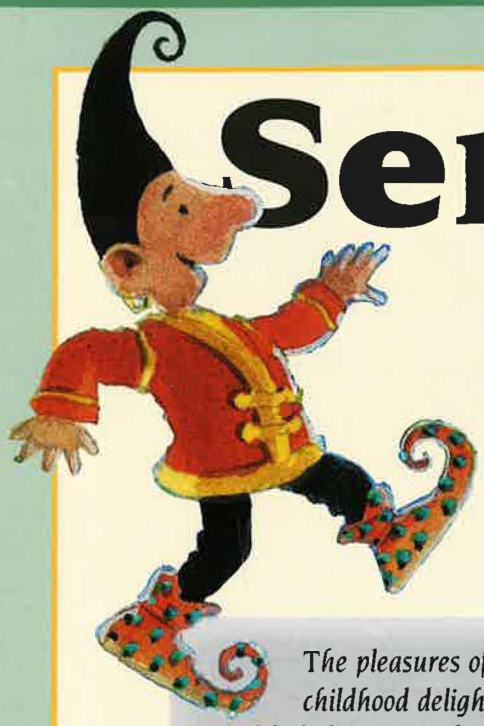
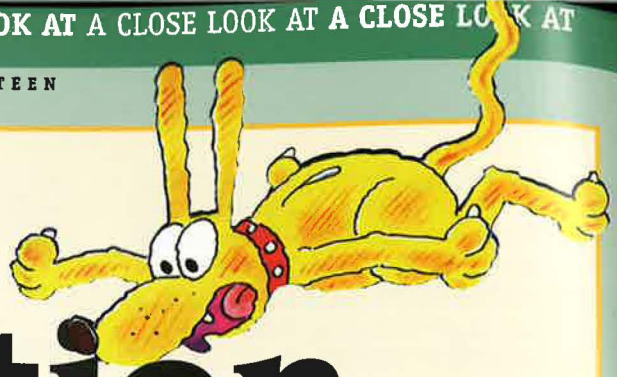


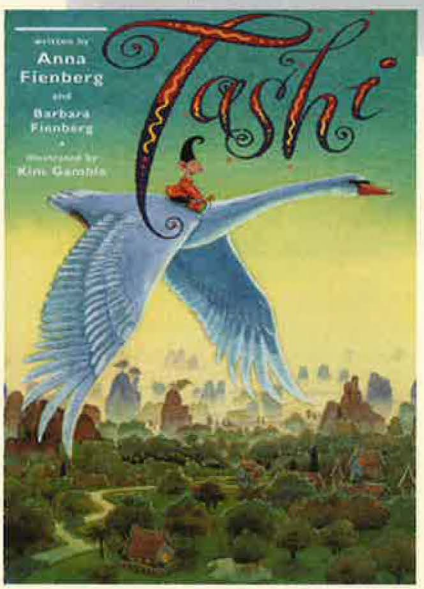


Series Fiction

Judith Ridge interviews the creators of two popular characters, as much in demand by Australian children today as when they first appeared on the scene: Selby in 1985 (Selby's Secret), Tashi in 1995 (Tashi).

The pleasures of series fiction are manifold. Many of us owe our adult reading lives to the childhood delight we took in **The Famous Five**, **Billabong**, **Trixie Belden**, **Biggles**. *We liked those series because we more or less knew what we were getting each time, the stories were exciting, unambiguous and satisfying, and in them were characters who became friends, who might change and develop in small ways, but who remained reassuringly themselves from book to book.*

It's these qualities that have made series fiction remain popular over the years with young readers. Two local favourites are the **Selby the Talking Dog** *series, which Duncan Ball has been writing over 20 years, and the inimitable* **Tashi**, *the creation of Anna Fienberg and her mother Barbara, visually brought to life by Kim Gamble. I spoke to Anna, Kim and Duncan about the origins of their respective characters and the creative process involved in keeping them fresh and engaging over numerous books.*



STARTING WITH TASHI. I ASKED ANNA AND KIM, WHERE DID THE CHARACTER COME FROM?

