

The Sentence Maker

Allan Ahlberg led the way down to his shed at the bottom of the garden; windfalls, I noticed, had tumbled from the apple tree and formed in a line against one of its walls. “It’s small,” he said. “I prefer small sheds.” And he went on to say how necessary it was for him to leave the house and ‘go to work’. “Otherwise, the cat’s sick on the carpet, the cooker blows up, or the house burns down – and you’ve got to fix it.”

He was right about the size of the shed. It is small. Square and compact – shelves, books and all necessities within easy reach – as snug as a cat in a box. A place for real work.

My attention was drawn to a doll-sized statuette at the back. “The Angel of the Shed,” Allan said. He moved the articulated arms into a supplicating pose. “If anything goes wrong, I can ask for her help.” Then, lest he be taken seriously, he tapped the figure with his fingers. “She’s made of metal. At least the skirt is.”

This reminded me of the fact that there’s no trace of the transcendental in his work; as the narrator of *The Improbable Cat* puts it: “No dark lord or magic wardrobe.” And even Frances in *My Brother’s Ghost*, who after all witnessed the visitation, is tentative: “You won’t, I don’t suppose, believe in ghosts. That can’t be helped. The truth is, in a curious way, I’m not sure I do either.” No matter how fantastic the situations or how much they may defy logic – boiled eggs named Billy legging it from the picnic spread (*The Runaway Dinner*) and refrigerators that can spell (property of the Gaskitts in *The Man Who Wore All His Clothes*, etc) – the books are rooted in a version of the real and steer clear of magical tricks or resolutions.

In *The Snail House*, for instance, Grandma tells her trio of grandchildren a story about three similar children who suddenly become small enough to live in a snail’s shell. It’s a proper house “with a door and windows, roof and chimney, table, chairs, three little beds, curtains and crockery – everything”, and the words and pictures make us hanker to share such a cosy, miniscule environment. But threaded throughout the book are gentle hints to remind us that the snail house is but a story inside another story. Signals from the wrap-around story (the outside world) – a ringing telephone, the hum of distant traffic – act as guy ropes to tether the fantasy to the real.

I was visiting Allan at his honey-coloured stone house on the heights overlooking the city of Bath, where he and his wife Vanessa



live. We’d decided beforehand to concentrate on work published since 2000 – for the sake of convenience as much as anything else, in view of the extent of his output. Besides, a great deal of attention has understandably been given to the earlier books, particularly those produced in partnership with his late wife Janet; so here was an opportunity to look at the most recent, which are as plentiful, as inventive and as variegated as ever.

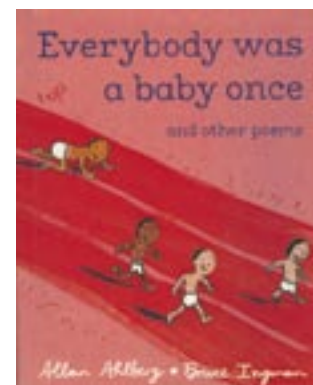
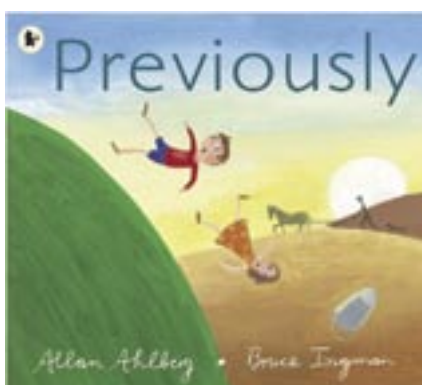
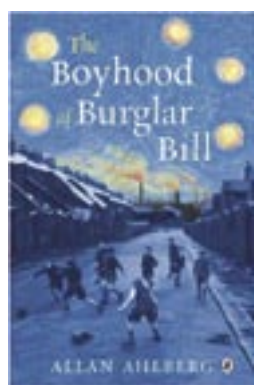
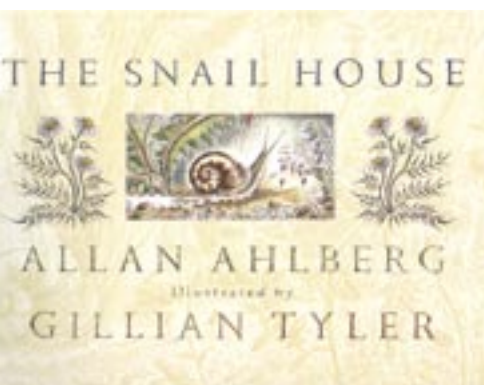
Allan, still boyish-looking in spite of the grey hair, sat at his desk under the window where he writes and fields the ideas that *circle down*

to land / On the runway in my head / And the page beneath my hand. Ever eager to involve me and to make what he was saying as lucid as possible, he would frequently leap nimbly to his feet to search (usually successfully) for the relevant book, manuscript or illustration that would elucidate his comments.

