

Alex Shearer

Tins

What gave you the idea for tinned body parts?

First I got the idea for the boy who found something strange in an unlabelled tin. Only what was it to be? A body part seemed like an interesting possibility.

The theme of forced child labour in factories was a strong one in 19th century Britain. Why did you choose to address this theme in contemporary Britain?

It is still a strong theme in the contemporary world and has been far from eradicated. Children are still forced into labour, and often – in the recent past, and possibly even now – we, in developed countries, have happily bought cheap, imported goods produced by child labour, which really, is little better than condoning it. But if it was happening on our doorstep, we'd be appalled.

You have written before about children being kidnapped. Why is this a recurring theme?

I never realised this until someone pointed it out. I think the reason is that I like the children in the books to have independence of thought and action: they are forced into situations where the only resources they can rely on are their own – adults cannot help them now, it's down to them.

Fergal and Charlotte are not typical hero material. Why did you pick them?

The few truly heroic people I have met in my life were never – without exception – heroic in character or stature. They were all either extremely ordinary or slightly eccentric. They had done something exceptional but you would never have known it to look at them or to talk to them. I suspect that people who do brave things are actually as riddled with doubts and uncertainties as the rest of us; they just rise to the occasion. I wanted Fergal and Charlotte to be like that.

What was the process you went through to write this story?

I spotted a basket of cut-price damaged groceries and unlabelled tins in a supermarket one day and thought, 'I wonder what you'd find in those tins. Is it worth buying one to see?' I didn't buy one, but the thought stayed with me and turned into the book.

What did you find most difficult when writing *Tins*?

The second part. Setting up the mystery was easier than finding a rational explanation for it.

How did you go about building suspense and comedy at the same time?

Comedy is a relief from suspense; it breaks it and allows it to build again. Relentless comedy ceases to be funny and becomes wearing, so you have to be serious sometimes. So one really follows the other with a kind of inevitability, like the swing of a pendulum. If you ever watch a good horror film, there is always a laugh-out-loud moment when, for example, the monster behind the door with a chain saw turns out to be just Tiddles the cat.

In the end there is a hint that the horrible Dimble-Smiths have ended up in *Tins*. Were you tempted to write about that more directly?

Yes, I was, but then decided that it might be better left to the reader's imagination.

Did you have any other ideas for possible endings?

Yes, but they didn't seem as good. The Dimble-Smiths could have escaped; they could have been arrested and put in prison. But neither of those seemed right.

What is the strangest thing you have ever found?

I can't remember. But I can recollect something fairly gruesome.

I worked in a hospital once and every day one of the porters would pass by the department with a green canvas bag. Inside the bag was a body part, which had just been chopped off in the operating theatre. 'Ere!' he'd say. 'Guess what this is!' and we had to guess from the shape of the bag what its contents were, and then he would open the bag up so that we could see if we had guessed correctly. One day, it was a leg.

Now I think about it, maybe *that's* where *Tins* came from...