



May We Recommend... Allan Baillie

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May We Recommend

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It's not often that a relative newcomer writes a string of unputdownables. **Val Bierman** caught up with this exciting Australian author on a flying visit to the UK.

Anyone reading Allan Baillie's books will quickly realise that he has his own distinctive style; a flair for creating suspense, an uncanny knack of understanding an emotional crisis in children, and all revolving around a search, either for adventure or, more often, for identity.

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Born in Scotland in 1943 but emigrating to Australia seven years later, much of his own character, either unwittingly or by design, frequently surfaces in his books. His obvious sympathy and understanding of disability stems from an accident at the age of 21 which left him semi-paralysed and with a speech impediment

His writing career began when he worked as a journalist and Published some short stories. After reading about the newly founded Kathleen Fidler Award, he decided to submit a manuscript of a children's novel: **Adrift** went on to win the Award. As with all Baillie's books it was based on fact. His wife Agnes had given him a newspaper cutting about four Lebanese boys and their dog being washed out to sea on an old raft. This spark of an idea grew into a full-length novel having as its core characters, Flynn, his young sister Sally and, a nice touch, their cat Nebuchadnezzar. As in all good adventure tales it begins with a holiday- But here similarity ends.

'Flynn turned and saw something angular and black moving on Sally's shoulder. There was blood in the water. He kicked until he could breathe and tried to lift the cat off Sally but the cat was sinking its claws into her head. Sally had closed her eyes and was whimpering from the pain She screamed when Flynn tried to pry a claw from her head. The cat made a sound he had never heard before, like a snake about to strike, and then hit his hand. Sally screamed until water flooded into her mouth.'

The three manage to scramble aboard their crate and as the shoreline recedes further into the distance, Flynn reflects that they are in trouble big trouble. It says much for the author's skill as a story teller that the tension between two children and a cat sitting on a drifting crate remains for the entire book.

The next book resulted from his years covering the Vietnam war, a deeply disturbing experience for Allan Baillie. He had toyed with the idea of writing an adult novel for years, then realised that perhaps the horrors of war could best be conveyed through the eyes of a child - to give a child's innocent view which often has a clarity and understanding lacking in adults. **Little Brother** is based on a chance meeting with a 16-year-old boy he found bandaging the wounds of a Khmer Rouge soldier. The boy had lost everything--family, friends, home and lived a fearful existence in the jungle. The boy's experiences were used as a background to the character Vithy, separated from his elder brother while

fleeing from the Vietcong. **Little Brother** means a great deal to Baillie. It is his favourite book - a gem which deserves to become a classic, it only to demonstrate to children the futility and cruelty of war.

Then two books followed in rapid succession. **Riverman** takes the reader back to 1912 to Tasmania where Tim's dad has been laid off from the smelter and has gone to Queenstown to find work. On his return they've planned a trip up the river to find the Thunderer, a huge waterfall that no-one has ever seen. Then there is a fire in a mine - and Tim's Dad is down there.

'In the afternoon, a long rope was lowered into the mine with a lamp, a board and pencil attached. It snaked through the heavy smoke, past the jammed cage 600 feet from the surface, past the still glowing fire round the blackened pump at 700 feet then down past silent tunnels in the rock until it stopped at 1000 feet, the bottom of the mine. The lamp mused in the deep shadows on the wall, as it swayed in imitation. It was not touched.

His childhood comes to an abrupt end and Tim is determined to prove that although he is derisory known as The Shrimp, he can take his place with the men. He journeys up river with his uncle copes with the scorn of the others, and draws on an inner strength to overcome the deep pain of his father's death.

Eagle Island, a racy thriller and Allan Baillie's most *Australian* novel, is set on an island in the Great Barrier Reef. Lew, the hero, is deaf. Col, his most hated enemy, picks on him at school because of his odd way of speaking. Lew's one pleasure in life is his catamaran, which his parents had been against at first. "How can he sail something like that?" she said, or he thought she said

"He'll drown." How can he not sail it? Here's something he can do as well as other kids.' Lew was going to forget about Col for two weeks as he set sail for the distant Whitsundays; he could almost forget about being deaf. The trip is vividly described and the word pictures of the wealth of wildlife make fascinating reading. (I defy anyone to read of Lew cooking a coral trout without their mouth watering!) This idyllic life is rudely interrupted by the appearance of Col, and their encounter turns into a deadly game of hide and seek. **Eagle Island** should be lapped up by older readers.

1988 sees the latest Baillie offering, **Megan's Star**, no doubt his most challenging and complex work so far. For the first time the central character is female-Megan, who reluctantly has to look after her small brother Walter, otherwise known as Goblin. Their mother works all day and their father has walked out on them.

'One sunny afternoon she had bounced up to her father's cupboard in search of an old tennis racquet. And found it totally bare, as if he had never existed at all. She had found a message in the kitchen and had to phone Mum at the library. Megan could still feel the dead desolation of that afternoon.'

Set in the 21st century **Megan's Star** is an interesting mix of science fiction and traditional adventure story. It reveals yet another later of Allan Baillie's talent.

There's more to come. He has a picture book on the stocks in Australia-hopefully it will be in the UK soon. Here is a first-class writer with the power to stretch children's imaginations and make them think. His books deserve to be far more widely read - this is a writer well worth discovering.

Allan Baillie's books are published in hardback by Blackie and in paperback by Magnet:

Adrift, 0 216 91424 8, reissue 1989; 0 416 06442 6, paperback 1989

Little Brother, 0 216 91616 X, £6.95; 0 416 08302 1, £ 1.75 pbk

Riverman, 0 216 91861 8, £6.95; 0 416 06452 3, paperback 1989

Eagle Island, 0 216 92096 5, £7.50)

Megan's Star, 0 216 92390 5, £7.95

Valerie Bierman is organiser of the Children's Fair of the Edinburgh Book Festival and children's books reviewer for the **Scotsman**. She was given the Eleanor Farjeon Award in 1987.

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