

PAPERBOY

Christopher Fowler



BANTAM BOOKS

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

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Most of all, this is for my mother and brother, who were probably happy to have forgotten these events, until I had to dig them all up again. And, of course, it's for my father, whose memory grows dearer with passing time.

‘My, you do like a good story, don’t you?’

Sweeney Todd,
Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler

The First Patch of Sunlight on the Pavement

Early one morning at the height of summer in 1960, I returned from the corner shop with a packet of Weetabix* under my arm and stopped to stare at the alien death ray that was scorching the pavement in front of me.

What I saw was a fierce yellow cone of light, ragged at the edges, smashing on to the concrete slab beside the green front gate with the power to melt a thousand suns. It was filled with sparkling, shimmering life forms that writhed and twisted like an invasive virus under a microscope.

I shrugged, navigated my way around the beam, went into the house and ate my breakfast (two Weetabix coated with snowy-white Tate & Lyle sugar and soaked in evaporated milk until they attained the consistency of rotted chipboard). Then I cut out the coupon on the back

*Breakfast cereal in tablet form that resembles roofing felt, or, when milk is added, wet roofing felt.

of the packet and sent away for a 3-D Spectroscope, so that I could view the three-dimensional animal picture card they gave away free inside.

I only needed Number 32, the Marmoset, and Number 28, the Diplodocus, to complete the set. The cereal company had no qualms about mixing dinosaurs and furry woodland creatures. Earlier that year I had sent off for the 31-in-1-o-scope, a pocket gadget with supposedly myriad uses, although I could only find about seven. It included a pocket knife that had snapped on first use and a magnifying glass that couldn't even burn an insect. Before that I had collected a Cornflakes marching band finished in red plastic, and a set of Shredded Wheat bath-time submarines propelled by baking soda.

I needed to keep an eye out for free offers. A child marooned in a London backwater with no ready cash was automatically rendered passive, a watcher-listener. At the mercy of my family, I could not go very far or do anything too unusual. My only consolation was that things were probably better than they would be as an adult, when, as my father constantly reminded me, I would have to find something useful to do, like mending carburettors, or else face a miserable fate. So I passed my childhood reading, watching, listening, and soon found that I could create something out of nothing, because the tools of imagination were everywhere I looked.

Having reached this frame of mind, I discovered that it was possible to stare at the first patch of bright sunlight on the pavement outside the house on a summery morning and see what others could not see. When I looked at the light falling through the dusty, unkempt hedge on to a section of warm grey stone flecked with mica, where ants filed past each other with shreds of leaves and ladybirds dotted the branches like shiny spots of poster paint, I was transported to a hostile jungle, a parched desert waste-

land, an uncharted forest. In sparkling motes of dust, I could witness a fiery apocalypse, the scorched surface of Mars, the arrival of deadly space spores, the mistrustful eye of God, the light of salvation in ascending angels.

Born in suburban post-war Greenwich with no money, a mystifying family and an uncertain future, I was uncomfortable even entering a shop or talking to classmates, and felt that I might not survive long enough to ever be considered part of the real world. But I was sure of one thing. Imagination, in one form or another, would always provide a means of escape.

In the summer of 1960 an impoverished London was limping into unknown territory, still bearing war wounds that successive governments had not been able to heal. The re-elected Conservatives were intent on building homes and motorways, creating jobs, ending debt, changing the lives of working men and women, but nothing much seemed to be happening. The New Elizabethans' England* felt dictatorial, not democratic. 'Do Not' and 'We Know Best' were the orders of the day, as if knowledge and freedom were things to be afraid of.

London, said one radio comedian, had spent the last fifteen years tidying up after a very messy party, and the Hitlers wouldn't be invited round again. The city had swept all the debris away, shovelling the rubble of destroyed houses into vales and ditches, even managing to turn the hilly scrubland of nearby Blackheath into a great green billiard table. It had eradicated all the stubborn stains and had set about replacing the damaged ornaments with ugly, cheap-looking utility versions. Everything would soon be back to normal, even if it was all much scrappier and poorer than before. But where

*Faintly pretentious but peculiarly charming term chosen for those born in the reign of Elizabeth II.

on earth did the country go from here, now that the framework of the past had burned down? What was going to replace it?

