



Obituary Clive King

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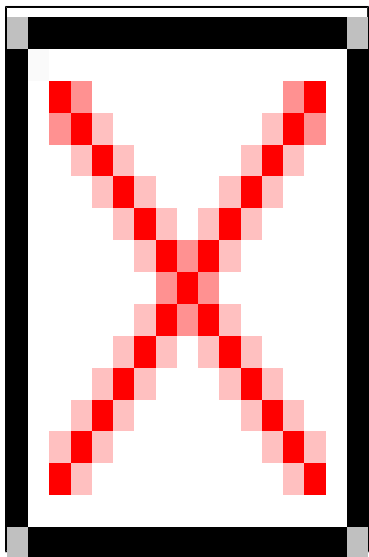
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Clive King remembered by **Nicholas Tucker**

Author of **Stig of the Dump**, still one of the best-known titles in twentieth century children's literature, Clive King along with his three brothers was brought up close to the village of Ash on the Kentish North Downs. Going on to read English at Cambridge, he joined the Royal Navy in 1943 and served on the Arctic convoys, repeatedly making what Churchill described as 'the worst journey in the world.'

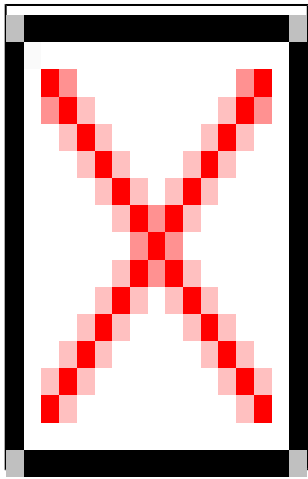


Working for the British Council after the war while writing in his spare time, King returned to Ash now with a small son and daughter. Seeing them playing the same games around the disused chalk pit he had once explored as a boy, he came up with the idea of two modern children making contact with a stone-age child of the same age. Taking three years to finish, the story tells how they play splendid games together, ingeniously recycling the rubbish they find there to construct dens and establish a regular water supply. Stig himself, all shaggy black hair and broad grins, although wordless comes over as an ideal companion. Gentle hints scattered throughout suggest that he is in fact a figment of the children's imagination. But for eight-year-old Barney, the younger of the two children, 'Stig's always here. He's my friend,' and thousands of child readers ever since have shared the same view. But A.A. Milne's stories had always been a favourite for King, and there are echoes in the last chapter of Christopher Robin's final farewell to Pooh Bear.

Turned down by twelve publishers the story was accepted by Kaye Webb at Puffin Books who then waited a year before publication. Beautifully illustrated by Edward Ardizzone, it went on to sell over two million copies and remains in print. It was followed by sixteen more novels, including **The 22 Letters**, a stirring historical adventure within which three brothers devise an early alphabet. There was also **Ninny's Boat**, set in the fifth century AD at a time when it was the

Angles who were the migrants coming to Britain for a better life. This novel was partially informed by King's own time working with Vietnamese Boat People while he was stationed in Pakistan. He also drew on his British Council experience in **The Night the Water Came**, which describes how a boy in Bangladesh survives a cyclone, aided by hard-pressed relief workers. But there were to be no more best-sellers, with King living a frugal life after moving to a marshman's cottage on the Norfolk coast, which he enjoyed renovating when not walking the open spaces all around him.

The original chalk pit that inspired **Stig of the Dump** is now buried underneath a golf course. But King's enticing image



of children allowed to play for hours on their own in untamed countryside never fades, particularly in today's more anxious parental climate. Living to the age of 94, he was still receiving fan letters about Stig up to his death.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

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