

Sue Hampton's speech, Lincoln Minster School 2nd July

I'm honoured and excited to be here this afternoon. Thank you for inviting me. I wouldn't be here, or an author at all, if it hadn't been for my dad, Paul Hampton. He was an architect as well as a poet, and in his retirement travelled up on the train once in a while to walk, look and think in this great building. I loved him, very much, and from an early age he taught me to love words and stories. He died before I became a published author, but he'd be thrilled to see me here today.

I'm afraid he'd be far from thrilled, however, if he knew what's happened in recent years in the world of books. He'd be appalled to hear that books are known as products and that publishers are looking not for good writing but for brands that can be marketed. He wouldn't be pleased, if he walked in to Waterstone's, to see the shelves dominated by celebrities who haven't actually written the books that carry their names. And he'd be horrified to hear that an English teacher I know was told by an agent that she would have to change her central female character into a boy. Why? Because her girl is a tomboy, an individual, who doesn't follow the crowd – and in the opinion of the agent, there aren't enough independent-minded girls out there to identify with the character! I think that's shocking on several levels. And you know better. One of you read a Sue Hampton book and emailed me to say "I love the way you resist stereotypes." I meet plenty of girls who are not girly, media-obsessed airheads who only care about how they look. If you look on the shelves of a bookshop, you might be forgiven for thinking that girls are all very shallow and very dim. But you're NOT! And you deserve better. So do the boys who think and feel and are interested in people and the world. And that's one of the reasons I write the way I do. It's important. You're important.

So yes, as a young people's author in today's book world, I am on something of a mission. I want to give my readers the credit they deserve. I don't dumb down or narrow their horizons. For me, the greatest writing targets head and heart. And that's what Michael Morpurgo meant when he said that "A book is not like chocolate." Chocolate give us short-lived pleasure and makes no demands. It bypasses the brain and our deeper emotions. He meant that too many books do the same. They *are* like chocolate! But like him, I aim to make my readers think and feel. I want to stir them, challenge them, open their eyes, widen their experience, and raise questions that matter. I believe in big themes like love, courage and freedom – not the latest media cash-ins. Not froth. You deserve more.

I'm sure parents and teachers here will be aware that there has been a trend in recent years towards fiction (especially teenage) that is dark. These novels focus on negative situations and people who are hopelessly dysfunctional. Publishers describe these books as "corrosive" – as if corrosive is great! I looked up the dictionary definition. *Capable of destroying ... tending to eat away ...cutting, sarcastic ...* Michael Morpurgo has a different goal. He doesn't pretend, as children's literature often used to do, that there is no darkness, no evil in the world, and no sadness. Far from it. He sets stories in concentration camps and writes about ethnic cleansing and

abuse. The world of his stories is the real world, and in it terrible things happen. But there is also love, compassion, understanding and forgiveness – and there should be, because the truth is that as human beings we are capable of goodness as well as destruction. His books are powerful and authentic but they don't corrode. They inspire. And he inspired me – to write, and in my writing to face up to the sadness and shame, but to keep the light burning. You deserve it.

If I told an agent or publisher that as an author I want to feed the soul, I think the door would be slammed in my face rather quickly! But isn't that what we do when we walk in the woods, smell a rose, stand on a cliff and watch the waves, see a rainbow or sunset, listen to great music or look at a painting that stirs something deep in us? Isn't Shakespeare full of it? My young characters get it. They might not use the word but they know there's more to being human than day to day business. Here's teenager Rachel, who stands up to bullying in *Just For One Day*. Here she encourages Wayne to do the same when she babysits and finds him in distress after a fall-out with her cousin Joe: READING P.171, *JUST FOR ONE DAY*.

My mission, then, is to shun corrosion, stereotypes and froth. But there's more to it than that, because there's more to good writing than choosing important subjects and themes. There's the writing itself. The other day I was in a school library and skimmed some paragraphs from the selection on a shelf. I found many made up exclusively of short sentences, dominated by simple, limited and unoriginal vocabulary and snappy dialogue. It reminded me of a time when, as a teacher, I taught my class to write what I called triple tick sentences (rich, vivid, precise and telling) and asked them to look for such sentences in the books they were reading – and they told me there weren't any. I checked – and they were right! Among the library books the other day I did find a few examples of complex sentences and striking imagery but many of them came from books published several decades ago. Too many children's writers today are short-changing readers and you deserve better. Ours is a wonderful language. You enjoy words. I'm sure you like discovering new ones and exciting ways of putting them together. You deserve good stories but you also deserve good writing. Seek out the authors who make words seem new, make them count or sing, surprise and excite you. There are some talented authors, living as well as dead, who aim for this kind of excellence in their writing. You'll find them if you look. Seek them out, enjoy them and learn from them. After all, if you want to be an athlete, you know that to succeed you'll have to work hard to be GOOD. If you want to play an instrument in a concert hall you know you'll have to practise and practise to achieve a high standard. I believe writing should be the same. When you write in school, your teachers encourage you to aim for such a standard. Yet the book world doesn't seem to care about excellence. In fact, the word is about as fashionable as soul!

The prizes I'm presenting will be honouring the kind of excellence for which I believe writers should strive and recognising the values that matter. Well done to everyone here who has done anything to make your school a happier place for anyone else in the Minster community. And thank you for inviting me to play a small part in it.