1960 was not a time suited to imagining – but imagination held the key to the coming decade. The ideals of a new generation could, my parents were told, transform the country; goodbye sooty old industrialization, hello trendy young image. London’s image, especially, was in line for a makeover, as a tiny handful of miniskirted dolly birds and Chelsea Set* boys in military tunics prepared to spark a revival in the capital’s dying leisure spots. Their psychedelic lifestyles were specifically designed to enrage adults, and yet there was a sense that something radically new was needed. Angry letters were written to *The Times* complaining about the young sporting their parents’ War medals as fashion accessories. Later, punk would democratize rebellion. London’s first swingers were few in number, and only appeared among the plum-voiced children of the rich. Their antics had traditionally been tolerated with a roll of the eye until their money ran out and they grew up. This time, though the air was thick with measured outrage, even I could sense that something fresh might come of it.

Unfortunately, I would never become a part of their exciting world. I was ten years old, for God’s sake, a decade and a social class down, stuck in a suburban Edwardian terraced house with a family that wasn’t even peculiar enough to be classed as eccentric. My classmates never noticed me, except when I accidentally found myself in charge of the playtime goalposts and let the ball into the net three times because I was busy trying to remember

*Posh trendsetters showed their rebellious independence by spending Daddy’s allowance at the Chelsea Drugstore, a groovy bar on the King’s Road, Chelsea, now a McDonald’s.

what Gold Kryptonite* did to Superman – then they noticed me long enough to kick me into a hedge.

My formative years were to be filled with orderly lassitude, like those of a soldier posted to a peaceful backwater. These were days of strawberry jam on white bread, the squeak of chalk in hushed classrooms, *Hancock's Half-Hour*,[†] cold mutton on Mondays, Shirley Abicair and her zither,[‡] back-fence arguments, kicking about in the garden and walking alone through empty, silent streets. The only counter-culture I could experience was the over-the-counter culture of the local Co-op. The most exciting thing that happened that spring was the tortoise waking up. If someone bought a car, all the men in the street came out to look at it.

Barely dragged out of the threadbare fifties, South London was still sooty and pockmarked, its populace coughing and on the cadge. It was a strangely private place, divorced from what was supposedly really going on. The houses might have been in London, but London was not yet in many houses. Little of what was happening in the capital filtered through; the odd radio report was commented upon, an occasional newspaper headline was read aloud over breakfast, but apart from the scandalously unfilled bomb-site at the top of the hill, the part of Greenwich where my family lived was just the same as it had been for the last thirty years.

During weekdays the men were all off at work, and

*It robbed Superman of his powers for ever. Needless to say, he didn't come into contact with it much.

†Seminal radio show by Galton and Simpson that changed the face of British comedy by foregrounding character. Sad, dry and hilarious if listened to with patience.

‡She sat and pinged it on her lap. An example of someone who became a TV star purely because she played an instrument no one had ever seen before.

their wives were busy waxing the lino in cool, shadowed hallways or in still, dead front rooms where even the dust hung motionless in the air. You could smell coal and lavender polish, cigarettes and steamed vegetables, mildew and fresh-cut grass. It was all so quiet and safe, full of purposefully pressed lips and chapped hands. The passing summer days were sensible, predictable and becalmed. *Housewives' Choice** was on the radio, and the choice was always the same. There was very little noise. Mangles were turned by hand, workmen dug roads with pickaxes, houses were swept with brooms. On Sundays it was so quiet that you could hear your neighbours cleaning their shoes next door.

But I felt that even here, behind the dullest daily routines, there was a dark and unruly strangeness that might somehow find a way to surface. It lay just behind a wooden fence, over a wall or through a hedge. It was hidden behind net curtains, in rooms where adults sat smoking in silhouette, in kitchens where wives washed up and whispered, in railway alleys where lovers clung guiltily to each other. It was tucked away just out of reach, on top shelves, in the backs of cupboards, deep under the stairs.

Or perhaps it lay within the pages of a forgotten book.

