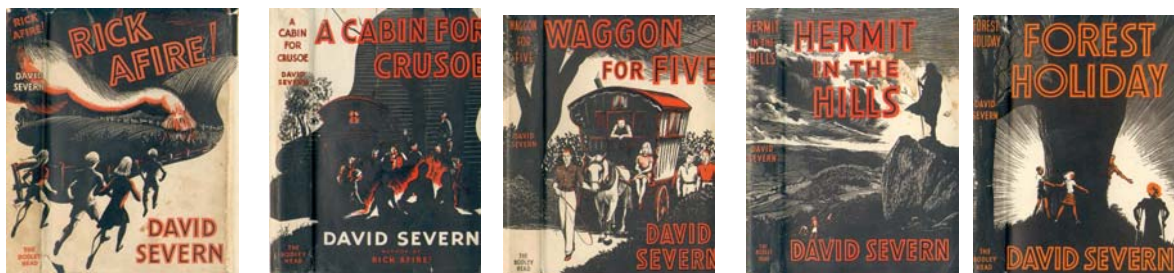


## David Severn (David Storr Unwin), Children's Writer. by Stephen Bigger



**David Severn** (3.12.1918 – 11.2.2010) is a pseudonym for David Storr Unwin, British, son of Sir Stanley Unwin the publisher. Not wishing to trade on the Unwin name, he chose the name Severn as a family name (his uncle Severn Storr went with Sir Stanley on a world tour (Unwin and Storr, 1934). David Severn wrote 30 children's books, mostly for John Lane at The Bodley Head, mainly school holiday adventures on a farm, or camping or travelling. The war is not mentioned till it is over, and then barely: the stories offer vicarious countryside peace at a time of national stress and danger, drawing positive learning from adventures, including with Romanies and a hermit artist, at a time of bombs, bullets and hunger in a countryside littered with tank traps, barbed wire and pill boxes. His first series (1942-6) featured 'Crusoe' Robinson who was befriended by youngsters in holiday adventures, many featuring a Romany group and included a Romany funeral pyre. The Warner family series followed (1947-52) featuring pheasants, ponies and country life. The woodcut illustrations of Joan Kiddell-Monroe greatly enhance these two series. A number of books experimented with the paranormal and time-slip, and can be compared with many modern books exploring supernatural themes. *Drumbeats!* has a musical youngster beating a native drum which transports children to a lost expedition to Africa twenty years earlier. *Dream Gold* shows the hypnotic power of one boy over another, with dreams actually reliving the conflicts of their ancestors. *The Future Took Us* is a time-slip into 3000AD. *The Girl in the Grove*, his longest book, is a psychological ghost story. He produced books for younger children, often to contract and for series.

### The Crusoe Series, 1942-46.



Severn's first children's novel was *Rick Afire* (1942), the first of five excellent 'Crusoe' stories. *Rick Afire* is a tale of two children evacuated from London because father was in hospital, to Whitehouse Farm<sup>1</sup> where they had adventures in the countryside with the twins Brian and Pam with a pony called Nobby ('Pegasus') and a dog called William. Joan Kiddell-Monroe's artwork is excellent.



*Rick Afire* starts:

"Stonebury Junction...Stonebury...change 'ere for the Muddlington, 'amsford and Downpoort line... Stonebury Junction...Stonebury..."

The station was crowded with people. People were swarming out of the train and more were pushing their way in; people were stumbling and tripping over bags and hampers, throwing large suitcases through the doors and heaving them up into the racks. At last the train steamed out, the bustle died down, and after a while the platform cleared. Derek and Diana Longmore grouped their rucksacks and cases in a heap and looked around. There was no sign of the twins.

<sup>1</sup> Based on a farm in Essex, according to his biography (Unwin, 1982).

The twins arrive helter skelter in a galloping home-made donkey cart.

"They came around the curve like a rocket. As he spoke the trap tipped violently, jerking both passengers off their balance, and they heeled over, clinging grimly to the sides while they took the bend on a single wheel...Then the trap hung poised for a moment; then the wheel dropped back with a thud and pony and cart came tearing along the straight into the station yard. The twins were sitting up on the seat as if nothing had happened...The trap drew up to the railings and the stocky figures of a girl and boy, in shorts and blue shirts, with tanned arms and legs and freckled faces, dropped down to the ground."



