

David Severn

David Severn (1918 –) was a pseudonym for David Storr Unwin, British, son of Sir Stanley Unwin the publisher. He wrote around 30 children's books, most at first for The Bodley Head, mainly school holiday adventures but some are quite experimental. Severn was a family name and his uncle Severn Storr went with Sir Stanley on a world tour (Unwin and Storr, 1934). His first series (1942-6) featured 'Crusoe' Robinson who was befriended by youngsters in holiday adventures, many featuring a Romany group. The first was *Rick Afire!* (1942). The Warner family series followed (1947-52) featuring pheasants, ponies and country life. A number of books experimented with the paranormal, and can be compared with many modern books revisiting supernatural themes. *Drumbeats!* has a musical youngster beating a native drum which produces visions of the fate of a lost expedition to Africa twenty years earlier. *Dream Gold* shows the hypnotic power of one boy over another, with dreams retelling the conflicts of their ancestors. *The Future Took Us* is a time-slip into far future. *The Girl in the Grove*, his longest book, is a powerful ghost story. *Foxy Boy* (1959) features a young boy brought up by foxes, behaving like a fox, hunted like a fox, but saved by a girl. He produced books for younger children, often to contract and for series.

The Crusoe Series, 1942-46.

Severn's first children's novel was *Rick Afire* (1942), the first of five 'Crusoe' stories which in my view are among Severn's best work. *Rick Afire* is a tale of two children evacuated from London because father was in hospital, to Whitehouse Farm ¹where they had adventures with the twins Brian and Pam with a pony called Nobby ('Pegasus') and a dog called William.

Rick Afire starts:

"Stonebury Junction...Stonebury...change 'ere for the Muddlington, 'amsford and Downpoort line... Stonebury Junction...Stonebury..."

The station was crowded with people. People were swarming out of the train and more were pushing their way in; people were stumbling and tripping over bags and hampers, throwing large suitcases through the doors and heaving them up into the racks. At last the train steamed out, the bustle died down, and after a while the platform cleared. Derek and Diana Longmore grouped their rucksacks and cases in a heap and looked around. There was no sign of the twins.

The twins in *Rick Afire* arrive helter skelter in a galloping homemade donkey cart.

They came around the curve like a rocket. As he spoke the trap tipped violently, jerking both passengers off their balance, and they heeled over, clinging grimly to the sides while they took the bend on a single wheel...Then the trap hung poised for a moment; then the wheel dropped back with a thud and pony and cart came tearing along the straight into the station yard. The twins were sitting up on the seat as if nothing had happened...The trap drew up to the railings and the stocky figures of a girl and boy, in shorts and blue shirts, with tanned arms and legs and freckled faces, dropped down to the ground.

The twins were like peas in a pod, with freckled snubbed noses. Pam had a pony tail, the only way they could easily be told apart. They chattered most of the time. Identical twins are genetically identical and therefore always same sex. The values in *Rick Afire* values include a love of the countryside, close observation of nature and a sense of preciousness of the environment. Readers are warned against collecting birds' eggs; there is delight at fox cubs at play; birds flit across the pages; compassion on animals at the market is expressed. Severn's books combine description with action.

¹ Based on a farm in Essex, the county he made his home.

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In *Rick Afire* two London children stay at a farm and are shown country ways. A pig escapes to farrow, a mysterious camper is stalked and later befriended (Mr Robinson, or 'Crusoe'), a hay rick catches fire and after proving Crusoe innocent, Tim Tinker, an itinerant, is identified as the culprit, and chased in a dramatic car chase.

The second Severn book was *A Cabin for Crusoe* (1943) where an attempt to build a wilderness cabin brings Crusoe and the children into conflict with a group of Romanies, a conflict fomented by the farmer. The Romanies are painted realistically with a gang of lads, a bad-tempered heavy, his scheming and cheating wife, and a decent elder figure who appears continually throughout the series, Patch Cooper. The story discusses traditional Romany camping sites, the Romany way of life, and attitudes of settled folk in a very sensitive way. The Romanies are real people, not stereotypes. The tone is respectful. The conflict is resolved, and with Patch's help, Crusoe gets a caravan instead of a cabin.

The third Crusoe book was *A Waggon for Five* (1944) where the group join up with Cooper's circus run by a relative of Patch. They experience circus life and foil a plot to steal the takings of the circus by the strong man. He is apprehended in a frantic lorry chase. Another family is introduced in this book, the Crosbies, who live on a houseboat and whose father is an artist. These feature in the fourth book, *Hermit in the Hills* (1945), and adventure that in real time follows immediately on from the circus. Mr Crosbie is a nationally famous artist who makes a living selling his paintings, living precariously in bohemian style with his three children in a houseboat. The Crosbie's hijack the 'Waggoners' for a cricket match and later met up with them at the circus. Motherless, and looked after by elder sister Jean, they had a "large, old fashioned tourer", an old and unreliable car. Leonard Crosbie was nationally famous in his own field, living by creative artistic endeavour, empowering his children to grow up freely and unencumbered.