*Morning radio show that played slush for women trapped behind ironing boards.

Things to Make and Do

‘You haven’t seen my good trowel anywhere, I suppose?’

‘I didn’t know you had a “good” trowel.’

‘Yes, there’s my good trowel and my cheap trowel.’ Bill tracked dirt into the little red scullery as he wandered in, as if shedding pieces of himself. ‘It’s a small house. How can things go missing?’

Kath absently wiped her husband’s bootprints from the red-leaded floor. If he kept shedding and she kept wiping, perhaps there wouldn’t be anything of him left one day. ‘Why, what else have you lost?’

‘Bricks. The gas poker. Four planks. A geranium tub. Some sheets of corrugated iron. My best pliers. One of my crash helmets. A large panel of foam rubber. And the old playpen. I was going to burn it at the bottom of the garden, but it’s disappeared. And I’m sure we had a coil of rope somewhere.’

I’m sure we did, thought Kath grimly. It was probably in the back room, beside the two motorbikes Bill was taking to pieces. A working-class habit, she supposed, always aware that she had married beneath her. Her

husband did not distinguish between the inside and the outside of the house, which is why the tiny front garden was filled with engine parts, why there was an upright washing machine and a mangle in the back yard, why there were two motorbikes in the back room and a third leaking oil in the hall.

‘Where’s the boy?’ Bill plunged oil-smeared hands into luminous green Swarfega,* gooshed them about, removed them with a sucking noise and wiped them dry on Kath’s only clean tea towel. To my father, I was always ‘the boy’.

‘He was under the kitchen table, reading *Where the Rainbow Ends* to the cat.’

Kath was cooking gammon with tinned pineapple rings and marrow, which she would cut into strips and boil until it jellified, held together by the rind. Then she would grate nutmeg over it, a mis-remembered tip from a make-do-and-mend wartime recipe book. You could eat most of her meals through a straw except for the meat, which had usually been cooked for so long that it couldn’t have been tenderized with a lawn-roller.

Kath didn’t approve of Bird’s Eye peas or Smedley’s frozen fish fingers because, being convenient, they were therefore common and eaten by people in council flats, as was Echo and Stork margarine. She experimented once with a packet of Vesta Chow Mein because it was exotic and bore the name of a Roman goddess, but didn’t buy it again because it was too spicy. Spices were not kept in the Fowler larder because they were nasty foreign things that spoiled the taste of food and took the pattern off your Fablon shelf coverings. Vesta Chow Mein comprised a sachet of grey powder with dried peas and unidentifiable red bits in it, like food designed for astronauts or arctic

*Glowing lime de-greaser; could double for Green Kryptonite.

explorers, and came with a packet of little yellow strips that you emptied into a hot frying pan, and watched as they swelled up into crisp twirls. Even though it smelled like the stairwell beside Waterloo Bridge and probably contained more chemicals than the Greenwich gas manufacturing plant, I thought it was fantastic.

Bill lit one dog-end of a Woodbine* from the embers of another, flicking the first out into the yard, and peered under the table at the untidy stacks of picture books high enough to hide a small child behind. 'Well, he's not here now.'

A terrible howl of pain rose from the garden. My mother dropped a pan of water into the sink with a bang and ran outside, ready to face the sight of blood.

'Christopher, what on earth are you doing?' she screamed when she realized that I was trapped within a collapsed pyre of acrid burning wood and twisted metal. She only ever called me by my full name when I had done something terrible.

My father pulled at the flaming playpen, which had concertina'd over my legs, pinching the skin blue, and was the reason why I was shouting the place down. Gradually I was released from this homemade torture chamber and dragged aside, leaving the burning frame to belch oily smoke over the neighbours' washing. The people next door had all filed out to watch with folded arms and pursed lips.

'What on earth did you think you were building?' Bill shouted, peering forlornly through the flaming tangle of embers and metal at his blackening best pliers.

'A big dipper,' I answered, as if it was obvious.

