



[Home](#) > The Good Thieves

The Good Thieves

Books Reviewed:

[The Good Thieves](#) [1]

Issue:

[237](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Nick Tucker](#) [3]

~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

2

Stories where children entirely on their own still manage to solve various serious problems, often including crime, have been a staple part of children's literature ever since Erich Kästner's superb *Emil and the Detectives*. At its best, this genre feeds children's wildest fantasies while also reminding them every now and again that their powers particularly when up against dangerous adults often remain very limited. But there are also other more flattering but basically escapist stories where child characters are shown overcoming all obstacles however fearsome on their way towards an idealised ending. Unnaturally clever pets often play a crucial part here while their young masters and mistresses forge ahead, drawing on sometimes quite extraordinary skills of their own while leaving their parents in the dark until the last chapter.

Such was Enid Blyton's heady and cheerfully undemanding fantasy formula in her *Famous Five* stories, and so too, surprisingly, is it found in Katherine Rundell's approach in this novel. Young Vita in search of a stolen necklace on a trip to New York has first to outwit a powerful crook plus his murderous henchman in order to succeed. She is helped by new friends she finds on the way, including a young pick-pocket with almost superhuman powers and other children working in a circus. They all get involved in a number of scrapes, at times quite literally when walls are climbed and windows are forced, but the gang stays loyal throughout. But by this time all tension has disappeared as everything keeps going their way, leading up to a triumphant climax that seems predestined ever since plans were first mooted.

Nina Bawden's story *A Handful of Thieves*, published in 1967, remains a wonderfully wise and witty account of the lows as well as highs involved when children try to take the law into their own hands and almost inevitably sometimes get it wrong. It still offers better and far more substantial fare than this deeply disappointing fifth novel from writer capable of doing so much better.

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Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-good-thieves>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/237>

[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/nick-tucker>