

John Wain (1925 -)

John Wain is a contemporary British poet, novelist and short-story writer. He writes about ordinary people and their problems as well as about class problems in the British society. As such, Wain "is associated with the spirit of the British literary generation of 'angry young men' of the 1950s. Wain's short-story *A Message from the Pig-Man* deals with the problem of growing up and facing reality as it is.

A Message from the Pig-man

He was never called Ekky now, because he was getting to be a real boy, nearly six, with grey flannel trousers that had a separate belt, and weren't kept up by elastic, and his name was Eric. But this was just one of those changes brought about naturally, by time, not a disturbing alteration; he understood that. His mother hadn't meant that kind of change when she had promised, "Nothing will be changed." It was all going to go as before, except that Dad wouldn't be there, and Donald would be there instead. He knew Donald, of course, and felt all right about his being in the house, though it seemed, when he lay in bed and thought about it, mad and pointless that Donald's coming should mean that Dad had to go. Why should it mean that? The house was quite big. He hadn't any brothers and sisters, and if he *had* had any he wouldn't have minded sharing his bedroom, even with a baby that wanted a lot of looking after, so long as it left the spare room free for Dad to sleep in. If he did that, they wouldn't have a spare room, it was true, but then, the spare room was nearly always empty; the last time anybody had used the spare room was years ago, when he had been much smaller - last winter, in fact. And even then, the visitor, the lady with the funny teeth who laughed as she breathed in, instead of as she breathed out like everyone else, had only stayed one or three nights. *Why* did grown-ups do everything in such a mad, silly way? They often told him not to be silly, but they were silly themselves in a useless way, not laughing or singing or anything, just being silly and sad. It was so hard to read the signs; that was another thing. When they did give you something to go on, it was impossible to know how to take it. Dad had bought him a train, just a few weeks ago, and taught him how to fit the lines

together. That ought to have meant that he would stay; what sensible person would buy a train, and fit it all up ready to run, even as a present for another person - *and then leave!* Donald had been quite good about the train, Eric had to admit that; he had bought a bridge for it and a lot of rolling-stock. At first he had got the wrong kind of rolling-stock, with wheels too close together to fit on to the rails; but instead of playing the usual grown-ups' trick of pulling a face and then not doing anything about it, he had gone back to the shop, straight away that same afternoon, and got the right kind. Perhaps that meant he was going to leave. But that didn't seem likely. Not the way Mum held on to him all the time, even holding him round the middle as if he needed keeping in one piece. *i*

— All the same, he was not Ekky now, he was Eric, and he was sensible and grown-up. Probably it was his own fault that everything seemed strange. He was not living up to his grey flannel trousers - perhaps that was it; being afraid of too many things, not asking questions that would probably turn out to have quite simple answers.

The Pig-man, for instance. He had let the Pig-man worry him far too much. None of the grown-ups acted as if the Pig-man was anything to be afraid of. He probably just *looked funny*, that was all. If, instead of avoiding him so carefully, he went outside one evening and looked at him, took a good long, unafraid look, leaving the back door open behind him so that he could dart in to the safety and warmth of the house ... no! It was better, after all, not to see the Pig-man; not till he was bigger, anyway; nearly six was quite big but it wasn't really *very big*...

And yet it was one of those puzzling things. No one ever told him to be careful not to let the Pig-man get hold of him, or warned him in any way; so the Pig-man *must* be harmless, because when it came to anything that *could* hurt you - like, the traffic on the main road, people were always ramming you into you that you must look both ways, and all that stuff. And yet when it came to the Pig-man, no one ever mentioned him; he seemed beneath the notice of grown-ups. His mother would say, now and then, "Let me see, it's today the Pig-man comes, isn't it?" or, "Oh dear, the Pig-man will be coming round soon, and I haven't put anythin' out." If she talked like this, Eric's spine would tingle and go cold; he would keep very still and wait, because quite often her next words would be, "Eric, just take these peelings", or whatever it was, "out to the bucket, dear, will you?" The bucket was about fifty yards away from the back door; it was shared by the people in the two next-door houses. None of them was afraid of the Pig-man, either. What was their attitude, he wondered? Were they sorry for him, having to eat damp old stuff out of a bucket - tea-leaves and eggshells and that sort of thing? Perhaps he cooked it when he got home, and made it a bit nicer. Certainly, it didn't look too nice when you lifted the lid of the bucket and saw it all lying there. It sometimes smelt, too. Was the Pig-man very poor? Was he sorry for himself, or did he feel all right about being like that? *Like what?* What did the Pig-man look like? He would have little eyes, and a snout with a flat end; but would he have trotters, or hands and feet like a person's?