I had attached roller-skate trucks to the base of the

*Rough-as-guts cancer-sticks for the working class affectionately known as 'gaspers'.

geranium tub, tied the rope to it and hauled it over steeply angled tracks consisting of the planks and sheet iron, laid on top of the playpen struts. The poker had an unusually long hose, and was attached to the red-painted gas tap in the scullery. It made a wall of flame for the coaster car to blast through – I would have constructed a water flume, but the tin tub was still used for baths in our house and I did not want to risk denting it.

I had only ever been on one Big Dipper, in the hellish death-trap that was the Sheerness* Pleasure Garden, a funfair that Kath said was run by gypsies, or at least by people with curly hair, tans, gold teeth and earrings. The front car had part of its floor missing, so you needed to keep your feet raised to avoid having them torn off in the sleepers passing below. Fairgrounds provided a rich source of horror stories for my mother. ‘Mrs Reed’s sister was thrown out of the chain-chair roundabout just as it hit top speed,’ she told me once. ‘They found her handbag over by the United Dairies . . . Your grandfather was there the night a stray spark burned the ghost train down with children still inside, and the people in the queue outside thought the screams were part of the ride . . . Your cousin Brenda won a poodle at a sideshow and used to suck it at night to get to sleep. It turned out to be made of lead, and we think that’s why she went simple.’

I desperately wanted to build a funfair of my own at home.

Instead, I was carried indoors, bruised, noisy and smouldering from the conflagration in the garden, and sent to my room to recover. Luckily there was an unopened Jamboree Bag and a pile of comics up there,

*A ‘resort’ on the Isle of Sheppey that comprised a lido, a funfair, some manky beach huts, a nasty estuarine beach and the pikiest holiday-makers on the South coast.

and I took consolation in them, knowing that I would never again attempt anything involving nails, saws, gas or wood. I was not, to put it mildly, a practical boy.

In 1960, when the accident happened, I was seven years old. Born during Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, I had been presented with a heraldic mug and a crested spoon, both of which my father had used in the course of repairing his Triumph motorbike, and therefore ruined. I did not hate my father, because to hate someone you have to understand what they are up to. Rather, it seemed that Bill was wired differently from me, like a Continental plug. We had no idea about what made each other pleased or angry, and as a consequence we could only communicate through a common element: my mother, his wife. Bill had a range of subjects he felt comfortable with: car engines, the War, boats, hardware shops. When Kath spoke, it was often to continue an abstract thought that had started in her head some time earlier, so that her conversation could border on the surreal. I happily related to that.

Low-evening sunshine heated the thin curtains in my bedroom. The air outside the window was alive with mayflies. My mother said they only lived for a day, but childhood seemed intent on lasting for ever. The sunset warmed the lincrusta wallpaper above my bed to a welcoming orange. Another hot suburban day tomorrow. In my memory it was always summer, except for the bits that were like living in a bowl of filthy water – there were still smogs. In December 1952, just before I was born, the worst of them had killed four thousand Londoners.

My mother came up to see me. 'Back from Treasure Island?' I figured she was referring to Long John Silver and my possible loss of a leg, because she liked all of Robert Louis Stevenson's books except *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. 'I suppose it hurt.'

'I could have lost it.'

‘It’s a miracle we can find anything in that garden.’

She seated herself on the end of my bed, smoothing out the racing-car bedspread. Nobody dramatized cuts and bruises in the Fowler family; they were the medals of childhood, and not to be fussed over.

‘Your father is ready to kill you. I don’t know why you go so far out of your way to annoy him. Perhaps you need more fresh air. Why don’t you go with Percy to Greenwich Park?’

Percy lived next door and had to walk very slowly because he had TB. He had spent part of last year in an iron lung and wasn’t allowed to play cricket in case the ball hit him in the chest. Plus, he had to go through life being called Percy.

‘It takes too long. By the time he gets there, the park will be closing.’

‘You spend an awful lot of time indoors. You’re very pale.’

‘You feed me too much tinned food.’

‘Your father doesn’t enjoy market produce. He prefers to be constipated.’ My mother knew that things in tins weren’t fresh, but thought that things in jars were. Her first sighting of fresh ginger root gave her quite a fright, because she was used to seeing it floating in brown liquid. We never dreamed you could get fresh beetroot. She continued to buy tins until a scandal occurred involving poisoned tins of Fray Bentos corned beef.

