

Sharing Stories A Generation Ago!

A number of best-loved classic children's titles have been recently re-issued to attract new fans. We wondered how relevant they are to today's children. Do they have a feeling of timelessness? Do they still appeal? Are they appropriate? Do they speak to young readers in the twenty-first century? Would you buy them for your children or your grandchildren? To find out we asked two families – one who shared four of these stories with their children almost forty years ago, and the other shared the same ones during the 2010 summer holiday.

Almost Forty Years Ago ...

A Grandmother replied,

"When our children were young we always found time to share a story with them – bedtimes, journeys in the car, on a bus or train, on the beach, in the sand dunes, ruins of a castle – in fact, anywhere. Now we are grandparents we have a new audience – grandchildren. I was delighted to read some old favourites and remind myself of the stories to see how they would suit today's somewhat more sophisticated children (in that they have so many different ways to see and read stories). But nothing beats cuddling up close to someone and listening to them reading or telling you a story and a good story is always a good story – in whatever time it is set or year it is written.

I read this one last because I thought it may have become dated. I was so wrong. *The Wombles*, written by Elizabeth Beresford and illustrated by Nick Price is bang up to date with their clever recycling of all the bits and pieces we humans leave behind on Wimbledon Common. The brand new illustrations made me laugh as we followed Bungo – still naughty, still cheeky – from his first escapades with Orinoco to making friends with Tomsk, learning skills from Tobermory and eating many culinary delights from Madame Cholet. In our family the Wombles were better known and loved through the television series with the voice of Bernard Cribbens, but I reckon Grandad will inspire Jacob with the eccentric charm of these characters and have him dressing-up and wombling around filling the family's recycling boxes.

We may have to wait a while before sharing *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, written by Alan Garner. Colin and Susan are sent to stay with their mother's old nurse, Bess, at Highmost, Redmanhey, when she is called to join her husband abroad for six months. The book begins

At dawn one still October day in the long ago of the world ...
and sets the scene for a story full of excitement and wonder for children around the age of ten. Alan Garner is at his best writing of night and the forces of evil, and after the children are chased by strange and frightening creatures across Alderley Edge in Cheshire, he created a magnificent Wizard to save them. This is the beginning of a magical adventure, a legend that seems to get more thrilling – a worthy narrative to feed Jacob's fertile imagination.

Certain children are held in thrall to some technical

entertainments available today – often nothing more sophisticated than wordless pow-pow or enemy zapping on screen games. This will break that spell! *Stig of the Dump*, written by Clive King and illustrated by Edward Ardizzone.

If you go too near the edge of the chalk pit the ground will give way. Barney had been told this often enough - but there's a difference between being told and seeing it happen.

So young girls and boys everywhere will sympathise with

Barney when there's nothing to do, nothing to play with and nowhere to go. Except to the chalk pit – the Dump. Barney does go too near the edge and lands in a cave and that's where he meets Stig. Who is Stig and does he really exist? Who knows? To Barney he's a new friend and through their games, problem solving and the fun of being together they overcome the language barrier and have the most amazing adventures that will be as exciting for Jacob today as it was for our children all those years ago.

Ballet Shoes was written by Noel Streatfeild and is beautifully packaged by Orion. This classic tale of sisters, stage school and stardom was first published in 1959. With two dancing enthusiasts in our family, we were intrigued by how Great Uncle Matthew – also known affectionately as Gum – a world famous collector of fossils, came to adopt three babies on three different occasions who simply became the Fossil sisters.

The story follows their childhood struggles, the real hardships that were overcome to achieve their individual ambitions, but along the way our young readers became engrossed and identified with Pauline, Petrova and Posy. They desperately wanted them to succeed in their vow to make the Fossil name famous. I feel this is a book that will be shared with Jacob's sister – only a toddler at the moment but one who likes to be centre-stage.

Carole Thomson



Carole reading with grandson, Jacob.



And Today... ?

Each new generation has a right to their own point of view. Did our chosen re-issued classic stories reflect a contemporary feel? Did they resound for the present day children?

