

David Crystal

LOVE THE BOOK

A FEW YEARS AGO I was in the small town of Uherske Hradiste, in the south-east of the Czech Republic, as part of its British film festival. My role was to introduce a series of British films and to give a couple of talks on language in relation to the task of adaptation from book to film. Love of words, indeed. They were showing Roman Polanski's *Tess*, which brilliantly adapted the Wessex dialect of Thomas Hardy; and Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, which replaced Jane Austen's complex and mannered sentences by a modern-sounding elliptical dialogue.

It was an enthralling event. The town was packed with enthusiasts from all over Europe. Films were being shown in local halls and on a huge screen in the town square—the weather was on the film-goers' side—as well as in the main cinema.

It was the cinema's fortieth anniversary, and an illustrated memorial book had been published to mark the occasion. Along with the festival director and the sponsors, I was invited to be a godfather for the book. A godfather for a book? I thought I'd misheard, so I asked for a repeat of the question. No, I'd heard correctly. A godfather.

It's an intriguing idea, and—as I later discovered—quite an old one. In the dedication to his first major poem, *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare refers to the Earl of Southampton as being the poem's godfather. In 1737, Henry Fielding wrote in the preface to

his play, *The Historical Register of the Year 1736*, that his bookseller thought a patron was 'a kind of God-father to a Book, and a good Author ought as carefully to provide a Patron to his works, as a good Parent should a God-father to his Children'.

I know what's involved in being a godfather, as I've been one several times. Attend baptism. Adopt suitably pseudo-paternal expression. Say prayers with parents on behalf of child. Watch while water poured gently over back of child's head. Go 'awww' when child cries. Give present. Retire to house for celebratory eats. And, if lucky, celebratory champagne. Drink toast to child.

But what does one do for a book? There could hardly be a baptism for an inanimate object. I waited uncertainly at the front of the packed cinema, along with my co-sponsors. A copy of the book was brought in, resting on a tray. On top of the book were four glasses of white wine. Huge applause and cheers.

When everyone had quietened down, the director said a few words about the cinema, the festival and the anniversary. Then he turned to us and invited us to raise our glasses. I was beginning to feel anticipatorily merry. My taste buds were tingling. I waited, ready to follow his lead. He turned towards the book, bowed and then ...

... poured the wine slowly over the book, and invited us to do the same.

One by one, we did just that. I was the last. The others took good care to make sure that the whole of the book was given a good wetting. So I did too. The top part of the spine seemed a little dry. I dealt with it professionally.

I have never deliberately poured wine, or any liquid, over a book before. Inadvertently, maybe. But here it was, now resting happily on a tray with the wine lapping lazily around its pages. It seemed very happy. As was everyone else in the cinema. I believe they auctioned it afterwards. Apparently people will pay a goodly sum for a wet book.

I must say I found the experience curiously moving. Godfather of a book, eh? I wondered about the future well-being of my new god-daughter. (The word for book in Czech is *kniha*, a feminine noun, so I assumed it was female.) 'What are my responsibilities towards this book?' I asked them. Just love it, they said. And tell the world about it.

So now I do.