

books



Calling all secret storytellers



The Gruffalo author *Julia Donaldson* launches our 2011 Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition with this wise advice: put the plot first

Writing a story is something like making up a joke. Not that I have ever made up a joke, but I'm sure that the punch line must be the starting point. I can't imagine that any joke-maker starts off by writing "an Englishman, a Welshman and a Scotsman went into a pub", and then carries on till he finds out how their characters develop and what happens in the end.

Hardly ever start to write a text until the story is in my head. It's not that a lot needs to happen. (Remember one of my sons complaining about a book, "The trouble with this story is that too much happens too quickly.") But the shape of the story is vital — the development, climax, satisfying resolution and, ideally, a twist in the tail.

Stories, stories, stories! They seem to be a basic human need, like food and drink — for adults as much as for children. We tailor our anecdotes, follow sitcoms, stay up late to finish whodunnits. Yet I can't help feeling that plotting is somehow looked down on by literary connoisseurs, or at any rate taken for granted, as in the case of Jane Austen. Everyone raves (justifiably) about her wit, her characters, her minutely exquisite canvases, yet fails to register what a champion plotter she was. It was so clever of her to weave the ludicrous Mr Collins into *Pride and Prejudice*, driving the events befalling the principal characters. I bet she planned all that before she began writing.

That stage of the writing process — sorting out the plot — is for me the most important and hardest one. Like every writer, the most frequent question I am asked is "Where do you get your ideas?" In fact, it's quite easy. I might visit an aquarium and think, "Aha! An underwater story about a lost fish", or at Hallowe'en I might muse, "Supposing a witch had not just a cat but lots of animals on her broomstick..." but it's the nitty-gritty of what happens — how the fish finds its way home; how the broomstick crew contrives to save the witch's life — that needs to be thrashed out before I put pen to paper. It can be frustrating.

I wish I had a formula for plot development, but I don't. Sometimes the story will unfold slowly in my head as I wallow in the bath; sometimes brainstorming on a notepad is helpful; only once in a while do I have

a eureka moment, as in the case of *Tiddler* (the fishy tale), when the whole story sprang into my head as I walked to the shops: the fish could make up elaborate excuses for being late for school and then, once lost, could find his way home by following the trail of his tall stories that have spread throughout the ocean.

It's not that the plots of my books are what I take most pride in. What means most to me is the language — the sounds and patterns, the rhymes and the rhythms, the element of repetition enlivened by the element of surprise. But the language is the flesh and clothing. You can't have flesh or clothes without a skeleton.

Another question I am asked a lot is: "How did you think up the character of the Gruffalo/ladybird/giant?" Most "characters" in picture books are fairly basic and can usually be summed up in two adjectives, eg. "scary but stupid" for the Gruffalo, "small and clever" for the mouse. (*The Gruffalo* was going to be about a tiger until I realised that I couldn't get anything to rhyme with "tiger".) The illustrator (in that case the wonderful Axel Scheffler) imbues the players with extra personality, rather in the way that actors bring to life characters who are nothing special on the page.

In books for older children the characters are, of course, hugely important. I never enjoyed books with a cast of stereo-

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types, such as Enid Blyton's Famous Five. I much preferred the more individual and believable Borrowers, created by Mary Norton, or Richmal Crompton's William. But the desirability of fully rounded characters does not diminish the need for a cracking good plot — which, of course, in the best books is driven by the characters.

When I wrote *Running on the Cracks*, my novel for teenagers, I was surprised more by the similarity than the difference in the methods of writing. My days became more regimented — I had to stick to writing 1,000 words a day or I would lose the thread — but otherwise I worked in much the same way that I would if I had been writing a 32-page illustrated book: the storyline was largely in my head before I started to write, though not quite so clearly. (The writer Theresa Breslin once told me that she thought writing a novel was like fol-



AXEL SCHEFFLER FOR THE TIMES

lowing a map in the dark with a dim torch.) I do realise that not every writer goes about the task in the same way. I read somewhere that Ian McEwan started writing a book with a paragraph about a man carrying two suitcases full of severed body parts, without knowing who the man or the mutilated corpse were. I don't know how McEwan took it from there, but I have read the book, *The Innocent*, which was very exciting and felt perfectly well-crafted. However, not everyone can be an Ian

McEwan. I have read many very dissatisfying books for adults, and found myself thinking "What brilliant writing!" — and yet had the feeling that the author had written lots of superb sentences on to raffle tickets, then drawn them at random. So I stick to my idea that for most writers, including beginners, it is best to work out the storyline first. After all, that's what J.K. Rowling did — for a series of seven books, which is a phenomenal achievement. One critic said of her that "She has the DNA of story-

telling in her marrow", though I suspect that there was also some sweat involved.

