



Barry Cunningham on Children's Publishing and *That Book*

Steve Barley interviews the man who discovered JK Rowling and uncovers an unlikely link with one of Roald Dahl's most famous characters.

Photo courtesy of Ian Cundell

Barry Cunningham holds an enviable reputation in the world of publishing. Known as 'the man with the Midas touch' he was the founder and editor of Bloomsbury's children's book list, looking for fresh writing talent, when a manuscript landed on his desk from an unknown author called JK Rowling. Barry spotted the potential in her children's story about friendship, struggle and sorcery and commissioned what was to become the worldwide literary phenomenon we all know and love as Harry Potter.

Barry is currently the editor, managing director, and driving force behind The Chicken House – an independent company set up in 2000 within the Scholastic Group. Chicken House claims to actively seek and nurture new writing talent and its pedigree backs that up with a book list that includes the bestselling *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke and *Tunnels* by Roderick Gordon and Brian Williams. It's a far cry from Barry's early days when he worked for Penguin in the 1970s and regularly donned a puffin outfit to entertain kids at publishing events, but, on the plus side, he did get to work closely with authors like Spike Milligan and Roald Dahl and with the people that really mattered to him, the children.

When Barry was named as a keynote speaker at the *Get Writing* conference hosted by the Verulam Writers' Circle in St Albans recently, I was keen to learn more about the man behind the legend. In a business where you are only as successful as your position in the bestseller list, you've got to have something that sets you apart from the crowd to sustain success for over thirty years in children's publishing. In Barry's case, it's his whole persona. He walked into the room wearing a chocolate brown, double breasted pinstripe and stood before his audience whilst sporting silvery stubble and a shock of hair that didn't know which direction to grow in next. From the gleam in his eyes to his ready smile, Barry's character and passion for his subject oozed out of every pore as he spoke about his history in the business, *that book*, and the fact that we are living through a boom time in writing for children in terms of creativity and diversity.



Photo courtesy of Ian Cundell

We all know the story of JK Rowling being rejected by twelve publishers before Barry took her on, and Barry has often been asked about that period and, to a degree, felt he was 'cursed' with knowing exactly what was to happen to Harry Potter right from the beginning, but I wanted to know more about the man himself. I wangled a short interview, promising not to ask about *that book*. Barry was intrigued, agreed, and proved to be open and charming when answering my questions. Here's what he said:

Q: *Do you think modern technology with its access to information and writing tools has made it easier for new writers to get into print or made publisher's slush piles too high to climb?*

BC: I think technology makes it easier for people to access what they want to do. Technology is a great boon and a great route into self publishing which is quite a boom area. So yes, I think it is universally a good thing.

Q: *How long does it typically take for you to make a judgement on a new manuscript?*

BC: I'm really bad, less than twenty minutes. If it doesn't do it in three chapters it doesn't do much for me at all.

Q: *You've had great success discovering new children's stories, but has there ever been a case of 'the one that got away'?*

BC: I turned down *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. I thought it was an adult book. It was really, really good, but I didn't think it was a children's book in the way that we do them (at Chicken House).

Q: *What do you like to read for fun by the pool on holiday?*

BC: Detective stories. I love the way they encapsulate character and dialogue, and I love reading modern American detective stories.

Q: *If you could write any type of novel of your own, what would it be?*

BC: Along the lines of what has already been written? I would have loved to have written *Northern Lights*. I think it is the best book of this century for children.

Q: *How much of your success in children's publishing is down to commercial astuteness versus the ability to relate to children?*

BC: I absolutely think it is the empathy with children. The commercial astuteness is almost an accidental consequence of that. I feel like a child and think in some ways emotionally in a way that relates to children. So I think that is the secret.

Q: *What part of your job gives you the greatest kick?*

BC: When a book first comes out. I love the publishing moment when it first appears in shops and you go with the author to see their books there. I love that moment when all those dreams have become a book.

Q: *Is that why you like working with new authors?*
Yes.

Q: *If you found yourself time shifted back to the start of your career, would you still essentially follow the same path?*

BC: I would do it all pretty much again, yes. Although I'd have started my own company earlier. I didn't quite realise that it was as easy to do as it was.

Q: *Is the current credit crunch affecting children's book publishing in any way?*

BC: No. I think people buy more children's books than before.

Q: *Do you think the literary phenomenon that was Harry Potter** only happens once in a lifetime, or is more likely to be repeated in this age of the internet and multi-media tie ins?*

BC: The Harry Potter phenomenon is like the Beatles or punk. It opens up the gates to lots of different parts of the phenomena. I don't think you ever have the same thing again, you have lots of slightly different things multiplying and shattering and sparkling out until the next big thing, and I don't know what that would be, or whether there'll be anything quite like the Beatles or Harry Potter again.

** Okay, I lied. Of course there had to be at least one question on HP.

Barry may be an accomplished publisher now, but he admits he once had a foray into writing with his picture book, *Giddy Finds a Job* – about a giraffe with a height problem – released back in his Bloomsbury days. Apparently it's not the only time he's had direct input into a book as Roald Dahl used to tell Barry that his beard was the inspiration for the lead character in his classic story *The Twits*. Barry still doesn't know whether he was being wound up or not!

Many thanks to Barry for agreeing to be interviewed in the middle of a manuscript pitching session that saw him approached and pitched to by ten writers in thirty minutes! It's nice to meet a publisher who is approachable and not hiding behind a MSS slush pile. Long may his career in children's publishing continue.

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