



Obituary: Nicholas Fisk

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[Clive Barnes](#) [1]

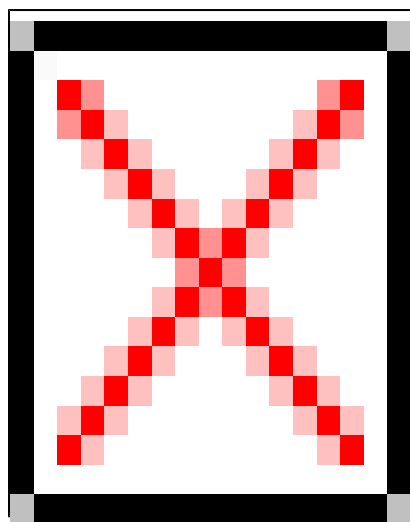
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Clive Barnes on the taboo-breaking Sci Fi author.



Nicholas Fisk, who died recently aged 92, was the pen name of David Higginbottom.

He was a prolific writer for children, whose heyday was the 1970s and 1980s, and who continued to be published until the turn of the century. His books are thoughtful, ingenious, funny and, above all, gripping. As a young librarian giving book talks, I never went into a school without one of his titles in my pile.

Fisk spent some of his teenage years in Soho during the Blitz, playing in jazz bands in the evenings, a time he entertainingly recalled in his memoir **Pig Ignorant** (1992). He served in the RAF in the Second World War and then, while establishing himself as a writer, worked variously as an actor, cartoonist, jazz musician, advertising copywriter and photographer. For a time, he was also an illustrator of children's books. **Space Hostages** (1967), a cold war tale in which a group of kidnapped children struggle to bring a top secret spacecraft home safely, was his first success. This was followed by **Trillions** (1971), in which a shower of blue crystal-like objects turn out to have amazing powers of combination, and then **Grinny** (1973), possibly his best-known work, given a welcome recent re-issue by Hot Key, in tandem with its sequel **You Remember Me**.

Of the more than thirty books that followed, **Time Trap** (1976) was made as a film in Denmark and **Monster Maker** (1979) became an episode in the **Jim Henson Hour** TV show. In **A Rag, A Bone and a Hank of Hair** (1982), anticipating the twenty first century blooming of dystopia teen fiction, Fisk imagined a future in which the government was cloning people to live unaware in an artificial world created from the 1940s. Ten years later, he was the obvious choice of editor for the **Puffin Book of Science Fiction** (1993). By then, the critic John Rowe Townsend regarded him as the only writer of science fiction for children of any significance.

Fisk was reluctant to wear the genre label, declaring in a 1975 essay that he wrote 'what is misnamed science fiction? stories centred on concepts, possibilities, extensions and fantasies?'. He recognised that he had to write for sophisticated modern children, in the television age? 'more technological, more hardware conscious?' and his fascination as an author was with the possibility of the age rather than its actuality: 'the freedom of fantasy from the chains of circumstance.' If he accepted that modern children wanted fast moving stories, with more action and less description and reflection, he was clear, too, that there could be no talking down to his audience: 'Insist they keep pace with you, the writer. Adults, too, must be permitted to express themselves.'

Fisk's novels were characteristically short, often exploring a single strange or intriguing possibility, sometimes darkly humorous, and characterised by psychological realism and perceptive social observation. **Grinny** is a good example. This tale of a visiting Great Aunt who is certainly not what she seems cleverly plays on real family tensions. As Justine Jardine remarked in her Guardian blog welcoming the re-issue: 'The genius of **Grinny** is that the monster arrives in the shape of a little old lady whom nobody can ask to leave: in real life, elderly relatives can often seem, well, alien to the young, with intimacy an obligation rather than a choice? Grinny's malevolence, and the children's aggression towards her, are both taboo-breaking narrative gambits.' Most daring, too, to dismember the old dear as a finale.

Fisk's work is remembered fondly by present day science fiction aficionados. For **SFX** reviews editor John Berriman, 'It wasn't Asimov, Clarke or any of the other towering figures of the pantheon that got me reading SF - it was Nicholas Fisk.' Paul Magrs was an avid child reader of Fisk novels after he had exhausted his local library's holdings of **Dr Who** books. He recently rediscovered Fisk's **On the Flip Side** (1983), a book in which animals start talking just as humans begin disappearing, and included it in his Guardian list of top ten Sci Fi books for teens, alongside books by Wells, Wyndham, Herbert and Bradbury.

Perhaps because Nicholas Fisk worked largely in a critically overlooked genre he maybe hasn't had the recognition he should have done. But present day writers for children could very well take any of his titles as a model of economical, attention grabbing writing. Thankfully, alongside the reissue of **Grinny** and **You Remember Me**, his **Starstormers** series is available in e-format from Hodder and, these days, it's not too hard to get hold of second-hand copies of most of his books.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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