

Figures of Speech

As someone who has all too often been referred to in print, or introduced, at the beginning of talks, as 'the very outspoken' Anne Fine, I feel that I'm in a strong position to argue the vital importance of children being able to 'speak out'. And I mean 'able' in every sense, of course: firstly, to have the skills to use language to get their feelings and their wishes known; next, to be permitted to do so; and also the sometimes overlooked aspect of having someone actually *listening* to them - paying attention.

Most women my age know fully well how important it is to have the language - sometimes even the mere vocabulary - to express feelings. I'm old enough to remember the sixties and seventies, when women first learned how to label things that, up until then, many of us had taken almost fully for granted. Being as good as patted on the head - often even called 'dear' - at a dinner party, for example, when one expressed an opinion that some man at the table didn't share. It was only in those years that many of us, raised without thinking, or question, in the patriarchy, learned to label this sort of behaviour 'patronising', and so found it far, far easier, whether gently or irritably, to call it out. The process of language illuminating thought is continual. Even in the last few years, such terms as coercive behaviour, micro-aggression, and the revival of the expression 'gaslighting' have helped people to recognise, and speak out clearly, about certain sorts of behaviour.

The same is true for young people. Over the last couple of decades there has been a huge amount of work and attention in our schools to try to help children recognise, and be able to speak out, about negative or unwanted behaviours like the importunate touching of body parts, bullying, sexism and racism. I think back to my own contribution to this - *Bill's New Frock*, written way back in 1989. The point of the book was to highlight the differences in approach to boys and girls, the girls' frocks often having no useful pockets, being in colours like pink that get dirty at the slightest thing, along with adult assumptions about how the boys would always be stronger and the girls' work neater, etc, etc) and to show in this very light little book how, if something was inappropriate or irksome for Bill (who remains ineffably Bill throughout) we should be asking ourselves if these same things are appropriate for the girls.

And language - labelling - is an important part of it. Remember the scene when Bill, in his stupid frock, and Rohan, in his shirt and jeans, have come to blows over the very last Beano.

Mrs Collins punished them both. She put them at neighbouring desks and made them write *Fighting is stupid and fighting is ugly* in their best handwriting over and over again, till the bell rang. They sat with exactly the same sour look on their faces. Both were still furious at the unfairness of it all. To everyone else, they looked for all the world like a pair of scowling and bad-tempered twins.

And every now and again, someone would tiptoe past and whisper in Rohan's ear,

"You look so *angry*." But in Bill's they whispered, "You look so *upset*."

It doesn't all sink in at once with everybody, of course. Or even after 32 years. One of my sort of step-grandsons reported back to me only last year that his teacher had told one of the boys in his class to collect up the worksheets at the end of the lesson. One or two fell on the floor and were handed in a bit smudged and crumpled. "Heigh, ho," said the teacher. "I suppose that's what happens when you ask a boy to do a girl's job."

I'd like to be able to tell you the remark was met by outrage and uproar in the classroom, but sadly it wasn't. We still do have an awful long way to go.

But knowing what you think, and how you feel, and having the skills and confidence to be able to make that plain to others is vital. To some, the Born Lippy, speaking up comes naturally. For examples of that, you need to look no further than one or two of the members of my own family, who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty. For others, it's far, far harder. For the desperately shy. The tongue-tied. The all-too-anxious-to-please who never want to risk putting a foot wrong. But there's a price to pay for not being able to unbutton your beak, spit it out, make with the words - whatever. For generations there have been deeply, deeply insulting overtones to the word 'dumb'.

I happen to have triplet sisters. I'm not a triplet myself. I'm three years older. But one of my earlier, more autobiographical, novels was called *Round Behind the Icehouse*, and featured twins. Not identical twins, in the way my triplet sisters are identical, but twins - enough to make me interested in how sibling relationships of that sort work.

One of the things I found in reading around the topic was that the children of double or multiple births tend, without thinking, to divvy up the expertise in various ways. As Tom, in the book, says,

"It is as if, to grow as twins, we chose to split ourselves in two right from the start, failings and skills. And now, for better or worse, some things are mine and some are Cass's. If I fell in the combine harvester, she'd probably have to live forever with her unslippy slip-knots, unable to tell when an animal's sick just from taking a good look, and never able to close the barn door since, with me there, she hasn't ever bothered to master the knack of rocking it over the warps on the floor.

