

FEATURE

The bad boys of books:

A force for good or a bad influence?

Children love to read about kids who break the rules – whose irrepressible spirit can't be crushed by teachers or parents.

For the past 63 years, The Beano's Dennis the Menace has been the wildest of them all. But Dennis has a rival in the shape of Horrid Henry – a dastardly boy locked in constant battle with his goody-goody brother Perfect Peter. So who really is the King of the Bad Boys?

At Colchester's firstsight gallery on March 16, we may find out. As part of Essex Book Festival, Horrid Henry's creator, Francesca Simon, and Steven Butler, writer of Diary of Dennis the Menace, will take to the stage to battle it out on behalf of their respective characters.

"We're going to come on with banners waving, and we want it to be quite adversarial, with lots of one-upmanship," enthuses Francesca, whose Horrid Henry books have sold more than 18 million copies worldwide.

"The audience gets to ask us lots of questions before they vote for their favourite, and we hope there'll be lots of cheering and booing."

American-born Oxford graduate Francesca created Henry back in 1994, and has had ample time since to ponder why such characters are so appealing.

"There's a long tradition of children's classics which deal with rebellion from Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer to Just

Horrid Henry and Dennis the Menace are two of fiction's naughtiest anti-heroes. Soon, in Colchester, their respective authors will battle it out in a contest to decide who deserves the title King of the Bad Boys. **PAT PARKER** spoke to Francesca Simon and Steven Butler about mischief-makers in children's literature

William," she says. "I think children are drawn to anarchic spirits. We all have these rebellious impulses, but children do in particular, because their lives are so circumscribed."

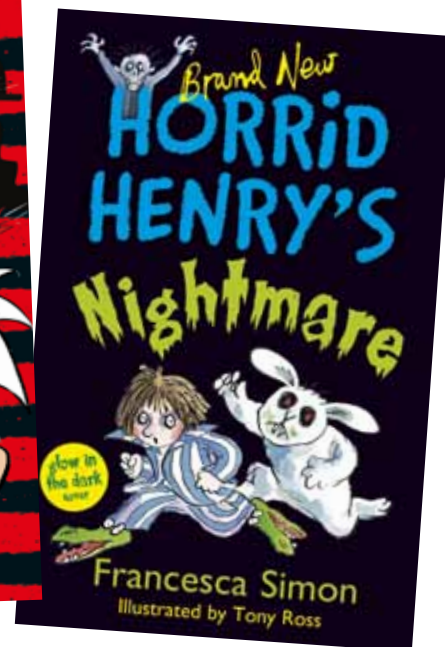
Not that she thinks Henry is bad, exactly – just impulsive. "I don't think he sees himself as naughty – he just sees himself as the centre of the world. He's extremely selfish, and single-minded in pursuit of whatever he thinks he deserves. He's greedy and lazy. But he's not bad – in a sense, that's falling into the trap his parents have laid."

By continually praising Perfect Peter, says Francesca, Henry's hapless parents stoke up his

resentment, perpetuating the cycle of conflict.

"Henry and Peter are locked into a system the parents have created," she says. "Children as young as four recognise this. By saying to Henry, 'Why can't you be more like your brother?' it's guaranteed to make him want to be less like Peter. They're well-meaning, devoted parents, but they don't know what to do with Henry. They can't accept the child they've been given."

The sibling rivalry between the brothers is and is one many children will recognise. Francesca believes the stories offer children "a place of safety" to explore hidden, forbidden emotions. "Henry gives the illusion of wickedness, but he hasn't done anything that every



child in the world hasn't done or dreamt of. He just vents his aggression in a funny way."

The brothers are two sides of the same coin. "I realised about four years after first writing Horrid Henry that he and Perfect Peter are actually two sides of every person in the world. They're opposites. If you pushed the two of them together, you'd have quite a normal person."

To her surprise, Francesca has discovered that, despite his perfection, parents are not all that fond of Peter.

"Parents dislike Peter. I don't know why that is, because he'd be the child we're all socialising our children to be. You can listen to yourself all day as a parent – 'Sit up straight', 'Don't eat with your mouth open', 'Do your homework', and Peter

has taken all that on board.

