



"Hoban is the best sort of genius." Patrick Ness, *The Guardian*

Soonchild

Russell Hoban , Alexis Deacon (Illustrator)

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Somewhere in the Arctic Circle, Sixteen-Face John, a shaman, learns that his first child, a soonchild, cannot hear the World Songs from her mother's womb. The World Songs are what inspire all newborns to come out into the world, and John must find them for her. But how?

Soonchild Details

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From Reader Review Soonchild for online ebook

Emma Vardy says

Strange book. I have heard really good reviews for this book, but was confused by it. A mythology story mixed with modern life, not sure if it was trying to show how modern life can cloud what is around us.

Mike says

get it. read it. it's lovely. and not a little wise.

Melody says

I love Hoban. This, his last, vastly ambitious fable does not disappoint but is not going to be my favorite. The illustrations are extraordinary. Haunting, exquisite, and resonating. The fable resonates as well, on more than one level. I found it utterly engrossing but I think it's a book that will reward rereading.

Hilary says

So many people really like this book and perhaps it didn't help my copy being in black and white (many reviews mention a change of colour as the story progresses which sounds like a nice idea) but I found this story confusing.

Soonchild is an unborn child who is due to be born but is suspected to be reluctant to arrive. The father who is an Inuit shaman, is described as lazy, scared of many things, likes to eat pizza and drink coke. He goes on a journey of discovery to aid the birth of his child. Here the story lost me, I see that perhaps this was inspired by Inuit mythology but given his food preferences I take it that it's modern day so I can only assume this part is a dream or an analogy or as he is a shaman perhaps this part is meant to be drug induced? I struggled to keep interested in the story.

Alexis Deacon's illustrations are wonderful, would have loved to see them in colour.

Harleychalmers says

I'm honestly not sure how I feel about this book. I can't decide whether I like its uniqueness or whether it's just too confusing.

Deacon's illustrations are stunning. The charcoal sketches create a dark, mystical image and the subtle outline of skeletons and trees in the Yiwok are eerily beautiful.

Hoban's story is difficult to follow at times and I did have to stop and back track occasionally to keep up. He has an interesting style of writing with a number of word plays and subtle humour that is difficult to find. I

do have to admit that I did not like the ending. Without giving away too much of the story, I felt it didn't fit the rest book and I would have liked to have seen the tribal, Eskimo elements continued to the very last page.

lucy black says

I liked the blue pages, the white pages were a bit too spacey and the brownish pages were annoyingly nonsensical.

The blue pages are great though. Russell Hoban's characters are very realistic and I like the strong female characters like the protagonist's wife and daughter.

I guess it's kind of about the fear of bringing a child into this shit world aye?

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

From the Publisher:

Somewhere in the Arctic Circle, Sixteen-Face John, a shaman, learns that his first child, a soonchild, cannot hear the World Songs from her mother's womb. The World Songs are what inspire all newborns to come out into the world, and John must find them for her. But how? The answer takes him through many lifetimes and many shape-shifts, as well as encounters with beasts, demons and a mysterious benevolent owl spirit, Ukpika, who is linked to John's past...

My Thoughts:

In *Soonchild*, Russell Hoban has given us contemporary myth-making at its best. Based in part on Inuit mythology and in part on Hoban's incredible imagination, then perfectly complimented with the wonderful illustrations of Alexis Deacon, it is a concoction not to be missed - if you like myth-making that will take you on a journey away from time and space as you know them.

Sixteen-Face John is a shaman in the far north where it's "so cold that your nose hairs get still and your eyeballs get brittle and your face hurts and your hands will freeze if you leave them uncovered for too long."

Sixteen-Face John may have been a shaman, but he is afraid of everything and if he couldn't face his fear with one face, well, he had 15 others to choose from. Sixteen-Face John is married to No Problem, who is pregnant with their Soonchild (so called because it is soon to be born and be a child.) But Soonchild tells her father that she does not hear the World Songs in her mother's womb and so is unwilling to be born. Now, Sixteen-Face John must go on a journey to bring these songs back to her.

On his journey, Sixteen-Face John will become No-Face John, Three Times Dead John, he will shape-shift, and meet an idluitok, a bad-person gull who feeds the Master Song containing the all the World Songs to Yiwok the World Swallower, who wants to destroy the world by swallowing everything in it. But in the end, John, and the reader, sees the importance of our connection to our past, present and future.

Sound confusing? It actually isn't. *Soonchild* does require a little suspension of disbelief on the part of the

reader, but that is true of all storytelling, isn't it? And you feel somehow renewed when you have finish it.

I found Soonchild to be funny, strange, beautiful, weird and satisfying all at the same time - sort of like the different aspects of the World Songs. And Sixteen-Face John, afraid of everything, must face the biggest most fearful thing of all - Yiwok the World Swallower - showing us that courage is really about being afraid but doing what is right regardless.