And it's the same for me. If Cass ran away from the farm, would I go through the rest of my life unsure which pair of boots are mine because she's not reached for hers, hopeless at changing the light bulbs in the cowshed, and never brave enough to answer Mum back the way that Cass can now."

It's this very last example that I stole from my sisters. One of them always was the one to speak up. If my mother was demanding to know who'd done this, or whether the three of them had yet done the other - whatever - always it was the same two of the three who would slide silently into place behind the sister who had been, quite without anyone ever realising it, deputed by the three of them to be 'the speaker-up'.

But that at least is what the other two *preferred*. Having a lippy child or two in the classroom can raise a problem for others. There can't be a single teacher who hasn't had to deal tactfully with the child whose hand goes shooting up at every opportunity, leaving the less confident and the less fluent somewhat floundering behind.

Sometimes we are tempted to ask ourselves, both teachers and parents, along with tired adults on any mid-afternoon bus, "Why do they have to speak up *at all*? What was so awful about the state of affairs when young people were expected to be seen and not heard?"

And the answer is obvious. Young people really, really need to have a voice. Childhood is not a cakewalk. As any psychotherapist will point out, of course, bad experiences in childhood are not entirely negative. Nonetheless, there's still something deeply shivery about Flannery O'Connor's remark: "*Anyone who survives childhood has enough information about life to last them to the end of their days.*"

And we should never be tempted to think that life as a young person is easier for some than for others - that perhaps those whose parents are stable and well-heeled might have an easier start in life than those raised in a drab, chaotic or poverty stricken household

Here's very posh Lord Berners, to prove that 'deprivation' isn't the issue:

"Those who say their childhood was the happiest period of their lives must, one suspects, have been the victims of perpetual misfortune in later years.The only thing for which children are to be envied is their exuberant vitality. This is apt to be mistaken for happiness...." He goes on to say, "*I know from my own experience that black care can sit behind us even on our rocking-horse.*"

We have a body of stories since children's literature began about cruel step-parents, cold orphanages, brutal schools. We can name books to exhibit a spectrum of misery from micro to macro - the single child, a family, most of a school - even whole nations - think of *The Silver Sword*.

And even the most domestic commonplaces of childhood can be *miserable*. I once asked my former hubby, "What's your earliest memory?" And it was of standing in short trousers in the sleet at the back door in the pocket handkerchief garden of his home on a Coventry housing estate, his knees and fingers burning from the cold, and beating on the back door with his fists, only to hear his mother saying, "You can't come

in yet. It isn't dinner time!" (Here was a woman with six strapping noisy boys and almost no money coming into the house, so we have to feel sorry for her too.)

Childhood, which is sensitivity without power, has always been the crucible of misery. And for all their expensive phones and online games and stuff, hardly any of us would envy those living through their childhoods now. As the American sociologist Ivan Illich has suggested, society now produces two kinds of slaves: "*the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy*". We see them as toddlers strapped into their pushchairs facing away while their parents chat endlessly to other adults on their mobile phones, or dragged through parts of shops where no young parent needs to be, and things go downhill from there.

We know of seven year olds slapping perfectly normal limbs, and wailing, "I've got fat legs", or taking to comfort eating and turning into barrage balloons. We see them miserable at twelve because their hair and faces don't look like whichever lovely is the new Clairol 'because I'm worth it' model. We see them losing all control and sense of proportion because their phones have been removed from them for less than an hour. And we know that, even if they stopped making themselves entirely miserable with their own chosen social media, and were encouraged to turn outwards to the wider world, there would be aspects of their lives that we still wouldn't envy. How can you grow up strong and confident when, from the day you were born, every bad thing that has happened in the entire world has been brought into your living room on a big screen, dead on the hour, with heart-stopping music and eye-grabbing graphics and, usually, satellite photos of the dead.

