

A short history of human rights and children's books:

80 years of the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals

By Nicky Parker

Anniversaries are valuable moments, spaces in which reflections on past and present can invigorate the future. The CILIP Carnegie Medal's 80th birthday is a great example. What better inspiration for booklovers than the words of Andrew Carnegie: 'To try to make the world in some way better than you found it is to have a noble motive in life.' The wonder of books ran through Carnegie's life and his philanthropy, and a constant theme was the vital importance of the free library, which 'outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.'

The eight decades of the CILIP Carnegie Medal have encompassed war and devastation, human upheaval and suffering. The same years have also seen great moves to make the world a better place, growing international understanding of rights, freedom and equality, and profoundly life-changing human rights laws. These values emerge in contemporary children's books, which are often beacons of social change. Arguably the most important and least valued of all forms of literature, they influence and shape children's attitudes to life.

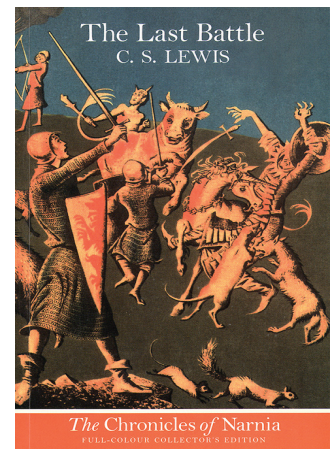
From war to human rights and great children's literature

The first Carnegie Medal, in 1936, went to *Pigeon Post*, whose author Arthur Ransome is usually portrayed as a conservative writer of books for and about privileged white British children. But Ransome's personal history was hardly stereotypical. He had reported on the Bolshevik Revolution, married Trotsky's secretary and then abandoned war reporting in favour of children's books, and his protagonists, the 'Swallows', were inspired by the British-Armenian Altounyan family. His books explore a value later enshrined as Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that 'education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality'. This is what makes *Pigeon Post* still relevant 80 years later: his characters are allowed the freedom to explore and take risks, a right now often denied by fearful parents.

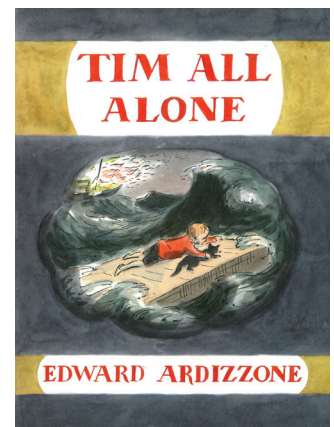
Some of the greatest children's books reflect their authors' experience of war. In 1937, JRR Tolkien's classic *The Hobbit* was nominated for the Carnegie Medal, and in 1956 CS Lewis won for *The Last Battle*, the last of the Narnia series. Both books explore notions of journeys, territorial rights and repression. Both Lewis and Tolkien had suffered the horrors of the Somme, and both would have known of the Geneva Protocol of 1928, a prohibition on chemical and biological warfare,



Arthur Ransome, *Pigeon Post*, Jonathan Cape, 1936; currently published by Red Fox, Penguin Random House.



C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, The Bodley Head, 1956; currently published by HarperCollins.



Edward Ardizzone, *Tim All Alone*, Oxford University Press, 1956; currently published by Frances Lincoln Publishers.

and 1948's mammoth Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the blueprint for all future human rights legislation, which sought to say 'never again' to the horrors of the Holocaust.

The soft lines of Edward Ardizzone, official WW2 artist and winner of the first Kate Greenaway Medal in 1956 with *Tim All Alone*, illuminate the vulnerability of children in a harsh world, while former WW2 soldier Richard Adams won the Carnegie Medal in 1972 with *Watership Down*, an allegorical epic with rabbits as heroes in the battle against tyranny and corporate greed. Their flight from poisonous gas echoes the debate that resulted in the signing of the Biological Weapons Convention that same year.

Refugees and gender equality in books

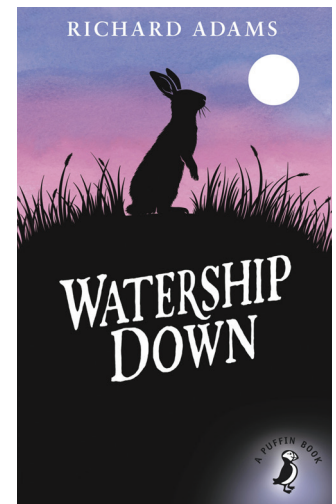
In the early 1960s Amnesty International was founded, the building of the Berlin Wall began, and the South African state forcibly removed 3.5 million people in its inexorable drive to implement total *apartheid*. Midway through the Vietnam war, Lucy Boston won the Carnegie Medal for *Strangers at Green Knowe*, about a young refugee boy and an escaped gorilla. This prescient story explores the human rights to family, sanctuary, home and freedom from repression.

