



## Tackling complex themes for children

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*Piers Torday on the challenge of incorporating urgent and complex ideas in a pacy novel for children - and why his fellow authors are coming together to pressurise publishers to act on climate change*



Like almost every other children's writer I know, my overwhelming desire is to get children reading. I want them to pick up the book and remain immersed in its pages for as long as is reasonable to expect any 21st century digital native to remain immersed in anything.

I want them to experience the unique pleasure of escaping their lives and minds for a brief moment or two through someone else's story. I want them to enjoy the book and share it with their friends, even perhaps re-read at some point. I want reading to be fun, and never a chore.

But that doesn't mean you can't discuss serious subjects - in fact, any subject - in a children's book, if you successfully manage the tone. Yes, young readers are at a crucial stage of emotional and intellectual development, indeed many at different stages. Some will be sensitive on certain issues, and every child needs to feel included in the stories they read. But mindful of all that, it is still possible, I believe, to address big subjects - whether it is grief or climate change.

And I'm interested in exploring these subjects through the dilemmas of characters, not passing down pat moral instruction or orthodoxies, that's not the job of writers. Children today are more connected to their world than ever before, whatever parental and school boundaries they live between, through devices and the constant background of 24 hour news and digital lives. They live in the shadow of issues such as climate change, and I think we owe it to them to provide narratives that navigate and explore such subjects.

Story is paramount. Once a reader is committed to a character, and invested in their jeopardy, there are few topics which are off limits. On paper, a story about a dystopian world with hardly any animals sounds almost impossibly bleak. (Spoiler alert: the first draft was!) But once a young boy who can talk to animals has resolved to reverse that situation, in *The Last Wild*, the twists and turns of the heroic quest also create space for debate about why humans find themselves in such a grim place.

The next key for me, is humour and warmth. No matter how extreme the peril, no matter how grave the



outlook, there is always room for a joke. Adult thriller, horror and crime writers often have to sustain extreme tension and suspend disbelief through unrelenting seriousness, but younger readers need a regular supply of laughter breaks.

This is why *The Wild Before*, which contains some very topical but challenging climate events, is never more than a paragraph away from a wisecracking harvest mouse. And warmth, whether through older mentor characters, loyal allies or just general tone, is so critical. Even when Mouse, in *There May Be a Castle*, is literally freezing cold on his brave journey, he is surrounded by characters who love and care for him.

But for me, the final all important ingredient is honesty. Climate change is real and humanity faces an existential threat like never before. I don't want children to be anxious about this, but I do want them to be engaged. I believe with a passion that we should not condescend to children in anything we write for them, or wrap the world up in cotton wool, writing like adults talking over their heads at the dinner table.

*The Wild Before* is in places a challenging book because we simply live in challenging times. It is also a tale of how hope - not just vague, generalised hope- but an active, deeply sourced hope in the face of calamity, can guide us through what is to come. It feeds into a trilogy which is ultimately a saga of survival and renewal.

Real hope, however, for children and authors alike, will come from action as well as stories. That's why this week, with over 100 writers and illustrators, we've written an open letter to UK publishers and agents, calling for our industry to publicly declare their commitment to reducing climate emissions in line with the Paris Accord.

We don't just need to tackle difficult subjects on the page, but in real life, and it is time for publishing to not only write about climate change, but act on it as well.

<https://medium.com/@pierstorday/why-publishers-need-to-take-action-on-climate-change-today-5531c9d0648a>

*The Wild Before*, Torday's prequel to his bestselling *The Last Wild* trilogy, is published tomorrow by Quercus Children's Books

Pictured: Paul Torday (cr James Betts)

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