What effect does this sort of thing have on them? (Apart from triggering exchanges like the one the Dr Theodore Dalrymple claims to have overheard between a four year old and his parents in a hospital corridor, when the youngster was told his Granny had died. The child's first question? "Was she shot or was she stabbed?")

You don't need me to remind you that hours of CBeebies left on like moving wallpaper do nothing for other areas of their development either. It doesn't just stunt them verbally and leave them less deft at physical tasks. Teachers report that many, many children now come to school bereft of the capacity to ask the question 'Why?' They are so used to seeing things they don't understand rushing past their eyes, they no longer have any expectation of getting on top of the mysteries of their universe.

It is indeed a bleak picture. But stories, oral or written, offer one of the most effective and important forms of help for children living in a difficult world. Essentially, the children's author's job is no more than to provide 'a good read'. But over and above that, most of us find we are also trying to interpret this world to the children who read us - illuminate their situations or those of others around them - enrich them, and with luck offer something in the nature of a hope to cling to, a line to take, even a way to go.

How? Well, there's the sense the child reader gets of no longer being the only one in the world to have this problem or to feel this way. "That's almost exactly like what happened to me." "That is exactly how I feel!" As C S Lewis puts it, "*Literary experience heals the wound without undermining the privilege of individuality.*" (Or, put more simply, "We read to know that we are not alone.") If you feel that what you're thinking or feeling has been *legitimised*, you can feel better about speaking up. There's vicarious, safe exploration. A child who cannot even bear to begin to think about his or her own situation can often begin, safely, to explore the problems they face through fiction, someone else's problem. The author or the storyteller has described the situation or the problem to you. Now you have both a structure and the vocabulary you might have lacked. Now you can go ahead and describe the situation or the problem you yourself have to another person.

Because, to speak up, we have to feel at home with language. We have to be comfortable meeting and using words, knowing what they mean, learning how to use them. Sometimes the pronunciation will go haywire. Only last week, listening to Radio 3, I heard the word Terpsichore. I've known the word for decades (well, read it) and thought it was Terpsichore. When I was young, I thought there were two separate words - misled (a total accident, a simple mistake made) and misled (a fiendish and deliberate deception).

And it's not just vocabulary - though I deplore the current trend with editors of children's books of saying, "They might not know that word, so can you pick a simpler one?" Give them a break. It is their *heritage*, and the richest language in the world.

But even simple language can be enriching. I had an Irish granny and I loved the colourful things she came out with all through my childhood. I loved weird proverbs from the start, and have used them in so many of my books. Take the various strictures of Rupert's Great Aunt Ada, in *Roll Over Roly*. "Take the road of Not Yet, and the only place you'll arrive is the Land of Never." "Good manners are like measles. The only way to get them is to spend time where they already are." "You look like a man sent to empty a bath with a teaspoon." "Bad habits are first cobwebs then cables."

Complexity of language can be a most important part of this. It's not just that thin and spiritless writing leads to thin, spiritless thought. It's also that ways of speech can serve another purpose to do with the strengthening of that important sense of self-identity. From different cultures we see intriguing similarities and differences. The Hindi proverb, "A hollow lentil rattles loudest." is just the same as "An empty vessel makes the most noise", except that instead of envisaging some sturdy British cooking pot we see a heap of once exotic red or yellow lentils.

And styles of speech can mirror national traits. Many years ago I taught EFL to recent Jewish Russian emigres who'd got to America through Ronald Reagan's Visas for Grain swaps. I remember talking to one of my young men about some person in the news who had done something awful, and said how mixed up and troubled this person must

have been. I got the most contemptuous response. "Troubled? Ha! He is mad or he is bad!" The entire concept of psychology had been banned during Boris's lifetime growing up in the Soviet Union, and in these matters he looked at the world through the prism of this, his native country's bleak and unforgiving culture. A few years later, I recreated Boris as the mother in *The Granny Project*, Natasha Dolgorova, reared similarly in that stern country in harsh times. On the first page, we meet her austere, not to say flinty, use of language. Of the way her four children are eating their sausages: "No need to kill your food. It is already dead." Of the plan to put Granny into a home: "Thinking is over. It is decided." Throughout the novel she disconcerts her English-raised children with her uncompromising Russian proverbs: "To drink tea is not to hew wood." "You can't hide sharp steel spikes in soft cloth bags." "To live life's not so simple as to cross a field." "Love is not a potato. You cannot throw it out the window." "Devils live in quiet ponds."