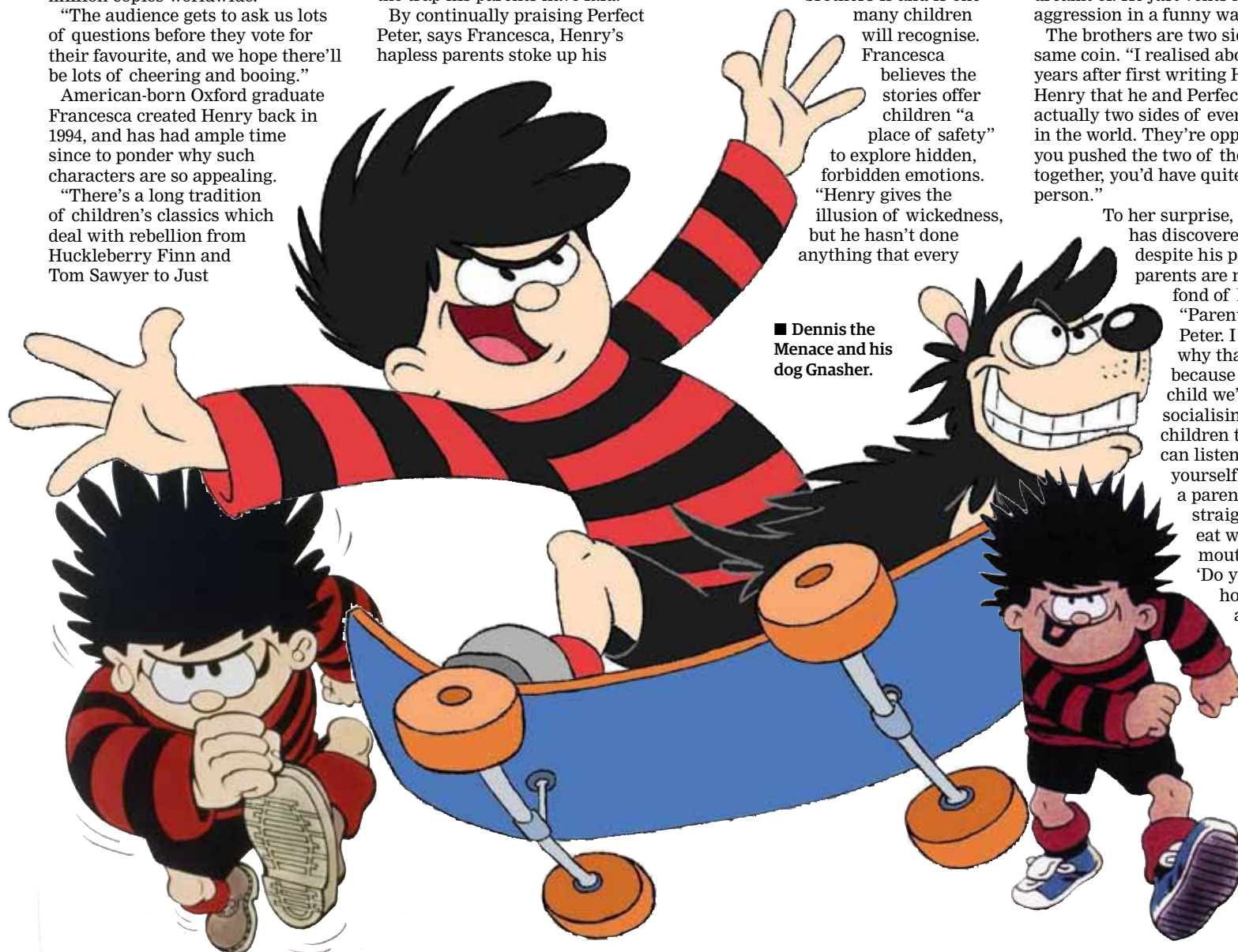
"I thought all parents would love Peter, but they don't. And I think, 'I'm giving you what you supposedly want – this perfectly-behaved child – yet you recoil from him. Why?'"

"I think he triggers something from their own childhood selves. He's the goody-goody they didn't like as children. There's something very primal about this fight between Henry and Peter – someone once told me it's like Cain and Abel."

Does Henry have any redeeming features? "Well, he's funny – and he's very creative. He spends so much time avoiding homework, it would be easier for him just to do it. And he has a real zest for life."

"The main thing about Henry is he's impulsive – he almost never plots things. He just responds to a given situation, often a perceived injustice. He never thinks, 'Today, I'm going to make my teacher's life a misery'. That would leave a sour taste. He doesn't go to a museum intending to knock over all the exhibits. Mayhem just happens along the way. That's why he's funny. Otherwise, he'd just be a sociopath."

She has no time for parents who accuse Henry of being a bad influence. "I find that absolutely hilarious. I think he's quite the reverse. He allows children to explore emotions safely. They get all the thrill of bad behaviour and none of the consequences. "It's a bit like adults reading detective fiction. It doesn't make us want to



■ Dennis the Menace and his dog Gnasher.



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■ From left, Horrid Henry meets fans at Waterstones book shop in Ipswich in 2007; Dennis the Menace is moved on from the House of Commons after distributing his Menacefesto. The Beano was celebrating its 60th anniversary; and Dennis the Menace's dog, Gnasher, has his teeth cleaned by Vets in Practice star Trude Mostue.

Pictures: ARCHANT LIBRARY/PA

become criminals ourselves. I think parents who enjoy Horrid Henry with their kids are sending them a very powerful message, which is, 'I know you sometimes hate your brother. I know sometimes you hate me, but I'm big enough to deal with it. I can cope with your passionate emotions and it's fine'."

As a child, was Francesca more like Henry or Peter? A bit of both. "I'm quite a fierce person," she says. "I wouldn't hesitate to intervene if something happened on a bus

or the Tube. At school, I was the best-behaved child in the world, but I was very badly-behaved at home."

Much of the inspiration for Horrid Henry stemmed from her own unsettled, bohemian childhood. She was born in St Louis in 1958, then the family moved to California. She was the eldest of four children, and there was always a battle for space.

