

## Family book club



### Parable of the talent

### Christopher Middleton on *The Black Book of Secrets*

#### Reader notes

#### Enter our prize draw

Right from page one, it's clear that Ludlow Fitch, the resourceful young hero of *The Black Book of Secrets*, has parents who aren't entirely supportive.

As we join him, he is being held down in a darkened basement by a bloodthirsty dentist called Barton Gumbroot, who intends to pull his teeth out, one by one.

This is happening not just with the permission of Ludlow's mother and father, but on the strict understanding that they get paid threepence per extraction. Which they intend to spend on gin.

As children's stories go, this is definitely not of the elves-and-fairies kind.

As the action unfolds, and Ludlow joins forces with a mysterious stranger, Joe Zabbidou (alias the Secret Pawnbroker), the book moves into distinctly fable-and-parable territory.

At the moral heart of the story is the enigmatic Joe, who is not so much a clandestine pawnbroker as one who pays people to tell him their guilty secrets.

Many of these involve shameful deeds that they have been either persuaded or forced to perform by Jeremiah Ratchet, the evil landowner who controls the lives of everyone in Pagus Parvus, the village where Joe, with Ludlow as his assistant, has set up shop.

Initially, the villagers are grateful to Joe for the opportunity of unburdening themselves (and earning some money). But they start to turn against him when he insists that they should take control of their own destinies, rather than expect him to solve the Ratchet problem for them.

"The effect Joe has on people may be magical, but at no time does he actually use magic," says Fiona (F E) Higgins, the book's author. "That's the whole point; he can show them the way but he can't change the course of events himself."

No prizes for drawing parallels between Joe and Jesus. Joe can't perform miracles, but he's charismatic, he offers redemption for past wrongdoings and, while people hail him as a saviour to start with, they eventually round on him for not telling them what they want to hear. Is *The Black Book of Secrets* intended as a religious allegory? "Not religious, no," says Higgins, "although I was brought up a Catholic in Ireland, with all that entails in terms of going to confession and feeling guilty.

"What I hope the book does do is to convey my belief in natural justice, in the idea that there is a rhythm in life that dictates that from chaos there should come order, and that what you give in terms not just of money, but of time and yourself, you will get in return."

Besides being based on solid, good-beats-evil foundations, the novel also has some distinctive decorative touches. The names of the characters, for example, fit their profession: Gumbroot the



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dentist, Horatio Cleaver the butcher, Elias Sourdough the baker and Perigoe Leafbinder the bookseller. And throughout there's a playful sprinkling of Latin phrases, bearing out Joe's assertion that no other language can combine such precision of meaning with such brevity of expression (eg "Dum spiro spero", or "While I breathe, I hope").

Even the book's dedication, to the author's young daughter, Beatrix, is written in elegant, Ovidian verse: "Non mihi, non tibi, sed nobis" ("Not to me, not to you, but to us").

Amid all this linguistic spectacle, there's also a fair bit of historical enlightenment, as Higgins (a former primary school teacher) can't resist a few end-of-book appendices, chronicling the real-life practices of tooth-pulling and body-snatching circa the 18th and 19th centuries.

This debut novel has just been chosen to appear on the short-list for the Waterstone's Children's Book Prize. There are nine other short-listed titles and the winner will be announced on January 25.

It is an annual competition, open to writers with fewer than three published books to their credit.

Votes are cast by readers and booksellers, and previous winners include *The Cry of the Icemark* by Stuart Hill and *The Diamond of Drury Lane* by Julia Golding.

This year's short-listed books cover subjects that range from a werewolf teacher to a dragon detective agency, and from the world's worst jester to a child spy in the time of Shakespeare.

And even if *The Black Book of Secrets* doesn't win, Fiona Higgins has lined up a sequel, or "paraquel" as she calls it, because it has the same characters but in a parallel time zone.

Getting that second book into print has been much easier than her first. "In the end, I suppose, it shows the value of perseverance," Higgins concludes. "And of listening to editors' suggestions, however painful it might be at the time. If you're just getting rejection slips, it means they don't think it's got a chance; if they're telling you how to improve it, they think it's good."

- To order *The Black Book of Secrets* (£ 8.99, Macmillan) at the special price of £ 6.99 plus 99p p & p, call Telegraph Books on 0870 428 4112 or see [www.books.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.books.telegraph.co.uk)

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