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Not Bad for a Bad Lad

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

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Media type:

Book

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This beautifully produced latest offering from the two Michaels (also available in slipcase version signed by them) has a familiar Morpurgo feel to it. The bad lad of the title has been redeemed from a possible life in crime by the faith of his music teacher at primary school and Mr Alfie, the Instructional Officer who looked after the horses at his borstal. Suggested by Michael Foreman's memories of the post Second World War Hollesley Bay borstal where Suffolk Punch horses were looked after by the inmates as part of their rehabilitation, it comes with a factual postscript which explains about borstal, Suffolk Punches, and the role of horses in the military. The bad lad, otherwise unnamed throughout the story, goes on to become a Drum Major in the Horse Guards. The story is one of venerable masculine and pastoral values, passed on from the days when men ploughed with horses or took them to war, whose delicacy perhaps reflects the younger age group for which the tale is intended. Its heart seems to lie somewhere about 50 years ago, despite the cruelties and injustices then sometimes involved in the disciplining of the young, which the novel acknowledges. In this book the teenage revolution hardly happens. The bad lad, keen on playing the drums, is pictured in his days of juvenile crime as a teddy boy. Nevertheless, rock'n'roll passes him by. The old fashioned atmosphere of the story seems to have seeped into the illustrations. The action takes place after the bad lad's birth in 1943 (Morpurgo, too, was born in that year) until the present day, where the book opens with the retired Drum Major telling his grandson about his life. Yet Foreman's illustration of the opening scene suggests a 1930s living room, or the living room of an old couple in the 1950s, rather than one in 2010: more like Foreman's grandparents' room in his youth than his own now, I would guess.

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