



THE BEST OF SCOTTISH BOOKS

ALAN DAPRÉ ON BOOKS AND A CHILDHOOD IN CARE INSTITUTIONS

PART OF THE SOCIAL JUSTICE ([HTTPS://BOOKSFROMSCOTLAND.COM/ISSUE/SOCIAL-JUSTICE/](https://booksfromscotland.com/issue/social-justice/)) ISSUE

‘Life is not a level playing field. Children do not have equal starting points or opportunities.’

Growing up in foster homes and care institutions, Alan Dapr  dreamed of living in a ‘real home surrounded by books’. In reality, the few books he had, he treasured. In this revealing account Alan, a prolific author, makes an impassioned case for enabling all children to read, and have opportunities to excel, regardless of circumstance.

What do the Superman And Batman Annual and The Guinness Book of Answers have in common? They’re the only books I possess from my childhood. One thrilled my young mind with its heroic tales of action and adventure. The other filled it full of surprising facts.

If I had to choose between the two, the superhero annual means more to me. When I open the cover I can see five handwritten words: ‘To Ian, love from Alan’. It’s the only example I have of my childhood writing. At some point, Ian crossed the words out and wrote ‘To Alan from Ian’ – and the book became mine once more.

I spent my early years in foster homes and care institutions. Most of the things I carried around on my travels were left behind at some point. In one children’s home, I carefully chained my 1970’s second-hand Chopper bike inside a dark coal shed. Then I was dispatched on yet another fostering. When I returned I discovered the front wheel was still chained up. Just the front wheel, mind. The rest had gone. It was never wise to leave things behind.

It’s hard to settle down when life is so turbulent. It’s hard to have privacy, especially when you share a room with other children. I remember being given a metal torch for my seventh birthday and sneakily reading under the

bedcovers. It made a change from staring at passing headlights out of a window. I'd gaze out and imagine myself being carried away to a real home where I would be surrounded by books and toys and love.



Alan Dapré

Most of the books in my first care home were unloved. They lurked on a narrow set of bookshelves behind a black and white television. Their cracked leather covers bore un-enticing titles like *Little Women* or *Anne of Green Gables*. I read them all with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Once, an old *Rupert Bear* annual appeared and I eagerly read it until the pages dropped out. I preferred the colourful, well-stocked library in my primary school, where I discovered incredible books like *The Wizard of Earthsea* and *Stig of the Dump*.

Imagination is powered by books. They open up young minds, raise hopes, banish fears, give children control. They certainly anchored me while my chaotic home life whirled all around. But if books are to have a real impact, they have to play a meaningful part in young lives. I'm always delighted to read about important initiatives that put this into practice. It shows children in care that others care.

The Scottish Book Trust is a proud partner of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which provides a free book a month to all looked-after children in Scotland up to the age of five. They're encouraged to build a personal library of up to 60 books. The youngsters involved are able to read and cherish well-written and beautifully illustrated stories. How good is that?

Other organisations are keen to promote the power of stories. CELCIS [the Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children in Scotland] recently ran *Get Write In!* – a creative writing competition for looked-after or care-experienced children. Inspired by the theme 'Random Moments', the children who entered wrote funny, poignant and powerful pieces – from the heart and their own experiences. The act of submitting an entry takes courage and self-belief. I was impressed by the number of children happy to express themselves through words and stories. I would have loved a chance to do that at their age.

Life is not a level playing field. Children do not have equal starting points or opportunities. So it's up to us adults to step in and provide creative young minds with opportunities to excel and be the best they can be.

It's not rocket science. That's on page 151 of *The Guinness Book of Answers!*

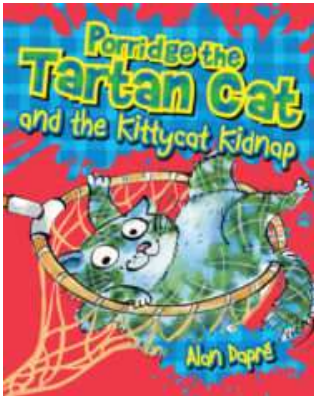
Alan Dapré is the author of more than fifty books for children, most recently the *Porridge the Tartan Cat* (<https://discoverkelpies.co.uk/series/?series=porridge-the-tartan-cat>) series, published by Floris Books

(<https://booksfromscotland.com/publisher/floris-books/>). He has also written over one hundred television scripts, transmitted in the UK and around the world. His plays have been on BBC Radio 4 and published for use in schools worldwide.

Find out more about the CELCIS GetWriteIn! Competition on their website (<https://www.celcis.org/news/campaigns/get-write-writing-competition-looked-after-children-2017/>).

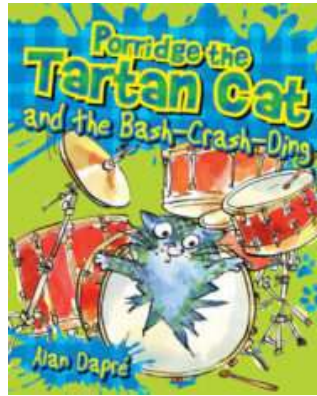
You can read an extract from Porridge the Tartan Cat and the Brawsome Bagpipes here (<https://booksfromscotland.com/2017/05/purrfectly-poised-prepped-festival-season/>) on *Books from Scotland*.

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