**Us and Them: Richard Armstrong, a working class writer for boys**

In March 1971, Margery Fisher, the editor of the children’s books review journal *Growing Point*, devoted her monthly Special Review to *The Albatross* by Richard Armstrong. She said of the author that, of all the writers for children with reputations going back twenty or thirty years, he had adapted himself to ‘the present climate…more easily than most’ (Fisher 1971, 1679). Unfortunately, Fisher’s judgement was not shared by children’s publishers, and *The Albatross* was the last of Armstrong’s novels to appear in print, ending a career that had included the award of the Carnegie Medal for *Sea Change* in 1949; had briefly seen Armstrong acknowledged as one of a new kind of children’s writer in the early 1950s; and had gained him regular approval in the major children’s reviewing journals and surveys of children’s literature in the following decade (Crouch 1972, 187-192; Doyle 9-10; Fisher 1964, 215-216, 218, 305-306, 347; Lines 214-215, 328).

It was perhaps Margery Fisher’s enthusiasm for tales of adventure that clouded her judgement about Armstrong’s continuing appeal. Her study of adventure stories, *The Bright Face of Danger*, published in 1986, contains, in six pages (Fisher 1986, 30-37), the only substantial critical study of his work that I have traced. Adventure was his metier, more precisely boys’ adventure, and, by the 1960s, more narrowly still, sea stories: a novel every year or two about young merchant seamen encountering danger in faraway places.

This was a subject he knew about (he had been a seaman), and in which he had made himself an authority. Among his information books for children was a three-volume history of seafaring (Marsh). But his was a dying trade. As
a matter of course, the reviews of adventure stories in *The Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*, which would often include a favourable acknowledgement of one of his titles, would begin with a preamble accepting that the credibility and creative possibilities of this kind of story were almost exhausted (Denniston; Longhurst; Anon 1967; Townsend 210-213). Critics, and presumably children, were wearying of tired plots and stereotyped characters, and, in the age of television and The Beatles, young people had more to excite them than the possibility of seeing the world from the deck of a tramp steamer.

As a writer of stories for boys he belonged to a gender based publishing tradition that had been established at the end of the previous century and that was based on a presumed strict division of interest between the sexes: boys were assumed to be adventurous and active; girls to be home-loving and passive. Even at the time he began writing, these social assumptions were questionable; and, by then, a deluge of undistinguished and derivative work had made stories for boys critically disreputable too.

By the end of Armstrong’s career, the whole idea of boys’ books was distinctly old-fashioned. Although the major thrust of feminist criticism of children’s books was yet to come, softer gender egalitarianism permeated children’s publishing. Most children’s books by then included girls, even if they did not give them major roles; and the way in which books for boys tended to concentrate on action, conflict, physical strength and courage, seemed, in an age before Lara Croft and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, to be discouraging to sensitive girl readers and to offer boys a limited emotional and social perspective. The boys’ adventure also carried associations with the imperial
adventures that were its prototype: a stain, faint in Armstrong’s case, of jingoism and militarism.

His work has fared no better with the passage of time. Even the recent revival of books for boys, in response to the anxiety about boys’ falling reading levels, failed to resurrect any of his titles. All of them are out of print; although, if my second-hand copy of *The Albatross* is anything to go by, some may still be found in the dark corners of secondary school libraries. *The Cambridge Guide to Children’s Books in English*, published in 2001, has no entry for him or his work (Watson passim).

The fate of Armstrong’s books is not unique, of course. The majority of mid-twentieth century children’s books now live only in second-hand book shops and their readers’ memories. Publishers and critics tend to concentrate on two extremes, the literary ‘classics’ and the popular series, which remain in print and continue to be the subjects of critical articles. Yet it is writers of the middling sort like Armstrong who provide the bulk of the reading available to children at any one time. Through their choices of theme, genre, and character, they reveal what is urgent and acceptable to be shared between adults and young people in literature. And the reading world they help create is constantly changing, particularly in the last fifty years; both responding to accelerated changes in society and childhood, and helping to shape those changes. If Marjorie Fisher’s assessment in 1971 of Armstrong’s continuing appeal was wrong, her main point remains right: that writing (and illustrating) for children is about dealing with change.

In this chapter, I explore Armstrong’s work as an expression of some of the changes that took place in the lives of young people and in the literature that
was produced for them from the end of the Second World War to the beginning of the 1970s. I will concentrate on the beginning and the end of Armstrong’s career, and largely pass over the fleet of sea stories in mid-stream. Here, perhaps, I am concentrating more on the urgent than the acceptable aspects of Armstrong’s work, but, as I think will become clear, the urgent and the acceptable often live in a less than comfortable marriage in children’s literature.

This is not the story of an important literary figure but it is the story of a remarkable man and an extraordinary writer. Much of children’s literature is informed not only by the relationship between adult author and child reader but also by the relationship between the adult author and his or her own childhood and adolescence. This was certainly the case with Armstrong. His first three children’s novels were autobiographical and, from first to last, he said that he was drawing on his own adolescent experience to provide guidance to other young men.

At the time he began writing, Armstrong’s background was unusual among children’s authors. The son of a blacksmith in a Northumberland mining village, he had ambitions to be a teacher, but family circumstances meant that he left school at thirteen to work in a steel mill. He went from there to the merchant navy and, self-taught, came late to writing for children. His first book, *The Mystery of Obadiah*, published in 1943, when he was forty years old, is about the adventures of a group of boys in a village like the one where he had grown up, and his next two novels, *Sabotage at the Forge* and *Sea Change*, shadow the events of his early working life (Doyle 9-10, Marsh 32).
Throughout his writing career, Armstrong espoused values that had been formed in an all-male working environment. The key relationship that emerges from his fiction, and that corresponds to how he saw his own relationship with his prospective young male readers, is that between master and apprentice, between the man of experience and restless youth; a relationship based on real working arrangements that, commonplace in his own adolescence, were becoming rarer by the end of his career.

In Armstrong's early books, he seems to have been searching for a form of children's book that would adequately contain his experience and the lives of other working class boys and young men. In his late career he sought to maintain a dialogue with young men whom he felt were growing up too quickly and expecting too much of life too soon. In neither of these quests was he entirely successful. In both he was driven by memories of his own adolescence and its unfulfilled ambitions and an abiding empathy with his would-be audience.

Although there was no way that he or anyone else could know it when he began to be published, Richard Armstrong's career was to coincide with an astonishing flowering of children's literature. In its own time, this renaissance became known as the second golden age, self consciously referring back to the time of Barrie, Kipling, Grahame and Nesbit. But actually it was something new: the moment when children's literature in Britain emerged with self confidence and ambition: as a distinct publishing enterprise, and a community of writers, editors and critics, unashamed to be associated with children's books, seeking excellence, keen to debate exactly what it meant to produce books for children and young people, and ready to test the limits of the
discipline they were discovering (Meek and Avery 185; Reynolds 20-32). Armstrong was in at the very beginning of this movement and he benefited from its mood for change, but he was never one of its important figures. These were men and women of the next generation who made their names as he slipped into the backwaters of sea adventure.

The second golden age was mainly concerned with literary quality: with defining and supporting good writing. Its promoters sought: to distance themselves from the formulaic writing associated in the public mind with pre-war children’s books and to provide books which explored character and situation with all the variety, commitment and skill expected in the best of adult work. In the quarter of a century following the war, they achieved singular success in this enterprise. But they did so without changing significantly the social reality of the children’s book world. Looking back, it is clear that children’s books in this period were written by predominantly middle class authors, and published by middle class editors for a middle class audience: and that, until the 1970s, the lives depicted in children’s books were those of middle class children (Tucker).

With hindsight, it is easy to assume that those who made the second golden age were indifferent to children who lived outside their social circle or that the demand for literary quality was itself socially conservative. In fact, as Armstrong’s early career shows, neither of these assumptions bears scrutiny.

