



Soonchild

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Editorial Choice:

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Book

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5

Russell Hoban died in December 2011. There is word of at least one more picture book (with illustrations by Quentin Blake) to come, but **Soonchild** provides a moving finale to his longer prose writings for young readers. It is fitting that there are some distinct echoes in content and idiom of his greatest work for those readers, **The Mouse and His Child** (1967) which, coincidentally, the Royal Shakespeare Company has announced as its family offering at Stratford for the Winter season of 2012/3.

At the centre of **Soonchild**, the old questions which troubled the mouse father forty-five years ago remain, asked and partly-answered without pretension or sentimentality: what does it mean to be alive and what do children need to cope with a harsh world? Despite his residence in the UK since 1969, the humour still echoes Hoban's American origins in its voice and wit, often in one-liners embedded in dialogue of seeming seriousness. As in **The Mouse and His Child**, you wonder if the words can really be as wise and deep-rooted as they seem. Yes, of course they can. Just read them again.

Soonchild is set in the far North, with its harsh, stripped-down otherness and clarity which offer truths for us soft Southerners. This is a world of ice bears and ravens and narwhals and barnacle geese and wolves, as well as mythic creatures we can only dream of; ?A north where the white wind blows. Where the night wind wails with the voices of the cold and lonesome dead.? But this is also a North where the Inuit swig Coca Cola, send out for ?lotsa hotsa pizza? and park their skidoos outside the co-op. Those truths could easily be lost.

Sixteen Face John is the only shaman in town, but he's grown too scared to carry out his shaman's duties, putting his townsfolk as well as his family at risk. His sixteen faces are his secret; they progress face by face in degrees of scaredness. In the end, he cannot avoid facing up to what terrifies his sixteenth face. His wife, No Problem, should be about to give birth to Soonchild, their firstborn. But Soonchild won't come out until she's heard all the songs of all the creatures, and all the songs of the wind, the earth and the sky. In short, the World Songs, which are being lost to humankind. Without them, we're all done for. This John sees, is the big one, and it's down to him ? he's the man. Thus begins his great shamanic journey, which turns into a quest where the whole world is at stake unless he finds the World Songs before the demon Yiwok devours them.

Alexis Deacon's accompanying illustrations are pencil-drawn and shaded I think, sometimes as disturbing as the text

they illuminate and extend. They embody John's dreams and journeys, where the haunting and frightening encounters of the narrative are often undercut by that grounded humour. At times, Hoban's words are abandoned for several pages, insisting that we read the images ? you could wish for a more generous format to do them full justice. There is something both poignant and optimistic in the sympathetic fusion of the work of a relatively young illustrator (Deacon was born in 1978) with that of an octogenarian writer, forging a tale of new birth and old wisdom.

Soonchild may well become a cult book for those who find their Truths embedded in legend, to be returned to again and again for new insights as well as for reassurance. It will no doubt find its own readers among adolescents. There is a less obvious linear narrative and fewer comic set pieces and characters than those of **The Mouse and His Child** (remember the performance of the Beckettian *The Last Visible Dog* by The Caws of Art, or the power-crazed Manny Rat?). But we are left with a hard-won optimism rather than despair, the bequest of a man at the end of a long, searching and ever-restless writing life.

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