The twins were like peas in a pod, with freckled snubbed noses. Pam had a pony tail, the only way they could easily be told apart. They chattered most of the time. Actually, identical twins are genetically identical and therefore are always same sex. The values in *Rick Afire* include a love of the countryside, close observation of nature and a sense of preciousness of the environment. Readers are warned against collecting birds' eggs; there is delight at fox cubs at play; birds flit across the pages; compassion for animals at the market is expressed.



In *Rick Afire* two London children stay at a farm and are shown country ways. A pig escapes to farrow, a mysterious camper is stalked and later befriended (Mr Robinson, or 'Crusoe'), a hay rick catches fire and after proving Crusoe innocent, Tim Tinker (illustrated), an itinerant, is identified as the culprit, and chased in a dramatic car chase.

The second Severn book was *A Cabin for Crusoe* (1943) where an attempt to build a wilderness cabin brings Crusoe and the children into conflict with a group of Romanies, a conflict fomented by the farmer. The Romanies are painted realistically with a gang of lads, a bad-tempered heavy, his scheming and cheating wife, and a decent elder figure who appears continually throughout the series, Patch Cooper. The story discusses traditional Romany camping sites, the Romany way of life, and attitudes of settled folk in a very sensitive way. The Romanies are real people, not stereotypes. The tone is respectful. The conflict is resolved, and with Patch's help, Crusoe gets a caravan instead of a cabin.

In the third Crusoe book, *A Waggon for Five* (1944) the group join up with Cooper's circus run by a relative of Patch. They experience circus life and foil a plot to steal the takings of the circus by the strong man. He is apprehended in a frantic lorry chase. Another family is introduced in this book, the Crosbies, who live on a houseboat and whose father is an artist. These also feature in the fourth book, *Hermit in the Hills* (1945), an adventure that in real time follows immediately on from the circus. Mr Crosbie is a nationally famous artist who makes a living selling his paintings, living precariously in bohemian style with his three children in a houseboat. The Crosbies hijack the 'Waggoners' for a cricket match and later met up with them at the circus. Motherless, and looked after by elder sister Jean, they had a "large, old fashioned tourer", an old and unreliable car. Leonard Crosbie was nationally famous in his own field, living by creative artistic endeavour, empowering his children to grow up to be free and independent.

*Hermit in the Hills* is an inspired exploration of the philosophy of art (e.g. pages 48-51). Two sections will suffice here.

“Take something more simple,” he said, “a tree growing out from a slope...”  
 People will see it in different ways,  
 “But of all the people who come by, perhaps only one will know the birch and feel with it; see the backward twist of the trunk as it adjusts itself to the pull of the slope; the curve of the branches, supple, yet firm and strong as steel; feel the life in it, roots groping down deep into the soil, leaves and twigs swayed and rustled by the wind... only one person will go away with the wholeness, the perfection of that tree as a tree firmly printed in his mind. And he would be the only person qualified to paint it.”

The hermit was brought up as a farmer, disowned by his father and in self-chosen exile to the hills in order to paint on the wall of a cave. He drew Mr Crosbie:

The stranger’s sketch was in complete contrast to Mr Crosbie’s drawings. Instead of their bold, forceful shading, he had achieved his effect with a few lines; the curve of the artist’s hat, the sagging outline of his coat and trousers. The essentials alone were there; nothing more. (pp. 108-9).

In the final book of this series, *Forest Holiday* (1946), joining instructions are misunderstood, so the children are lost in a forest. They survive by their wits, building a shelter, and observe a great deal of wildlife. It culminates boisterously with gipsies at a local fair.

The Joan Kiddell-Monroe FEPs of *A Waggon for Five* and *Forest Holiday* are illustrated below.