In the first major post-war review of children’s literature, *Tales out of School* in 1949, Geoffrey Trease demanded change both in the literary quality of children’s writing and the social world it depicted. Trease had already made his name as an author with a radical re-casting of children’s historical
fiction; and *Tales out of School* was an analysis of the major genres of writing for children and a manifesto for the future. He called for an end to hackneyed writing in children’s stories, a widening of the social reality they presented; and serious consideration of the social, political and psychological implications of writing for children (Trease passim).

Trease’s book faithfully reflected the tone of contemporary discussion of children’s books. Children’s book professionals shared the general eagerness for social and economic reform following the war; and there was a conviction that the social world shown in pre-war children’s fiction was too narrow and unrealistic to serve the purposes of a post-war world that was extending opportunity to children of all backgrounds. This conviction was underlined by the passage of the 1944 Education Act, which for the first time opened up academic state secondary education to able working class children.

The major forum for discussion of these issues in the children’s book world was *Junior Bookshelf*, a review journal that provided a buying guide for children’s librarians and a platform for the opinions of librarians, authors and editors. When Armstrong’s second book, *Sabotage at the Forge* was reviewed there in 1946, the anonymous reviewer regarded its most important aspect as ‘its background of work in a Tyneside steelworks, and the fact that it concerns ordinary working boys,’ and concluded, ‘We should welcome more stories of the same type.’ Two years later, Eleanor Graham, the editor of the newly established Puffin Books, then the only children’s paperback imprint, was unreservedly recommending Armstrong’s third novel, *Sea Change*, for its ‘good, sound ring of authenticity’ (Anon 1946; Graham).
Armstrong’s fourth novel, *The Whinstone Drift* (1951), about a Northumberland mining village, might have been written in response to Trease’s suggestion in *Tales out of School* that it would be good to have a career novel about coal mining which could be ‘at once exciting and socially invaluable’ (Trease 171). Edmund Penning Rowsell’s *TLS* review of the same book linked Armstrong’s work with the rejection of formulaic children’s adventure, a new social realism, and the need to broaden the appeal of children’s books:

In situation and subject contemporary fiction for older children is often remote from the lives of most of its likely readers…the shelves of every junior public and school library bulge with the pony book, the adventure tale based on the inevitable rich uncle’s house in Cornwall, the boarding school story with a setting as unreal today as Dotheboy’s Hall. Such books are offered as the principal fiction reading to those who can seldom find any points of contact between the world of these novels and their own lives…there is stabling for few ponies in the backyards of our large cities.

Rowsell wanted writing for children that ‘presents life as it is and as many readers are likely to find it’. The main problem that he saw was that few authors had the opportunity to ‘share or sample’ the life which most children lived. Of the four authors whose books Rowsell considered in his review, only Armstrong, he said, ‘had the ability to write from the angle of those he is addressing’ (Rowsell).

The post-war children’s book world was not a bastion of reactionary values. On the contrary, it saw itself as progressive and allied with the forces for change in society. It believed in equality of opportunity and that books should contribute to children’s moral and social welfare. However, there were obstacles in the way of making itself more socially inclusive. While its ignorance of the working class could be addressed by encouraging writers like
Armstrong, other barriers were more deep-seated. There was no children’s literary form or language that obviously lent itself to the depiction of working class life; and there was a prevailing assumption that equality of opportunity meant working class children adopting middle class mores and values.

Armstrong’s early novels have the hybrid characteristics of a changing literature: conventional forms of children’s adventure are used as thin frames on which to hang stories of greater weight than they can bear; frenetic action gives way to serious reflection; implausible plotting alternates with careful, step-by-step descriptions of working practices; and symbolism rubs shoulders with realism. Some of these characteristics can be put down to the clumsiness of an apprentice writer. Others were traits that Armstrong always found it difficult to control.

Armstrong was didactic by instinct and conviction, something that was acceptable, even expected, when he began writing for children, and the clarity of the message was always more important to him than the plausibility of the plot. But, above all, in his first novels, Armstrong was writing about a subject for which there was little precedent in children’s literature: the life of working class young men. He was exploring not only his own capabilities as a writer but also the nature of realism in the children’s literature of his time.

**The Mystery of Obadiah (1943)**

Armstrong’s first novel, *The Mystery of Obadiah*, attracted very little attention when it was published in 1943. It is in the form of the then newly fashionable children’s mystery adventure, in the manner of Enid Blyton, and its story is conventional enough. Three boys enjoy various escapades in the
countryside, including being trapped in a disused mine, and help to capture a
dangerous burglar, a foreign seaman. The novel’s distinguishing feature is its
working class setting. Armstrong draws on his own childhood to give the
adventures a tougher edge than is usual in such adventures, which can be
seen in the opening where the boys discuss the lack of incident in their lives:

‘Nothing ever happens here,’ grumbled Thias. The truth of the
matter was that nothing had happened on that expedition. They
had set out full of expectation; they had crawled through hedges
and scouted along ditches under the very windows of the farm
houses; they had invited trouble in every way they knew. But a
week end quiet sat over the fell and there had been never a single
farmer or hind or gamekeeper to molest them and give them the
thrill of pursuit and escape.

(Armstrong 1943, 6-7)

This is no middle class holiday adventure. The story takes place in a
countryside shaped by industry where the three boys live. And what is most
striking is the matter of fact description of their life of rough freedom. Thias,
Dick and Norman range freely across the fells and through the fields around
the former mining village, bird nesting, exploring, and building a den, not so
much oblivious to private property as actively courting the possibility of being
discovered and chased.

Some of the aspects of this guerrilla life are particular and vivid enough to
be from Armstrong’s own experience, including one, very alarming to a
modern reader, in which the boys attack the house of a ‘crabbed’ old man, Mr
Redhead, who has reported the boys for trespassing. They barricade him in,
post hedge-hogs through his letter box, and give him a taste of ‘the Buzzers’,
stuffing the iron down pipes outside his house with paper and setting fire to it,
producing ‘a terrific roaring noise that droned and swelled through the whole
cottage’ (Armstrong 1943, 67-74).
Despite the provocative behaviour of the boys towards adult authority, they show a genuine respect for their elders. They stoically accept ‘one or two sharp cuts’ from the belt of the local policeman (‘a good pal’) or a caning from their understanding headmaster who, while he doesn’t blame them for not accepting ‘rules and restrictions’, including the rights of private landowners, tells them that they do have to take the consequences of their actions (Armstrong 1943, 10, 63-65). More importantly, throughout the story, there is an implied appreciation of the hard work, skill and, sometimes, courage involved in industrial occupations. The boys are able to find their way in the disused mine because they know that the galleries would be constructed according to a plan. The manner of their eventual escape, with all the men from the village forming a search and rescue party, recalls the efforts of mining communities faced by real disasters.

**Sabotage at the Forge (1946) and Sea Change (1948)**

In Arthur Ransome’s holiday stories, children’s adventures are ways to build character, a preparation for adulthood. There is an element of this attitude in *The Mystery of Obadiah*, but Armstrong’s second novel, *Sabotage at the Forge* which follows one of the boys, Thias, into work in a steel mill, makes clear that Armstrong regards childhood less as a preparation for adulthood than an opportunity to enjoy freedom from the responsibility (and fulfilment) that work inevitably brings.

Walking on the fells, contemplating his first important job at the mill, the Thias of *Sabotage at the Forge* looks back on the ‘high adventure, excitement and fascination’ of his childhood, but now the landscape that he had then
enjoyed seems ‘flattened and shrunk’. He was now part of a working community.

He would be handling steel as Jackie handled it - as something that was alive with the sweat and strength and skill of the men who had made it. And if he worked well, he would be adding to it something of himself...It was that he had responsibility now, not to himself alone but to Geordie Speers and Ted Arkle, and all the people who had taken a hand in the making of that ingot, right back to the unknown men who had mined the ore in the Spanish sierras and the far off Caucasian hills...No wonder the coverts and fir trees had shrunk! That had all been play. Fun. Mischief. Adventure. This was different. This was work and it had meaning, and went on.

