

“The Borribles”

by Jack Zipes

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Jack Zipes is Professor of German at the University of Minnesota. Educated at Dartmouth College and Columbia University, where he gained a PhD in English and Comparative Literature in 1965, Zipes has held professorships at the universities of Florida, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, New York, Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt. He has published many books on the practice and theory of writing Fairy Tales and Fantasy.

At a time when numerous writers of books for young people are conjuring plots to escape and camouflage the hard social conflicts of the present, Michael de Larrabeiti refuses to bow to trends. Apparently he is convinced more than ever before that fantasy has a social purpose, for he has dashed once again into the turbulent fray of literature and life wielding his terrible typewriter to confront readers with a cheeky sequel to his impudent novel *The Borribles*. The result is exemplary: *The Borribles Go For Broke* is a fine demonstration for present-day authors how fantasy literature can be used to raise questions about thorny social and political tendencies which drive young people to despair, and it is also a poignant and witty comment on past masters of fantasy like Tolkien and Lewis, who used the fairy-tale genre to point the way to holy salvation and preserve the status quo. de Larrabeiti insists that we try to explore life to the hilt while remaining disturbed by a world so sick that it is unaware of its own sickness. All his efforts are expended to bring out the Borrible in us, no matter what age we may be.

As many of us know, Borribles are 'outcasts or runaways who value their independence more than anything else because they take a deep delight in being what they axe.' They avoid

adults and especially policemen who represent arbitrary authority. Their ears grow long and pointed, a sign of their non-conformism, and, if they are caught by the law, their ears are clipped and their will is broken. Borribles exist everywhere in the world, but de Larrabeiti writes mainly about the Borribles who inhabit London.

In his first novel he wrote about the Borribles' great struggle with the high and mighty Rumbles, representatives of middle-class snobs, and the loss of a vast treasure in the River Wendle. In *The Borribles Go For Broke* he depicts the further adventures of a small group of Borribles who are manipulated by Spiff, the irascible chief, to search for the lost treasure in the underground territory of the treacherous Wendles. Actually, the group of Borribles consisting of the two tough girls, Chalotte and Sydney, a Bangladeshi named Twilight, Stonks from Peckham and Vulge from Stepney, primarily wants to rescue the horse Sam, who had been of immense service on their Great Rumble Hunt. However, the police have created a Special Borrible Group (SBG) under the command of the fanatic Inspector Sussworth, and the Borribles are pursued with vengeance. In fact, at one point they are even captured by the SBG but then rescued by an extraordinary tramp named Ben, who is a grown-up Borrible in his own way. Though the Borribles and Ben have no difficulty in making fools of the police, it is a different story with the Wendles in the sewers of London. Spiff has instigated everything so that the Borribles must help him search for the lost treasure and eliminate the tyrannical Wendle chieftain Flinthead. Ultimately the Borribles escape and Sam is rescued.

However, the Borribles are not happy in the end unless they can continue bickering and arguing among themselves about their next step in opposition to the normal routine of an oppressive society.

It is difficult to do justice to the style and manner in which de Larrabeiti makes the unbelievable believable. His starting point is obviously the young 'lumpenproletariat', the down and outs of the London lower classes. In this novel he begins by focusing on the interaction between Charlotte as hard-nosed courageous girl and Twilight as sensitive and sensible Bangladeshi. His immediate concern is to establish the integrity and skills of these two characters generally representative of females and minority groups. Thereafter, he expands the scope of his attention by depicting the relation between Ben as adult dropout and the Borribles as defiant outsiders. At first the Borribles distrust Ben, but they learn quickly that his principles are similar to theirs: he lives from day to day, contented with the waste and abundance of a wasteful society, abhors the deadliness of routine, shuns profit-making, and minds his own business. All this is proclaimed in his special song:

Let the world roll round an' round
Wiv its hard-worked folk in fetters:
All'oo think themselves yer betters,
Money-mad and dooty bound.

Make yer choice, there ain't so many,
No ambition's worth a fart;
Freedom is a work of art -
Take yer stand with uncle Benny!

Together Ben and the Borribles reveal how creative and adroit one must be to gain and protect one's independence. Not only are they surrounded by powerful social forces

demanding law and order just for the sake of law and order, but they must contend with each other's disrespectful and suspicious natures. de Larrabeiti's fantasy projection shows lower-class life more like it is than many so-called 'realistic' novels. He does not mince his words nor pull his punches. His character portrayals and command of colloquial speech, especially Cockney, are remarkable. At times he lets his imagination carry him away, yet there are very few novelists writing today who can infuse fantasy stories with social themes pertaining to racial, sexual, and political struggles of the present in such a way that readers can comprehend the importance and urgency of protest by outsiders. de Larrabeiti begins his book with a Borrible proverb. If a Borrible don't look alive he's very soon dead.' Let us hope that the creator of the Borribles keeps them alive and kicking as on Borribles can.