

## Chapter 14

### The Combined School Story

Gene Kemp – *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* (1977),  
*Gowie Corby Plays Chicken* (1979) and five other novels

What *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer* did for secondary school pupils in bringing school into the everyday world, Gene Kemp's seven novels set in or around Cricklepit Combined School did for younger children. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* (1977), the first novel in the series, is the only school story to have won the Library Association's Carnegie Medal. Narrated in the first person, and with a smattering of familiar school rhymes and corny jokes, it is Tyke's account of his last term at Cricklepit School. It is about the scrapes that Tyke gets into – usually to protect or placate the endearing Danny, who is intellectually challenged and suffers from a speech defect:

'He looks bright,' I've heard people say. 'There must be a block.'  
There is. I know that. I've known it for years. It's his head.'<sup>1</sup>

It is, above all, a story about the assumptions we make about identity and gender, and about the power of friendship.

The opening sentence plunges us into a wet Friday playtime and the first hint of trouble. The picture is painted in a few evocative strokes: 'the canteen that smelled of boiled swede and cabbage, enough to make you throw up'; 'a crowd of under-sized Chinamen streamed towards us,

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1. Gene Kemp, *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), chapter 1.

shouting, panting, kicking, the second year doing Aladdin again, I suppose'; Lorraine Fairchild and Linda Stoatway were dancing in a corner, 'all flying skirts and hair, showing off to the boys who couldn't have cared less'.<sup>2</sup> This is school life in all its mundane hilarity, expressed in the authentic voice of childhood. Amid the chaos, Danny steals a ten-pound note from a teacher's handbag, generously offering to share it with Tyke. To keep Danny out of trouble, Tyke takes the note and hides it in an attic store until it can be secretly returned. After school, Tyke takes his dog Crumble for a walk, and from the bank he watches the weir in the river. The description of the river in spate is woven seamlessly into the narrative, as is Tyke's inner relief at saving Danny from the consequences of his thieving:

All the murky feeling about the money washed away as I stood there. Nothing much mattered very much except the noise of the water and the wetness in the air and the willows blowing in the mind on the other side of the bank.<sup>3</sup>

But when on the following Monday Tyke returns to the store to recover the stolen note, it has gone. To make matters worse, in assembly Danny puts his pet mouse into Linda's hair. The resulting scene is carefully handled farce, as children fall like ninepins, Mrs Somers climbs up the wall bars, and Mr Merchant attempts a flying tackle. In due course, the matter of the theft is sorted out by the headmaster ('Chief Sir'), with Tyler let off with a cautionary letter home and Danny invited to tea by the guilt-ridden victim, where he is entertained to 'ice-cream and jelly and cakes and sausages'. It is an example, says Tyke, of 'the unfairness of things'.<sup>4</sup>

The middle chapters of the novel are laced with similar episodes: Tyke retrieving a rotting sheep's carcase from the weir stream so Danny can gain house points for bringing a 'skellinton' to school; Tyke accidentally dropping his father's election leaflets into the river, then making amends by removing a rival's leaflets from the town doorsteps; the setting up of a hide-out in the derelict paper mill; and an account of Mr Merchant's brilliant lesson on William the Conqueror (with a re-enactment of the English fighting the Normans) to which even the tramp and the gardeners in the park begin to listen; the love hearts scrawled on the front of the school after Merchant's ill-advised assignation with the delectable student teacher, Miss Honeywell ('Miss is so super star she could get anyone,' says Tyke).<sup>5</sup>

2. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 1.

3. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 1.

4. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 2.

5. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 9.