(Armstrong 1960, 144)

In *Sabotage at the Forge*, Armstrong discovered the subject that would be the focus of his work for the rest of his career: young men at work; young men finding out what it meant to be adults. Armstrong was not only a pioneer in the depiction of the working class in children’s literature; he was also one of the first writers for children to focus on adolescence. He wrote about young men at work because, in his day, for the working class, work and adolescence went together. Work began for many of his generation, as for him, at 13; and, for most young men after the 1944 Education Act, at 15. But, as the quotation, tells us, he also wrote about work because he believed that it was work that provided meaning to life, it was through his work that a boy achieved manhood and discovered a sense of community.

In *Sabotage at the Forge* and the two books that followed, *Sea Change* and *The Whinstone Drift*, Armstrong examines three working environments in turn: the steel industry, the merchant navy, and coal mining. In each of the novels, he continues to use conventional mystery and adventure forms to provide a narrative framework. In the discussion that follows, I will consider *Sabotage at the Forge* and *Sea Change* together, to show how Armstrong
develops a characteristic style and preoccupations in dealing with the theme of a young man adjusting to the world of work. I will treat *The Whinstone Drift* separately because it introduces a slightly different question, with relevance in the 1950s, about whether an intelligent working class boy on the brink of adulthood should choose a working apprenticeship or higher education as the path to his future.

The style of *Sabotage at the Forge* and *Sea Change* has been perceptively dubbed ‘documentary adventure’ by Margery Fisher (Fisher 1986, 30). Here, interest and drama is provided by the working environment itself and by the conflict between the restless self-consciousness of youth and the disciplined skill and knowledge of the older men. Work is presented as a heroic enterprise in which men master elemental forces, and the portrayal of this struggle is combined with a careful exposition of working practices, and the explicit advocacy of certain values and behaviour as being characteristic of adulthood or manhood.

*Sabotage at the Forge* features an unconvincing mystery plot, in which Thias suspects the ancient forgeman, Jackie, of trying to sabotage the forge. But the interest and excitement lie elsewhere. As Thias moves from place to place and from job to job within the mill, the reader is carefully introduced to each stage in the industrial process from smelting the steel into raw ingots to the forging of the finished gun tubes.

Beside this technical education, Thias and the reader become aware, through Armstrong’s description and Hugh Lupton’s illustrations, of the forge as a vast dangerous place, characterised by extremes of darkness and light, and dust and shadows, in which the air shimmers with heat and power, and
the workers have to use all their daring, strength, knowledge and experience to complete the work safely. In this place, men are transformed, in Thias’s and the readers’ perceptions, from creatures dwarfed by the works, like the foundry’s moulders - 'grey gnomes from some shadow world that was still half real' (Armstrong 1960, 61) - into magicians and giants as tall as the shadows they cast, entirely in command of the work. Armstrong’s final chapter illustrates Armstrong’s characteristic blend of technical precision and heroic rhetoric:

> At half past six the ingot was brought to the anvil of the press, and the forging of the gun tube began. It went on through the whole of that week and gradually the great block of steel was drawn out on the water cooled mandril.

> It was a tough job. Over and over again it went back into the furnace for re-heating, and each time this was done the mandril had to be withdrawn from the bore. Sometimes it came out easily, but sometimes it stuck fast and had to be hammered out, and this took anything from ten minutes to two hours.

> And all the time Old Jackie dominated the forge. It was like magic. The power of the great machines, the strength of the men and their will to use it, were his tools and, frail wisp of a man though he was, with these things and his own skill, he handled the job like a toy.

> (Armstrong 1960, 189)

Just as the forging of the gun tubes provides the narrative time span for *Sabotage at the Forge*, so in Armstrong’s next novel, *Sea Change*, the space of an eventful cargo voyage is used to show a raw and discontented apprentice, Cam Renton, being turned into a true seaman under the tutelage of Andy, the experienced mate. And, while Armstrong retains the documentary adventure style of the previous book, he now displays a much greater skill at characterisation, particularly of the adults that share Cam’s voyage.

Andy, a ‘tough old shellback’ of the school of learning by experience, insists that Cam should begin the voyage by doing only the dull routine work
aboard, and becomes the target of Cam’s sullen resentment and the object of a practical joke concocted by Cam and his fellow apprentice that recalls the childish ‘larks’ of *The Mystery of Obadiah*. Gradually, however, Cam realises:

> How every little niggling thing old Andy had given him to do counted. How one developed his muscle, another his eye, a third his judgement of time and distance; how each hour he spent working with the foremast hands taught him to know and understand them better against the day when such men would look to him for guidance.

(Armstrong 1948, 124)

After Cam and the mate work together to quell a fire aboard, to take on the task of salvaging an abandoned ship, and to support one another as they both suffer injury, they finally appreciate one another’s qualities. Cam sees Andy as ‘magnificent, hard as iron, tough as steel, and indomitable.’ Andy, acknowledging Cam as his mate, speaks of him as being as ‘tough as old boots, keen as mustard, and guts to spare. In all my days I never sailed with a better one’ (Armstrong 1948, 184, 211). Nor is it just these traditional tough virtues of the working class male and boy’s adventure hero that they come to appreciate in one another. Andy reveals a sensitive, almost tender, aspect to his nature; and when, because of Andy’s injury, Cam has to take responsibility for navigating, Andy proves ‘a tower of strength’:

> Although the injured hand gave him great pain, he [Andy] never complained, but was always gentle and understanding and, what was perhaps most important of all, he did everything he could to make Cam sure of himself.

(Armstrong 1948, 203)

Cam’s transformation into a seaman is not Andy’s work alone. For, almost imperceptibly, he is drawn into the comradeship of the other seamen. As he relaxes with them on deck in the evenings and joins in the singing, he feels at ease:
It was good to lie there with one day’s work behind him and another ahead; good to watch the clouds sailing endlessly across the moon, to see the shore lights flicker and hear the faint far off sounds from the houses on the cays; good to see the men around him and to feel himself accepted as one of them, as a sailor who could pull his weight and stand his turn in anything that might come along. (Armstrong 1948, 143)

*Sea Change* can be read in at least two ways. In one, it is an exemplification of how a young man would be initiated into the values of skilled work: learning to master his craft through hands-on experience, the careful tutelage of an older man, and immersion in the working community. In another, it is a peace-time re-working of the traditional sea adventure in which the British fleet sails across the world building the Empire. Armstrong makes explicit reference to this second reading when he writes of the seamen being of ‘the breed’ of English sea dogs going back to ‘Kidd and Morgan and before them Raleigh and Drake’ (Armstrong 1948, 84, 95, 118). He even includes what appears to a modern reader as an unnecessary episode in which Cam and his fellow apprentice, as a result of a misunderstanding, are imprisoned in a local fort in the Caribbean and take on the entire foreign garrison in a bold escape effort. Yet contemporary critics passed over this piece of *Boys Own* nonsense without comment, as if its fictional familiarity rendered it invisible in comparison to the air of reality that Armstrong achieved in the rest of the book.

It was its perceived realism that made *Sea Change* a critical success. It was awarded the Library Association’s Carnegie Medal as the outstanding children’s book of 1948; and librarian and critic Marcus Crouch described it as a ‘revolutionary book’, which ‘substituted for romance a robust facing of reality;’ and in which ‘an adventure story became a manifesto on the dignity of
labour’ (Crouch 187). Eleanor Graham was particularly taken by Armstrong’s painstaking explanations of the intricacies of ships’ routine:

If it were for nothing else, this book would be worthwhile for the understanding it gives the ordinary reader of the skill that goes to stowing and discharging of cargo...for the reader the words fall into so clear a context that he is more than likely to seek an early opportunity to see for himself how the arrangement works.

