



Classics in Short No.40: A Swarm in May

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[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

[141](#) [2]

Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on William Mayne's **A Swarm in May**.

Having done a modern classic last time round, and a school story (of sorts) the time before that, it seems fitting to synthesize matters with <!--break-->

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet.

?A superb, unconventional writer ... rare and intense quality ... a complete original, a damn-your-eyes individualist ...?

Aw! You can not be serious.

?A writer whom children will not read ... sound narrative technique, misdirected psychologizing ... he remains obstinately unread by children ...? (To which can now be added assaults on current sensibilities, here seen as elitism ? all that Latin and posh music ? and exclusiveness ? not a female in sight, apart from a queen-bee and, possibly, a resident cat.)

Such strictures were not heard in 1955

when **A Swarm in May** first appeared and other dispensations prevailed. It was Mayne?s third book and was greeted with universal praise, although both it and Philippa Pearce?s **Minnow on the Say** were passed over for the Carnegie Medal in favour of Eleanor Farjeon?s stories reprinted in **The Little Bookroom**.

Ostensibly the book was ?a school story?.

After all, most of the action occurs among schoolboy-boarders with a line in genuine argot: ?Potty Fido ... chiz ... well done ye ...? but none of Mayne?s work is made for predetermined categories. The school is a choir-school and the narrative is focused upon the duties of John Owen as youngest Singing Boy present for the summer term. To him has fallen the lot of performing in the four-hundred-year-old ceremony of presenting a candle to the Bishop in the service following Ascension Day. It?s not something he cares to do though and he resists in a manner disparaged by all.

His conversion

to the path of duty occurs through his own remarkable discovery within the cathedral?s wall of the ancient beehive (a tiny room hidden in a tower) whence came the medieval candle-wax and the concomitant ceremony of blessing. By shifts and stratagems he and the head chorister rescue enough ancient wax to make a candle, while his further discovery of a globe, formed of a strange substance attractive to bees, enables him to bring a tethered swarm before the Bishop?s throne: ?They hung in an egg-shaped brown lump, with a faint buzz coming from them; but they were perfectly docile.?

John Owen?s conquest

of his aversions and his role in reviving the old custom may seem the point of the story, but in truth they are an excuse for a more telling inquiry. This choir-school is at Canterbury, where Mayne himself was a scholar (the book's dedication reads 'for my fellow choristers') and what is really being celebrated beyond the discrete story is the working-life of a *societas* cathedral as hive. The relationship (wonderfully conveyed) between teachers and taught is essentially collaborative rather than conventionally oppositional. As the headmaster, Mr Ardent (drawn after an actual teacher) says in a later book: 'We are only here to do one thing: sing the Cathedral services.'

That one thing

cannot help but implicate both building and music in the events of the story. It is no accident that we first meet John Owen as he returns to the Cathedral Precincts at the start of a new term. For as he makes his way through the dark grounds the building looms as a presence that dominates the lives of its servants and their toils. Nor is it an accident that the book concludes with a poetic evocation of the Cathedral's music as the organist, Dr Sunderland (a mighty character) sweeps the reader along towards a final diminuendo.

What Mayne achieves here

is a *tour de force* of the writer's craft, having the capacity permanently to shift the reader's sensibility. Workaday authors given this story would plonkingly explain settings, routines, activities 'what a buttress is, or how bees swarm. With Mayne however our apprehension of these things is almost assumed so that his story gains an extraordinary density through the trust placed in the reader's own imagination. Less demonstrably means more.

Nor is this an isolated magic instance.

Homely examples occur in three successor stories (they are hardly sequels) 'but later William Mayne presents us with a host of startlingly dramatic, wondrously varied examples of the storyteller's craft, a succession of imaginative explorations of unparalleled richness. **A Swarm in May** has no primacy among them. There are a dozen at least that equal or exceed its classic status 'but they will hardly figure here. As is the way of things, they are all out of print.

Bibliographical note

Readers of the welcome new printing of **A Swarm in May** (Hodder) should know that it lacks the endpapers designed for the original edition (O.U.P.) which gave the words and music for the Beekeeper's Introit (the notes represented by bees). It also cuts the number of Walter Hodges's line drawings. He went on to illustrate two of the successor volumes: **Choristers' Cake** (1956) and **Cathedral Wednesday** (1960), but the third one, **Words and Music** (1963) had some disconcertingly different drawings by Lynton Lamb. William Mayne also wrote a quite separate choir-school tale for the Choir Schools Association: a slim paperback, **In Choirs** ..., with a companion information booklet, ... **And Places Where They Sing** (1985).

The line drawings by C Walter Hodges are taken from the 2003 Hodder Children's Books edition, 0 340 65681 6, £5.99 pbk.

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Page Number:

28

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