Hermit in the Hills is an inspired exploration of the philosophy of art (e.g. pages 48-51. Two sections will suffice here.

"Take something more simple," he said, "a tree growing out from a slope..."

People will see it in different ways,

"But of all the people who come by, perhaps only one will know the birch and feel with it; see the backward twist of the trunk as it adjusts itself to the pull of the slope; the curve of the branches, supple, yet firm and strong as steel; feel the life in it, roots groping down deep into the soil;,, leaves and twigs swayed and rustled by the wind... only one person will go away with the wholeness, the perfection of that tree as a three firmly printed in his mind. And he would be the only person qualified to paint it."

The hermit was brought up as a farmer, disowned by his father and in self-chosen exile to the hills in order to paint on the wall of a cave. He drew Mr Crosbie:

The stranger's sketch was in complete contrast to Mr Crosbie's drawings. Instead of their bold, forceful shading, he had achieved his effect with a few lines; the curve of the artist's hat, the sagging outline of his coat and trousers. The essentials alone were there; nothing more. (pp. 108-9).

The final book of this series was *Forest Holiday* (1946), a story of being lost in a forest and culminates with gipsies at a local fair.

In 1947 Severn introduced a new family – the Warners – in a separate and disappointing series although some characters and situations are promisingly bizarre. This is country estate and gymkhana territory. The artwork of J Kiddell-Munroe is tremendous. The books are:

Ponies and Poachers (1947)

The Cruise of the Maiden Castle (1948)

Treasure for Three (1949)

Crazy Castle (1951)

Burglars and Bandicoots (1952).

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His experimental works stand up well against modern fantasy thrillers with adventures in other worlds, or the past, or the future, coping with supernatural powers. We must remember that Narnia was only published in 1951, so much of this work was pioneering.

Drumbeats! has a musical youngster in a progressive school (such as Dartington) beating a native drum which produces trance visions of the fate of a lost expedition to Africa twenty years earlier. The picture of school life is interesting in itself.

Dream Gold shows the hypnotic power of one boy over another, with dreams retelling the conflicts of their ancestors over a shipwreck which results in timeslip and grave danger.

The Future Took Us is a time-slip taking youngsters to a school in the far future where the land is run by a dictatorship of mathematicians, who even have mathematical forms of execution. A mathematics text book has become sacred scripture and dominates ideology, ritual and politics.

The Girl in the Grove (1974), a late work, is a powerful ghost story in which the girl becomes stronger as people believe in her.

Foxy Boy (1959) features a young boy who had been abandoned and brought up by foxes. He walked on all fours and behaved like a wary fox. He was also hunted like a fox and at the mercy of some hounds. This encourages reflection on fox hunting.

He produced books for younger children, often to contract and for series. *My Foreign Correspondent through Africa* (1951) seems to follow a real journey with his wife Periwinkle, described by 20 typed and illustrated letters home (two other writers, Peter White and Bridget Moss went to the British Isles, scandinavia and Switzerland in the same series and sent back fortnightly illustrated letters).

The six Bill Badger and Wily Fox picture books for infants were a contract to provide a story for Geoffrey Higham artwork. *Walnut Tree Meadow*, and *Blaze of Broadfurrow Farm* are about children on a farm, with beautiful artwork by Kiff and Wilmore. *Jeff Dickson: Cowhand* (1963) follows the farming theme. *Three at the Sea* (1959), and *A Dog for a Day* (1965) are primary children's school readers. The *Green Eyed Griffon* is also for younger readers, about children who ensure that their father does not get posted abroad on business. *Clouds over Alberhorn* (1963), for teenagers, is an adventure of attempted assassination and rescue of a young Sheikh set on dangerous ski-slopes. His last children's book, a curious picture-story book, with a camel on the cover following the Arab theme, is *The Wishing Bone*, where to cut a long story short, a wishing bone has magical effects so the children enter into their toy castle and begin to fight real wars against magic forces. It could have been written today.

There were also books for adults written in his own name. (He used his pseudonym to escape being linked to his father; and he used his own name to escape the reputation of being a children's writer). His two novels: *The Governor's Wife*, and *A View of the Heath* did not win him a reputation as an adult author. His autobiography *Fifty Years with Father* (1982) is an interesting read.

References

Unwin, David. (1982) *Fifty Years with Father* London: Allen & Unwin.

Unwin, Sir Stanley, and Severn Storr, (1934) *Two Young Men Travel the World* (London: Allen and Unwin)