the falling from grace and imprisonment of Lord Essex. The author says, "The fact that in Elizabethan theatre women were played by teenage boys has always intrigued me. The lives of these apprentice players must have been astonishingly busy...with the public demanding a new play about every six weeks. I began to wonder how it felt to work at this relentless pace, performing daily before a rowdy, unforgiving crowd. And what would happen if an apprentice stepped out of line..."

Susan Cooper in her fine novel *King of Shadows* (1999) has a young 20th century boy from the Southern States of America visit London in the company of other young American actors to perform at The Globe. He time-slips back to 1599 and finds himself at the Globe together with William Shakespeare. This wholly involving and enjoyable novel brings to life the sights, smells and dangers of life at that time. Susan Cooper not only conjures up the spirit of the performances at The Globe but the conspiracies and the pressures surrounding Shakespeare.

The issue of who should succeed Queen Elizabeth was a national preoccupation throughout her reign. A quarter of Shakespeare's plays, as Frank Kermode points out, are built around questions of royal succession. Shakespeare trod a fine line as speculating about Elizabeth's successor was against the law and could send one to the Tower of London.

The Queen had a strong spy network run by Sir Francis Walsingham and there was also the somewhat sinister Dr John Dee – a gift to novelists. He figures largely in the enjoyable (and somewhat unbelievable) *Will Shakespeare and the Pirate's Fire*. The author, Robert J. Harris, supposes that the germs of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* were to be found in events of Shakespeare's early life. And the story takes off from that supposition.

Anthony Horowitz, now largely known for the hugely successful Alex Rider books, wrote a most enjoyable novel, *The Devil and his Boy*, published in 1998. It is a lively, often light-hearted novel though dealing with cruel and dangerous times. Many of the characters are based on people alive in 1593. Not only Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare but the splendidly named Gamaliel Ratsey, Moll Cutpurse, Dr John Dee and even Mr Bull, the hangman. He evokes the sights and smells of the London of that time and also Framlingham, a small market town in Suffolk. It is, incidentally, well worth visiting the town not only for the castle but also for St Michael's Church where the fine Howard



tombs show only too clearly the dangers of plotting against the Establishment. The 3rd Duke of Norfolk (known as the Poet Earl) was executed during the dangerous days at the close of Henry VIII's reign and his son, the 4th Duke, learnt nothing from his fathers' fate, and became involved in many plots, several involving Mary Queen of Scots, and was executed some thirty years after his father.

Stratford Boys by Jan Mark (2003) imagines Will Shakespeare as a teenager. Will is a glover's son, who spends his days fitting gloves to pretty hands in his father's busy shop, and apart from the odd poem he's never before put pen to paper. But the good people of Stratford require a play, and with his pal Adrian Croft he finds himself responsible for putting one on the stage. Will's imagination works overtime as he struggles to find parts for his motley selection of friends and neighbours: school boys who refuse to wear skirts, Adam of Muscovy, Wat the plasterer with a chip on his shoulder and many others. A witty, engaging novel – and it doesn't take much imagination to leap from the teenage players in this novel to the Mechanicals in *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

And what better, more authentic place can there be to see *Midsummer Night's Dream* but The Globe. It is being performed there as part of their summer 2008 season from 10 May to 4 October. For full details of performances see their website www.shakespeares-globe.org. If

you have back copies of *Carousel* you can read about The Globe in issue 9 Summer ten years ago. And do try to read at least one of the books mentioned above first to give a real feel of life in Elizabethan London.

Enid Stephenson

Two of the books mentioned in the article are out of print...but they can be obtained fairly easily through the Internet or by visiting your local friendly second-hand shop. It would be good to think that they could be republished for a new generation to enjoy.

Shakespeare Bill Bryson Harper Perennial £7.99 ISBN: 978-0007197903

Cue for Treason Geoffrey Trease Puffin out of print

The Boy, The Bear, The Baron, The Bard Gregory Rogers
Allen & Unwin £6.99 ISBN: 978-1741145359

Shakespeare's Apprentice Veronica Bennett
Walker £6.99 ISBN: 978-1844281480

King of Shadows Susan Cooper Puffin £5.99 ISBN: 978-0141207992

Will Shakespeare and the Pirate's Fire Robert J Harris
HarperCollins £5.99 ISBN: 978-0007194242

The Devil and his Boy Anthony Horowitz
Walker £4.99 ISBN: 978-1844286065

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