

London's dangerous. All of us who love it know that. In London, weird things go on. Stuff you really don't want to get involved with. Back-to-back with the everyday, just behind us, London's savage.

We see movement out of the corners of our eyes. We're watched from the city's shadows. We all know that. We just don't want to. Sometimes, though, you can't help wondering – who are those other Londoners? The ones we never see? Who sifts through the rubbish? Who got oily handprints so high up on that building, way out of reach? Who scratched warning marks on those walls, who disturbs deserted building sites? I can tell you. There are a few of us that know the answer.

Borribles.

That's what they're called. Tribes of children who don't need us, punky urban elves who've gone their own way, who are proud and resourceful and hard and who never grow up. Borribles.

For those of us who read Michael de Larrabeiti's extraordinary, classic trilogy, an awful lot of things suddenly made sense. London's neurotic about children. Oh, people love them, of course, bless them, the little darlings, of course we do, there's nothing we won't do for 'the kids'. So how come everyone's so scared of them? Scared rigid?

Think of all the signs on newsagents' doors – 'Only Two School Children At A Time'. Watch the faces of the passengers when a bunch of noisy school-uniformed roughnecks appear on the bus (topdeck – bagsy the back seat). Listen to our politicians slapping down curfews wherever young people are bored and rowdy, locking them indoors like animals.

And do you really, honestly think that children don't notice? Is it any wonder that the idea of living without adults, these lumbering morons who are so clearly terrified of them, is so appealing? Living in a world where elders won't try to convince them that 'you little terror' is a term of *endearment*?

Faced with a society that doesn't know what to do with them, children want to live by their own rules.

They tried it, infamously, on a coral island in *Lord of the Flies*, and the moral would seem to be that the effort's doomed. But the guilty truth of that book is

that even after it all goes so bloody and ugly, no one can read the scene where the grown-up re-establishes 'order' without a jolt of loss. His arrival is less a salvation than an interruption.

The Lost Boys found their adultless world in Neverland, but at the end – with the honourable exception of Peter Pan – they wussed out and came back to be grown-ups. They forgot how to fly and became office workers, a tram-driver, a lord and – God help us – a judge. I am not joking.

The Borribles are a damn sight tougher. They're city-dwellers. They don't need to find their adultless land far away – they've built it under our noses. In squats, by canals. In the byways of London. And yes, it's savage and tribal. They'd have it no other way. None of them would ever jack in that life to come back to us. Because they know that along with the savagery comes love, loyalty, friendship and adventure that those of us stuck in the everyday can only envy. Envy: maybe that's why we're so scared.

More than anything in my life, ever, I wanted to be a Borrible. The camaraderie, the adventure, the fights, the tribes that sounded like life.

Unfortunately, I got on far too well with my mum ever to run away. There was absolutely no chance at all of me turning feral. But through these books, I could at least hear the stories. The Borribles were, and are, my heroes. Argumentative, flawed, dirty and raggedy-arsed, brave and brilliant.

And the names. A litany of patchwork sounds, handles as arcane, as urban, as unique and beautiful as graffiti. Orococco. Vulgarian. Tron. Lightfinger. Arfamo. Knocker. I still remember the stunned excitement of first opening *The Borribles* and reading the dedication: 'For Whitebonce, Spikey and Fang'.

Yes, of course I decided what my Borrible name would be. No, of course I won't tell you.

The Borribles was published halfway through the seventies. And though the Borribles themselves have existed for centuries, for me they'll always be the ultimate dwellers in that extraordinary decade of reggae and punk and ska, counterculture, multiculture, drab, bleached-out summers and stormy autumns, political highs and lows. Above all and always extraordinary stories,

the Borrible trilogy snares readers (of all ages) with its throat-tightening narrative, but for those who care and care to notice, the pugnacious politics are clear.

This is a joyously mongrel, mixed-up England, anathema to the racists. For those who fought for equality on seventies streets, the initials of the Borribles' police enemies, the Special Borrible Group, are a badge of dishonour – the SBG are obvious cousins to the real-world SPG, the murderers of Blair Peach. ‘Good citizens,’ sing de Larrabeiti’s police, ‘behave like sheep’. Today, everywhere, people are refusing to behave like sheep. Just like the Borribles.

There are those who’d like children’s books to be clean, and instructive, and polite, and nice. I’m not one of them, and neither, thank God, is Michael de Larrabeiti. The Borribles are unapologetically mucky. As confused and contradictory as the rest of us. Violently anti-moralistic, these are some of the most moral books I know. A realistic morality, rooted in friendship and freedom.

Despite their seventies centre-of-gravity, re-reading the books now it’s impossible not to be struck by how incredibly relevant, how contemporary these books are. The Borribles are true and worthy heroes for children – and for the rest of us. They would not stick the rules of an English boarding school, magic or otherwise, for thirty seconds, and I salute them wildly for it. It’s absolutely right that a new generation should have the chance to learn from them. We need them more than ever.

We need them, flicking Vs at those in authority. We need them on the beach when the officer lands, so that when he says (as he does, verbatim), ‘I should have thought that a pack of British boys would have been able to put up a better show than that,’ they’re not, like Ralph, too polite to tell him to piss off.

Look around you, they’d tell him. Look at your world. How dare you lecture us?

There are books we like, and books we love, and books we need. And then there are books that mean so much to us that they embed themselves in us, irresistibly, and become permanent parts of our mental landscapes. Ever since I first read it aged eleven, *The Borribles* has been such a book for me.

Michael de Larrabeiti’s stunning trilogy, put simply, comprises three of my very, very favourite books ever. I am deeply honoured to introduce them. May they mean as much to you as they do to me.

The story opens with a Borrible request, a proverb that still moves me as much as it did nearly two decades ago: *If you’re my friend, follow me round the bend.*

Against my own best intentions, I suppose I’m a grown-up now (it happens behind your back). Still, I am and will always be a friend, a loving and loyal friend, to the Borribles. I will follow them anywhere.