



[Home](#) > I Wish I'd Written... A Swarm in May

I Wish I'd Written... A Swarm in May

Article Author:

[Jan Mark](#) [1]

[109](#) [2]

Article Category:

I Wish I'd Written

Byline:

Jan Mark chooses William Mayne's **A Swarm in May**.

Jan Mark on William Mayne's A Swarm in May ? the book that showed her the way she must go...

<!--break-->

It is almost 40 years since I discovered **A Swarm in May** and an image from it has haunted me ever since: Prior Tollege's mysterious bee-charming compound with its 'pale green smell'. I came to it late, as a 6th former, not a child, and I was shocked. Children's books were not written like this, elusive, elliptical, uncompromising, but I read it because although Mayne never identified Canterbury I recognized our neighbouring city and its cathedral from Hodges's illustrations. I was hooked, instantly, by the familiarity of the setting and the pervasive strangeness of the world he was describing; a school, but like no school I knew, where children were trained singers, lived and worked as much in the cathedral as in their homes and classrooms, alongside the clergy and musicians who were their teachers, speaking an argot intriguingly combining prep-school slang with ecclesiastical puns. The story of John Owen, a choirboy who fears to sing solo in public at a special service and conquers his fear by solving a mediaeval mystery, became my lodestar. In between A level texts I read and re-read it. I wished I had written it, I began to feel almost that I *could* write it. It showed me the way I must go.

A Swarm in May by William Mayne, illustrated by C Walter Hodges, first published by OUP 1955, currently paperbacked by Hodder 1997 (0 340 65681 6, £3.99). Jan Mark's latest book is **The Sighting** (Viking Children's Books, reviewed **BfK 108**).

Page Number:

11

Source URL (retrieved on Nov '19): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/109/childrens-books/articles/i-wish-i%E2%80%99d-written/i-wish-i%E2%80%99d-written-a-swarm-in-may>

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/jan-mark>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/109>