But when Tyke overhears the teachers discussing the secondary school selection test, it seems Danny is destined to be sent to a boarding school for backward children unless he does well, and Tyke knows that Danny can't manage if they are separated. Desperate measures are called for and Tyke takes a test paper from the headmaster's office, works out the answers with the help of his bright seventeen-year-old sister Beryl, and persuades Danny to learn them. Not surprisingly, Danny does well enough in the test to go to the comprehensive school, but Tyke does too well and is offered a place at the school for gifted children. Luckily, Tyke and Danny's friendship is saved because Mr Tiler 'doesn't believe in privilege and that place is so privileged that even saints and millionaires have a hard time getting in'.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the novel moves to a series of climaxes. While Tyke is ill, a gold watch is stolen; Danny is accused of the theft and disappears. But Tyke knows that Danny would not steal a watch ('"Nasty staff time is", says Danny. "My Dad does time in the nick."')<sup>7</sup> and that he has been framed by two class bullies. Somehow Tyke manages to 'strike a deal' with 'Chief Sir', Danny is rescued from the paper mill, and the real culprits are discovered.

The account of the last day of term captures all the familiar excitement and emotion: the school play; the prayer for the school and those leaving; the singing of 'Lord Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing' while Linda and Lorraine sob and wail in the back row; and, above all, the uncertainty and desolation of moving on to a different and unknown world suddenly overtaking the excitement of it all. Here, typically of the novel, the unmistakable language of school is overlaid surreptitiously with the more reflective voice of the author:

It was the last time I should be here. No more Sir, gloom. No more Mrs Somers, FANTASTIC. I'd come here, holding Berry's hand, when I was four, and now I was twelve. Eight years had gone somewhere. And I didn't want to go to a new school. And I didn't want to grow up. Growing up seemed a pretty grotty sort of thing to have to do. I felt empty, strange, restless.<sup>8</sup>

But when, far away, a clock strikes four, Tyke has an urge to ring the bell in the school's bell-tower – just as his ancestor Thomas Tiler had done long ago. Tyke shins up the drain pipe and straddles the roof. It is here that Mrs Somers, in shouting at Tyke to come down, reveals the novel's extraordinary secret, that rough and tough Tyke is a girl, not a boy, and we are brought face to face with our own often misguided assumptions about girls and boys.

6. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 12.

7. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 13.

8. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 14.

Defiantly Tyke tolls the bell 'as if summoning the whole city to come. And people came'.<sup>9</sup> But the bell tower is weak. Bell, tower and roof crash to the ground, and, with them, Tyke. In the Postscript, attributed to Will Merchant, Mr Merchant visits Tyke in hospital ('a broken arm, a broken ankle, bruises and concussion') and ties up the loose ends.<sup>10</sup> But in another, metafictional twist, he reveals himself as the teller, or at least the reteller, of the entire story: 'When I went again she was much recovered, and started to tell me all about the term, which I enjoyed. I began to try to put it down just as she told it to me. . . . Oh, Tyke wanted the jokes put in, because . . . there can't be too many jokes'.<sup>11</sup>

However, what mostly sets the novel apart is its original use of language, which starts with its alliterative title. Look, for example, at the sympathetic humour of 'Chief Sir' interviewing Danny and Tyke about the stolen money. Look at the way the shouts from the crowded playground are echoed in the way they are crowded together in two columns on the printed page,<sup>12</sup> and the neat juxtaposition as Tyke sees the route to the bell tower: 'Perfectly simple. Simply perfect.'<sup>13</sup> And look at the aptness of the imagery: 'Life, all clear and bright again, stretched before me like the first page of a fresh exercise book';<sup>14</sup> 'the cane, lying like a snake that had been turned to stone';<sup>15</sup> and 'Danny went as pink as school blancmange'.<sup>16</sup> And listen: Kemp has a sharp ear for language and the dialogue she creates is exactly the way that children speak. What is most striking, though, is the lack of any overt moralising. Although *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* is very much in the moral tradition of the mainstream of school stories, children hate being patronised, and not only does the novel's first-person narration preclude any direct authorial intervention, but the writing is so subtle that there is also little sense that the author is standing behind her characters, and directing their and our response. As readers, we are nearly left to reach our own conclusions.