“It’s a curious trade,” he said, meaning his own. “I make things for little babies and children up to twelve years old. ... You create a little fort inside which the child sits. ... Yes, I have a natural limit – from babies up to about twelve,” he repeated, as if to confirm it to himself. Some of his books however, those he calls his ‘no-man’s-land books’, stray over this natural limit. *The Boy, the Wolf, the Sheep and the Lettuce*, which along with much else, playfully embroils the reader in knotty authorial matters such as viewpoint and what to include and what not, he judged to be “Not quite a children’s book and not quite an adult’s.” He did so with an air of amazement, as though of an enticing conundrum he was still puzzling over. However, “I’ve worked out that if you yourself like what you write, there’s a chance the adult [the book-buyer and first reader] will like it too” – a statement that bore the imprimatur of experience.

“You get up in the morning, pick up your pen, and see what comes out. The first line written is like a first row of stitches in knitting; it dictates what is to come.” (As the narrator of *Half a Pig* says: “The first sentence is often the most difficult to think of, we writers find.” Incidentally, Allan’s narrators tend to be crucial, so worth keeping an eye on.) His knitting comparison was apt. Listening to him talking about his work was like hearing a craftsman discoursing about their expertise. The same attention to detail and concentrated determination to get it right. (Although, he maintained, “You never do, of course”.)

Later, towards the end of my visit, I was struck by the care and attention he paid to the brief personal message he added to the



book I'd asked him to sign: closely checking and re-checking the inscription and running his finger under each word, to make absolutely sure what he'd written was what he'd intended to write. A small matter, but enough to show an infinite capacity for taking pains. I was also aware of the unease when he mentioned a phrase in one of his books he knew to be repeated almost word for word some fifty pages later. "I'm not sure I like that too much," he remarked, the repetition nagging him still.

"I'm a sentence maker," he said, quietly, evenly, undemonstratively. "Some writers are, some not." And, he added, we read them for different reasons, and in different ways. "Martin Amis, I suppose, is the supreme sentence writer. And Charles Portis – *True Grit*? Forget the film – is a good example of the former." (The names of other favourite writers – Carson McCullers, William Maxwell, Philip Roth – popped up frequently during the course of the conversation.) "I can't move on from a dodgy sentence. I prefer to get them right before moving on" – a diligence that helps account for the grace of his writing and his sense of form. And for the ease with which his writing cuts across age ranges; a sort of cultivated trespass that doesn't deny the originally stated natural limit, and goes some way to supporting Auden's assertion of there being "no good books which are only for children."

Punctuation too, used as he uses it, creatively, as it's meant to be, to aid suppleness and fluidity, is supremely important. Which is why he combs through a completed piece of writing with a sort of grammatical checklist, validating the dashes, the parentheses, the ellipses – all chancy tools in the wrong hands – and the footnotes (which are fully integrated into the storytelling to add supplementary sparkle and wit, like grace notes and trills in music, and anything but pedantic) – as well as keeping a wary eye on exclamation marks. "I used to buy books about grammar," he said. "*Good English* by G. H. Vallins and *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk." (He quickly found a copy of the Strunk to show me but, after a quick reconnoitre of the relevant bookcase, admitted defeat on the Vallins.) The Strunk – "a really useful book" – even gets to be quoted in *The Boy, the Wolf, the Sheep and the Lettuce*, along with an eclectic list that includes Einstein, Ionesco, Ed Murrow, Joe Orton, Thackeray, Whitman and the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*.

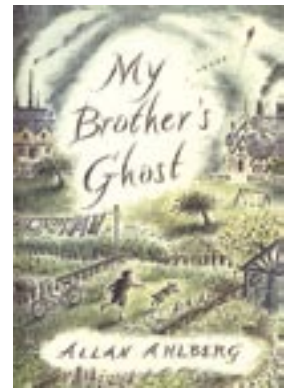
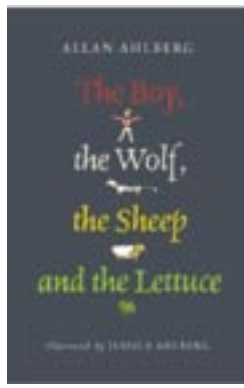
The task of finding the words – the "fewest necessary" – can be like "wringing out a dishcloth"; but, as with all good writers, he has an unerring instinct for picking the right ones, those that do

the job clearly and precisely and never browbeat or condescend. In *Janet's Last Book* he describes finding a drawer crammed with her tights. Not just a mound of tights but, he says, "a history of tights", thus alighting on a perfect collective noun. But, of course, knowing what words to use and how, doesn't preclude knowing when *not* to use them, as in those instances when restraint can reveal an unspoken expressiveness. "Things in those days," says the narrator of *The Boyhood of Burglar Bill*, "were just more, what's the word? Well, just more."

The Boyhood of Burglar Bill, like the slightly earlier *My Brother's Ghost*, is set in Oldbury in the West Midlands where Allan grew up. Hence the vivid snapshots of a 1950s' industrial town: "A low, sulphurous fog, expelled from Danks's furnaces, fanned out across the road. Street lamps floated like jellyfish in the spooky yellowish light". But in spite of the authenticity, the autobiographical elements and the presence of a boy named Allan, the book is not autobiography. Artistic licence distances it from the strictly factual. The accident that forms the book's climax, for instance: "The tree is there, and the fence beneath it ... But it didn't actually happen." (When he talks about Oldbury, a place he regularly revisits, what sounds to an untutored ear to be a general purpose Midlands accent, quickly and effortlessly segues into fully-fledged Black Country. "This is how I speak when I go up there," he said, looking pleased.)