AF: Tashi is very much my mother, a little version of her in a way; her redoubtable story telling when she was a child. I was stuck in another book; I felt I had to leave that novel and do something else for a while. Barbara and I thought of having a character just like her, who was a great storyteller. One of the things I like (about Tashi) is that feeling of an oral storytelling tradition, because part of the concept of that character is that his identity is about telling stories — but he needed someone to tell them to. We thought that in the book we could have that interaction of Tashi with an audience, who became Jack and a person in his own right. In terms of why Tashi is an Asian boy, I think a lot of that was an influence from our reading. I think we'd both finished the **Joy Luck Club** recently, and we were sort of full of that fairy tale tradition. I love that easy mix of the supernatural with the real.

Did you plan from the outset that you'd draw on different fairy tale and mythology and "the other".

AF: No! It was (meant to be) a one off. We thought it would be a colour picture book, and it was Roslyn (Price from Allen and Unwin) who said, *This could be a series and he could have more adventures and you could develop this whole world of Tashi if you did little books in b&w.* Initially we were disappointed because I was looking forward to this luxurious full colour book, but that'll come!

KG: Actually it'll come next year. Anna and Barbara have finished the story and I've just begun the pictures. It's for younger readers though, leading up to the first Tashi.

What was the process of creating Tashi visually?

AF: Tell her how we gave you no instructions.

KG: Well, yes, there's no description of him, is there, just *Tashi came from a land very far away.*

AF: And even when you asked, how old? what does he look like? we just said, that's your problem!

KG: But that's good. I like to have that amount of freedom. But, because of his name and the names of the people around him, and the presence of dragons and warlords, there was an Asian feeling there. I've always loved Asian things in general, misty mountains and whatnot, and I could be quite eclectic with the images. (Kim gestures to various titles as he speaks.) Like that little fairy is out of an English garden, and that warlord

— I ripped him off from a book on Samurai armour. Tashi himself, he looked like that to begin with in my imagination, except that he had pointy ears, and I don't think his head quite curled over at the top, but it was peaked like that. Just little dots for eyes; I kept him very simple, in contrast to a lot of other characters in the book, and you can read whatever you want into him. It was just a matter of fine-tuning his ears, he looked a bit too much like an elf. As for the suit that he wears — the colours are very Noddy, and I love Noddy. So is the curl on top, although I think that Noddy had a bell on his cap, but the reds and yellows... there's something a little bit Santa Claus about that suit; the red coat and the boots, which hark back to days of surprise and wonder.

The writing of the stories. You work with your mum. Do you get together and toss around ideas, or does one of you come up with the plot?

AF: Usually it's my mother that does. Barbara's really good at plot. She's very economic and has an instinctive feel for the ultimate goal, and placing a couple of obstacles in the way, and then how you get there. It's really wonderful working with that, because I tend to be more chaotic. I'm more interested in how they all feel and what they're saying and what other motive there was. Somehow putting those things together and that atmosphere, having that through-line of a really tricky, interesting plot, being able to work with that and being able to add all those bits that interest me is a wonderful thing.

So Barbara does a lot of the plotting?

AF: Yes, and I take that away and interpret it and I bring it back to her. She has a very economic way of writing, and every now and then there'll be *you don't need that many adjectives* and *we don't need that bit.* We'll have arguments now and then about that — *But I think that makes it more atmospheric!* But mainly we seem to see things in a very similar way, so it's very easy, and it's lovely having that spine of a story to rest upon. I've never written like that before, it's always been a very solitary process.

Things have changed in Jack and Tashi's world since the first book. In the early books, it was a little bit like, is Tashi just Jack's alter ego or his imaginary friend? But it's now quite clear he's a real person. Tashi knows Jack's family, Tashi goes to school with Jack. They also look a little bit older. How do you see the stories as having progressed?

AF: I think Jack's developed as much as Tashi. Perhaps in this latest one (**Tashi and the Royal Tomb**) he has more — character perhaps? and also (minor characters such as) Angus Figment has a bit more identity. I think the point of Jack initially is that he was an audience for Tashi and a friend in this strange land, but in a series you need to develop a character and a family and roots.

KG: It makes it interesting when Jack is telling a story to Uncle Joe that he's heard from Tashi. It's kind of second hand telling, interspersed with Uncle Joe's own similar experiences that he's had in his travels. It adds a layer, a depth there for the reader, it's not just 'once upon a time'.