### ***Gowie Corby Plays Chicken* (1979)**

We have seen the not very satisfactory ways in which writers of series of school stories deal with the problem of their characters growing up. Some (for example, Frank Richards in the Greyfriars series and Anthony

9. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 14.

10. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, Postscript.

11. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, Postscript.

12. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 12.

13. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 14.

14. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 2.

15. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 9.

16. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, chapter 10.

Buckeridge in the Jennings series) lock their children in time, so they never age and never move up the school. Others (for example, Enid Blyton in all three of her series) follow their children through their school career, without ever allowing them properly to develop and change. Kemp, however, takes a different and more satisfactory route, which opens up a number of possibilities. It is Cricklepit Combined School that remains constant, while each year the eldest class of children moves on to secondary school and another class takes its place. So when school reassembles the term after Tyke's dramatic finale, the school building still lies in ruins, but it is Gowie Corby and his peers (more enemies than friends) who are being taught by Mr Merchant.

*Gowie Corby Plays Chicken* is an angrier and more challenging book than *Tyke Tiler*, with a less easy-to-like child narrator; perhaps for this reason it has proved less popular, especially with adult readers. It is again about the power of friendship, but also confronts the problem of the deprived and disturbed child. Always in trouble and unpopular at school, Gowie is in a downward spiral of despair. When term starts, isolated from the other children, he kicks a marble aimlessly in the playground – 'It goes down the drain, of course' (note Gowie's sarcastic resignation). So he kicks litter instead, and is told to pick it up: 'I pick it up, hate, hate. They've started already. Picking on me. Bossing me about. Telling me off. Gowie Corby, Gowie Corby, the theme for all that's wrong in this school.'<sup>17</sup> He hasn't brought any gym kit; he is branded a thief; he slices up a new rubber ('What is a new rubber for if not to be spoilt?'); he defaces his exercise books and scrawls over Heather's folder.<sup>18</sup> He steals JJ's silver pen and after a chase Stewart's elbow is broken when Gowie pushes him down the library steps. In class – 'the torture room' – nobody will sit next to him (apart from Heather, who throughout the novel makes unrequited attempts to befriend him – 'Given a straight choice, I'd rather sit by a slug'): 'It's always the same. No place for me. Other people have friends. I have enemies. Not that I care.'<sup>19</sup> Not caring is a jarring refrain, suggesting how, beneath the angry façade, Gowie does care, desperately.

The tensions explode when Gowie refuses to join the football TEAM and is subjected to a brutal attack. The violence and the fear are captured in a frightening stream of consciousness. This is Kemp at her best, inside Gowie's head, making us feel his pain and terror and loneliness and confusion, worth a thousand words of authorial comment:

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17. Gene Kemp, *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), chapter 1.

18. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 1.

19. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 1.

I try to cover my head, my body. The pavement's hard, it tears my trousers, gashes my knees, scrunch, scrape, blood, warm and wet. Blood and salt in my mouth, tears pouring, I'm scared, I can't think, I can't fight, there are too many of them, help me, help me somebody, help me please, why won't somebody come, help, no one will, no one ever did, no one, there's only you and all of them . . . lie still . . . play dead . . . lie still . . . lie dead . . . perhaps I am dead . . . voices above the grunts.<sup>20</sup>

And help does come in the form of strange-looking Rosie Lee, another outsider, a black girl who has just moved in next door; and suddenly somebody cares about Gowie. As Rosie treats his wounds, he tells of his background, matter-of-factly, without any hint of self-pity or shame. His abusive father has left and is now in prison, and his mother works at a club every night. His eldest brother, Joe, 'the best of us', has been killed in a motorcycle accident, and his other brother, Mark, has been sent to reform school for stealing cigarettes.<sup>21</sup> Gowie trusts Rosie Lee sufficiently to introduce her to the creepy substitute family that he has assembled in the basement: the gerbils, Zombie and Voodoo; the mice, Terror, Ghoulie, Weird, Lurch and Witchie; and the rat, Boris Karloff, who is 'clever and smart and he loves me'.<sup>22</sup>

