



by Peter Härtling

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Children's & Young Adults'

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Everybody's Child *Paul das Hauskind*

review

This is a compelling and superbly told story, managing to combine sharp psychological study with real narrative drive. With its theme of a determined child coming to terms with his parents' separation and divorce, *Everybody's Child* will find a ready audience, particularly among mature pre-teens or younger teenagers.

Twelve-year-old Paul, an only child, lives in a block of flats and, as the summer holidays begin, he is left in the care of an elderly neighbour, Käthe, while his father goes on yet another business trip. Paul's mother lives in New York. Soon the news is broken to Paul that his parents are to divorce, but his father suffers a nervous breakdown, is hospitalised, and Paul becomes the unofficial ward of the entire building. He grudgingly moves from spare bedroom to spare bedroom as a series of events contrive to remove successive neighbourly guardians from the picture; but he retains a key to his own flat, where he bolts whenever things get too much.

The story comes to a close with the end of the summer holidays. The occupants of the building gather to celebrate Paul's birthday. Paul's mother has promised to come to his party and Paul is hopeful that she will also bring the iPod he has requested as a gift. In the end Paul's mother doesn't turn up, even though she is in Frankfurt on a visit, and she further disappoints him by sending the wrong present; but Paul's father, who has been released from psychiatric care, does attend. Paul finally meets his mother in a hotel, accompanied by Adam Schwarzhaupt, the friendly, elderly lawyer who lives in the

building and who is overseeing Paul's parents' divorce proceedings. Paul storms out of the meeting furious at his mother's attitude towards him and returns 'home', to his neighbours and to his sick father.

Although the story's subject matter would suggest a gritty realist style, *Everybody's Child* has a surprisingly light touch. It conveys, with empathy and compassion, the confusing and painful emotions of a pre-teen who suffers quite outrageous neglect on the part of his parents. The catalogue of wrongs inflicted on Paul contains a touch of fantasy in what is not a fantasy novel, but it proves a skilful device to allow Paul to explore the diverse building in which he lives, to experience the kindness of people who are not family, and to develop meaningful friendships with adults.

press quotes

'Peter Härtling's children's books are composed out of anger at the adults' lies – and out of love for the children. His books sketch social reality ... If anything, his children's books are more relevant than ever today, because their author's anger and criticism was always ahead of its time.' – Bücher

about the author

Peter Härtling, born in 1933, lives in Mörfelden- Walldorf/Hesse and is one of the most significant authors of German children's literature. His work has been awarded numerous literature prizes. His most recent book to appear with Beltz & Gelberg was *Reise gegen den Wind* (Trip Against the Wind, 2000). Härtling was awarded the German Youth Literature prize in 2001 and the German Books Prize in 2003.

Previous works include:

Reise gegen den Wind (2000); *Tante Tilli macht Theatre* (1997); *Jette* (1995); *Mit Clara sind wir sechs* (1991); *Ben liebt Anna* (1979); *Oma* (1975); *Das war der Hirbel* (1973)

rights information

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