Interestingly, the pages change color each time the story moves forward. As you read, you might was to pay attention to why that is a part of the story. And do dwell on the excellent charcoal and pencil illustrations that add so much to the whole story.

I loved Soonchild but it probably isn't for everyone. It is supposed to be a YA book, but some critics have questioned that. I think that, like all good myths, it will appeal to YA readers as well as adults. It is most unfortunate the Russell Hoban passed away shortly after he finished this and one other book in 2011. Hoban was an American expat who had lived in London since 1969.

This book is recommended for readers 14+

This book was obtained from the publisher.

James Benham says

In all honesty, I struggled with the book. There are some things I love; the names that give hints about that person's personality; the short, snappy 'chapters'; the blend of the modern and spiritual world. There are lots of things to really love about this. The problem is, I just couldn't get into it. It felt clunky to read and I really had to force myself to keep going. I can understand some people really loving it but it just wasn't for me. Despite that, I had a few laughs, worried over the fate of John, and appreciated some of the excellent wordplay. A tricky one to put a star rating to.

Eva says

I am adding this book to my DNF shelf.

I really tried to like it but I just could not get past the names and the writing style.

The idea intrigued me but it was hard to get into the actual book. Even though it is a short book, every page felt like a hill I had to climb. It took the same level of effort for me to read this as it does my textbooks. That is not a good thing.

I may try again at a later date but for not it is a DNF.

Frith says

This is a swirling, deep story. It's the illustrations, though, which really make this book pretty special - they

work with the text perfectly. The actual pages of the book even change colour to match the flow of the story. Other reviewers have commented that they don't like mentions of the modern world juxtaposing with the traditional Inuit elements, but they're an integral part of the story, and it's a beautiful look at how traditions change and adapt around the times in which people live.

Sally Ito says

Just finished this book, and loved it. Started off dark, as my daughter, put it -- I read the first few paragraphs to her -- but it is after all set in the far North. It's a mythical story of a shaman named John who must embark on a journey to get the world-songs for his soon-be-born daughter, Soonchild, who apparently is unwilling to come out of her mother's womb.

Hoban is an engaging, imaginative writer and this book, published post-humously tackles some of the terrain he explored in *Moment Under the Moment*. Like his other children's book -- *The Mouse and His Child* -- this story operates at several levels at once, and this layered metaphoric quality is what makes it appealing.

An aside ... in my last package of review books for PaperTigers, there were a few books about Inuit culture and Inuit mythology. In Hoban's book, he refers to a BBC documentary called *The Kingdom of the Ice Bear*, and I was wondering if perhaps the British imagination had been caught by this realm of stories which feature giants, and tricksters, and a host of interesting animal spirits. Of course, what Hoban is doing with this material is quite unusually filtered thru his particular voice and sensibility.

Lisa says

A mysterious dream-read of a book, somewhere between allegory and vision. it was made more poignant for me knowing that Russ wrote this when he was near to death, and that I was reading it with a soonchild of my own in my thoughts, but I can see why it's left so many bemused.

Donna Enticknap says

i liked this. felt like a dream the whole way through; dream speed, dream logic. and of course, i enjoyed all the animals and spirits, and a mythology i'm unfamiliar with. there were some incredibly beautiful passages, lyrical and magical.

i would have given an extra star, but for the americanisms and modernisms. the mentions of coca cola and television and some of the ways of talking pulled me out of the dream a little. i understand why it's in there, but it made me sad.

also, i only got to read a copy that was an uncorrected book proof, and reading other reviews i realise i missed out on the coloured pages and whatever was intended by that.

Pam Saunders says

I wanted to rate this book higher, it is a beautiful package, and deals with big themes, preserving our world, it's spirits, it's children, but it was just a bit slow and rambling for me. For many that will be it's joy.

Candy Wood says

Looking at the cover with its pattern of swirling wolves, I wondered why this book was listed as a 14+ in the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize longlist for 2012. Some younger children might like it--on one level it's a traditional hero-quest narrative, where the hero must reluctantly risk his life and even lose his life in a struggle with cosmic forces, and many of those tales are considered suitable for younger children. But the hero, Sixteen-Face John, is an out-of-shape shaman in a very contemporary North. Yes, he carves figures out of bone, and his wife scrapes hides to make boots, but he also drinks Coke, drives a ski-doo, and watches baseball on TV. The illustrations by Alexis Deacon really make the book special. The opening pages are on blue paper, as John learns what he has to do so that Soonchild, who can't hear the songs of the world, can be born. When he dies the first time, swallowed by Yarluk the killer whale, three wordless 2-page spreads on white show what happens. When he recognizes the ghost wolves as part of him, the pages turn sepia, and the final confrontation with the demon who is swallowing the world is on black, followed by grey shading back to blue as he completes the journey. So there is much here for older children and for adults as well.