Bolstered by Rosie's unconditional friendship, Gowie's rehabilitation begins. In school he starts working and achieving; out of school, he is accepted into Rosie's family and is invited to go on holiday with them. But when JJ smashes the puppet that Gowie has made, he chases him into the cloakroom, where in his effort to escape JJ climbs onto the cistern and brings it crashing down. Retribution is inevitable and swift, described in the most searing passage in the novel:

Don't let him cane me, don't let him cane me, DON'T LET HIM CANE ME. Then as in a nightmare I hold out my hand, the cane whooshes, it hurts, it hurts, I don't cry. He looks at me. Is he waiting for tears?

'Corby, did that hurt'

'Yes, Sir. On the outside, Sir.'

He puts down the cane.

'Not an inside hurt. Not like . . . ?' He watches me. . . . Not like with Joe. When he was dead, and my mother wouldn't stop

20. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 4.

21. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 5.

22. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 5.

screaming. Or seeing my puppet broken. Sir. . . . Sir. Aren't you going to cane me, any more?' . . .

'You want to be caned.'

'No. But I don't want not to be.'

The blows are sharp and swift. I cry as I leave the headmaster's study. Only, I'm crying for a lot of things that have nothing to do with hands that hurt.'<sup>23</sup>

There is no reflection here on the irony of JJ's revenge and Gowie's reaction; no reflection on Gowie's fear of physical pain; no reflection on the headmaster's continuing Gowie's punishment against his better judgement; no reflection on the juxtaposition of Joe's death and the smashed puppet; no reflection on Gowie's inside hurt. As readers, we are left to reflect for ourselves. Victor Watson (*Reading Series Fiction*) suggests that 'because Gene Kemp does not provide quotable and conclusive wisdom in an adult authorial voice, her work can be regarded as slight . . . [her] ability to "do the voices" of her child characters is both her greatness and her undoing'.<sup>24</sup> I think children, who are constantly having to make sense of the world, recognise and relate to the novel's ironies and to Gowie's confused emotions. No other authorial comment is needed or wanted.

In the final chapters of the novel, Gowie 'plays chicken' with JJ in front of a car and 'playing chicken' becomes a Cricklepit craze. Having admitted he's too 'chicken' to hide in the allegedly haunted school, he ends up there at night as he tries to escape from the now-released Mark and his gang. He is discovered by Rosie Lee and then by Mark and friends: they threaten to set light to the place, but Rosie faces them down and, when the police arrive, they all hide in the cellar together. The next day Gowie lets the classroom mice escape and 'the pandemonium in the school grows louder and louder and LOUDER'.<sup>25</sup>

In the short Prologue to *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, as a family have breakfast in 'a comfortable room', the father reads from a newspaper: 'Dr Rosie Angela Lee has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with children in need throughout the world. . . . If it hadn't been for Rosie, you probably wouldn't be here now, and I would be in gaol, I suspect.'<sup>26</sup>

With no context, the Prologue makes little sense (it is nearly fifty pages before Rosie Lee makes an appearance), but the first sentence of the opening chapter may give us a clue: 'I didn't want to go back, but

23. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 9.

24. Victor Watson, *Reading Series Fiction* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2000), p. 203.

25. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 15.

26. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, Postscript.

then I never do, anyway.’<sup>27</sup> This is the remembering of something that has happened in the past – ‘didn’t want’ (and not ‘hadn’t wanted’) and ‘go’ (and not ‘come’). The father telling a story to his children, perhaps. But then the tense changes – ‘but then I never do, anyway’ – and the novel has switched to a present-tense, first-person narrative, the aggressive voice of a child ‘baddie’, the voice of Gowie.<sup>28</sup> At the end of the novel, the Epilogue continues the breakfast table dialogue (‘Did they catch all the mice safely?’), so the father is identified as the grown-up Gowie made good, and in a way he has been telling the story; and in a way he hasn’t, because everything has been told from the young Gowie’s perspective, with almost no adult point of view.<sup>29</sup> And as we ponder the novel’s narrative trick, we are treated to another surprise revelation – the unexpected fate of the hapless Heather.