Her father was a freelance screenwriter. "He was writing films half the time and plays the other half, so he'd have one year earning a great deal of money and another year earning none.

"My mother was very anxious – not suited to living with someone whose income is uncertain. Her father had been wealthy when she was a little girl, but they lost everything in the Depression."

Her mother combined home-making with civil rights activism. "She was a free-thinker and a big campaigner" who influenced Francesca's own politics.

The family left Los Angeles for England when Francesca was six, as her father was writing Judy Garland's last film. When she was eight, they went to live in France. Then it was back to California. By then, she had acquired European habits and was treated as a foreigner.

Did she feel angry about her peripatetic childhood? "Probably. I always did very well in school, but as I got older, the thought of starting over again became increasingly hard. I hated moving house – I've lived in the same house in London for over 20 years."

After studying medieval English at Oxford, Francesca stayed in England. She married a software developer in 1986. After the birth of their only child, Joshua, in 1989, she started to write children's stories.

"It was at a time when my friends were having second children and I started noticing that people were categorising them – 'Oh, she's such a good baby', 'My God, he was awful' – and I started thinking about a family system of a good child and a bad child."

She has written about 90 Horrid Henry stories. The latest, Horrid Henry's Krazy Ketchup,

stems from many years ago when her son's friend came to tea. "He said how much he liked coming to our house, and I asked why, wondering which of my many qualities he admired. And he said, 'It's because you let children pour their own ketchup!'"

Horrid Henry is a global phenomenon, and has spawned a TV cartoon series, a film and a stage play. Steven Butler was cast as Henry in the original stage production, and he and Francesca became friends, despite the age difference (Steven is 31).

It's indirectly down to Francesca that he is now the creator of the Dennis the Menace's diaries. The actor, dancer and circus performer had always wanted to be an author but had never completed a novel.

"When I had to leave the cast because I was contracted to appear

in something else, she took me out to dinner," he tells me. "I'd made the decision I wouldn't say anything about the fact I wanted to write books, because it's so needy and pathetic. But half-way through the meal, Francesca said, 'You strike me as the kind of person who would want to write', and I very gingerly said, 'Well...' And she said, 'Go for it – just go for it'. So I did."

"It's a very unlikely friendship, but we both have a wicked sense of humour, which comes across in our books," says Steven.

They shared a sense of being an outsider. "Francesca was this staunchly-feminist, curly, dark-haired Jewish girl on the blonde, bikini-clad West Coast, and I grew up in a tiny village in Kent, where anyone who wore red was considered weird, and if you liked any music except your average pop you were considered crazy."

"I was this quirky, grungy rock kid who wore lots of brightly-coloured clothing and didn't fit in at all."

It's this sense of not quite belonging, he says, which helped him understand the frustrations of Dennis the Menace.

After Francesca encouraged him to write, he came up with a story called The Wrong Pong, about a boy who is whooshed down a toilet and encounters a family of trolls in the sewers.

The Wrong Pong books were a great success, so when The Beano publishers, DC Thomson, asked Puffin Books to find an author to write new Dennis the Menace books, they put Steven forward.

Dennis the Menace first appeared in The Beano in 1951. With his spiky black hair, red-and-black jumper and his unruly dog Gnasher, he is an iconic bad boy.

While Henry is constantly at war with Perfect Peter, Dennis's enemy remains the priggish Walter and his band of Softies.

Traditionally, Walter was a rather effeminate character, and in modern times DC Thomson has been

anxious to eradicate any suggestion of homophobia in the portrayal.

Steven has been careful to do likewise. "I'm gay myself, so I was keen to avoid any hint of that, and I took anything which could be construed as bullying out," he says.

"The Softies are old before their time. They're strange to Dennis – bookish, boring, smarmy, self-important children. Walter is quite an unpleasant character – very calculating and spiteful, and a rival to Dennis. Walter is from a wealthy family and looks down on Dennis, who's working class, so it's a permanent battle of power."

"Walter's constantly trying to get everyone else into trouble, whereas Dennis just wants to have fun, and Walter stands in his way. Dennis isn't nasty. He's just wild and chaotic – a lovable rogue."

As Steven has played Henry on stage, and become the writer of Dennis's diaries, he's well-qualified to have an opinion on which is the naughtier. His vote goes to Dennis. "Whereas Henry's misbehaviour is almost never calculated, Dennis's can be. Also, because Dennis comes from a comic book, he is freer than Henry. He could make a flying machine that could fly around Beanoland, whereas Henry couldn't, because he lives in the real world."

Steven says that, often, it's the most mischievous pupils who win their teachers' affections.

"There's nearly always a character like Dennis," he says. "I see them all the time. And what's funny is that in front of the other children, the teachers are disapproving, but in the staffroom you find that they're the ones the teachers are really fond of, because they're such strong little characters."

"Even adults like a lovable rogue. That's why characters like Dennis have stood the test of time."

■ **Francesca Simon and Steven Butler appear in Bad Boys: Dennis the Menace vs Horrid Henry at firstsite, Colchester, at 3pm on Sunday, March 16. Tickets £7.50. www.justimaginarycentre.co.uk**



■ Authors Steven Butler and Francesca Simon.