And what about the theme of a book? Isn't that more important than the narrative? If a story really works and is not merely a series of meaningless coincidences, it is almost bound to reveal something about human nature or the world. People have often pointed out to me what my books are "about" — co-operation, kindness, displacement or whatever — but I don't consciously choose these themes. Re-

How to enter

Are you a secret storyteller? Now's the time to let your talent out in the open. *The Times* and Chicken House are on a mission to discover another great children's writer, whose book will be published around the world by Chicken House.

How to enter
Your full-length manuscript (no more than 80,000 words) must be received at The Chicken House by October 29, 2010. The address, submission criteria, terms and conditions and tips can be found at timesonline.co.uk/chickenhouse

The shortlist
The Chicken House reading team will select a shortlist of five entries, to be announced in February 2011. The judges will choose a winner from this shortlist, to be announced at Easter 2011.

The prize
The winner will be the entrant whose story, in the opinion of the judges, demonstrates the greatest entertainment value, quality and originality suitable for the children's age group. The prize is the offer of a worldwide publishing contract with Chicken House, with a royalty advance of £10,000.

The judges
Barry Cunningham, publisher, Chicken House
Julia Donaldson, author of *The Gruffalo* and *Running on the Cracks*
Amanda Craig, children's book critic, *The Times*
Neil Blair, partner at the Christopher Little Literary Agency
John McLay, literary scout and director of the Bath Literary Festival
Damian Kelleher, author, reviewer and children's media consultant
Rebecca Wilkie, Booktrust
The Waterstone's Children's Bookselling Team

Entrants must be aged 18 or over. Entries must be the original work of the entrant and not previously published. The entrant must not have previously published any book in any country, whether fiction or nonfiction. The entry should be suitable for a children's audience aged between 9 and 16. Picture books and graphic novels will not be accepted and illustrations will not be considered. Before entering you must read the full terms and conditions at timesonline.co.uk/chickenhouse

cently I realised that three books in a row (*Tiddler*, *Stick Man* and *Tabby McTat*) were about separation and a search for identity. But that was not my starting point and I suspect that the stories might have turned out rather dull and preachy if it had been.

My starting point was — yes, you've guessed it — the story.

To read about previous winners visit timesonline.co.uk/childrensauthor
For more about Chicken House visit doublecluck.com

From Get Carter to get sleazy

At 77, director Mike Hodges has written a racy debut novel.

Ben Machell met him

Mike Hodges suggests that we meet at his son's restaurant on a quiet Central London street. He sits in a corner of the empty dining room in a black corduroy jacket and scarf, while members of staff iron tablecloths and respectfully bring him espressos. He looks about and grins. "It's all a bit... gangster, isn't it?"

It is, in a visit-to-the-gents, pistol-hidden-behind-the-cistern, shots-fired, blood-splattering-the-tablecloth sort of way. That Hodges's feature debut as a director and scriptwriter was the seminal 1971 gang-

land revenge thriller *Get Carter* (pictured) only adds to the underworld vibe, provided that you ignore the sunny morning outside and the way he talks in the arch, eloquent manner that was presumably once de rigueur for British film directors.

Hodges is just visiting. He lives on a remote farm in Dorset with his wife, growing vegetables and listening to Radio 4 "when it's not pontificating or being smug, which it often is". He is also now, at 77, promoting his



first novel, *Watching the Wheels Come Off*. "I've written television scripts and film scripts, theatre and radio plays, but I'd always promised myself that I would write a novel. I had been waiting for another film to be sorted out, which we are now in the process of doing, but it's been a long process," he frowns. "So I decided this was the time to write it."

His novel follows Mark Miles, a snivelling, libidinous PR man based in an anonymous, dreary seaside town. It starts with Miles overseeing the doomed stunt of an escapist client, before he is drawn into

a grubby spiral of blackmail and violence that culminates with his role in the macabre "Leadership Dynamics" course of a crooked American self-help guru. It's a pungent, bleakly funny book with a pulp thriller's pacing, and almost every character is a grotesque of some form, creating a sort of *Viz* meets Raymond Chandler atmosphere. There is lots of sex, too, including broom-cupboard quickies, lesbianism in a limo and a (accidental) bout of bestiality. Hodges grins but worries that his family "might not speak to me" if they read the book, which, so far, they haven't.