(Graham 133)

The qualities of authenticity and realism in Armstrong’s work were to be acknowledged approvingly by critics throughout his career. In his few published comments about what he sought to achieve in his writing, Armstrong talked about dispelling the fantasies of childhood and telling children what the real world was about, implicitly relating those fantasies to the reading that he had been offered as a child. Yet, writing forty years after Sea Change’s publication, Margery Fisher found it clumsy. She thought the way in which ‘a point of navigation, ship’s structure or deck organisation’ interrupted the flow of the narrative ‘deliberate’ and ‘laboured’. She thought Armstrong’s didactic passages ‘may even set up a certain resistance on the reader’s part’ (Fisher 1986, 32-33). Reading Armstrong twenty years later than Fisher, it is hard to disagree with her. But then, the enthusiasm of Armstrong’s contemporaries needs explanation.

It has to be remembered that children’s publishing in the 1940s and 1950s had not yet drawn a strict demarcation line between information books and fiction. Many information books, particularly books about other countries, were produced in the form of a story as a way of sugaring the pill for children. And, contemporary with Armstrong’s early work, several children’s publishers brought out career guides to particular occupations in the guise of novels. The emphasis of these books was different from Armstrong’s, and
they were mainly concerned with professional careers, but they testify to an agreement among adults that the world of work should be the subject of young people’s interest. Geoffrey Trease wrote, ‘The career story, whether in biography or in the pure fiction form of the junior novel, is one of the most valuable books we can put on our shelves’ (Trease 173).

However, the favourable reception for *Sea Change*, and the documentary form of Armstrong’s work, had more to do with the fact that Armstrong was dealing with a subject, working class life and work, that had previously been excluded from children’s literature and was still marginal in British culture as a whole.

When formerly excluded subjects are first broached in literature, they are quite often justified in terms of authenticity; as being true to life: perhaps as social exposure or as documentary, accompanied by a didactic tone. And the most meaningful comparison with Armstrong’s work of this time is to be found outside children’s literature in the work of the British documentary film movement of the 1930s and 1940s, in which working people and the daily routines of occupations with an element of danger or excitement were imbued with an understated collective heroism. In the celebrated film *Night Mail*, the process of collecting and sorting mail on the night express to Scotland, an everyday occurrence, was transformed into an epic adventure (Vaughan). This association of drama documentary and working class life had also carried over into successful morale-boosting feature films during the war years. *Millions like Us*, for instance, mixed scenes of life on the factory floor, with the personal tragedies of wartime. *Sea Change* may not be comparable in achievement but it deserves to be considered in the same light.
The Whinstone Drift (1951)

Three years after Sea Change came The Whinstone Drift, the last of Armstrong’s early novels of working class youth. This is a less satisfying novel than its predecessor, largely because the elements of adventure and working documentary are even less successfully integrated. Unlike Thias or Cam, the novel’s hero, Peter Musgrave, is not actually at work. An intelligent boy, the son of a miner, who has had the benefit of an education at a ‘fancy’ boarding school ‘down south’, he is weighing up whether he wants to go to university or into the coal industry.

The book falls into two parts. One is a mystery story in which Peter and his friends range the fells and explore the grounds of a decayed mansion looking for clues to the whereabouts of a long lost drift which will enable the local mine, which is facing closure, to access new seams of coal. The other is a barely fictionalised introduction to mining, which presents its working methods and professional prospects for the benefit of any reader who, like Peter, might be considering making the newly nationalised industry his career. The interest in the story is firstly the way it reflects contemporary concerns and attitudes; secondly the way it broaches a subject to which later authors would return – the situation of the working class boy educated away from his community; and, finally, the personal significance of this last theme for Armstrong.

The reviewer in Junior Bookshelf praised the novel’s ‘substance and topicality’ (Anon 1951). It was topical in the sense that it addressed what was perceived at the time, as Geoffrey Trease put it, as a “maldistribution of labour. Too many people wanting safe, clean, white-collar jobs...Too few willing to produce or carry on some of the main essential services’ (Trease
But it was also topical in the sense that it weaved into its mystery story a symbolic representation of some of the social aspirations of the post-war period.

Much of the action in *The Whinstone Drift* takes place around a ruined country house and its enclosed estate. This is owned by Dorothy Blenkinsop, the daughter of the former mine owner. She wants to see the local mine closed down. So she keeps secret her knowledge of a long lost drift whose discovery would give access to new coal seams. The documents are locked away in a room at the base of the folly on the estate, which is furnished exactly as it was in Edwardian times; as if she is attempting to turn the clock back to her youth when her family exercised unfettered power over the valley. To keep people away from the estate, she employs a gang of tough retainers and encourages rumours of a haunting in the grounds.

In a manner that harks back to the escapades of *The Mystery of Obadiah*, *The Whinstone Drift* is concerned with Peter and his friends trespassing. But this is trespass with a purpose: to dispel the ghosts of the past and secure the future of the mine, now nationalised and under the control of the National Coal Board. At the end of the novel, as miners and management come together to march on the estate and rescue Peter, who has been trapped there, Long Matt, Peter’s grandfather and leader of the miners, pledges ‘We’ll make it clear to-night once and for all that the day of the Blenkinsops is done’ (Armstrong 1954, 218).

Intelligent working class boys like Peter and his friends were important to the vision of a post-war Britain which promised welfare and opportunity for all its citizens rather than just those privileged by birth or wealth. They were the
children for whom the grammar schools had been devised. But little thought was given to the kind of personal adjustments that these children and their families might have to make to the new educational opportunities. The most remarkable aspect of *The Whinstone Drift* is its early treatment of the alienation of an educated working class youth from his community. This was to be identified as a real social phenomenon within the next twenty years and also became a rich source of possibilities to writers of working class origin, including those who wrote for children. Alan Garner, one of the pre-eminent writers in the younger generation of the second golden age, has identified as it one of the dynamic forces in his work. Garner’s *The Stone Book Quartet* (1976-1978) is a rediscovery of the masculine community of craft in his own rural working class background on the other side of the Pennines in Cheshire.

It is clear from Armstrong’s early novels that he values education highly and that he is addressing himself to aspirant working class boys. On the first page of his first novel, *The Mystery of Obadiah*, when Armstrong introduces his three young heroes, he makes clear that none of them intends to end up as a worker, not even a skilled worker: Norman will be a teacher, Dick a musician, and Thias (Armstrong’s youthful alter ego) is as yet undecided. The value of education is emphasised later in the novel by the pronouncements of a mysterious tramp, who appears for one chapter only as a vehicle for the author’s adult admonitions to children to work at their studies: ‘No matter how dreary and difficult and meaningless it seems to you now – if you stick to it then you’ll come through to richness and happiness’ (Armstrong 1943, 106).

In *The Whinstone Drift*, education and individual aspiration conflict with community expectations; and Armstrong tackles the question of whether
higher education necessarily means a young person moving away from their background. Armstrong accurately shows all the pressure that could be exerted on someone like Peter by his friends: the accusation that he is getting above himself; and the charge that, because he doesn’t have a clear idea of what he might do after university, he is ‘putting the cart in front of the horse, like’ (Armstrong 1954, 11-12, 110, 163).

As Peter tries to re-establish friendships with the young men in the village, he returns again and again to the question of what he should do with his life. Should he go on to university or find a suitable career in mining? To go to university he must have Latin¹ and so he begins to study:

‘Nominative, vocative, genitive….’ He sighed. Latin might be all right if you were going in for teaching or for a job where languages counted; but there in Dewley it was dead and meaningless. It was people that mattered; the people and the village where they belonged.

(Armstrong 1954, 68)

Armstrong’s view was that education must be useful. This belief stemmed naturally from his conviction that only work provided meaning. Although Armstrong’s novels encourage individual achievement, it is always in the context of cooperative effort and on behalf of a working community. The main plot of The Whinstone Drift shows Peter using his intelligence in the service of the miners in unravelling the mystery of the lost drift; and a sub-plot, involving football and cricket matches, demonstrates that only through learning to be a team player does Peter’s individual skill have any meaning. It does not come

¹ It is curious that two prominent late twentieth century writers with working class backgrounds, Tony Harrison and Alan Garner, were classicists by education. In one poem, Harrison writes of all the languages he has learned, including ‘dead Latin…dead Greek’, ‘but not the tongue that once I used to know/but can’t bone up on now, and that’s mi mam’s.’ He also writes of ‘all my years of Latin and of Greek/they’d never seen the point of “for a job”.’ Tony Harrison, Selected Poems Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984, 118, 156.
as any surprise to the reader that, at the end of the novel, Peter determines to remain in the valley and make mining his career.

