



# Classics in Short No.76: Mind Your Own Business

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

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Classics in Short

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**Brian Alderson** on Michael Rosen's **Mind Your Own Business**.

**Brian Alderson**

What's that there?

What's what where?

I want to know what this is

Keep your hair on mate:

*Long years ago,*

lecturing regularly on children's literature (regarded then as a quaint, if not aberrant, occupation) I would eventually reach Poetry.

*?Okay, people? I would ask,*

?give us some names.? A hush would fall, followed by a tentative ?Stevenson?? or ?De la Mare?? and then one or two other more or less predictable bards and, perhaps, daringly, Ted Hughes, whose **Meet My Folks** had been published as recently as 1961.

It was not a trick exercise but a way of pointing up how few were the memorable volumes of what came to be dubbed ?single-poet collections? for the young. Anthologies, yes, and the superb series of selections from ?adult? poets put out by The Bodley Head, but very little to stand beside such thoroughbreds of the genre as **Peacock Pie** or **The Blackbird in the Lilac**.

*But then came Michael Rosen.*

[image:Mind Your Own Business.jpg:left]

The year was 1974 and **Mind Your Own Business** began a quiet ? and later rather racketty ? revolution. The book's prolegomenon (which we transcribe above) almost tells everything in its half-rhyming lines catching the inflections of direct speech, in its cheeky ambiguity ? for there are no quotation marks ? and in the interpretative skill of its illustrator who reflects but does not interfere with the deliciously understated text.

*What follows*

expands upon the implications of that interchange. Here was a startling new voice, converting both the sound and the

substance of 'poetry for children' into a register of its own time. A custom has grown up to call it 'performance verse' and assuredly it owes something to some striking contemporary novelties, whether in Liverpool or California, but that is to neglect the range of which such performance is capable. There is at one end of the scale playground doggerel owing much to tradition (I can remember chanting something like the stanza on Old Ben Brown long before 1974) and at the other end reflective pieces – not least the closing poem: 'I'm alone in the evening / when the family sits / reading and sleeping / and I watch the fire in close...?' where adult recollection movingly interprets childhood experience.

*It comes as no surprise therefore*

to find that among his many diverse achievements Mike Rosen undertook an MA in children's literature at Reading University which led him to an intensive study of Stevenson and **A Child's Garden of Verses**\*. 'No surprise' because, allowing for *autres temps* and *autres mœurs*, a Stevensonian influence lies behind much of **Mind Your Own Business**. You can find it in the perceptive and often quietly comic accounts of children's play: 'Saturdays I put my boots on and go wading...' or 'I share my bedroom with my brother...' and these link in to renderings of scenes from family life, featuring not least the narrator's redoubtable father ('If you don't put your shoes on...?') and culminating in the tremendous ballad 'My brother got married in a Wimpy bar...' It is of no consequence that Wimpy bars are no more (or, for that matter, brunchburgers at three and ninepence, or small boys going through the rite of passage from short to long trousers) what is outstanding about the volume is – as with Stevenson nearly a hundred years earlier – the meshing of all the diverse parts into a coherent whole.

*Impossible, I suppose,*

not to include Quentin Blake's support to this coherence. As with that first picture of child and pedagogue, shown above, he (and the publisher's unnamed book designer) supply a faultless accompaniment to the progress of the verses, and he is allowed occasional riffs all his own, rather like the piano solos that occur in certain song-cycles. The demotic in the drawing matches that found in the language – and the finished construct contrasts tellingly with a later rescension of some of the poems in **You Can't Catch Me!** (1981). That book won the Signal Poetry Award, but, because of its larger format and scatter of multi-coloured pictures, it served to detract from and dilute the strength and colour of the poet's own voice.

*What a start though was the 'Business'?*

Although three years elapsed before Mike and Quentin published a companion volume, **Wouldn't You Like to Know** (1977), the influence of its predecessor, allied to work from such coadjutors as Roger McGough, seems to have inspired previously reluctant publishers to make more room for children's poetry in their lists. A busy hubbub got under way, which can be most happily charted through the Bookguides that were severally issued by **Signal** magazine and by the commentaries attached to that magazine's annual Poetry Award. Students of the day would have found a lot more names to shout out than heretofore.

*For all that,*

the response was not unprecedented. All the way from **Divine Songs** in 1715 to **When We Were Very Young** a single classic collection can inspire multitudes of imitators, but, in this instance, it inspired its creator too – not just to more of the same but to action in its own cause. Who would have thought that his hero, at one moment 'the big sleeper' and at the next 'Rob Roy and a tiger', would grow up to enjoy what has turned out to be an incomparable laureateship – to become spearshaking champion of the child as uninhibited (Stevensonian?) reader and of children's books and children's poetry truly 'for keeps'. Thank you, Mike, for everything.

\*See his essay on 'Robert Louis Stevenson and Children's Play' in **Children's Literature in Education** 26.1 (March 1995) pp.53-72.

The illustrations are taken from the 1974 edition of **Mind Your Own Business** by Michael Rosen, with pictures by Quentin Blake, published by André Deutsch Children's Books.

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.



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