What have we got here? Hewing wood, sharp steel spikes, fields, potatoes, ponds. It reeks of basic rural life. And Natasha's brusque and severe way of talking, never wrapping anything up to make it sound softer, gives out a strong sense of both her identity, and her hard, unsentimental upbringing in dangerously brutal times.

Similarly - or more accurately, in contrast - in the Genie series, *A Sudden Puff of Smoke*, *A Sudden Swirl of Icy Wind*, and *A Sudden Glow of Gold*, we meet the ancient African and oriental cultures and gather a strong sense of their atmosphere and surroundings simply from the proverbs:

Nobody calls his own buttermilk sour.

Truth is not hid in a nutmeg.

The wise man raises his roof beams *before* he brings home his camel.

Life is a splendid robe: it's only fault is its short length.

He who is angry at a feast is rude.

Riches are like camel dung. No use till they are spread.

The wise man sits on the hole in his carpet.

We see the ties between language and landscape and climate and culture. We're introduced to the richness of Persian proverbs. I couldn't have made these up myself. I found them in Edinburgh City Reference Library, in an old book that I was probably the first in years to take down from the shelves. And sitting there reading through them, I could almost taste saffron and tamarind, and feel a desert wind blowing sand into my face. One more example of the importance of the written word as a means of recording, preserving and then learning about other cultural heritages. Through the three stories the reader get insight into, and hopefully a much, much deeper respect for, different parts of the world.

Complexity and richness of language is a joy to many children. I once told my husband where one of my editors had gone on holiday - "Gilly's in Chile" - and won't

forget my own toddler spinning round the kitchen for ages after. "Gilly's in Chile. Gilly's in Chile." She'd never met Gilly, hadn't a clue what an editor was, and she'd never heard of Chile. But she could recognise a brand new nursery rhyme as soon as she heard it.

As I said earlier, it's simply not sufficient for children to learn to make with the words. It's equally important that adults make an effort to hear what they're trying to say. I wonder how many of you remember the old Cat Stevens song, Father and Son, with that very telling line, "From the moment I could talk, I was ordered to listen." The problem of parents not even listening comes in *Poor Monty*, the only picture book I'm going to mention. In *Poor Monty*, illustrated first by Clara Vulliamy, later again by Kevin Evans, Monty's mother, a very busy doctor, gets home and all she wants to do is put her feet up and have a cup of tea and a quiet little read of the paper. Monty tries talking to her.

"Suppose," he says, "Suppose you felt funny all over and a little bit shivery." "

Mmmm," said his mother, turning over a page.

"And suppose," said Monty, "Suppose your forehead was hot, and your head felt as if little men with steel boots were stamping in it... And suppose your tummy felt as if someone had made you eat worms."

"Mmmm", said his mother, turning another page.

"And suppose," bellowed Monty, "Suppose when you lifted up your shirt, you found you had little red spots all over your body!"

And he burst into tears.

Monty's mother scooped him up and cuddled him. "Oh, poor Monty," she said. "What a terrible doctor I am. You've got chicken pox!"

And Monty felt a little bit better already.

We don't any of us talk for nothing, and learning how to air one's views clearly is massively helpful. Most people seem to remember the book *Goggle-Eyes* mostly because of the personal relationship that gradually develops between Kitty and Gerald Faulkner, aka Goggle-Eyes. But the book was written in order to air the arguments for and against nuclear disarmament. (Today, of course, Kitty would be in Extinction Rebellion, so any smart teenage reader will have no problem sussing out the echoes.) Gerald truly believes that it is the sheer awfulness of these all but unusable weapons that keeps big nations from risking all out-war. Kitty and her mother believe they are a deeply immoral use of much-needed public money. The argument begins on the first day Kitty and Gerald Faulker are briefly left alone together.

"So," he said. "You're all mixed up in it, too. The woolly hat brigade. Close down

the power stations. Ban the bomb."