As with other writers of working class origin who have tackled this theme, there is a strong suggestion in the novel of the author working out a solution to a personal dilemma, for Armstrong himself had left the working world which was the subject of his novels, and the source of his values, in favour of solitary desk work pushing a pen. The didacticism of his early work may well be part of his perception of himself as a spokesman for a working class view of the world and a progressive social democratic movement in which, in the language of the Labour Party then, workers of hand and brain could come together to make a new future.

Armstrong’s Middle Period

_The Whinstone Drift_ was the last of Armstrong’s novels representing the working class in children’s fiction, published, appropriately enough, in the same year that the Labour government was replaced by a Conservative one. We cannot know why he chose to return to sea adventure at this point in his writing career. But it is interesting to consider what his early novels show about how difficult it was for a children’s writer to write about a world that didn’t speak in the tones of Middle England, particularly as the lack of books featuring ordinary children would be raised again regularly over the next twenty or thirty years, and would not be properly addressed until the 1980s.

Partly, it was a problem of freeing children’s literature from the grip of a formulaic writing defined by archaic middle class social attitudes. The incongruity between form and content in Armstrong’s early work shows the
hold that earlier forms of children’s adventure still held on writers’ imaginations, and publishers and readers’ expectations. The ghosts of boarding school stories and imperial adventure, the spectres of Armstrong’s own Edwardian youth, hover about his work like Dorothy Blenkinsop haunting *The Whinstone Drift*.

Armstrong could come up with nothing to replace these tired formulas. The documentary form that he introduced into children’s literature suited the immediate post war years, but it failed to last except as a variation of boys’ adventure. The social climate of the 1950s was not encouraging for the continuing portrayal of heroic collective endeavour. The emphasis on community struggle that had characterised the war and its immediate aftermath gave way quickly to a desire for individual social mobility; and, in popular films like *I’m Alright Jack* (1959) and *The Angry Silence* (1960), the working class were shown as a brake on individual aspiration rather than a source of collective strength.

Other changes took place in the children’s book world. The rise in the school leaving age led to the working world being largely excluded as a subject for children’s fiction. The elision of fiction and fact became suspect. As the second golden age developed, part of the project of establishing the literary credentials of children’s writing was the absolute separation of works of imagination from those of information and the eradication of explicit didacticism. Marjorie Fisher’s misgivings about *Sea Change* faithfully express

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2 Considering the topic of work in children’s literature. Peter Hunt argues that work is largely excluded from the majority of children’s books and, in fact, ‘forms a contrasting sub-text to the golden play-world of the child.’ This may well have been related to the middle class nature of children’s literature at the opening of the twentieth century, but as education beyond the age of sixteen becomes the norm for young people at the beginning of the twenty first century, work has become even more securely an adult preoccupation. Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children’s Literature* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 175-179.
this view. Realism became a neglected form over the next twenty years in Britain, being inextricably linked by many writers and critics with didacticism. Historical fiction and fantasy were the preferred genres, and it was only with the development of paperbacks aimed at teenagers in the 1970s that stories of the lives of contemporary young people began to appear in any numbers.

It is possible, too, that Armstrong, having exhausted his own working experience, could see no way in which he could develop the documentary form further. He made an unhappy foray into fantasy with *Wanderlust* in 1952, a story about a travelling monkey, an experiment so disastrous he never repeated it. Then, with *Danger Rock*, four years later, he returned to the course which he had charted in *Sea Change*, introducing authentic detail and characterisation of greater depth to sea stories for boys. In the years before 1964 he also published four adult novels of the sea.

The withdrawal into sea adventure was made easier, perhaps even attractive, by the close fit of Armstrong’s working class masculine values with those of the traditional book for boys. Armstrong had no interest in writing about women, even as minor characters. Although Armstrong’s working world was far removed from the empire builders of imperial adventure, it shared a common masculine ethos. It too was an all male world in which young men proved themselves to other men by mastering their environment through technical skill and courage.

Armstrong preferred domestic life to be left on shore, ‘faint and far off’, like the sound of the houses on the cays that Cam enjoyed on the evenings of his voyage in *Sea Change*. The role of women in working communities is never adequately reflected in his books, where women and girls are all but invisible.
This lacuna in his writing was exacerbated by social changes set in motion by the Second World War, which saw women entering the working world in increasing numbers. Only in rare instances could a working environment exclude women almost entirely, and Armstrong’s concentration on sea stories not only allowed him to preserve a male dominated view of work and life but also relieved him of the necessity to portray women at all. It put him firmly apart from one of the most important social developments to shape the world of ordinary children and adolescents in the late twentieth century.

Armstrong’s attempt to introduce the working class into children’s literature was curtailed not only by prevailing attitudes in the children’s book world but by his own limitations as a writer. However, his early work had a lasting impact on the shape of the post war boys’ adventure story and led him to develop a distinctive use of language.

Armstrong democratised and pacified boys’ adventure. He replaced the public school boy hero of Edwardian fiction with a working class youth; and the heat and danger of battle and exploration with the peril and excitement of steelworks and merchant ships. In this narrower sphere, he attracted imitators and gave the book for boys a new lease of life. From 1954–1968, the more prolific Arthur Catherall, for instance, also published by Dent, produced eleven adventures in the ‘Bulldog’ series, thrillers about the adventures of a salvage tugboat in the South China Seas which are clearly influenced by Sea Change.

**Armstrong’s Use of Language**

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Armstrong’s attempt to introduce the working class to the middle class world of children’s books was his use of
language in his early novels. Understandably, Armstrong doesn’t indicate working class speech in dialogue by the use of eccentric spelling or syntax, since this technique had been used by other children’s writers mainly to mark working class characters as comic or villainous, and certainly as ignorant. Although three of his first four novels were set in Northumberland, his use of regional forms of speech, either in vocabulary, syntax or cadence is also sparing, and the effect in older characters is of a faint touch of all-purpose North Country. This speech by Peter’s ‘granfer’ in *The Whinstone Drift* is as strong as it gets:

You’ve had all I know about it, son. Folks were queer in those days, you know; superstitious like. They reckoned the ridge was put there to stop anybody getting at the coal to the north of it, and no good could come of trying to get round it...Blenkinsop tried it and it killed him and a whole lot with him.

(Armstrong 1954, 71)

The speech of younger characters is even less recognisable as belonging to any particular region or class. This is Jacko, one of Peter’s friends, describing the same situation:

Gosh, Peter, I see what you’re after. It would be marvellous all right. But...after all what does this story amount to if it’s true! That old Blenkinsop was driving this drift and it killed him and an unknown number of others with him.

(Armstrong 1954, 137)

The slight distinction between the speech of the older and the younger characters (compare ‘a whole lot’ with ‘an unknown number of others’) is significant. For it identifies his younger characters as upwardly mobile. ³ At the time Armstrong was writing, the use of ‘Received Pronunciation’ and

³ Much the same distinctions can be seen in a more recent novel set in the working class Northeast. In *Kit’s Wilderness* (1999), for instance, Christopher, the narrator, a star pupil at school, has patterns of speech which are closer to Standard English than his old grandfather, a former miner, or John Askew, his eventual friend, the ‘rough’ boy who comes from a difficult home background.
‘Standard English’, the language of the southern upper middle class, was seen as a prerequisite for getting on in British society. This was also the preferred speech and language of the grammar schools, and of books written for children.