***Charlie Lewis Plays for Time* (1984), *Juniper* (1986), *Just Ferret* (1990), *Zowey Corby’s Story* (1995) and *Snaggletooth’s Mystery* (2002)**

For me, the third novel in the series, *Charlie Lewis Plays for Time*, is a disappointment. The hardly inspiring plot centres on the arrival of Mr Carter at Cricklepit as teacher of 4F, covering for Mr Merchant who has been injured falling from a ladder, and the main thrust is an unflattering comparison between Carter’s ‘traditional’ teaching method (‘Your trouble is you think you’re different’; ‘This is a language lesson so there should be no talking AT ALL’; ‘I can’t read this,’ said Rocket. . . . ‘I didn’t ask you to read it. Just copy it for now.’)<sup>30</sup> and Merchant’s ‘child-centred’ approach. At the end of term, we are reminded again of the novel’s political agenda, when Carter leaves to take up a post at a ‘great Cathedral School’ and Trish comes out with another joke: ‘Listen, Charlie. Cut Education costs. Shoot the teachers.’<sup>31</sup> More interesting is the central character, Charlie Lewis, who suffers from a usually absent mother (a touring concert pianist, who on a visit home responds to Carter’s fawning overtures) and an absent father in Australia, and is left in the charge of Hortense, an ineffectual Belgian au pair. Emotionally, rich children can be as deprived as poor children, and Charlie finds sanctuary with the chaotic and impoverished family next door. However, he is a brilliant musician (like Pennington) and much of the action is played out in the compositions that run through his mind

27. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, chapter 1.

28. The novel is dedicated ‘For All My Baddies’.

29. *Gowie Corby Plays Chicken*, Postscript.

30. Gene Kemp, *Charlie Lewis Plays for Time*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), chapter 5.

31. *Charlie Lewis Plays for Time*, chapter 16.

– and when in the final paragraph, true to school-story form, his father arrives from Australia and it seems that his problems may be over, ‘The waiting melody crescendos into a mad finale as I run to open the door.’<sup>32</sup>

With *Juniper* (1986), Kemp is back on terrific form, though this is an intriguing mystery story and most of the action is played out away from school. Juniper’s criminal father has disappeared, her mother Ellie is mentally ill, there’s no money for food and rent, she has only ‘one point five arms’ (but no self-pity, ‘no handicap-patting, thank you very much’)<sup>33</sup> and she may be taken into care. Then Juniper senses that two shady men are stalking her and she has no-one to turn to for help except her school friend Ranjit. The cast is completed by old Nancy, who lives next door and doles out food and comfort; Mr Beamish, the sleazy debt collector; Jake, who makes Juniper go weak at the knees; Juniper’s patronising cousins, aunt and uncle; and Tom, the vicious cat, who is a danger to more than birds and mice (‘Lord Tom, King Tom, bow down, bow down and grovel, you wets’).<sup>34</sup>

*Juniper* is a more complex novel than its predecessors, something made possible by the shift to an overarching narrator and by the way it can leave the trivia of school behind. There are small time shifts and breath-taking dream sequences that turn into nightmares, like the one about Juniper’s cousins Marie and the spiteful Olga, in which Juniper’s longing to be whole and beautiful collides with reality: ‘She was seventeen and in a garden, full of flowers, sunshine, trees, lawns, fountains and white balconies and shining pools. . . . She was rich and scented and clever and confident and beautiful – and the Juniper that was still the other Juniper knew how clean she felt and was surprised.’<sup>35</sup>

There are allusions to other texts: Mr Beamish is ‘straight out of a story by Dickens or Joan Aiken’;<sup>36</sup> the previous winter ‘had been just like *The Long Winter* in *The House on the Prairie* series’;<sup>37</sup> Juniper’s secret path, which runs behind the house, is likened to the road in Rudyard Kipling’s poem (‘And now you would never know / There was once a road through the woods.’);<sup>38</sup> and the carol playing in the cathedral has a chill beneath the triumphant birth (‘Now the holly bears a berry as black as the coal’ and ‘a berry as blood it is red’).<sup>39</sup> There are also particular debts to folk

32. *Charlie Lewis Plays for Time*, chapter 16.