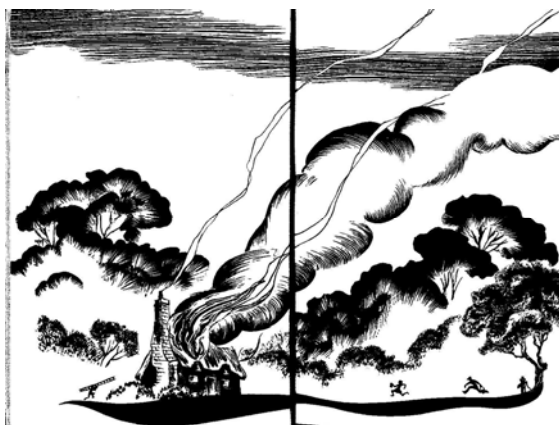
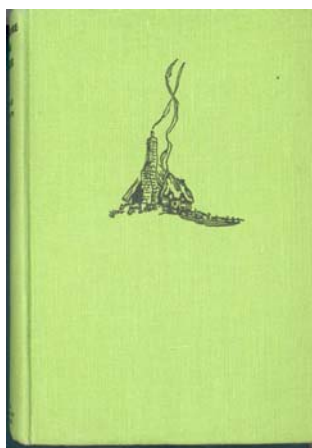
### The Warners' Series, 1947-52



In 1947 Severn introduced a new family, the Warners in a separate series – Alan, Joan, Christopher and baby Jeremy Warner in descending order of age. Christopher is passionate about butterflies in particular and wildlife in general. David Grantham is Alan's school friend whose parents are in Burma: two of his uncles provide the plot for two stories. Some characters and situations are promisingly bizarre. This is well-off country living and gymkhana territory. Joan Kiddell-Munroe's artwork is tremendous. Illustrated below is the FEP of *Treasure for Three*, and the embossed cover that features in all Severn's Bodley Head's books in these series.

The books are:

- *Ponies and Poachers* (1947), foiling a petty crime pheasant poaching syndicate;
- *The Cruise of the Maiden Castle* (1948), an adventure on a canal barge with David's archaeological uncle Lionel;
- *Treasure for Three* (1949) – during their 4 week Easter holiday, they try to raise money

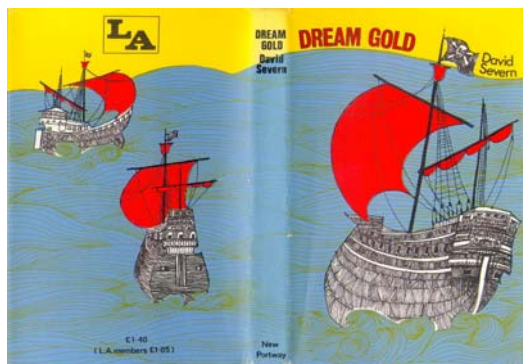


for a horse and animal sanctuary. They accidentally steal the Colonel's prize daffodils, and burn down a cottage they are tidying up; but they find in the ashes a stash of gold sovereigns and rescue the breadman's ill-treated horse through social action.

- *Crazy Castle* (1951), a story of finding a lost horse, stolen by gypsies and sold to a corrupt estate manager.
- *Burglars and Bandicoots* (1952), an adventure with David's taxidermist uncle Stuart when a stolen jade horse is hidden in a part-stuffed bandicoot destined for the Natural History Museum.

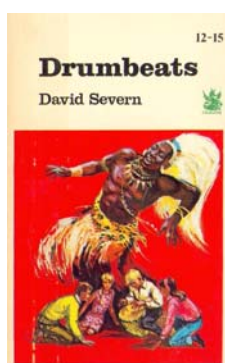
## Other Substantial Works

David Severn's experimental works for "Over 13s" stand up well as early modern fantasy thrillers with adventures in other worlds, or the past, or the future, or with supernatural powers. This work was pioneering as the general move to supernatural and magical themes in children's literature comes later. These books do not deserve to have been forgotten, and were the books that David Severn himself prized most highly (Doyle, 1978:1114). These works were reprinted with some entering the paperback lists.



