



THE ASTRID LINDGREN
MEMORIAL AWARD

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BIOBIBLIOGRAPHY

SONYA HARTNETT (Australia 1968–)

“A young person who reads a book today takes that book into tomorrow, is shaped and influenced by the work, learns from it, remembers it, holds it inside. And because this happens to books written for the young, children’s and Young Adult literature is important – more important, one could argue, than writing for adults.”

Sonya Hartnett, lecture in 2004

Sonya Hartnett made her publishing debut at the age of just 15 with *Trouble All the Way* (1984), a novel she had written when she was 13. She received a great deal of media attention. The painfully shy girl who had always felt she was weird became, in her own words, a loud-mouthed child who appeared on TV. Nowadays Hartnett regrets her early debut. She believes she has devoted large parts of her life to trying to write books that prove she is better than the reputation of her first book would suggest – books that prove she can be a real author.

To say she has succeeded would be an understatement. Hartnett is one of the authors currently charting a new course for young adult fiction in terms of both form and content, while constantly pushing the boundaries of her own authorship. No two works are alike. She skilfully adapts her beautiful, precise and illustrative language and her artful narrative technique to the requirements of each novel.

The subject matter and the complexity of the novels bring many of them close to adult fiction, blurring the distinction. In Hartnett’s view, she has tried to offer her young audience material that can expand their consciousness: *“Would a portion of the audience actually prefer me to write of boy meeting girl, boy getting girl, boy losing girl? If so, then that portion of my audience is not my audience.”* (*Guardian*, 12 October 2002)

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Hartnett repeatedly depicts situations of power and dependence in small, close-knit groups: a family in *Sleeping Dogs* (1995) and *Thursday's Child* (2000), a group of friends in *All my dangerous friends* (1998), and a pair of twins in *Princes* (1997).

In her works Hartnett offers examples of great insight into the contradictory nature of humanity, such as our yearning for security and attraction to danger. Satchel in *Stripes of the Sidestep Wolves* (1999) stubbornly stays with her fanatically religious father, even though she ought to set herself free. Louie in *All my dangerous friends* is enticed into a gang of criminal young men, even though they are violent.

What Hartnett's characters go through is often hard to endure: mental and physical abuse, violent and sudden death. She does not avoid that which is dark, unpleasant or malevolent. No reader can fail to be moved by what Hartnett describes. Perhaps the most emotionally compelling ingredient is her ability to delve deep into the psyche of young people with difficult and traumatic experiences behind them, as in *The Devil Latch* (1996) and *Surrender* (2005). Here, she is breaking new ground and going further than any previous author of young adult fiction.

Beneath the surface there is a throbbing anger at the way children and young people are treated. If someone – generally an adult – had acted differently, the outcome would have been different. For instance, if the artist Bow Fox in *Sleeping Dogs* had been governed by anything other than self-interest when he discovered the Willows family's dark secrets, disaster would have been avoided.

Hartnett's uncompromising honesty in recognizing the difficulties young people may struggle with, and how horrible human beings can be to one another, creates a sense of empathy and involvement. Anyone who has ever known such feelings towards existence may draw strength from seeing their experiences confirmed.

There are also counterweights to all this darkness. One is closeness to animals and nature, which Hartnett captures with a vivid wealth of detail. She conjures up the Australian landscape in the minds of readers. Although she not infrequently portrays it as parched, desolate and full of dangers, it is crucial that human beings should be part of a wider context. Our affinity and kinship with animals foster respect for all living things. Hartnett goes furthest in *Forest* (2001), which on the surface is a fable in which the protagonists are cats – perhaps the most genuinely catty cats ever seen in literature. Paradoxically though, as is often the case with Hartnett, the book is also a universal tale of young people, of life and death, peer pressure and the fight for survival.

Other positive forces are love – most clearly seen in Hartnett's brilliant description of the weird and impoverished Flute family's struggle for survival during the 1930s depression in *Thursday's Child* – and art, a central theme in *Wilful Blue* (1994), which depicts a group of young painters. The idea of creativeness as a refuge and an escape recurs in several places

in Hartnett's works. The girl Harper in *Thursday's Child* writes stories about bold young women when times are at their hardest, and the abused boy Jordan in *Sleeping Dogs* lives most fully through his drawing.

So, darkness is not all-prevailing in Hartnett's fictional world. One example of a lighter note is her only book written purely for children, *The Silver Donkey* (2004), which tells how three siblings meet and help a deserter from the trenches of the First World War. Here, Hartnett is spot-on in her portrayal of children at various ages, while successfully depicting war at a child's level without its being either scary or adapted. Another example is her latest novel, *The Ghost's Child* (2007), a fantastic, poetic tale that, on a symbolic level, conveys deep truths about the realities of love and life.

Like the works of Astrid Lindgren, Hartnett's books are permeated by an empathy with children and young people living under difficult circumstances. Her original, provocative and unpredictable writings take this subject matter into a new era.

Sonya Hartnett has been translated into a number of languages, including Danish, German, Swedish, Italian and Chinese. She has won numerous awards, including the Guardian Children's Literature Prize in the UK for *Thursday's Child* in 2002 and the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award for Younger Readers in 2005 for her children's book *The Silver Donkey*.

WORKS IN ENGLISH

Trouble All the Way, Rigby (Australia), 1984

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