

# *Contents*

Cover  
About the Book  
About the Author  
Also by Susan Hill  
Dedication  
Title Page

The boy who taught the beekeeper to read  
Father, Father  
Need  
The punishment  
Moving messages  
Sand  
Elizabeth  
The brooch  
Antonyin's  
  
Copyright

## ABOUT THE BOOK

'Hill can evoke a setting, convey the essence of a situation and let one see into the inmost hearts of her characters in a paragraph or even a single sentence' Francis King, *Spectator*

A young schoolboy visiting his aunt's country home finds company and friendship with the gentle beekeeper and begins teaching the man to read, so that it seems nothing can ever intrude upon their closeness. A young country girl fights against becoming a downtrodden domestic skivvy like her dead mother, while another young girl reaches a delicate understanding with an elderly blind man as they walk along the beach together. On another beach a more sinister plot unfolds as a gang of boys plans a most wicked deed.

'Hill's sentences speak eloquently ... the pleasure to be had from [these] stories lies in their carefulness: memories are exactly sustained, small gifts are valued, little words are listened to' *Guardian*

'Hill's stories evoke place, situation and complex emotions with enviable economy ... Masterly' *Daily Mail*

'Simple and mesmeric prose' *Observer*

'These very strange, beautiful tales demonstrate a relentless capacity to surprise ... *The Boy Who Taught The Beekeeper To Read* introduces many individual people who

will continue to stare back at the reader long after the book is closed' *Times Literary Supplement*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Hill's novels and short stories have won the Whitbread, Somerset Maugham and John Llewellyn Rhys awards and been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She is the author of over forty books, including the five Serrailer crime novels, *The Various Haunts of Men*, *The Pure in Heart*, *The Risk of Darkness*, *The Vows of Silence* and *The Shadows in the Street*. Her most recent novel is *A Kind Man*. The play adapted from her famous ghost story, *The Woman in Black*, has been running on the West End stage since 1989.

Susan Hill was born in Scarborough and educated at King's College London. She is married to the Shakespeare scholar, Stanley Wells, and they have two daughters. She lives in Gloucestershire, where she runs her own small publishing company, Long Barn Books.

Susan Hill's website is [www.susan-hill.com](http://www.susan-hill.com).

ALSO BY SUSAN HILL

Featuring Simon Serrailer

*The Various Haunts of Men*

*The Pure in Heart*

*The Risk of Darkness*

*The Vows of Silence*

*The Shadows in the Street*

Fiction

*Gentlemen and Ladies*

*A Change for the Better*

*I'm the King of the Castle*

*The Albatross and Other Stories*

*Strange Meeting*

*The Bird of Night*

*A Bit of Singing and Dancing*

*In the Springtime of the Year*

*The Woman in Black*

*Mrs de Winter*

*The Mist in the Mirror*

*Air and Angels*

*The Service of Clouds*

*The Man in the Picture*

*The Beacon*

*The Small Hand*

*A Kind Man*

Non-Fiction

*The Magic Apple Tree*

*Family*

*Howards End is on the Landing*

Children's Books

*The Battle for Gullywith*

*The Glass Angels*

*Can It Be True?*

To Vivien Green  
Best of Agents

Susan Hill

THE BOY WHO  
TAUGHT THE  
BEEKEEPER  
TO READ

  
V I N T A G E

*The boy who taught the beekeeper  
to read*

## *The boy who taught the beekeeper to read*

'What are you doing?'

There might be a boldness in the boy's voice but there was fear in his heart too and the boldness hardly concealed it. Mart May could tell.

He had emerged out of the shimmering white gold of the mid-afternoon high summer garden into the deep green cool, a thin boy with arms and legs as greenish pale as peeled twigs, pale hair; but he stood his ground, once upon it, which Mart admired.

'Listen,' he said.

The small boy stared.

'Go on - you listen.'

They both stood quite still, the man in the strange helmet and ghostly garment and the stick-limbed boy. There was no movement of air among the dark heavy August leaves, so that the vibrating in the branches of the oak tree above them was clearly heard, like the sweet music of comb and paper.

'What is singing?'

'The swarm.'

'Oh.'

After a moment Mart May said, 'You visiting?'

'I came last night. It was dark.'

'On holiday then.'

The boy seemed to consider it, but in the end did not reply.

Mart May bunched the ankles of the billowing white suit into bicycle clips. The boy went on watching.

'You could hold the ladder,' Mart said, 'see I don't come a purler.'

'What is that?'

'A purler? Where've you been all your life?'

'In Scotland and London and Kent and France and London.' He ticked the places off.

Something about the careful answer, and about the seriousness of the pale boy's pale face touched Mart May at a level he scarcely knew in himself. He felt it as a swift sharp twisting sensation in his throat.

The boy wore long shorts, almost to the knee, and a cotton shirt with a neat collar.

