



## BfK Profile: Terry Deary

Article Author:

[Sue Unstead](#) [1]

[141](#) [2]

Article Category:

BfK Profile

Byline:

**Sue Unstead** on the UK's leading writer of non-fiction, **Terry Deary**.

Ask a group of 8-10 year olds to name their favourite author and Terry Deary's name is bound to crop up. Rarely out of the bestseller lists <!--break-->in the past ten years, he has collected two Blue Peter awards, was voted 'Outstanding children's non-fiction author of the 20th Century' by **BfK** readers, and was found to be the most-borrowed author of non-fiction in a library survey. With more than 130 books to his name in the UK and over 350 worldwide, he is best known for 'Horrible Histories', which have sold over 8 million copies. **Sue Unstead** explores.

Thanks to the success of the 'Horrible Histories' series, Terry Deary is labelled as a non-fiction author, but this is only part of the picture. 'In fact it's far more enjoyable writing fiction,' says Deary. His very first book, **The Custard Kid**, has recently been reissued by A & C Black, along with seven other Deary classics in the 'Black Cats' series.

Born in 1946 in Sunderland, Deary's first venture into writing came about as a result of his work with Theatre In Education. Deary studied drama and then went into teaching before his dream-job came up as an actor-teacher with a theatre group in Wales performing plays in schools and community theatre. Frustrated by the poor quality of published plays, he started writing material himself. The company wanted a Western for their next play ('so they could talk in American accents all the time and get away with it?'). Deary turned the genre on its head and created a cowardly cowboy 'The Custard Kid'. Adapted into a book, it was rejected 23 times before a discerning editor appreciated the humour and published it alongside another teacher-turned-author, Jeremy Strong.

Other fiction series followed, several of which were targeted at reluctant readers. A change of direction came with an approach from Scholastic to write a Father Christmas joke book. Not wanting to turn down work as a fledgling writer, he made such a good job of it that there followed a request for a history joke book. This was originally to include such gems as 'Where did the French keep their guillotine? In the chopping centre?', with historical anecdotes alongside the jokes. In the end the historical content proved much more interesting than the jokes, and 'Horrible Histories' emerged, the first title being **The Terrible Tudors**, followed by **Awesome Egyptians** and **Rotten Romans**.

Now Deary alternates writing fiction with non-fiction, though often he combines the two, as in 'Tudor Terrors', an historical adventure series published by Orion, or 'The Time Detectives', another adventure series, this time from Faber in which a young team of investigators uncovers the truth behind real historical mysteries. 'Tudor Tales', a new collection of stories for younger readers from A & C Black, bear all the Deary hallmarks with their descriptions of the underbelly of Tudor society 'a world of greasy taverns, rat-infested attics, scullions and potwashers. The Henry VIII we meet here is no Renaissance prince but a bloated elderly king behaving like a playground bully, while Elizabeth I is not the Gloriana currently being celebrated in quatercentennial exhibitions but a raddled old hag with rotting teeth and foul breath. In each tale the plot turns upon the brave or cunning actions of the smart kid who outwits the adult. That child is also the narrator, so we are immediately drawn into the story with convincing dialogue, and sharply drawn historical detail.

According to his website, books pop out of his wordprocessor like 'eggs from a chicken's bottom'. Clearly Deary is not a man who suffers from writer's block, for he is a prolific author who sorts out ideas in his head and then gets them down at speed. Most books are completed in a month. As a result he hates rewriting or revising, and though he puts trust in his sales and marketing people, he views most editors as 'a waste of space', an unnecessary obstacle between author and his audience. 'Mostly middle-aged, middle-class women from the south of England', he is reported to have announced to a startled conference of publishing worthies!

Deary has a strong authorial voice, a feature that distinguishes his books in a field where bland encyclopedic information is too often the norm. He writes with his imaginary reader always in his mind, someone who is not a particularly fluent reader or with a long attention span. His tone is conspiratorial 'not 'I'm a grown-up so sit still and I'll tell you what I know', but 'I'm no expert but you'll never believe what I found out when I read this book'. His huge popularity, especially amongst boys, is undoubtedly a result of this genuine enthusiasm 'a big kid who just wants to share the information with others kids, big or small.

It's now ten years since the first 'Horrible History' titles were published and a mass of publicity and special events have marked the anniversary. There are now 30 books in the series ranging from curriculum favourites like **Awesome Egyptians** and **Rotten Romans** to specials on **Ireland**, **Bloody Scotland** (a book that caused huge fuss when it was launched) and **France**. It would be easy to assume that having found a winning formula, the content of each book is poured into an identical mould. In fact the books are remarkable for their variety, with subject matter dictating style and approach. They are never straight chronologies. Terry Deary sidetracks the reader with features on Terrible Tudor clothes or witches, Rotten Roman childhood or Vile Victorian schools. And there are practical projects (such as how to make a ruff 'and once you've put it on how to stroll around singing 'Greensleeves?'), recipes, sample menus, games, quizzes, diaries, letters and of course the witty and subversive cartoons by Martin Brown which perfectly match Deary's text. Much copied, much maligned by envious publishers, children can't get enough of them, while parents and teachers praise the books for encouraging reluctant readers, especially boys.

Those who give the series little more than grudging praise make comparisons with **1066 and All That**, although the latter is a quite different beast. Originally written as a series of articles for **Punch**, the authors of **1066** celebrated our 'frail recall of the salient facts of history' and the humour comes from getting them wrong. The premise for 'Horrible Histories' is that history is horribly boring unless enlivened by a joke or three a page and a generous helping of gore. Actually I never did find history boring, but then I had a father who wrote popular history books for children '

Perhaps the last word should go to the little boy who paid Terry Deary what he describes as his best compliment: 'I don't like books, but I read yours.'

## The Books

'Black Cats' series (A & C Black) including

**The Custard Kid**, 64pp, 0 7136 5989 0, £3.99 pbk

'Tudor Terror' series (Orion)

'Tudor Tales' series (A & C Black) including

**The Thief, the Fool and the Big Fat King**, 64pp, 0 7136 6434 7, £4.99 pbk

**The Actor, the Rebel and the Wrinkled Queen**, 64pp, 0 7136 6428 2, £4.99 pbk

'Horrible Histories' (Scholastic) including

**The Terrible Tudors**, 128pp, 0 590 55290 2, £3.99 pbk

**The Rotten Romans**, 128pp, 0 590 55467 0, £3.99 pbk

**The Vile Victorians**, 128pp, 0 590 55466 2, £3.99 pbk

?The Time Detectives? series (Faber) including

**The Princes in Terror Tower**, 86pp, 0 571 20117 2, £4.99 pbk

?Spark Files? (Faber) including

**Light and Wrong**, Barbara Allen and Terry Deary, 96pp, 0 571 19742 6, £3.99 pbk

**Talking Books** (includes an interview with Terry Deary) by James Carter, Routledge, 266pp, 0 415 19417 2, £12.99 pbk

Terry Deary?s website: [www.terry-deary.com](http://www.terry-deary.com) [3]

**Sue Unstead** was a publisher of children?s non-fiction for 25 years and is now a freelance editorial consultant and writer.

Page Number:

3

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Nov '19):** <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/141/childrens-books/articles/bfk-profile/bfk-profile-terry-deary>

**Links:**

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/sue-unstead>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/141>

[3] <http://www.terry-deary.com>