Tones of voice don't come much more frosty than mine was, I can tell you. "I'm in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, yes."

"But nuclear power's been invented now," he said. "You can't just pretend it hasn't. You can't disinvent it."

"You can't disinvent thumb screws, either," I snapped. "Or gas chambers. But you can dismantle them. And you should."

He spread his hands. "But why? Nuclear weapons are our best defence."

"They're no defence at all," I said. "Bombs that poison the planet you live on can't defend you. You can't use them. It would just be suicide."

The testing out of one another goes on, with Gerald's political views mirroring almost entirely those of my then Daily Mail reading father, and Kitty's mirroring mine. But Gerald also can't help coming out with his views (mine at the time, actually) on how the flaky and inefficient demonstrations are run, and so the reader also has to think about that. And by the end of the book, the child reader has a much richer, deeper sense of how the arguments on two sides of an ongoing political issue, still very much with us today, can be unfolded intellectually and are best publicly aired. Haven't we seen the message of Extinction Rebellion blurred by public attitudes to some of their methods? The issues raised in the book are live.

The Granny Project, *The Book of the Banshee*, and *The Road of Bones* were all written to illuminate historical and political issues - to give the reading child a handle on the world. *Blood Family* and *Charm School* are written to tell us more about the issues in our own society and the readers' own lives: *Blood Family*, about addiction. *Charm School* about the tyranny of wanting to look good. As Susan Sontag once remarked, "I think the most useful thing that I can do with my fiction is increase the sense of the complexity of things." And once the reader is confident they know a little more, they will speak up. It's not as if they're slow in coming forward to put you and me right on matters that they *know* they know about, like computer games, rap groups or how to change the settings on our mobile phones.

It's not just the child who has to find a voice through literature. The author, too, has this challenge. I think the loveliest thing about starting any first person piece of work for young people is finding the tone of the narrator. Let's talk for a moment about the Killer Cat, Tuffy. Tuffy's voice is seminal to the series as a whole. The idea for the very first book came from an urban legend, a modern type of oral storytelling that relies on part truths, exaggerations, embellishments, and purely invented stuff. Like the poodle accidentally exploded by the silly old lady in her microwave, here we have the rabbit accidentally exhumed from its grave next door. Now Tuffy's voice, of course, is that of the resentful, sulking teenage stepson. "Okay, okay. So hang me. I killed the

bird." There are now nine of these Killer Cat books, six published in Britain, and if you read in any European language, you can probably find a further three: *The Killer Cat's Funeral*; *The Killer Cat in Love*; and *The Killer Cat Sees the Light*. One of the pleasures of these books is finding unlimited ways of saying, "Okay, okay, so hang me." And here, your pupils have been more than helpful, posting in suggestions:

So boil me in bunny juice.

So spank my little furry bum.

So stick my head in a holly bush.

So bite my bum and feed me worms all week.

So glue my paws to the carpet.

So cover me with jam and drop me in a box of wasps.

So pump me up with air and tie a knot in me.

I have been sent so many Killer Cat stories by schools, always reminding me that I myself learned to write by writing like my then favourite author, Enid Blyton. In doing that, without even knowing it, I was following Philip Larkin's advice to any would-be author, "Sit down and write the book that you yourself would most like to read, but no one has written for you." It's my opinion that the word 'derivative' has no place whatsoever in primary education.

But that leads me on to another observation about books being of use as a trigger. As we all know to our cost, young people are not noted for their keenness to take sensible advice. On the other hand, they can be very quick indeed to follow a bad example. But not just bad examples. It might be in a novel, after all, that the daughter of an extremely traditional family first sees the role model of a girl aiming for the career she secretly envies, or that the son of an overbearing bully first reads about another family with a warm supportive father and tells himself, even unconsciously, "That is the sort of man that I am going to be when I grow up." Books can trigger all sorts of things, including the more sophisticated understanding of - and ability to make with the words about - our children's inherent unease about some aspects of our society. I've had more than one child tell me that it was only after reading *The Stone Menagerie* that they were able to follow Ally's example, and tell their parents they no longer wanted to go to any circus that used animals, or to cramped zoos. I've had a host of parents tell me that, after their offspring got *The Chicken Gave it To Me* out of the library, they became quite militant about only eating free range eggs.