Armstrong’s decision not to give his young men recognisable working class voices thus adjusts the working class experience to the demands of writing for children and also identifies his young characters as having aspirations beyond their class. It shows both an awareness of middle class norms and an acknowledgement of social reality within the working class community at that time. However, his decision not to use regional forms of language also had, as in other aspects of his writing, a democratic aspect. He developed a style which, while avoiding heavy regional or class markers, was not Standard English. It made extensive use of demotic language in both dialogue and narrative.

The defining feature of slang is its opposition to proper usage, a characteristic which enables it to cross class barriers, particularly among the young. This was already happening in Armstrong’s time. So popular were boarding school stories among boys of all classes in the early twentieth century that it is not unrealistic for Armstrong’s working class lads to occasionally sound like Greyfriars’ boys. More surprising, and occasionally irritating to some reviewers, is Armstrong’s use of colloquialisms in narrative, whether in fiction or information books. He takes a low key approach in his early novels, using simple conversational forms and vocabulary. His later novels show a self-conscious, tougher, street-wise voice.
. Marcus Crouch wrote that Armstrong was ‘no great stylist. He has a straight man-to-man attitude towards words, which he expects to do their job without fuss’ (Crouch 189-190). Armstrong would have seen that as an accolade. His style is resolutely plain and matter of fact, using straightforward vocabulary and few literary figures of speech. His narrative is constructed of only a slightly more formal kind of language than he uses for dialogue. In this extract from *The Whinstone Drift*, the boys are throwing a weight over the estate wall to carry a line so that they can climb over.

‘Look, Peter,’ said Jacko, ‘I’ve been thinking; maybe it would be a good idea if we left Lank on this side to keep watch – just in case we get in a jam. He could hole up in the bushes and if anything starts moving give us a whistle.’

This was agreed to and Peter, judging the distance, swung his weight. It wasn’t easy to get it across the branch and he nearly brained himself with it before he realised he was standing too close in. He backed up three or four paces and from the new position got it over first time.

(Armstrong 1954, 137)

The second paragraph’s conversational style is indicated not only by the use of ‘brain’ and ‘back up’ as verbs but also by the retention of two grammatically redundant prepositions which would not be noticed in conversation but would have attracted a red pen in a 1950s grammar school essay: ‘agreed to’ and ‘close in’. A punctilious teacher might also demand more precise alternatives for ‘get it across’ and ‘got it over’.

Although this paragraph is apparently not intended to represent Peter’s thoughts, it could do. And Armstrong’s language moves easily between narrative, dialogue and internal monologue, establishing his narrator as a more experienced man who is nevertheless on the same wave length as his characters and, by implication, his readers. Armstrong seems to be aiming for the appearance of a relaxed classlessness and at establishing a rapport with
his young audience, anticipating the situation later in the century when the quickly changing language of adolescence, led then by working class rather than middle class youth, would cross national, regional and class barriers. However, his use of language and the role of the narrator were to become problematical in his later novels, where he was seeking to address a readership that he regarded as increasingly alienated from adults.

**Armstrong’s Later Writing**

By 1965, Armstrong had moved in critical reputation from being a pioneer of working class adolescent fiction to being one of the better exponents of old fashioned boy’s adventure. And it might have been assumed that, as he entered his sixtieth decade, this was how his writing career would end. However, he went out with a bang, producing three books in five years that, in ambition and achievement, were probably his best. They were still boys’ books, but they examined young men and the world of work with renewed passion and a more critical eye. In these books he was responding both to the new literary freedom created by the writers of the younger generation and to the mood of youthful rebellion of late 1960s adolescence.

The first of these appeared in 1966. A tale of a young Norwegian, Thor Krogan, on his first whaling expedition, *The Secret Sea* is in Armstrong’s familiar documentary mode, with plenty of information about types of whales, ships and hunting equipment, as well as the perils of frozen seas and powerful prey. But this is no tale of a young man’s discovery of responsibility and heroic comradeship in the manner of *Sea Change*. Rather, recalling the masters of sea adventure, Conrad and Melville, it is a tragedy in which proud, ambitious
and desperate men, experts, generation after generation, in a brutal trade, drive themselves to their own deaths, observed by the youngest of them with a mixture of atavistic excitement, disgust and despair. It is possibly Armstrong’s most perfectly constructed book. In this story, the didacticism is not obtrusive, rather the measured passages of explanation offer reason and objectivity to set against scenes of slaughter and disaster, as if the narrator, the boy himself grown older, is desperately seeking to understand and explain the actions of his elders, and unpick all the factors that contribute to the eventual catastrophe. It is a story, too, from which Armstrong feels no need to draw any explicit final moral. The first person narrative ends simply, ‘and I was the only survivor’ (Armstrong 1966, 151).

*The Secret Sea* is the beginning of a loosely linked trilogy, each of which ends with survivors being picked up from the sea, victims of largely man made tragedies. In these books, Armstrong explores the dark side of masculinity: how work, leadership, comradeship, and individual aspiration can all be corrupted and bring about destruction. Each of these books relies on some inspiration from earlier writers for adults and, as a whole, they show Armstrong’s new sense of freedom in what he could share with his readers. While *The Secret Sea* concerns a young man observing adults destroying themselves, *The Mutineers* and *The Albatross* are about young men whose rejection of adult guidance and misplaced confidence in their own abilities cause their downfall.

From his first books, Armstrong was interested in group dynamics and how leadership is earned and exercised. Three of his early novels feature groups of argumentative young men; and, although Armstrong usually identifies one
of the boys as a leader, this leadership never goes unquestioned. Even in Sea Change, where leadership is determined by rank, Armstrong is at pains to show the mechanics of consent through discussion, working together and leading by example. This preoccupation with elemental democracy no doubt stemmed from his working life, where leadership was earned through ability and experience rather than birth or qualifications, and was tested in real situations.

In The Mutineers, published in 1968, Armstrong placed a group of young men on a desert island and examined their capacity for survival. Critics were quick to draw parallels with Golding’s Lord of the Flies, published over ten years before and, by 1968, used as a set text in schools (e.g. Blishen). While Golding’s book may have provided initial inspiration, there are crucial differences. Golding’s castaways are upper middle class boarding school boys who have arrived on their island as a result of a plane crash and desperately want to get off. Armstrong’s ‘pilgrims’ are tough teenagers on a ship bound for Australia as part of a resettlement scheme, who have mutinied and who greet their landing on the island with joy and anticipation.

[They had found] as they thought, the freedom they had dared so much to win, the one place in the wide, wide world where they would be untroubled by rules and regulations and forever rid of the adults and cops and all the other squares who made and enforced them. The beach wasn’t nearly big enough to contain the exuberance pent up inside them…and presently they were horsing about, wrestling and tumbling in mock combat, with everybody trying to throw everybody else into the sea just for the heck of it.

(Armstrong 1977, 26)

On the beach we can see the force of the boys’ primitive aspirations for a life of freedom and, in their boisterous play, anticipate the way in which these naïve dreams are to end.
Even in his early books, Armstrong’s adolescents were usually discontented: typically encountered, like Peter Musgrave in *The Whinstone Drift*, with his hands ‘dug deep into his trouser pockets...scowling and kicking at the loose stones’ (Armstrong 1954, 11). In the course of a novel, they would be knocked into shape and settle down to take their place in the working community. However, in *The Mutineers*, what had been vague discontent or frustrated ambition in the earlier novels has developed into a set of attitudes expressing antipathy to adults and any form of authority, alienation from conventional social values, and a cool disdain for any loyalties beyond the self (Armstrong 1977, 18, 22, 34). While the boys have the personal resources and the strength of character to make a success of their stay on the island, they are incapable of organising themselves, in the absence of despised adults, to work together for a greater good.

Leadership is divided among three individuals: Chick, a natural leader, charismatic and decisive; Stubby, thoughtful and sensitive; and Bo-bo, intelligent and eager to serve, but, while each contributes to the group’s early success in reaching the island and avoiding detection by the authorities, they fail to find a way in which they can all work together. Stubby wants only to be left alone; Chick can’t tolerate opposition; and Bo-bo lacks the self confidence and physical presence to aspire to leadership. Few of the mutineers have any clear idea of what they want from life on the island.