A Busy Working Mum told us

Reading 'old' books

When we started on the project of reading four republished novels, we were all excited. For my husband, revisiting one of his childhood favourites, *Stig of the Dump* by Clive King, first published in 1962 was something to look forward to. I remember many pleasurable hours spent in the company of the Fossil sisters of Noel Streatfeild's *Ballet Shoes* (first published in 1936, so it was old by the time I got to it in the seventies!). Both parents were thrilled to be reading *The Wombles* by Elizabeth Beresford, although we're no longer sure if we remember the 1968 book, or the TV series! However, new to all of us was Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* from 1960. Our task was to read them with ten-year-old Alfie, whose reading tastes are quite varied, so the very different subject matters were appealing.

Alfie said he was looking forward to reading these older books, as he's a fan of *Just William*, owning the complete works as audio books. He likes hearing 'old fashioned language' in particular children's speech and their slang. Listening to how children spoke years ago, hearing old slang words for example, and then being able to compare that with how I speak with my friends today ... all this made me realize how much English has changed over time.

The most appealing book emerged as *The Wombles*, so this is where we started and Alfie loved it. "It's amazing," he said. It did feel old fashioned at times and a few words needed explaining – for example lots of people were wearing sou'westers! However Alfie reckons *The Wombles* could have been written in 2010. The fact that they're imaginary creatures makes them timeless. And as a child brought up in our recycling times, for Alfie the themes are surprisingly modern... and inspiring. He felt this was easy to read and very, very enjoyable.

Stig of the Dump appeals to ten-year-old boys by dint of having a picture of Stig, the caveboy, on the cover. Alfie enjoyed the clash of the Stone Age and the 'modern' eras in the book, but thought it interesting that even the modern age is historical now. He reckoned the 'now' parts had seemed very old-fashioned at first, but by the end of the story he'd got used to that, and they seemed modern. Alfie felt this was a really exciting book – the cliffhangers at the end of chapters made you want to keep on reading. Quite a few of his expectations were also confounded, and that kept him very engaged with the action. Again this was easy enough to read, only a few words confusing him; for example mackintoshes, obviously we wear them, but call them macs, and Alfie had no idea that 'mac'

was an abbreviation. Which is, of course the perfect argument for reading older books, nothing stretches the vocabulary more than hearing how language used to sound. That said, the book was most engaging despite a slight language 'barrier'.

This was not the case with *Ballet Shoes*. Alfie was much less keen to share this one. It wasn't the subject matter that put him off, but rather the uncomfortable language again. I chose to read this to Alfie, and I admit I don't remember the language

sounding so stilted. It was very hard work to read aloud. Nevertheless it is one of those books which needs the appropriate language, or the subject would become bizarre, completely at odds with everything we know. Having an old-fashioned sentence structure, unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary, gives historical context to a tale of children brought together by a fossil collector who had travelled around the world. No adoption papers, immigration

forms or any current obstacles to bringing home new children at will! But the world

of child performers was as magical as I remembered – maybe due to the language providing more distance from reality? One line I loved describing the Fossil sisters' holiday. *They got very brown, and all put on weight, and ate more every day.* This reminded us that putting on weight was once desirable for children, too poor to eat well, and living in cities considerably more dangerous to children's health than the ones we live in nowadays. Alfie, on the other hand, is regularly warned of the dangers of excessive weight gain in the modern, healthy-eating curriculum at school.

The *Weirdstone of Brisingamen* was again a bit of a struggle at times. Again only because of the language. This time it was not the era of the language *per se*, but rather the Cheshire accent in which the Mossocks speak. It made us realise that children's authors don't use regional accents very often any more. But with Mum and Dad reading it aloud, Alfie was able to appreciate the truly atmospheric writing. I was scared at some points, and found myself doing that annoying thing of stopping reading aloud, because I was too keen to find out what happened next, mainly to calm my own nerves! This is a brilliant fantasy novel, and as such Alfie really enjoyed it. It's definitely a page turner, and a story we all enjoyed.

Abigail and Alfie MacMillan

Did our reviewers find the answers to our questions?

Let us know what you think.

The Wombles Written by Elizabeth Beresford Illustrated by Nick Price
Bloomsbury £5.99 ISBN: 978-1408808375

Stig of the Dump Written by Clive King Illustrated by Edward Ardizzone
Puffin £6.99 ISBN: 978-0141329697

Ballet Shoes Written by Noel Streatfeild Illustrated by Ruth Gervis
Orion £9.99 ISBN: 978-1842556795

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen Written by Alan Garner HarperCollins
£5.99 ISBN: 978-0007355211



Abigail reading with sons Alfie and Edward (front).