"If you've a main character who is pria-

pic then inevitably you're going to have him screwing all the time, or attempting to."

But you can't blame the character if you created him?

"That is a bit unfair, I agree," he sighs. "Maybe it's because as you get older your sexual abilities diminish..."

His fascination with the "sleazy underbelly" of our country — which he explored as a director in *Get Carter*, *Croupier* and *I'll Sleep when I'm Dead* — developed during National Service in the Royal Navy. He says that, already qualified as a chartered accountant and coming from a "fairly refined" Bristol background, "the lower deck of a minesweeper on fishing protection duties was a revelation to me. The poverty of the fishermen and their wives, and the degradation of their lives, changed me forever. Consequently this is a world I find interesting to write about. Of course, the British cultural scene disapprove... they're more interested in Ian McEwan and Martin Amis and people like that."

After the Navy, Hodges forged a career in television, eventually becoming a producer on the investigative current affairs programme *World in Action*. It was an experience that further confirmed his pessimistic, left-leaning world view. The widely acclaimed *Get Carter* should have heralded the start of a consistent career in cinema. Instead, it was anything but smooth: good films suffered from bad distribution deals or cack-handed editing. One "very neur-



Competition

Times+ members can win an exclusive CrimeFest weekend

Mike Hodges (above) is one of the many writers appearing at CrimeFest, the annual international crime fiction festival, in association with *The Times*, May 20-23, in Bristol. (Events include crime-writing workshops; for more details visit crimefest.com) The prize for our competition is three nights' accommodation for two at the four-star Bristol Marriott Royal Hotel, two tickets to the gala dinner and two passes to all the interviews and panels. (Travel expenses are not included.)

To enter visit mytimesplus.co.uk. If you don't win, readers of *The Times* receive 25 per cent off the full CrimeFest pass (visit crimefest2010.eventbrite.com and enter the discount code "times") and members of Times+ receive 35 per cent off (visit mytimesplus.co.uk for details)

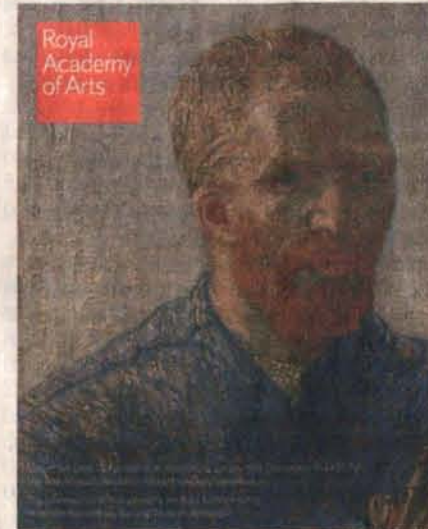
otic producer" pulled out a loaded handgun during a "discussion" about budgets for the 1978 horror film *Damien: Omen II* (Hodges left the project soon after).

Looking back, he admits that he probably wasn't suited to the business. He was a "reluctant film-maker", uncomfortable with compromise, who didn't really enjoy reading or writing scripts. He enjoyed the relative freedom of writing his novel but is at pains to stress that *Watching...* isn't just a noirish romp. It's an angry book, he says, in which everything from the mass media to religion to "turbo-capitalism" is the subject of bitter satire, and that the anger itself "stems from the fact that the world I and many others had envisaged simply hasn't materialised... I find the world today absolutely hair-raisingly frightening and horrible."

Does he worry that, maybe, he's just a grumpy old man?

"Oh yes, I do. Haha! Undoubtedly I am a sort of grumpy old man, but I laugh about my grumpiness as well. I've started another book, another satire. Kurt Vonnegut, who was a satirist I loved, in the end gave up. He said there's no place for a satirist in the world now, because the world is more surreal than anything we could dream up... I think that's almost true."

Watching the Wheels Come Off is published by Max Crime at £7.99. To buy it for £7.59 call 0845 2712134 or visit timesonline.co.uk/bookshop



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THE ARTIST AND HIS LETTERS

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