In the event it is Chick who dominates the ‘pilgrims’, through physical intimidation and the development of an obsessive project to destroy an immense staircase of giant statues left behind by previous inhabitants, The statues, which resemble the mysterious monuments of Easter Island, come to
represent for the young men the weight of ‘Authority’: ‘of all the parents, schoolmasters, bogies and beaks they had ever confronted; it was they [italics in the original] all gathered into a single entity then turned to stone’ (Armstrong 1977, 65).

Armstrong’s depiction of the mutineers’ life on the island shows some of the aspects of the freedom of expression that had developed in children’s literature during the twenty years he had been writing. While the mutineers are still not able to swear in the pages of a book as they would have done in life, they are allowed to express a level of verbal abuse and physical violence, which, while it had always been part of young men’s lives, would never have been acceptable in a children’s book at the beginning of Armstrong’s career. The inconvenience of bodily functions on a desert island is mentioned; and the mutineers express their contempt for the statues by pissing on them. For the first time, Armstrong mentions sex. The sexual feelings of young men are ignored in his early novels, and the absence of young women seemed to excuse Armstrong from having to deal with them. In *The Mutineers*, however, he acknowledges adolescent male sexuality and suggests that the absence of women might lead to aberrant sexual behaviour. Bo-bo takes on the female role of cook to the group, and the physical attacks on him by Chick’s henchmen include unspecified sexual acts. Armstrong handles this theme discreetly but seriously.

Chick’s control of the group and his obsession with the statues leads eventually not only to the destruction of the statues but of the huge temple steps on which they stand, most of the mutineers and a proportion of the island. Only Stubby, Bo-bo and another mutineer survive. To Stubby, who
sees something more in the statues than the implacable face of adult disapproval, their destruction is an act of such vandalism that he cannot find his own words to describe it:

This, he felt, was real crime; the sort of thing parsons had in mind when they yammered about a sin against the holy spirit [italics in the original]...The stone faces belonged to man; they were an expression of his will and aspirations; and because what had been done to them was for ever, irrevocable, all mankind was diminished by it. Moreover...he still shared some of the responsibility for the catastrophe if only because he had refused to see where the madness was taking them and refused to act before it ran wild.

(Armstrong 1977, 160-161)

Stubby's reversion to the language of adult authority – crime, sin and responsibility – marks his realisation that there must be limits to freedom and youthful rebellion. Stubby is always at the centre of the story. His intentions are essentially good. While Chick is mustering his forces to destroy the statues, Stubby is trying to renovate an old water mill on his own. Both obey Armstrong's conviction that only in work do men find meaning, but Stubby is building on the past not seeking to destroy it.

Early on in the novel, the narrator sets out, at some length and with some force, and in the unmistakable tones of 1960s student radicalism, Stubby's philosophy:

He took a dim view of life in a highly organized industrial society. In his view everything about it was phoney, a swindle from start to finish...It taught a fellow to recognize what was good in nature and in real art, then it gave him plastic flowers; it preached universal brotherhood and peace then wasted itself on weapons of war...it measured achievement by the amount of money you could earn and then devalued it so that what you could buy with it in the end wasn't worth having – cars that went too fast for the roads they had to run on, cigarettes that killed you of lung cancer before your time.

(Armstrong 1977, 12)

This analysis is never contradicted in the book, only the conclusion that Stubby draws from it: that he doesn't want and doesn't need people.
Ultimately he realises, just as Peter Musgrave had before him ‘that there was no opting out’ (‘dropping out’ would have been the more familiar phrase at the time), and here the words are unmistakeably his own:

Of course belonging, being part of something that went back to the beginning of time and would go on for ever wasn’t all jam…And, if they – the adults – acted up and didn’t see things in your way it was because they couldn’t. It was crazy to expect them to; but they tried and the bright thing wasn’t to kick their teeth in but to help them; to give a bit and keep on hoping…

(Armstrong 1977, 168-169)

At the end of *The Mutineers*, the remaining three boys decide to return to society and take their punishment, a decision that becomes inevitable when Bo-bo’s leg is broken and needs hospital attention, but which is also determined by the failure of their social experiment.

Armstrong’s basic message in *The Mutineers* is little different from that in his early books: that youth needs the guidance of age and the benefit of experience. But the discussion in this book, and *The Albatross* that followed it, has been pushed to a new level of urgency and sophistication by the kind of arguments that Armstrong has heard being brought forward by young people around him.

*The Albatross*, published two years later, also looks at what happens when a group of young men – ‘all promise and no fulfilment’ (Armstrong 1970, 17) - seek to survive without adult guidance. Four Merchant Navy apprentices discover buried pirate treasure on a Caribbean Island devastated by an earthquake. They steal a yacht, the *Albatross* of the title, and sail away with the treasure, eventually to fall out, like the revellers in Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale, and discover only death.
The story begins, as if consciously referring back to *Sea Change*, over twenty years before, with the mate getting on the apprentices’ backs. This time, there is no reconciliation. The mate is less understanding than Andy, and these are tougher, more cynical young men than Cam Renton. They regard themselves and the mate as ‘natural enemies like cat and mouse or mongoose and snake’ and they regard the mate’s reprimands as merely ‘part of the game’ (Armstrong 1977, 67, 80).

In all his books Armstrong favours a broad brush approach to characterisation. In his early novels, important figures are introduced with a short summary of their physical appearance and their major personality traits. In *The Mutineers* and *The Albatross* he develops this essentially naïve technique so that, in the manner of a mystery play or *Pilgrim’s Progress* his heavily outlined characters are made to stand for particular ways of viewing the world. And the opportunity that fate puts their way, whether island freedom or unexpected riches, becomes a test not only of individual personalities but of social attitudes.

In *The Albatross*, Wick, who eventually assumes leadership of the group, is clever and ruthless and regards life as a rat race in which you need to have an advantage. For him, the treasure represents the possibility of power over others. Brett is strong, slow-witted but loyal, particularly to ‘his bird’ back home. He has become the particular victim of the mate’s wrath and believes he has lost all prospect of a career at sea. To him, the treasure means the possibility of a good life style for himself and his future wife. Stringy is conscientious, and believes in playing by the rules: a ‘congenital conformer.’ The treasure is an anxiety to him and, to begin with, he is carried along by the
others purely because he is outvoted. Judd is an anti-authoritarian – ‘a congenital dissenter’ - for whom the treasure is only a means to an end. He needs only enough to take him somewhere like the Himalayas where he can enjoy the simple life (Armstrong 1970, 9-17).

Inexorably, the treasure works on their characters and destroys their friendship. From a quartet working together more or less democratically, they become four deadly rivals and the story ends with the probable murder of Wick and Stringy by Brett, and Judd fleeing the yacht in a life raft.

Judd is very much like Stubby in *The Mutineers*. Unimpressed by ‘trendy gear’ and ‘the coveted consumer durables of the opulent society,’ he believes that, ‘It’s doing things that matters not owning them’ (Armstrong 1970, 61-62). Although he, too, is affected by the treasure, his relative indifference to it allows him to observe himself and the others with some objectivity. All of the young men are shown as having good qualities, some of which they possess to begin with, and some they discover as a result of having to rely on themselves and each other in their endeavour to possess the treasure: but, ultimately, all are corrupted, and not even Judd can see how deadly the combination of the treasure and their limited perceptions and aspirations might be.

*The Albatross* closes in an ambivalent fashion. It is reported that none of the other boys have been picked up by ships in the area: a circumstance that confirms Judd’s suspicion that Brett had murdered the other two. Yet Judd apparently bears no animosity to Brett, even doubting the general wisdom that Brett and the boat must themselves have been lost, and speculates that there ‘was a fifty-fifty chance of him slipping through the net and...being holed up

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with the loot in some South American dog-hole, waiting for his bird to join him’ (Armstrong 1970, 187). Despite Judd’s condemnation of the effect of the treasure on all of them, but particularly on Brett, the reader is left with a statement that conveys not only that Brett may have escaped punishment but that Judd has a sneaking admiration for him.

