



Red Letter Days

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[David Bennett](#) [1]

[97](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

David Bennett on anthologising.

David Bennett gives a personal account of making a short story collection.

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I'm as excited by receiving post now as I was when I was a kid. Not for me leaving mail unopened for days. The second time our crazed cur lets out her pretence of fiercesome rage each morning, I know there's a letter on the mat and I'm driven to discover what it is. (The first time is the milkman and I don't find much allure in his delivery.)

My pigeon-hole at the day job gives me a second crack at anticipation, heightened all the more by any letter which looks unfamiliar and not in the usual line of catalogues, invoices and details of forthcoming attractions. 22nd October 1994 saw such a day.

It brought an invitation to compile an anthology of short stories, with two themes to choose from, all wrapped up in compliments about my articles and reviews and my fitness for the task. Here was heady post indeed... and before 8.30am!

After that moment of surprised elation came a busy working day where I didn't have space to do much except smile a flattered smile from time to time. That evening I rang a few friends-in-the-know and was persuaded I'd enjoy the challenge and knew enough to do the job.

?But I don't teach 5- to 10-year-olds - I don't know what they're like. I don't know any. I teach great big kids with facial hair, acne and mostly addicted to Point Horror.?

?Don't worry,? soothed Powling. ?Your sons were in that age group once weren't they? You've read and reviewed enough short story books to know your stuff. Aah, now I come to think of it I might have recommended you ages ago when I was chatting to the publishers. Don't let **BfK** down, just enjoy the time spent rummaging in libraries and so on and so fifth. Get on to your Schools? Library Service.?

?I won't have time.?

?Of course you will. It's the winter and you can't be out in your garden.?

That clinched it.

I frightened myself into inaction re-re-reading the general brief I'd been sent and so it took two more days before I responded to the ?Associate Publisher/Fiction?, who seemed to be slightly unsure of who I was when I ?phoned. Perhaps it's just that my questions seemed inane to her. Anyway, we established that I'd take on **Witches and Wizards**, an editor would be assigned to me and make contact soon, and I'd be sent a contract in due course.

A month later, from the 'Publishing Manager', said document arrived. This ran to seven sides of intricate legal-speak and in part seemed to alter things I'd understood from the brief. I could just about cope with that, but the Publicity Questionnaire fazed me with its presupposition that I was a real writer or something. Still, I doubt that my responses are the most bizarre they have on file.

I signed on the dotted line, tucked my tender plants up from the frost, locked the summer house and prepared for a winter passed in haunting libraries across two counties.

NOTES TO MYSELF - SHOPPING LIST FOR ANTHOLOGY

1. Relevant to age-group and reading level.
2. Suitable both for reading alone and for reading aloud by parents.
3. Balance of well-known authors and unfamiliar writers.
4. Intercultural content.
5. Balanced content in terms of male and female characters.
6. Equal numbers of witches and wizards if at all possible.
7. No extracts from longer stories.
8. Remember that this collection also intended for US audience.
9. As wide a range of subject-matter as possible -domestic, fantasy, fable, animals, people, historical, contemporary.
10. Try to get some new material or at least generally unfamiliar material.
11. A well-balanced list in terms of length comprising 15-20 tales.

Making and thinking about this list was a good delaying tactic to put off the actual work... and, anyway, there always seemed to be some attention needed to those plants in the conservatory!

Then Abigail arrived on my telephone - I had an Editor. I was to meet her just before Christmas, for lunch, so I'd better have something to offer for starters.

I'd never liked libraries all that much as places. I can never get comfortable in them. I was the only adult lying full-length on the floor of Derby City Library (Children's Section) and I can tell you a pretty unyielding floor it is, too. Nottingham's Angel Row isn't much better and Ilkeston could do with a thicker carpet. I liked the after-hours floor and carpet of the Junior School Library opposite my house. I tend to conform to conventional standing or sitting in my own school library, mainly because pupils get a bit wobbly when they have to step over elderly teachers slumped in their way.

Also, I discovered, an adult male in the Children's Section on a Saturday morning with no bratkins in tow does get some sideways glances. Should I wear a badge?

HARMLESS

SHORT STORY

COLLECTOR

The mac should be left off, definitely!

The fortunate thing about my theme was that the books wherein I'd find my material pretty easily identified themselves

at once by cover illustration or title. I can't estimate how many tales I meandered through, starting at A and scouring to the end of the alphabet before I'd allow myself to seek a comfortable catering location elsewhere. En route I also plundered the sections on Picture Books, Parentcraft and stories in Urdu and other unfamiliar languages. Friends' bookshelves also came under scrutiny as the whole business became more and more compulsive.