What do kids tell you they like about the books?

KG: The adventure.

AF: Yes, and Tashi's bravery and ability to solve things. But I think it's the adventure.

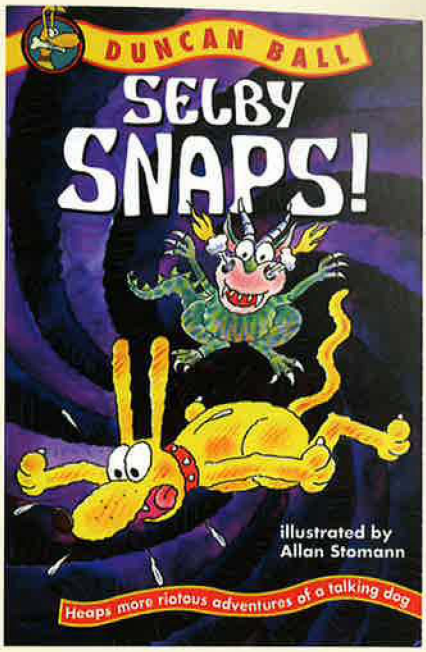
KG: The adventure and the overcoming of the obstacles from this little person facing great adversity. Fearless. Fearless, but not stupid, acknowledging the danger. They just like who Tashi is. He's honest and he's faithful and loyal. Those sort of qualities, which aren't stated but as you grow acquainted with him you realise that this is a really dependable little person. It's not just a one off adventure. There's a kind of a consistency about him which children grow to like, with the qualities that you'd like to find in your own best friend.

And you're not sick of him yet?

AF: No, no... he's very much a part of our lives, I think, like your other arm or something.

And you must have drawn him literally thousands of times.

KG: I never get sick of drawing him, at all, never, no. It's always lovely to draw him in full colour in a school, with a background and all of that. I like coming up with the new characters in each book. Kids ask, don't you get sick of doing the same thing over and over again?, but you never do because each story is different.



SELBY THE TALKING DOG HAD QUITE A DIFFERENT START IN LIFE TO TASHI. DUNCAN BALL EXPLAINS:

DB: In about 1982 ***Family Circle*** magazine asked me if I'd write a series of stories for their children's pages. Each story had to fit onto one page along with an illustration. This meant that each story had to be very short, about 850 words. I decided that the stories should revolve around a single character. Then came the vexing question of whether that character should be a boy or a girl. If I chose a boy then the girls might not relate to him as well. And if it was a girl, the boys might not like her. So I opted for an animal — a dog. Animals in children's stories have the advantage of being warmly accepted even before the character begins to emerge or the action of the stories begins.

When did you enter the picture as the intermediary between Selby and the rest of the world?

DB: As I've gone along I've added little glosses to the Selby myth. I shouldn't call it a myth, of course he is a real dog! But I have, little bits at a time, very slowly over twenty years, I've thought of things, and one of those was, maybe instead of me just writing about Selby, he really is real. I think it was a couple of years after I started writing him I decided he was real. I remember toying with that idea for a while; is it a good idea to tell kids that he actually exists, and at what point do I crack and say "OK, it's me, it's me!" And then I just decided, it can't be too damaging to

them. They do seem to respond to it. You can tell on one level they don't believe you, but on another they do. In fact when I have older and younger kids in together, I've noticed with the really young ones I can talk about Selby and I can talk about him as really existing, and then the older ones will ask, where did the idea come from, and I'll just say, well I thought it up. They seem to accept both.

Tell me more about how the readers engage with Selby and your other characters.

DB: I get mail to Emily (Eyefinger) and to Selby. Very often I'll get three emails at once from a kid; one to Selby, one to me and one to Emily. Occasionally (they're) very cheekily trying to tell me that they don't think Selby is real, and then asking Selby if he is real, things like that. But they do engage with the characters and you know that they don't really believe that those characters exist, but it's fun. I think it's harmless fun.

What do kids tell you they like about the stories?

DB: Usually of course, they say, *Oh I loved this one*, and occasionally, *I didn't like this one.* If they write to you they usually say nice things. They'll sometimes mention a specific story or book, and I have found over the years that the ones I think work the best are the ones the kids like. But I can't say that they pick out a certain quality that they like.