‘I’ll cook you fresh if we can get it. It doesn’t make any difference to me, I get no pleasure from eating because I have no taste buds. I damaged my mouth in a bicycle accident when I was seven. But you’re a growing boy.’ She narrowed her green eyes at me, preparing to sum up. ‘Well, there you are, more outdoor pursuits, eat things you don’t like, make some friends, try not to annoy your father.’

She straightened the cornflower-blue apron she wore

every day for the first fifteen years of her marriage, and quietly shut the door behind her. My mother had a way of closing herself off from difficult conversations.

There was a time when all lower-middle-class English families were this emotionless. I remembered seeing a Victorian cartoon in a very old issue of *Punch** magazine, in which a lady's maid was calling to her employee in great distress.

Maid: 'Oh Ma'am! I've just swallowed a safety pin!'
The lady of the house (drily): 'Oh, so that's where all my safety pins go.'

As far as I could tell, there were three classes of people living in England, sandwiched together like the flavours in a Neapolitan ice-cream brick. People who were 'not like us', 'people like us', and people who were 'not for the likes of us'.

The first lot were common; they exaggerated their vowels, especially the letter 'a' (as in 'Haaang Abaaaht!') and shouted at each other in the street. They laughed all the time, voted Labour, said rude words and drank bitter or stout. One of them, Mr Hills next door, took his teeth out and hung a teaspoon on his nose when he was tipsy.

The middle ones were bemused, genteel white-collar workers who put on airs and graces even though they didn't have two halfpennies to rub together. They helped out at Tory party headquarters and admired the royals. They were always shushing each other and worrying about being embarrassed, or 'shown up'. They were obsessed with the cleanliness of their shirt collars, and

*Occasionally humorous Victorian magazine famed for its longevity in dentists' waiting rooms.

although they moaned all the time, were pathetically grateful when posh people deigned to acknowledge them. Most middle-class men stayed in one job for fifty years, at the end of which time they were presented with a carriage clock and packed off home to die.

The ones in the top bracket liked telling everyone else what to do but were generally invisible, only appearing on fête days to talk loudly about once meeting ‘the radiant Princess Margaret’.* They attended street parties for the poor, but never organized them. The ladies wore white gloves and the men never knew what to do with their hands.

Naturally, none of these groups spoke to each other unless they absolutely had to – i.e., when their houses fell down.

Class was an endless source of fascination. Another ancient *Punch* cartoon I recalled showed an upper-class young lady cutting up a hansom carriage in her motor-car at Piccadilly Circus.

Cabman: ‘Sound your ’orn!’

Lady driver: ‘Sound your aitches!’

It was a mysterious world all right, and better to stick with what you could understand. After nursing my wounds by removing a knee-scab with surgical precision, I lay on the bed and opened my Jamboree Bag, so-called because it had a poorly printed picture of Scouts on the cover.

Inside were:

A handful of tiny round pastels as hard and tasteless as coat buttons.

*Elizabeth’s hard-drinking sister, a legendary royal freeloader inexplicably worshipped by the lower orders.

Two of the ugliest, most utilitarian toffees in the world, wrapped in thin wax paper that proved impossible to separate from the toffee.

A sherbet fountain with a bunged-up stick of liquorice in it to act as a straw.

A toy so poorly assembled that it was impossible to figure out whether it was a submarine or a farmyard animal.

A joke. Sample:

Q. Where does Mr Plod the policeman live?

A. 999 Letsby Avenue.

The only quality the Jamboree Bag possessed was its mystery, and it therefore remained far more interesting if left unopened. Things invisible to the eye contained hope.