I went to each library at least three times to catch up on any books that might have been out on loan during my other visits. Times without number I came across perfect stories on GHOSTS, which had been my alternative choice of theme. In fact, I composed some knock 'em dead anthologies on numerous *other* themes, yet all this time I was ticking items off my shopping list for suitable witches alarmingly slowly. Furthermore, promising wizards appeared to be in desperately short supply.

Four days before Christmas my notebook had 22 possible stories plus five unpublished ones I'd persuaded friends to write. Fortunately for me I'd realised very early on that scrupulous record-keeping was vital if I was to be efficient and not waste valuable time. I made photocopies of possible stories including the printing histories and, as a belt and braces job, kept a separate list in case anything got lost in the post or the house caught fire. I forgot all these precautions only once and it was no fun trying to backtrack for the information I wanted.

I found that I needed pretty full notes on why I'd been attracted to a story. When you're on your 52nd tale about a witch it's a bit like The Miss World Contest: you can't quite recall number one! Well, almost the same! Perhaps the Eurovision Song Contest would be a better comparison.

Lunch was a healthy Italian repast in ambient surroundings, although the table was a little small for the story collector's clutter as well as diners' dinners. We managed nevertheless and I came out with 12 stories less to worry about, a manuscript deadline and a train to catch in a hurry. Abigail had 10 stories in the bag to send to the US editors for starters, a seasonal token from me and the bill.

After Christmas, armed with Abigail's comments, I persevered with my writer friends to get their stories into the running. Busy people all, we didn't quite make it. At least five more stories had to be found so it was back to the library floors in the hope I'd missed something, or they'd unearthed some other stock. I say 'other' because I had a conviction that nobody would want to buy a collection of stories that were already widely available or very recently published. The library at the publishers must be terminally ancient because Abigail passed on some truly unusual material for my consideration. So, by fair means and foul I unearthed 11 more witcherly/wizardly tales and postal moderation (lots of big heavy envelopes on the mat) saw us down to a long list of 20.

Here's where the fun started - with the gardening season not that far off.

Letters: Editor to Collector

17th January 1995

* A few problems. The first is the simplest but also the most problematic in that a number of stories are sadly just too long for this collection.

* There's something rather adult about the style, and some of the language might prove difficult in story 4.

* In story 8 the dialect of the narrative, although not difficult here, might be a problem in the States.

2nd February 1995

The Scottish story made me laugh and I think we'll get away with the odd 'Och-Aye' - it's not quite Burns so I think our readers in Iowa will get the hang of it.

10th February 1995

Even with the latest wizard I still feel we're short of wizards so I'm enclosing something I found from an American collection.

7th March 1995

As I said on the phone, I still prefer the first Anancy tale you chose. Please come up with an order of stories by March 17th.

9th March 1995

I've just discovered that the Baba Yaga story is in one of our previous collections. We'll have to find another. Because the manuscript is now being typed, we'd need to find something in the next couple of weeks.

4th April 1995

Here's my new suggested order of stories. Can you let me know as soon as possible if it's OK, as the designer will start laying out the book in the next few days?

23rd May 1995

I'm afraid I've got some bad news on the second wizard story. The author rang me and said he wouldn't agree to it being re-illustrated. Since the book has now been laid out and our illustrator has started work, we need a wizard story of about 1,000 words to fill the gap. Could you let me know what you think soon?

29th June 1995

Our publishing director has read through the collection and thinks it is 'wonderful' but is rather worried about story 9. She thinks it's too dark and gruesome for the age group and wondered if we could replace it with something more benign.

6th July 1995

Sorry to be so dense about your replacement suggestion. I've checked since we talked on the phone and found it in another of our collections after all.

9th October 1995

What you'll find here is the complete book, pictures and all, plus a proof of the cover. You'll find a couple of stories have changed places. Our US editor pointed out that we had a character called Prince Ferdinand in two consecutive stories ... oops!

In Naomi Lewis's words, following Baudelaire, 'an anthology is never finished - simply abandoned'. I've since found four stories I would have liked to have shared with readers of **A Treasury of Witches and Wizards** and my antennae now spot a potential source at a hundred hops of frog or toad.

As collector, I'm obviously grateful to the writers of the material; it's their book just as much as mine and Abigail's, but one page I must claim as all my own. In the year of my Silver Wedding Anniversary I was able to give my wife the present of a dedication in a book.

I've been advised of two more publishing dates so far - one before and one after you read this, so by now you'll either have made your own mind up whether I would have better spent my time in the garden, or else you'll have that decision yet to make. Don't phone, just send your communications by post please. I'll no doubt read them in the summer house.

David Bennett's day job is at a Nottinghamshire school where he's Senior Teacher responsible for the English Faculty and resources management.

A Treasury of Witches and Wizards, with illustrations by Jacqui Thomas, is published by Kingfisher, 1 85697 435 9, £4.50.

Page Number:

22

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