33. Gene Kemp, *Juniper* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), chapter 1.

34. *Juniper*, chapter 1.

35. *Juniper*, chapter 2.

36. *Juniper*, chapter 1.

37. *Juniper*, chapter 2.

38. *Juniper*, chapter 7.

39. *Juniper*, chapter 9.

tales: Ellie's bedroom, with its 'snakes of beads, shawls and shoes, fans and shells' is 'Aladdin's cave' (Ellie herself, with her 'silver-gilt hair spread over the pillow', reminds of Snow White).<sup>40</sup> And later, Juniper wishes for Aladdin's lamp: 'But, Charlie, there isn't a lamp and I don't know what to do. I'm just so hungry.'<sup>41</sup> The frying pan in which Nancy cooks enormous breakfasts 'must have come from the Fee Fie Fo Fum Giant's Castle';<sup>42</sup> Jake calls Juniper 'Goldilocks' and she sees him as 'a huge, golden bear';<sup>43</sup> and her own name derives from Grimm's 'The Juniper Tree', where the Tree brings good fortune:

But pretty Margery pitied me  
And laid me under the Juniper tree.

'But,' says Juniper to Ranjit, 'it wasn't like that. It was the other way round. Don't you understand? The song was the wrong way round. And we lived unhappily ever after. Ever after.'<sup>44</sup> And all the time, the mystery is working itself out, and Juniper is like a pawn in a chess game. But when the game ends in the violent dramatic finale, many of the characters turn out not to be what they seem, and as the cathedral bells ring out for Christmas, for Juniper, in spite of everything, it may just be that there will be a 'happy-ever-after' ending.

There are three further novels in the Cricklepit series. *Just Ferret* (1990) is about bullying, with another outsider, Owen Hardacre, or Ferret, at its centre. His mother has gone (Mrs Flint, the teacher, 'sighed crossly as if I'd deliberately lost her somewhere')<sup>45</sup> and his father, Joe Hardacre, an itinerant artist, is usually too busy painting or drinking to take much notice of him. Although bright and resourceful, he can't read or write, and he becomes a victim of Magnus and his gang. But with the help of two unlikely allies, Minty (whose mother is a wacky poet) and the sickly Beany, Ferret stands up to the bullies who steal money to fund their slot-machine gambling and are sly enough to have the teachers thinking they are angels. The novel also makes Kemp's familiar points about teachers and teaching, and although they remain a sub-text (efficient Mrs Flint examines Ferret like 'a small sliced-off bit of louse in a slide under a microscope' and 'Not being able to read doesn't always mean dyslexia. And people aren't quite sure what they mean by it.'). they are a rebuke to the old 'one size fits all' approach

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40. *Juniper*, chapter 1.

41. *Juniper*, chapter 2.

42. *Juniper*, chapter 3.

43. *Juniper*, chapter 3.

44. *Juniper*, chapter 11.

45. Gene Kemp, *Just Ferret* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), chapter 2.

to education.<sup>46</sup> In the end, Mr Hardacre confronts Magnus's father, and Magnus's aura and credibility are shattered; Ferret learns to read and write; and Ferret and Minty come to the rescue of a runaway teenage mother-to-be (this added-on sub-plot feels contrived: they are heroes enough without it). The concluding chapter is not in Ferret's voice, but is an extract from 'Minty's Private Book' and does not quite sum things up: 'I fancy Mr Hardacre no end, but so does Mum so that's no good. . . . I did think of Ferret as a boyfriend but he said don't be barmy and ran off as fast as he could. . . . You see it's the teacher, Miss, that makes the difference.'<sup>47</sup>