_The Mutineers_, too, ends on a note of admiration. When the three survivors give themselves up to the navy they say they are ready for their punishment and believe they can take it, however severe. The naval officer, in an implicit reference to their survival on the island, replies, ‘I’ll bet you can!’ (Armstrong 1977, 175). There is praise in both novels for what young men can achieve in adverse circumstances and both suggest an author who himself admires the independence of the young, sympathises with some of their critical attitudes towards society, yet feels estranged from them and worried by their apparent rejection of adult authority. These impressions are strengthened by the narrative voices adopted in each of the novels, which are an uneasy mix of teenage and adult registers.

By the late 1960s, Armstrong had developed a narrative voice that was like American ‘hard-boiled’ crime writing, but somewhat toned down, suggesting an older man able to talk a young man’s language. His description of Judd’s interview by the police at the opening of _The Albatross_ is typical:

They grilled him thoroughly without profit and after a week or so, turned him over to a psychiatrist with instructions to find out whether the boy was mentally deranged or just a fancy liar. Judd was very badly ploughed up, touchy, suspicious and uncooperative. (Armstrong 1970, 7-8).

This tone is under strain in his last two novels as Armstrong attempts to come to terms with fashionable teen speak. By the 1960s teenage slang had
become a major means of young people defining themselves against the adult world. Through TV, film and popular music, it had become a transatlantic movement, with American and British teenagers exchanging and sharing a quickly changing set of terms. It seems to have been something that Armstrong felt he needed to acknowledge if he was provide a plausible picture of modern youth and be credible to his intended audience, but his use reveals his misgivings.

In the first few pages of *The Mutineers*, the narrator somewhat awkwardly demonstrates his knowledge of this language as he describes how the mutiny was provoked on the ship by a party being broken up ‘just as it was beginning to swing’ and how the lounge had been smashed-up ‘just for kicks’. More of this follows throughout the novel in both narrative and dialogue, in a rather hit and miss fashion, in which some slang terms – bogies and beaks, for instance (for police and magistrates) – seem to belong to an earlier era (Armstrong 1977, 4, 5, 35).

This use always has some self-consciousness about it, and the narrator holds himself slightly aloof from the language and its users. Particularly at the beginning of the novel, he frequently adopts the manner of an older and wiser man, describing the events in the tones of an official report, and pointing out the limitations of the mutineers’ perceptions. For instance, after detailing the problems that might have followed from the mutineers’ decision to set out in a small boat for a tiny island in the Pacific, he says, ‘They were untried, their ability to stand up to stress unproven and their capacity for cooperation extremely suspect.’ In this passage, a note of adult sarcasm even creeps in. The narrator describes the mutineers as ‘not much given to introspection.’
And the impulse to differentiate himself from them pushes his own language at times into a studied artificiality. When he wants merely to say that the mutineers believed that the world owed them a living, he adopts the mocking supercilious rephrasing of ‘having had life wished upon them by the world, the world owed them the means whereby to live it.’ Set in the context of these adult admonitions, the narrator’s use of teen speak carries an edge, as if he regards the mutineers’ language as one of the indications of an immature view of life (Armstrong 1977, 17-18).

In *The Albatross* there is a complicated narrative strategy, where the story comes to the reader through a third hand narrative. It is Judd’s account as told to the doctor who talks to him after he is rescued, reported by the story’s narrator. Mostly it is told in Judd’s reported words, occasionally the doctor’s opinions are interposed, and frequently the narrator offers his own version, taking over the account from Judd or offering an explanation of Judd’s actions. It is further complicated by Judd sometimes offering two versions of his understanding of events: what he thought at the time and what he realised later. The result is a layering of accounts that establishes Judd’s initial version, itself the most apparently objective view of the four boys, as subject to revision in the light of his own experience, the doctor’s observations of him, and the narrator’s opinions.

So Judd’s own voice, which is characterised by his use of teen speak, is constantly modified and commented upon by adults. As in *The Mutineers*, there is some deprecation in this adult comment, though the tone is light-hearted. Talking of Judd’s opinion of the *Albatross*, the narrator comments, ‘In Judd’s peculiar idiom, she was a beyoot (by which he presumably meant a
beauty)’ (Armstrong 1970, 70). Compared to *The Mutineers*, there are fewer instances where the narrator feels it necessary to pronounce at length on the action, though he does explain why Judd, otherwise ‘clear and lucid’, was ‘so curiously mixed up and displayed a woolly mindedness that was right out of character’ when going along with the theft of the *Albatross* (Armstrong 1970, 69). The closer integration of teenage protagonist and adult narrator in *The Albatross* produces a more convincing and consistent narrative tone than *The Mutineers* because it is a teenage voice explicitly mediated by adults. Yet, as in *The Mutineers*, it necessarily allows adults the last word.

**Conclusion**

Armstrong’s last published works show him trying to maintain his contact with young men and to warn them about the pitfalls of rejecting wholesale the adult world and the lessons of the past. He had spent most of his writing career in building bridges between youth and experience. In a short essay called ‘Writing for Boys’, which he contributed to *Junior Bookshelf* after receiving the Carnegie Medal in 1949, he wrote of ‘the gulf between us and them’ and ‘the ancient conflict between youth and age’. He saw the conflict as both ‘the spring of progress’ and the source of ‘the bitterness of misunderstanding’; and he believed that adults could only make contact with the adolescent boy by recognising the boy’s unique difficulty, that he wanted to stand on his ‘own two feet’ but was ‘largely ignorant both of the possibilities held by the vast world with which he must come to grips, and of his own potential in relation to them’ (Armstrong 1949, 73-74). In his early work, he put forward the working apprenticeship as a model of how youth could reach
maturity through learning by experience and the understanding guidance of older men. By the end of his career, while the relationship of master and apprentice was no longer within the real experience of the majority of even working class young men, Armstrong still sought to relate to his readers in the same way.

It could be said that, in all his most interesting work, Armstrong was dealing with questions of ‘us and them’; both in establishing a dialogue with adolescents whom he believed to be necessarily in conflict with adults, and in seeking to introduce working class subjects into children’s literature. In hindsight, he might perhaps be regarded as a precursor of the school of gritty realism for young adults which appeared at the close of the twentieth century, most notably represented by some of the work of Melvin Burgess. In his own time, Armstrong was a rather solitary figure.

He opens ‘Writing for Boys’, with the statement ‘Writing is of necessity a lonely job’ (Armstrong 1949, 73); and it is significant, that, for a writer who aimed to extol the fellowship of working men, his books are full of images of solitude: Thias sat on a country gate contemplating the future and the past; Peter on a stile looking down on the mining village and thinking about threatened friendships; Cam polishing his sextant in the early hours plotting his revenge on Andy; Thor accidentally abandoned by his shipmates on a sinking whaler; Stubby in his shelter by the water wheel wondering about his responsibility to the other mutineers; and lastly Judd, adrift in the life raft, grieving for lost freedom and comradeship.

The end of Armstrong’s career may have been lonely too. Apart from ‘Writing for Boys’, the only other statement of his aims as a writer came eight
years after the appearance of *The Albatross*, his last published book, in a short paragraph written for the reference book *Children’s Writers in the Twentieth Century*. This acted as an introduction to an appreciation of his career contributed by Gwen Marsh, his long time editor at Dent. Here, Armstrong acknowledged, a little defensively, ‘the didactic element’ in his books and wrote intriguingly, but without elaboration, that ‘the main body of my work is a compromise between what I wanted to say in it and what my publishers would accept and pay for.’ He reported that he had ‘a novel on faith and three books for boys’, that he considered to be his best work, as yet unpublished and ‘up for grabs’ (Armstrong 1978). They were never to be published, and Richard Armstrong died eight years later in 1986.

Bibliography

Anon (1946) ‘Sabotage at the Forge’ *Junior Bookshelf* 10 (1) 1946, 87.


