

Word from Jenny Nimmo

The story behind 'Henry and the Guardians of the Lost'

Even before the last Charlie Bone book had been published, I was receiving letters from children begging to know what had happened to Charlie's cousin, Henry. In Book Two, 'The Time Twister', Henry arrives in the present after being whisked through time from the year 1916. Charlie helps Henry to escape from the malevolent magician, Ezekiel, now over a hundred years old. It was Ezekiel who, as a jealous teenager, sent Henry through time as a punishment for being clever at jigsaws.

After his escape Henry lives in a remote and secluded cottage with his aunt, Pearl, and his cat, Enkidu. Better keep him there for a while, I thought, out of harm's way. So there he stays for almost two years. However, when children's letters started arriving, asking for news of Henry, I knew it was time to determine his future. What would become of a boy, a hundred years out of his own time? In my mind Henry began to emerge as a resilient and resourceful boy (he has to be) a boy determined to survive no matter what. I knew what he looked like as I had already described him in 'The Time Twister'. He bears an uncanny resemblance to Charlie Bone, who has dark, springy hair and eyes like muddy pools.

Henry's problem, when I finally decided on it, doesn't worry him in the least. He is safe and happy, and nothing else matters. But Henry hasn't grown since he was catapulted through the years. His hair, his nails, every one of his features in fact, has remained frozen in time. A boy like that, once he is discovered, is bound to be of interest to certain unpleasant agencies. They would consider Henry's peculiarity a means of making a fortune, I thought, regardless of his health, or even his life. When Henry's secret becomes known, his aunt has to take him somewhere that she learns is the only place in the world where he might grow again. For me that place had to be in a forest.

I have always loved trees. I find them beautiful, mysterious and soothing. Very often, when I am walking through woods on a winter's day (or even in spring and summer), the lines of a poem run through my head. The poem, 'Stopping by woods on a snowy evening', by Robert Frost, is one of my favourites. But I don't stop by the woods, I keep walking, and feel all the better for it. Trees are home to creatures that couldn't live anywhere else, and deep within the forests of the world there are plants that have never been discovered, plants that could heal many of the world's ailments; we destroy trees at our peril.

So, Henry goes into a forest; but this one can be dangerous. No one can leave it without the help of people that Henry never knew existed, forest folk who have lived secretly among the trees for centuries, the only beings on earth who can help him to grow. Unfortunately, against his aunt's wishes, Henry takes his cat with him, and cats can be a threat to very small, vulnerable people.

Here, I must mention my own cat, Enkidu, a small female version of Henry's cat. My Enkidu arrived at our door on a freezing November day; a tiny, five-week-old kitten, that grew into a ball of long, silky fur. Where she came from nobody knew. My husband wanted to call her NK, for New Kitten. How unimaginative is that? I thought. But N K said aloud, is almost Enkidu, and Enkidu was a hairy (or furry) man in one of the oldest written stories in existence: the ancient Sumerian poem, 'The Epic of Gilgamesh.' I was a little anxious that I had called a female cat Enkidu, but she was named long

before we discovered she was not a male. By then she had eagerly embraced her name and I didn't have the heart to change it.