*Dream Gold* (1949) is a psychological thriller. Moody and unpleasant Guy Trelawny has dreams of a 300 year old island beach where sailors are waiting for a ship, the wreck of which lies near his home in Cornwall. He discovers that Peter Mannings can dream the dream with him and the two minds make it real – they actually visit the beach in the past, although invisible to the people there. During a Christmas visit to Guy's home in Cornwall, Peter finds himself in a situation he does not wish to be in, and in grave danger. The dream relives

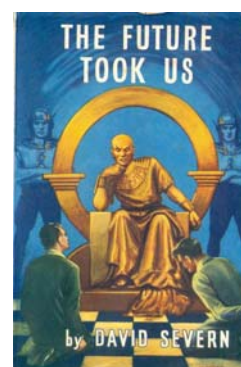
the conflicts of their ancestors over a shipwreck in a timeslip and imports the enmity back into the current time. This risks the lives of both, and only one survives. There was a 1951 school edition and a 1971 reprint (pictured) which has heavily inked line drawings. Illustrations: A K Lee.



*Drumbeats!* (1953) has a pupil narrator, Esther, and focuses on Oliver, a musical prodigy in a co-educational progressive school Dulvercourt based in a 'dignified old Manor House in the west of England' (similar therefore to Dartington School). The picture of school life is interesting in itself, a school where children are given "the freedom to develop". Maurice Punch, writing a social history of Dartington, reported that most children were sent there because they were unhappy in traditional schooling, so the regime was designed to give meaning to children with various social and emotional problems. Our pupils find a magic drum which they discover had been stolen by an ill-fated expedition to Africa in 1935. When Oliver beats it, the children are transported back to 1935 Africa and witness the lost expedition. The time slip presents deadly dangers

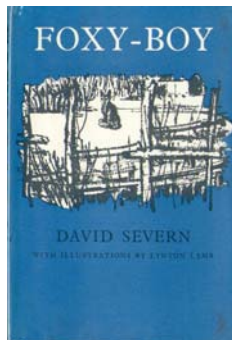
for the present, causing a fire in school. A paperback appeared in 1957 (pictured). Illustrations: Richard Kennedy.

*The Future Took Us* (1957) is a forward time-slip taking two youngsters, Dick and Peter, to 3000 AD. The shift happens whilst the boys are about to be caned by the Head (a mathematician) for borrowing and crashing the school station wagon. The future is run by a dictatorship of mathematicians, who even have mathematical forms of execution. A 20<sup>th</sup> century mathematics school text book has become sacred scripture and dominates ideology, ritual and politics. In the end, the dictatorship is defeated. Dick meets Wanda and decides to stay in the future. Peter returns to school but no one will believe him, not even Dick's father. Dick's mother however had dreamed that he was alive and happy with his girl. A paperback and Children's Book Club edition (pictured) were also published.

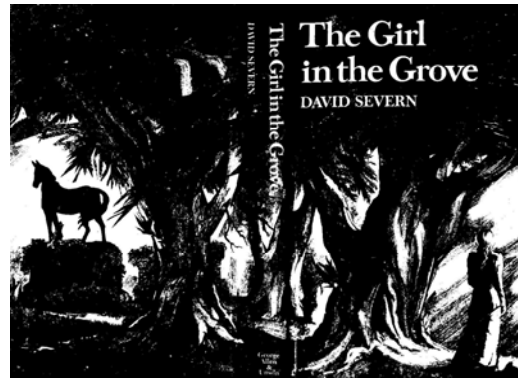


Illustrations: Jillian Richards.

*Foxy Boy* (1959) features a young boy who had been abandoned and brought up by foxes. He walked on all fours and behaved like a wary fox. He was also hunted like a fox and at the mercy of hounds. This encourages reflection on fox hunting. The girl's befriending of this naked boy was daring but sensitive. Illustrations: Lynton Lamb.

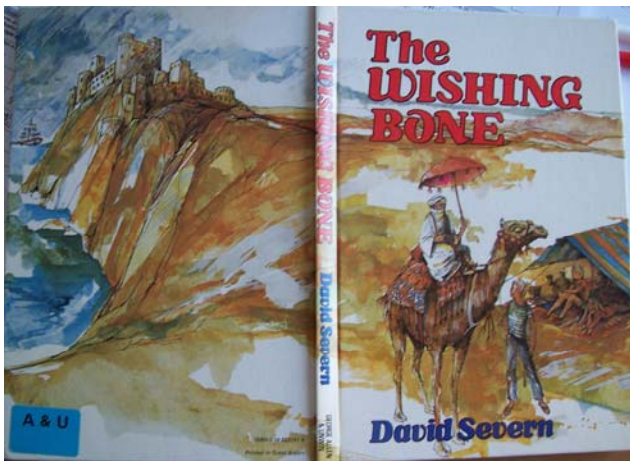


*The Girl in the Grove* (1974) is a ghost story in which the ghost of 13 year old girl Laura becomes stronger<sup>2</sup> because the disturbed polio handicapped boy