My bedroom was filled with reading material: books salvaged from dustbins, books borrowed from friends, books with missing pages, books found in the street, abandoned, unreadable, torn, scribbled on, unloved, unwanted and dismissed. My bedroom was the Battersea Dogs Home of books. Unfortunately, none of them were books I would have chosen for myself. I did not want to learn about dentistry, rope-making, the Museum of Bricks or the Shropshire Evangelical Guild, and I certainly did not want to read the Condensed Books of the Reader's Digest, not just because the novel of the month was usually a heartwarming chronicle of a Brooklyn family who had relocated to the Italian countryside, but because it was obvious that 'condensed' meant 'censored'. I rescued them because I could not bear to see them thrown away. It seemed wrong to leave words unread, even when they were incredibly, staggeringly boring. I read the boring bits first just to get them out of the way, and this proved so arduous that I often failed to reach the good bits.

I would be left alone here until dusk, which at this point of summer was around nine p.m. I loved reading. When I was reading, I could not hear my parents sniping at one another. Kath had a subscription to the *Reader's Digest*, which was filled with snippets of triumph over tragedy, girls choking back tears, brave guide dogs, recovery from secret illness and other wholesome toss in which I had no interest.

The family also owned a set of ten blue cardboard-bound volumes from the 1930s entitled *The Arthur Mee Children's Encyclopedia*. These volumes included such fascinating and useful items as:

How to Stalk a Deer
 Keeping Guinea-Pigs as Pets
 The History of Tunnelling
 Proficiency Badges of the Boy Scouts
 The Wonderful World of the Worm
 Crocheting a Pot-Holder for Empire Day*
 Fun and Amusement with Stops and Commas
 How to Cultivate a Monastery Garden
 The Right Way to Slide
 The Cheerful Black Folk of Africa
 And 'What Is Wrong with this Picture?'
 (Answer: 'The gentleman has buttoned his waistcoat
 incorrectly.')

In an article on 'How to Build a British House', the end photograph showed a man standing on his roof behind actual crenellations, beneath a fluttering Union Jack, clenching a pipe stem between his teeth, staring

*On Empire Day a grateful nation (and Canada) held inspirational speeches and lit bonfires in their back gardens. It became Commonwealth Day in 1958 in order to sound less patronizing.

pompously into the middle distance. Another article entitled 'Things to See in London' included the Inigo Jones Watergate, Adelphi (moved and forgotten), the Crystal Palace (moved and burned down) and, more obscurely, the W. T. Stead Memorial on the Embankment (Stead was a journalist and spiritualist who survived the sinking of the *Titanic*). The volumes were fascinating from an anthropological perspective, but also dusty, peculiar and vaguely offensive. I loved them.

In a house that contained so little to read, I would read anything, because I possessed no functioning critical faculties whatsoever. At breakfast I would read the Cornflakes box, and then, when it was empty, attempt to make the absurdly complicated paper sculpture of a tiger's head that Kellogg's had printed on the back of the packet. I would even read the sugar bag, although Mr Cube, the anthropomorphic lump of sugar brought in by Tate & Lyle to deliver propaganda messages against the government's plan to privatize the sugar industry, gave me the creeps, as did Mr Therm, the weird dancing gas flame who advertised cookers. When there was absolutely nothing else left to read at the breakfast table I would read my father's *Daily Express*, every front page of which featured 'Our Radiant New Queen'. In times of desperation I read my mother's knitting pamphlets.* I would read on the toilet and in the bath, and while crossing the road, which you could do because there were hardly any cars about. I read while walking along the pavement, aided by a sixth sense that kept me from vanishing down manholes or smacking into lampposts. I read just standing up for a pee, with a comic book propped on the cistern.

Ideally, I wanted to read every book in the English

*Most of which have now been turned into a range of smutty birthday cards suggesting that the models were rent boys or on drugs.

language, climaxing with Shakespeare, which at the moment looked like gibberish. But the only things I could afford to buy for myself were comics, and they became my literature.

More than that, they were an addiction.

The first one I ever bought was a Harvey Comic featuring Baby Huey, a stupid giant yellow duck in a nappy. When this character proved unsatisfying I switched to Hot Stuff the Little Devil, Little Dot, Casper and Wendy, Sad Sack, and Richie Rich, the adventures of a grotesquely wealthy blond boy who was forever carting around wheelbarrows full of giant diamonds. Even at an early age, I knew this comic was wrong.

But there was something bigger and better out there, and its name was Superman.