Not speaking up can, of course, also entail a power of its own sort. I'm not sure

who it was who first made the observation that 'the only power of weak people is their secrets'. But when you look around you, whether the weakness concerned stems from the person's situation, or from their character, the wisdom of this becomes plain. In my most recent novel for older children, *Shades of Scarlet*, the family splits up, Scarlet is definitely not happy about it, and lo and behold, Mum just happens to give her the most beautiful glossy blank book - the sort you would instantly be tempted to use as an intimate diary.

Is it deliberate? Does Mum plan to sneak upstairs and try to bone up secretly on what her daughter is thinking? Scarlet certainly thinks so. She does, of course, have the choice now of either keeping the beautiful notebook well hidden from her mother's prying eyes, or writing in it the brutal stuff she'd *like* her mother to read to punish her for turning all their lives upside down. And so, in ways that are unclear at the start, the book becomes a quite extraordinary catalyst for Scarlet thinking things through, weighing up one thing against another, taking a deeper and much more mature look at everyone around her.

It's not just children, of course, who sometimes find themselves unable to use language to express their feelings. We do, after all, have the word 'unspeakable' - something too awful to put into words. This brings me to my newest novel, *Aftershocks*. For all my working life, people have been coming up to me, sometimes determined, sometimes embarrassed, sometimes tearful, to ask me to try to tackle certain topics. And the death of a child is way, way up there on the list.

It's not something we like to think about. Then, suddenly, we have to. It happens in our family, or to a neighbour on our street, or to someone we meet. And some of us are good at knowing what to say, and when, and how. And others find ourselves so tongue-tied, or nervous that we will say the wrong thing - handle it clumsily - that we are silenced.

And for the parents, of course, feelings go far, far deeper than words ever could.

In *Aftershocks*, it is the father who can't bring himself to speak of Toby, killed on his bike. We all know, intellectually, that people grieve in different ways, take different attitudes, take different lengths of time to want even to try to pick up the ragged threads of life. But all too often, unhappily, one person's way of dealing with the worst horror that can beset a parent is just what the other can't stand. We see so many good marriages faltering under this stress.

Dad had been clearing out the cupboard under the stairs to make room for the new indoor recycling tubs, pulling out a heap of things and piling them behind him, all the while asking Mum, "Do we still need this?", and, "Surely there must be a better place for us to keep these!"

She kept her patience. "Yes, Phil, I use that all the time." "Well, if you're happy to go and fetch that out of the shed each time I need it, then fine, go ahead and move it."

Then, just as she went in the kitchen to find a place for the old blender he'd hauled out, he called to her, "What shall I do with these?"

"With what?" she called back.

"These."

She was still trying not to sound too irritated. "I'm up a set of kitchen steps here, Phil, and I can't see round corners. What are we talking about?"

But Dad just called back, "These."

I looked up. Dad was holding out a pair of Toby's running shoes. They were brand new. If Toby had even worn them twice, I'd be surprised.

Mum had come down the steps by now and walked across to see. There was one of those awful, awful silences when you just know that something bad is on its way.

"You can't even say his name, can you?" Her voice was icy with scorn. "He was your son, and you can't even say his name aloud. You never mention him, and if I do, you wriggle and squirm, and hope that I'll shut up. You try to go around as if he never was here. You act as if you would *prefer* that."

"Anna - "

"No, don't 'Anna' me, Phil! I have had enough. You've tried to cast your It-Never-Happened spell on everyone, and now even Louie here knows better than to say his brother's name when you're around."

That shook me. Till my mum flung that at Dad, I hadn't realised. But it was true. If Dad was anywhere around, I never mentioned Toby.

"He lived *here*," Mum said, flinging out her arms. Her voice rose. "With us! In this house! He was in every corner of it, day after day, from the first week he was born. Not one square inch of it is free of him. How can you even *begin* to want to try to pretend he isn't part of us? How can you *do* that?"

Dad tried again. "Anna, be fair! We all have different ways of trying to deal with things like this, and - "

She cut right in on him. "'Things like this'? 'Things like this'? What are you *talking* about? There *is* nothing like this! Nothing! This is the very *worst*."