Paul believes in her. Jonquil meets her as a real girl and does not at first realise she is a ghost, made solid we are told by Paul's attentions. There are time distortions as Jonquil becomes an observer to past events which cause a major reassessment of her family history. Laura had prevented Paul's grandmother (her nursery maid) from marrying the love of her life, a son in a family whose wealth came from working slaves to death ("*Estate Economies: The Better Control and Management of a Plantation Labour Force*". Laura the ghost is set free by events, and Paul is able move on too.

His last children's book, *The Wishing Bone* (1977) is a surreal story, with the cover showing a scene combining a fort or castle with an Egyptian scene with a tent, camel and boy with a pink umbrella. An Egyptian wishing bone bought in a local joke shop has magical effects and gives the children, Richard, Julia and Tom, one wish each – actually all their other wishes came true too more gradually.



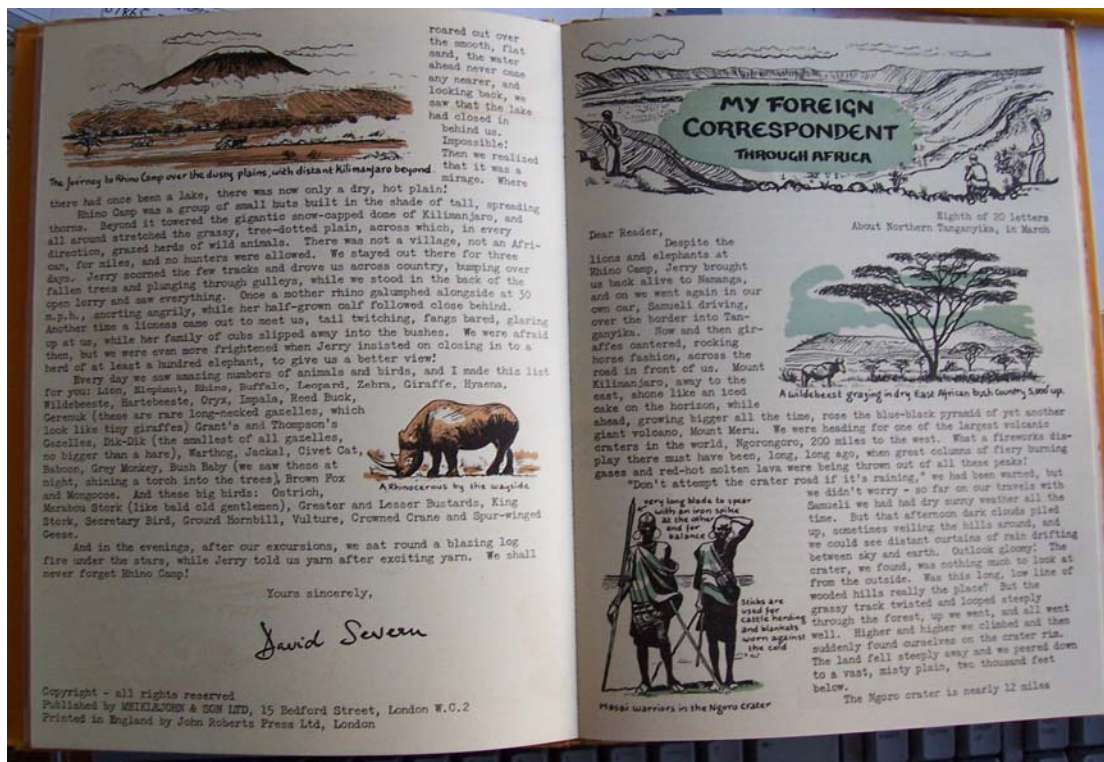
Their parents are archaeologists in Egypt and they are being looked after by a housekeeper Miss Montgomery. The wishes made are accidental so their fort grows, and comes alive so the children enter and explore a new world and encounter magical adventures and wars against now living toy armies. Their hostile next-door neighbours Humphrey and Edgar who bully them also enter and have wishes which they waste. They