As the women's movement grew in the 1960s and the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970, children's picture books began to show greater gender parity for the main characters. By the 1990s there was nearly equal representation of male and female human characters, though male animal characters still outnumbered female by two to one – and not a lot appears to have changed since. The significance of subliminal messaging cannot be underestimated: the stark context is that worldwide one in three women suffers rape or sexual violence.

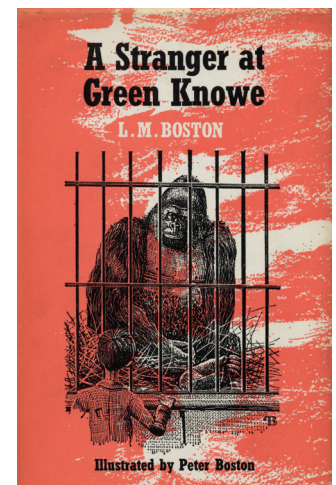
In 1977 Amnesty won the Nobel Peace Prize and the Carnegie Medal was awarded to *Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler*, with its subversive take on gender assumptions, two years before the arrival of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW). This was a precursor to 1995's Beijing Declaration, a key global policy document on women's empowerment – the same year that Philip Pullman's Carnegie Medal winner *Northern Lights* put a strong girl character firmly at centre stage.

Rites of passage and rights of the child

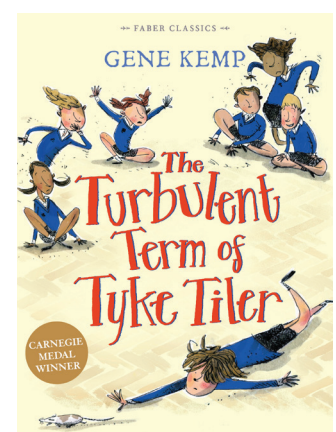
In 1990, specific protections were given to children by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely and rapidly ratified human rights treaty in history (to date unratified by only two countries: Somalia and the United States). It's interesting to explore fiction for teens through a human rights lens, as the gaining of independence has always been an important theme for young adults. To achieve narrative tension, writers frequently set stories in contexts of multiple violations of human rights, often inspired by real life. Look at Kevin Brookes' *Bunker Diary* and Melvyn Burgess's *Junk*, both of which won the Carnegie Medal to howls of alarm from those who want children to remain children.



Richard Adams, *Watership Down*, Rex Collings, 1972; currently published by Puffin.



Lucy M Boston, *Stranger at Greene Knowe*, Faber, 1961; currently published by Faber and Faber.



The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler, Faber, 1977; currently published by Faber and Faber.

Last year, *There's a Bear on My Chair* and *Lies We Tell Ourselves* won the inaugural Amnesty CILIP Honours. Both books explore the right to protest and turned out to be more timely than any of us realised. Chris Riddell won the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal for *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, including an image of a same-sex kiss that still has the power to startle us nearly half a century after the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Sarah Crossan won the CILIP Carnegie Medal for *One*, scrutinising the impact of the loss of the right to privacy on the story's main characters, a few months before the draconian anti-human rights UK Investigatory Powers Act heralded one of the most sweeping surveillance laws in Europe.

If books are building blocks of progress, what next?

Good children's books are crucial to a well-functioning society, but large swathes of the UK population cannot afford to buy them and find it ever harder to borrow them. Closures of school and public libraries – in defiance of the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act – exacerbate social inequality and restrict intellectual freedoms.

Meanwhile, discriminatory and toxic divisions between 'us and them' are dominating world politics, young people are experiencing increasing anxiety and the UK government plans to remove us from the European Convention of Human Rights, which will dismantle our access to many precious freedoms. What can the world of children's books do? For young people to feel valued and to value others, books need to uphold our common humanity, starting with proper representation of voices from all sectors of society. Tokenism is never enough and stories need fully rounded characters. It's time for publishers and booksellers to challenge entrenched institutional prejudice and discard unproven assumptions that diversity doesn't sell. We have a collective responsibility to make diversity as normal in children's literature as it is in life. We are all human after all.

