

The end of the adventure(s)

Robert Swindells *talks about his life as a writer*

SO NOW IT'S OVER, and I still find it hard to believe it all happened. Me, published. An author, living by his pen. Can't happen to an eleven-plus failure from Bradford, can it? Well can it?

Reading. That must've been a factor. I was a voracious reader. Another was certainly Composition, the only school subject I enjoyed. The only one I could do really. Arithmetic baffled me and everything else sent me to sleep but give me a title: *A Storm at Sea*, *A Foggy Day*, *The Adventures of a Penny* and I was away. And I mean away. The classroom would dissolve, taking my thirty-five classmates with it. There was only me in that storm, me groping my solitary way through the fog. And I was a penny: I could feel the perfection of my rounded edges, the bruise where they stamped the king's head and everything.

In 1953, my final year, my English teacher entered me for an essay competition run by the Royal National Lifeboat Institute. I was fourteen. The competition was open to children who, unlike me, had passed the eleven-plus and were at grammar schools all over Britain. "But sir, ..." I protested. "Give it a try, Swindells," insisted Dowson. "You never know." And yes, I won. I'd left school by the time the result was announced and had forgotten all about it. I had to take an hour off work and go back to be presented in assembly. I got a book, a certificate and three cheers. At Lapage Street Secondary Modern School, only boys who managed to smash a plateful of dinner on the floor received cheers: you can imagine how deeply honoured I felt.

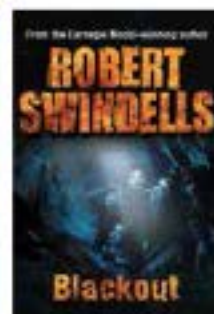
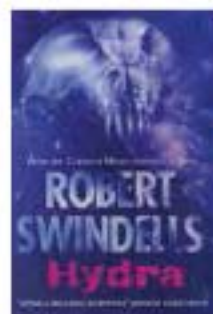
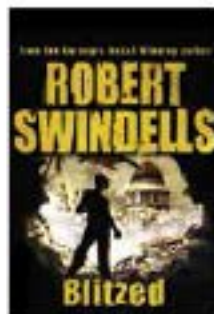
At work I became that guy who used to be found in every factory and office – the one who wrote ribald verses about the boss and pinned them anonymously on the notice board: the guy of whom it was often said, "You're wasted here y'know – you should be writing for *Tit-Bits* or *Revellie*."



I never scaled those heights, but in my late twenties I finally chased down the qualifications my school had not offered and was accepted for teacher training. At college I wrote a children's novel as my Long Study, and this was published in 1973 as *When Darkness Comes*.

I entertained the usual fantasies: saw myself swanning around all day in a silk dressing-gown, granting rare interviews during which I would

utter totally original words of wisdom, the pithiest of which would one day appear as aphorisms on the flyleaves of other people's novels and be attributed to Oscar Wilde. I would use the proceeds of my Pulitzer Prize to buy an island.



It hasn't been quite like that but hey – I'm not grouching. Why would I? My seventy books have taken me several times round the world. I've stood on every continent including Antarctica, spoken to thousands of children high on words, been credited with turning reluctant readers into avid ones, even with persuading one young man not to run away to London.

That'll do me, as we say in Yorkshire. It's all been so very much more than I've deserved: than I could ever have dreamed of when I was being a penny at Lapage Street School.

I'll be off now, to see what's round that bend down the road there. Be kind to one another.

Robert Swindells



Robert does not mention that he has won the Federation of Children's Book Groups' Children's Book Award twice with *Brother in the Land* (Puffin 978-0140373004) and *Room 13* (Yearling 978-0440864653) and the Carnegie Medal for *Stone Cold* (Puffin 978-0140362510). They are also available as eBooks.