all end up in Egypt. Humphrey and Edgar eventually became their great friends, which is one of the wishes. The surreal happenings are orchestrated by Ma Jefferies of the joke shop, aka The Sorceress, aka The Great She, aka The Witch of the High Hills. She arranged matters so that adults around see nothing strange in the arrival of doodlebugs, and their parents digging in Egypt were not phased to find their children in an underground chamber there. This book did not sell well and is now unobtainable; but it could easily find a home in today's market for books on surreal and magical themes.

<sup>2</sup> There is a similar theme in Robert Westall's *The Watch House* (1977).

**School and other educational texts.**

*My Foreign Correspondent through Africa* (1951) describes a journey through Africa with his wife Periwinkle, described by 20 typed and illustrated letters home originally published

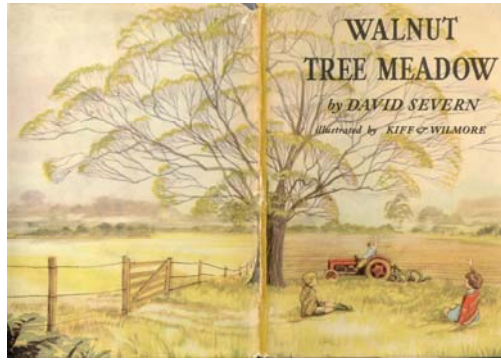


fortnightly (two other writers, Peter White and Bridget Moss went to the British Isles, Scandinavia and Switzerland in the same series and sent back illustrated letters). These letters are illustrated lavishly with a single colour per page, plus black, the colour varying for each letter. The writing is in travelog-diary format; the illustrations show animals, local people, local dress (and undress), and customs. The letters were first unbound, and later bound and published in book form (illustrated) by Meiklejohn & Sons. Illustrations are by Peter White.

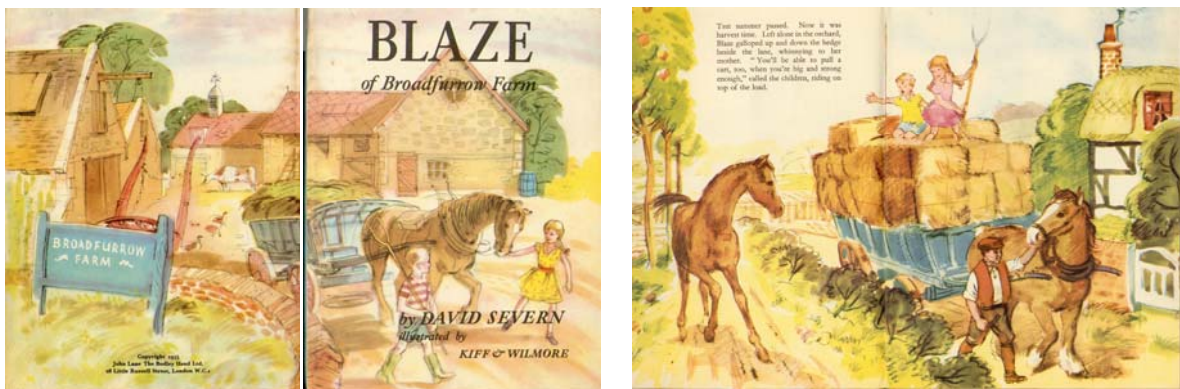
The six Bill Badger and Wily Fox picture books for infants were a contract to provide a story for Geoffrey Higham artwork. These are: *Wily Fox and the Baby Show* (1947, pictured – note



his 'baby' has been stolen!); *Bill Badger and the Pine Martens* (1947, pictured, driving these unwelcome neighbours out); *Wily Fox and the Christmas Party* (1949); *Bill Badger and the Bathing Pool* (1949); *Wily Fox and the Missing Fireworks* (1950); and *Bill Badger and the Buried Treasure* (1950).