This is the second year of the Amnesty CILIP Honour, an extra commendation for two books on the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medal shortlists that best uphold, illuminate or celebrate human rights. Amnesty shadowing resources for all the shortlisted books enable readers to explore human rights issues related to the stories.

www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/resources.php

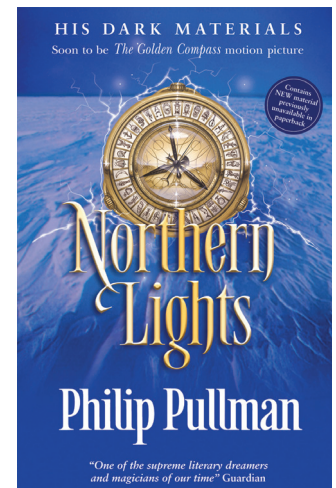
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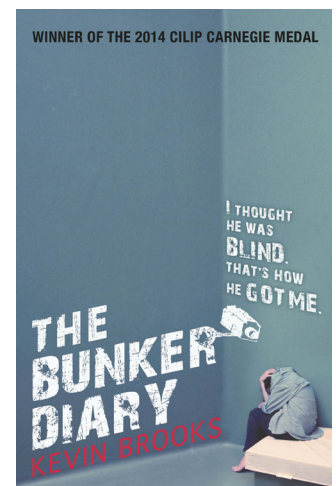
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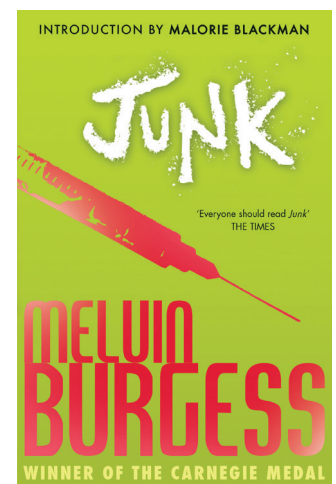
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Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*, Scholastic Point, London, 1995; currently published by Scholastics.



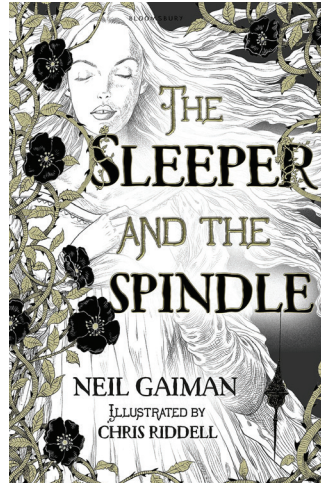
Kevin Brooks, *The Bunker Diary*, Penguin Random House, 2013; currently published by Penguin Random House.



Melvin Burgess, *Junk*, Andersen Press, London, 1996; currently published by Andersen Press.



Ross Collins, *There's a Bear on My Chair*; inner spread; Nosy Crow, 2015.



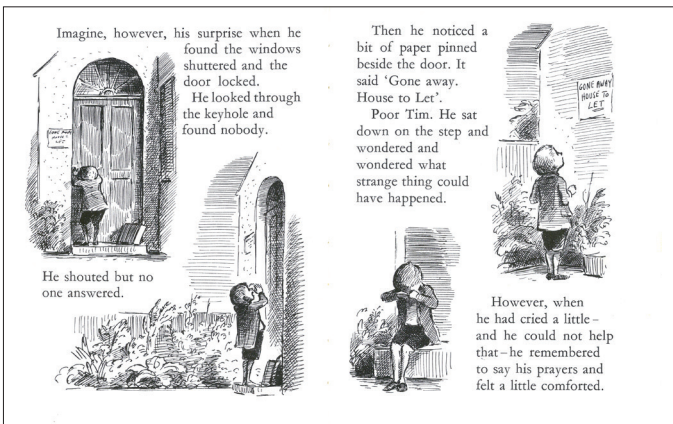
Neil Gaiman, *The Sleeper and the Spindle* illustrated by Chris Riddell; inner spread; Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014



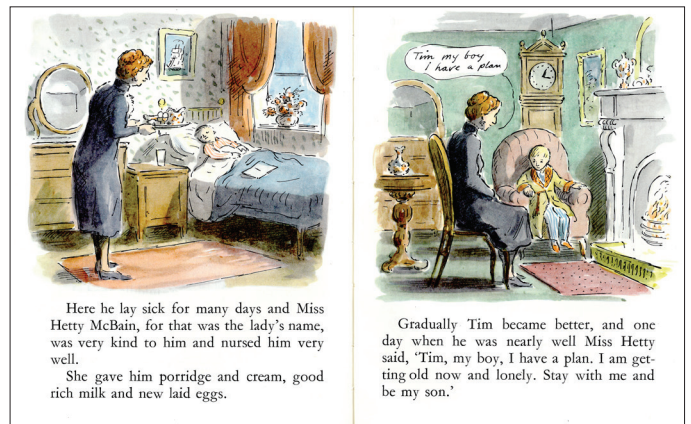
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