Again, as he read an extract from a work in progress based on memories of his time as a grave-digger, he was a trifle uncomfortable about including another character called Allan, who bore a resemblance to the real Allan. In this instance he was also at pains to stress that, because of the content and the occasional ripeness of language in the dialogue, the story, when finished, will be for adults. Although I couldn't help thinking that some less scrupulous (and less talented) writers would have little compunction about publishing it for children.

Throughout our conversation he struck me as someone who harboured no false premises; dedicated to his profession but able to view it with equilibrium and a certain wry amusement. "Of course," he remarked at one stage, "some people claim too much for children's books." And he was utterly unfazed when I referred to Martin Amis's deliberately provocative assertion that he would only contemplate writing for children if he were brain dead: "He's right, of course. It would be entirely the wrong thing for him."



I got the impression of someone who is constantly on guard against manifestations of ego. Not so much a matter of diffidence as a jealous regard for the integrity of the writer and what is written. Which perhaps goes some way to explaining the reasons behind his apparent reluctance to be considered for the post of children's laureate, even though many fans may have long regarded him as, at the very least, a *de facto* holder of that role.

"I found I had a natural instinct for writing picture books texts. A picture book text should be like this – ." He raised a hand, fingers splayed. "The pictures fit into the spaces." He brought the other hand up to it and drew both together, fingers enmeshed, a single entity. Working with illustrators should be akin to riding tandem: pedalling in unison in the same direction to the same goal. "Rodgers and Hart! ... George and Ira Gershwin!" he proclaimed; in each case, gifted composer collaborating with fleet-footed wordsmith. This close-knit writer/illustrator relationship is paramount. And a glance at his notebooks reveals that preliminary ideas for the text for a new picture book often include schematic layouts – quick pen sketches by him – of how the illustrated page will look.

In *Janet's Last Book*, privately published in 1996, Allan characterized the intimate professional partnership between him and his late wife. "She did the pictures, I did the words, together we made the book; together we surrounded the book, played tennis with it." But even though, as he intimated, you have to be married to the illustrator to achieve quite that degree of closeness, subsequent collaborations have proved as artistically inspired, inventive and mutually rewarding. His work with Bruce Ingham, an illustrator whose spare, witty humour and subtle blend of artlessness and sophistication nicely complements Allan's own, is particularly noteworthy: four remarkable picture books – *The Runaway Dinner*, *Previously*, *The Pencil*, *Everybody was a baby once* – with another, *Hooray for Bread!*, on its way

The books give the impression of being barely restrained by the covers, the stories impatient to get going, like wound-up clockwork toys. This is a legacy from Janet who, like films that begin the story before the title sequence, "wanted books to start before the start". So, for example, in *Previously* – a brilliantly-conceived tale involving characters from fairy stories and nursery rhymes, which, like Pinter's *Betrayal* and Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*, runs backwards – two Bruce Ingham illustrations appear before the title page showing what happens *after* (as it would be in normal

sequential time) the event described in the opening words of the text: "Goldilocks arrived home all bothered and hot".

"There, you see," said Allan, "you have to have a good text. Even if there are no words." He grinned. "Now there's a subject for an article."

There is one collaborator who is much closer to home, almost in-house, you might say: his daughter Jessica. They've worked together in the past, she contributing witty line drawings to his *jeu d'esprit* *The Boy, the Wolf, the Sheep and the Lettuce* and matching his fun and ingenuity in the glorious *Half a Pig*. They're now engaged on a book about Goldilocks. From what he told me, and bearing in mind the Ahlberg slant on things, it will be a highly unique take on a familiar story. He eagerly showed me examples of Jessica's original artwork for the project: tiny exquisite and finely-detailed coloured drawings that bear an unmistakable family resemblance to her mother's work but are distinctly her own.

Just before leaving the shed he pointed out the framed birthday poem Jessica had written and illustrated for him some years back. It was funny and racy in a recognisably Ahlbergian way and peppered with family jokes and references. "She'd like to write," he said, "and I think she will one day." He read the whole poem aloud, visibly proud of his daughter's prowess but, as becomes the man, without crowing.

On the way back up to the house he handed me an apple he'd picked from the tree. "Try it." It was crisp, refreshing and full of flavour, just like his writing.

Chris Stephenson

* From *Everybody was a baby once and other poems*

Published by Walker

Everybody was a baby once ISBN: 978-1406321562 £7.99

The Pencil ISBN: 978-1406319552 £5.99

Previously ISBN: 9781406313505 £5.99

The Runaway Dinner ISBN: 9781406305494 £5.99

The Snail House ISBN: 978-0744561647 £6.99

Published by Puffin

The Boy, the Wolf, the Sheep and the Lettuce ISBN: 978-0141317786 £6.99

My Brother's Ghost ISBN: 978-0141306186 £4.99

The Boyhood of Burglar Bill ISBN: 978-0141321424 £5.99