For infants, *Walnut Tree Meadow* explains through the eyes of two children, Susan and Peter, what happens on a farm, with beautiful artwork by Kiff and Wilmore. *Blaze of Broadfurrow Farm* (1956) describes a horse's life through the eyes of Richard and Joanna, with artwork also by Kiff and Wilmore. *Jeff Dickson: Cowhand* (1963, Jonathan Cape, Jets Series no.5) also follows the farming theme: illustrator, Patrick Williams.



*Three at the Sea* (1959, ill. Margery Gill) describes a simple seaside visit for junior age children. From Hamish Hamilton for younger readers there came the *Green Eyed Gryphon* (1958, ill. Prudence Seward), about children who ensure that their father does not get posted abroad by his company. The gryphon is an emblem on the building that exerts its influence. *A Dog for a Day* (1965– the second impression, 1970, is pictured, printed in blue with black, the first impression alternating as second colour blue, brown and yellow; ill. Joseph Acheson) is a young primary children's school reader, age around 7, about a boy who wants a dog and on a visit to the seaside, plays with a sheepdog all day. *Clouds over Alberhorn* (1963), for teenagers, is a more substantial adventure of attempted assassination set on dangerous ski-slopes in which the characters support and rescue an 11 year old Arab heir to a Sheikdom – a story suggested by a real skiing holiday in Lenzerheide.





Geoffrey Trease once wrote (1964:141): "David Severn, M.E. Atkinson and Malcolm Saville were perhaps the other three outstanding pioneers of the holiday themes" [after describing Peter Dawlish]. These are writers are the subject of much of my research into children's literature of this period. By 1977, the world of children's writing had changed. Publishers' old restrictive standards had been swept away, leaving authors who had been forced to adhere to them seeming very old fashioned and not sexy enough. David Severn wrote to me: "we couldn't write about bosoms in my day".

He also wrote books for adults in his own name. (He used his pseudonym to escape being linked to his father; and he used his own name to escape the reputation of being a children's writer). His two novels for adults were published by Michael Joseph: *The Governor's Wife* (1954; New York: Dutton, 1955), and *A View of the Heath* (1956) did not win him a breakthrough as an adult author and he did not continue with this genre. His autobiography *Fifty Years with Father* (1982), his final book, is an interesting read.

#### **Books for Children** (all first published by The Bodley Head unless stated)

<i>Rick Afire</i> (1942)	<i>Burglars and Bandicoots</i> (1952)
<i>A Cabin for Crusoe</i> (1943)	<i>Drumbeats!</i> (1953)
<i>A Waggon for Five</i> (1944)	<i>Walnut Tree Meadow</i> (1956)
<i>Hermit in the Hills</i> (1945)	<i>Blaze of Broadfurrow Farm</i> (1956)
<i>Forest Holiday</i> (1946)	<i>The Future Took Us</i> (1957)
<i>Ponies and Poachers</i> (1947),	<i>The Green-Eyed Gryphon</i> (1958, Hamish Hamilton)
<i>Wily Fox and the Baby Show</i> (1947);	<i>Foxy Boy</i> (1959) = <i>The Wild Valley</i> (USA)
<i>Bill Badger and the Pine Martens</i> (1947);	<i>Three at the Sea</i> (1959)
<i>The Cruise of the Maiden Castle</i> (1948)	<i>Jeff Dickson: Cowhand</i> (1963, Jonathan Cape)
<i>Treasure for Three</i> (1949)	<i>Clouds over Alberhorn</i> (1963, Hamish Hamilton)
<i>Dream Gold</i> (1949)	<i>A Dog for a Day</i> (1965, Hamish Hamilton)
<i>Wily Fox and the Christmas Party</i> (1949);	<i>The Girl in the Grove</i> (1974, Allen & Unwin)
<i>Bill Badger and the Bathing Pool</i> (1949);	<i>The Wishing Bone</i> (1977, Allen & Unwin)
<i>Wily Fox and the Missing Fireworks</i> (1950);	
<i>Bill Badger and the Buried Treasure</i> (1950)	
<i>Crazy Castle</i> (1951)	
<i>My Foreign Correspondent through Africa</i> (1951, Meiklejohn & Sons)	NB Some books were translated into several European languages

My book collection is viewable by appointment in the University of Worcester. ([click for link](#))

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