Not the humour, or the adventure?

DB: It's usually unqualified. *I really like this*, or *Willy and Billy are really nasty*, and when they write to Selby they express sympathy, encourage him to get them back. Occasionally, and it's usually the girls, they want to know if he's got a boyfriend. I just got one yesterday that says, *To Selby, do you have a boyfriend and has he given you anything yet?*

Well, there's a new dimension to Selby!

DB: But I do have him increasingly falling in love. I say increasingly, I did it once, I can't remember which story.

I don't know how you keep track of them! What did you say, there's 150 stories?

DB: 155, I counted them the other day. The problem is I can't keep track and I am forever asking, have I done this before? One of the problems is that I have a whole lot of notes on possible stories, and I go through them occasionally, I add things or I cut things out, try to see if I can develop them. And occasionally I'll be sure I've written this story before, and I find out it's just something I had in note form. I used the same name of a story twice. I didn't notice it, Jill (Duncan's wife) didn't notice it, my editor didn't notice it. A kid of course noticed it — *Did you realise that...* Oops!

What I like about Selby is the satire. There's a lot of social satire in the stories.

DB: That's the adult content. Much as I'd like to delight the adults, I hope there's enough in there for kids.

***Room Rage** from* **Selby Sorcerer** *is a great example — adults will love the satire, but kids love those home renovation shows...*

DB: Everything I do, it's a blind guess, seat of the pants, and hoping, fingers crossed, that kids will like it. I should have kept a tally over the years of the stories the kids like, because I'd really know a lot about kids' taste if I had (done) that.

What attracts you to writing a series?

DB: You get to plumb the same character in a huge amount of depth. In a novel, of course, you can get a lot more out of characters than in a short story. In a series you can get even that much more. If I were trying to get all the attributes of Selby, of his character, it would be a very big book I think. You can just keep going and going and you get to know the character more, and the kids do too. I think it's great.

How else has Selby changed? More people know his secret now.

DB: The stories have changed a bit in that I've introduced some high fantasy. They were always low fantasy — I guess talking dogs, in more or less realistic situations, are low fantasy. And then he went to Mars. I actually did pull punches with that and with others at the same time. Maybe he didn't actually go... I did have a ghost earlier on which was real fantasy, and by the end of it we think maybe there was a real ghost, although Selby wasn't sure. But recently he goes into a parallel universe, and there's a magic wand, and a genie in a bottle in a previous story...

You're not sick of Selby?

DB: No! The only problem is I want to keep writing him but I've got all these other ideas for books. The other thing is, I want him to develop. He's always developed a bit. You're always stretching the envelope, but you don't stretch it to bursting point. Do envelopes burst? I'm thinking of balloons. The idea is to build on what you've got.

I confess, I haven't read all 155 stories...

DB: Well, I can recommend them!

Selby Books:
(All published by Angus & Robertson Pb)
Selby's Secret 0 207 15494 5
Selby Speaks 0 207 16794 X
Selby Screams 0 207 16718 1
Selby Supersnoop 0 207 18565 4
Selby Spacedog 0 207 18925 0
Selby Snowbound 0 207 19652 4
Selby Surfs 0 207 19809 8
Selby Snaps! 0 207 19731 8
Selby's Joke Book 0 207 19715 6
Selby Splits 0 207 19780 6
Selby's Selection 0 207 19772 5
Selby's Stardom 0 207 19948 5
Selby's Side-splitting Joke Book
0 207 19853 5
Selby Sorcerer 0 207 19861 6

Tashi Books:
(All published Allen & Unwin Pb)
Tashi 1863738061
Tashi and the Baba Yaga 1 86448 688 0
Tashi and the Big Stinker 1 86508 350 X
Tashi and the Dancing Shoes
1 86508 552 9
Tashi and the Demons 1 86508 084 5
Tashi and the Genie 1 86448 296 6
Tashi and the Ghosts 1 86448 090 4
Tashi and the Giants 1 86373 945 9
Tashi and the Haunted House
1 86508 840 4
Tashi and the Royal Tomb
1 74114 090 0