He tried to reach for her. She pushed him away. 'No! Do it your way, if you must! But don't think for a minute that banning the word 'Toby' from this house does you, or any of us, any favours!'

"I *never* banned the word. I just can't - just can't - "

Dad stopped. His face was set. I waited. Nothing else was said. After a moment or two, Dad turned back to the cupboard he was clearing, and Mum went outside 'for a

breath of air'.

But it was on the following day that she went looking for another place.

They always say that writers write about what they know, and as I admitted at the very start of this talk, not being able to speak up has never been a problem of mine. But in the last book I'm going to discuss here, it is a central theme. I'm talking of *The Book of the Banshee* - what some might call a tragi-comedy of family life - and more autobiographical in some ways than I would care to admit. Indeed, I recall passing the typescript to the daughter concerned when I finished it. "I'm a bit worried", I said, "that people might think the central character is not a million miles from you. If you like I will publish this one under another name."

She took it away and read it. She brought it back.

"That's all okay," she said. "I think I come out rather well."

Now that truly was one time when I have found myself speechless.

Elective or selective mutism, thankfully rare, is a sign of deep malaise. The person who won't speak in *The Book of the Banshee* is (entirely fictional) little Muffy, around four years old. "Make with the words, Muffy," her elder brother Will keeps urging her, even though he himself tends to keep his opinions to himself, what with Estelle, the teenage Banshee of this book, rampaging about, turning the house upside down with her outbursts. So it's scarcely surprising that little Muffy also prefers to keep her head down, or safely up her brother's woolly, or in any way out of the line of fire. It's a complicated book to explain. Suffice it to say that by the end of it, Will, having compulsively read and reread the war memoir of William Saffery, who learned the hard way what happens when you don't stand up to be counted, moves on from just being exasperated by what he takes to be his self-indulgent, uncontrolled sister, to seeing the value of her speaking up, over and over, about just about everything. And in finally recognising what's she's about, and admiring her determination and courage, he makes the effort to emulate her and speak up for himself. Instantly we see him grow in confidence. He will no longer be pushed around, not, not even by his beloved Muffy, to whom he reads the bedtime story every night.

Under my nose, she thrust another book.

"What's this?"

She didn't speak, of course. I took a look.

"*Beauty and the Beast.*"

A smile spread over her face. Nodding happily, she slid between the sheets. I bet she thought I'd just fall in with her plans, settling myself against the pillows and starting straight in on the story. Well, no such luck. Muffy might not have realised it yet, but this

was the day on which Will Flowers had decided to learn to stand up and be counted.

I closed the book. "It looks very good, but I'm not reading it until you ask me properly."

Muffy stared. Then she pointed at the book again.

I ignored her. Whistling softly, I gazed up at the ceiling and pretended to examine the dust on the light fitting.

She stabbed the book again.

The witchy finger holds no terrors for me. Is someone who's been pointed at by Mum with her scarlet fingernails, and Estelle with her green ones, likely to crack when they see a chubby pink finger?

No, I'm afraid they are not.

"I'm sorry," I told her firmly. "I'm sick of this business of you not talking to me. I'm not a reading and a carrying machine. I am your brother. Will Flowers is my name. And if you want me to read you a bedtime story, you can go to the trouble of asking me."

She glowered at me like a tiny Estelle. I'm surrounded by them, all ages and sizes. But I am going to hold firm.

"Go on," I prompted. "Make with the words. Ask me."

"Read me a story, please," she muttered, still glowering horribly.

"Certainly," I said, bowing and scraping. "With the greatest of pleasure. I'd love to read to you. Nothing would be nicer. Would you like this one?" I opened the book to the first page. "It's called Beauty and the Beast."

She nodded.

I made as if to close the book again.

"Yes, please. That one," she said.

"Very well," I said. "Are you sitting quite comfortably? Then I'll begin. 'Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom....'

The old, old way of starting one of the old, old stories. And as Will himself remarks at some point in the book, "These, old, old fairy tales. They really do hit the spot."

Thank you.

Talk given to UKLA (UK Literacy Association) conference, July 2021