'A purler,' Mart May said at last, 'is a tumble-fall. I don't want to climb that tree and have the ladder slip.'

'What would you have done if I hadn't come?'

'Mind out for myself like I always do.'

'Why are you going up the ladder?'

'To take the swarm.'

'Where?'

'Back to the hive where they ought to be.'

'Are they your bees?'

'They say a swarm belongs to you until it's out of sight and then it's anybody's. They're her ladyship's bees. I look after them.'

He lifted the ladder and propped it against the tree directly below the widest spreading branch. The boy waited until it was wedged in place and then came forward and put his hands on either side. Mart May climbed delicately, effortlessly; the swarm of bees was taken into the cotton bag and carried like burglary swag down to the ground and across the clearing on the far side of the glade. The boy followed, silent, watching, his green-white body a small ghost behind the voluminous billowing beekeeper.

'What will happen now?'

'They'll settle down. Takes a while.'

'They didn't sting you.'

'Their bellies were full. When they're that way they can't bend themselves to sting.'

'Why did you wear your covering-up thing?'

'Best be on the safe side.'

'When do they sting you?'

'When something upsets them.'

'What will upset them?'

'This and that. Losing their queen. People getting in their path. Thunder.'

Mart May the man began to emerge from the suit like a grub from a chrysalis. He folded the discarded white husk and set the helmet on top. A low soft hum came from the beehive.

The boy stood in the underwater light of the clearing. Beyond, the shimmering garden. Mart May opened his mouth to ask his name but the boy slipped through the hair crack between the forming of the words and their speaking and was gone, absorbed into the sunlight, leaving the bee man heavy among the shadows.

The hot weather settled in. The garden was drenched with butterflies and the petals floating off the last of the roses. Behind the garden the house remained half-shuttered the whole of each day. When Mart May was sent for to smoke out a wasp's nest in the attics he made his way through ocean depths of corridor, but the attic was hot as a boiler room and baking in the sun. Long-dead spiders were caught, transparent in dirty webs.

'What are you doing?' The boy watched him emerging silently as if through the wall.

'Smoking out the jaspers.'

For the first time he laughed. '*Jaspers.*'

'Wasps to you, then. And if bees won't go for you, these will. You steer clear.'

'I'm not afraid.'

'Well, I am afraid for my job if I let them pepper you.'

Mart May waited for the boy to move to the farthest end of the baking attic before pumping out the smoke.

Like a white moth the boy pressed himself against the wall and watched.

'Now we scram,' Mart May said after a moment.

They stood on the landing outside letting their eyes adjust to the dimness.

'I thought you were the bee man.'

'So I am, and a lot else besides.'

'Wasp man.'

'Window cleaner, guttering clearer, rabbit popper, boiler stoker, pigeon shooter, rat catcher, molehill flattener, leaf sweeper and a few I've forgotten for now.'

'My mother is dead so I came here.'

The dust surrounding them on the landing stopped seething, like the stopping of a clock.

'What's your name?'

'Mart May.'

He was gone again, quicksilver down the steep dark stairs. Mart stood, hearing the faint far-off closing of a door, and then the silence again, like felt in his ears.

After that, they met several times a week, the boy materialising wherever Mart May happened to be working, so that it seemed he had been waiting, following.

The name, he said, was James Burnett. But he was never anything to Mart but 'the boy'.

'My father is working in a dangerous country. I'm not allowed to go.'

'Well you're safe enough here if you steer clear of jaspers and don't fall in the pond.'

'I can swim.'

'All the same.'

'If I drowned, would you lose your job?'

'Very like.'

'Likely.' His voice was clear as a flute, and prim as a girl's.

'What, you being my schoolmarm now? You'd have a job on.'

Mart May was scraping the last of the honey from the combs. The boy, as always, watching, watching. Close up, even his eyelashes were pale, feathers above cloud-grey eyes.

'You like this?' He held out the comb. 'Make your hair curl.'

'That's bread crusts. My father won't come home for at least a year.'

'He won't know you then.'

The cloud eyes flickered with alarm.

'All that bread crust and honey'll have made your hair gone curlified.'

*'Curlified.'*

'That's it.'

'How do you spell "curlified"?'

Mart May rested the cleaned comb on the tray. In the lance of sunlight falling between the leaves, the gnats danced.

'Her ladyship would be your grandmother then?' he said at last.

'No, my aunt. Don't you know?'

'I do now. You've told me.'

'Not that. Don't you know how to spell "curlified"?'

'No,' Mart May said, walking away, 'I don't.'

When he glanced round the boy had gone.

He did not appear again for three days. The weather turned warm and sultry, there was no air, no stirring of the leaves. The bees teemed inside the hives, restless, pent-up, sullen.

Once or twice Mart May caught sight of Lady Burnett walking slowly along the gravel path, pulling off the dead heads of a late rose here and there, probing the dahlias