*Zowey Corby and the Black Cat Tunnel* (1995) is about the arrival at Cricklepit of posh Lucy and her struggle to fit in (as we have seen in Part III, this is a staple of the girls' school story). It transpires much later that her father has been caught embezzling and has killed himself, and her mother has run off with her father's best friend. So Lucy is left living next door to Zowey Corby in Black Cat Lane, with her grandmother who cannot accept coming down in the world either. The action of the novel is book-ended by two incidents on the railway that runs through Black Cat Tunnel. In the first, Zowey and Lucy manage to remove stones from the line, put there to derail a train; in the second, she and Lucy are attacked by a gang and are in danger of serious sexual assault. Between these, there are a campaign for Cricklepit School to opt out of local authority control (another example of Kemp's political agenda taking over), an attack on Rosie Lee by thugs from the National Front, and a vibrant description of adolescent girls electrified at the Saturday market – 'Lights switched on, music played, my feet zipped, go, go, go, girl, dance, dance as we weaved through the crowds, looking, searching, everybody's looking for something, dreams, adventure, danger.'<sup>48</sup> There is, I think, a sense that *Zowey Corby and the Black Cat Tunnel* might be the last of the Cricklepit series, with the reappearance of Gowie (Zowey's half-brother), with Lorraine, Ruth and Heather still in tow; Rosie Lee; and Mr Tiler (Tyke's father) as a city councillor. The end of the novel is elegiac in tone, with Rosie leaving to work as a volunteer in Africa, Gowie going out with the other girls, and Zowey's Gran lamenting the threat to the old tree: 'It's the end of an era. My Youth gone.'

In fact there was to be one more novel, but a largely disappointing one. In *Snaggletooth's Mystery* (2002), written twenty-five years after *Tyke Tiler*, 'Chief Sir' has retired, Mr Merchant has become deputy head, and

46. *Just Ferret*, chapter 3.

47. *Just Ferret*, chapter 17.

48. Gene Kemp, *Zowey Corby and the Black Cat Tunnel* (London: Puffin, 1997), chapter 12. First published in 1995 by Faber and Faber under the title *Zowey Corby's Story*.

Mrs Somers, Tyke's *bête-noir*, has become a hateful chair of governors. Snaggletooth is the editor of *The Cricklepit Chronicle*, which reports on the haunting of Cricklepit School and offers a possible explanation when a flash flood reveals the skeletons of two children who long ago have died from cholera. It is left for the reader to decide whether this 'SCOOP OF SCOOPS'<sup>49</sup> is fact or fiction: 'We tried to bring you the news. We tried to tell you the truth. It's up to you, kids, to decide if the school was haunted.'<sup>50</sup> But the real failure is not only that Snaggletooth comes across as a self-centred poseur ('I, me, moi, Snaggle'),<sup>51</sup> but that the first-person narration no longer has that sharp ear for children's language that characterises its predecessors.

It could be argued that the Cricklepit series is an example of the fashion for issue-based writing in children's literature. Learning difficulty, deprivation, disability, dyslexia, bullying, parenthood, and teachers and teaching: all these are subjects that Kemp views from a child's point of view. But it is when the issues and not the characters are foregrounded, and there is more than a hint of authorial intervention, that the novels are least successful. The triumph of the best of the Cricklepit novels lies in the way that they look at school life – its jokes and its disappointments, its successes and its pain – through a child's eyes and in a child's voice; in the way they stand up for 'the lonely, the lost and the damaged';<sup>52</sup> and in the way that the children manage to win through, often against almost impossible odds.

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49. Gene Kemp, *Snaggletooth's Mystery* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), Introduction.

50. *Snaggletooth's Mystery*, Postscript – 'The Last Cricklepit Chronicle'.

51. *Snaggletooth's Mystery*, chapter 13.

52. *Zowey Corby and the Black Cat Tunnel*, chapter 10.