Lying on his back, Eric worked soberly at the problem. The Pig-man's bucket had a handle; so he must carry it in the ordinary way, in his hand - unless, of course, he walked on all fours and carried it in his mouth. But that wasn't very likely, because if he walked on all fours, what difference would there be between him and an ordinary pig? To be called the Pig-man, rather than the Man-pig, surely implied that he was upright, and dressed. Could he talk? Probably, in a kind of grunting way, or else how would he tell the people what kind of food he wanted them to put in his bucket? *Why hadn't he asked Dad about the Pig-man?* That had been his mistake; Dad would have told him exactly all about it. But he had gone. Eric fell asleep, and in his sleep he saw Dad and the Pig-man going in a train together; he called, but they did not hear him and the train carried them away. "Dad!" he shouted desperately after it. "Don't bring the Pig-man when you come back! Don't bring the Pig-man!" Then his mother was in the room, kissing him and smelling nice; she felt soft, and the softness ducked him into sleep, this time without dreams; but the

next day his questions returned.

Still, there was school in the morning, and going down to the swings in the afternoon, and altogether a lot of different things to crowd out the figure of the Pig-man and the questions connected with it. And he was never further from worrying about it all than that moment, a few evenings later, when it suddenly came to a crisis.

Eric had been allowed, "just for once", to bring his train into the dining-room after tea, because there was a fire there that made it nicer than the room where he usually played. It was warm and bright, and the carpet in front of the fireplace was smooth and firm, exactly right for laying out the rails on. Donald had come home and was sitting -in Dad's chair, but never mind - reading the paper and smoking. Mum was in the kitchen, clattering gently about, and both doors were open so that she and Donald could call out remarks to each other. Only a short passage -lay between. It was just the part of the day Eric liked best, and bed-time was comfortably far off. He fitted the sections of rail together, glancing in anticipation at the engine as it stood proudly waiting to haul the carriages round and round, tremendously fast.

Then his mother called, "Eric! Do be a sweet, good boy and take this stuff out to the Pig-man. My hands are covered with cake mixture. I'll let you scrape out the basin when you come in."

For a moment he kept quite still, hoping he hadn't really heard her say it, that it was just a voice inside his head. But Donald looked over at him and said, "Go along, old man. You don't mind, do you?"

Eric said, "But tonight's when the Pig-man comes."

Surely, surely they weren't asking him to go out, in the *deep twilight*, just at the time when there was the greatest danger of actually *meeting* the Pig-man.

"All the better", said Donald, turning back to his paper.

Why was it better? Did they want him to meet the Pigman?

Slowly, wondering why his feet and legs didn't refuse to move, Eric went through into the kitchen. "There it is", his mother said, pointing to a brown-paper carrier full of potato--peelings and scraps.

He took it up and opened the back door. If he was quick, and darted along to the bucket *at once*, he would be able to lift the lid, throw the stuff in quickly, and be back in the house in about the time it took to count ten.

One - two - three - four - five - six. He stopped. The bucket wasn't there.

It had gone. Eric peered round, but the light, though faint, was not as faint as that. He could see that the bucket had gone. *The Pig-man had already been..*

Seven - eight - nine - ten, his steps were joyous and light. Back in the house, where it was warm and bright and his train was waiting.

"The Pig-man's gone, Mum. The bucket's not there."

She frowned, hands deep in the pudding-basin. "Oh, yes, I do believe I heard him. But it was only a moment ago. Yes, it was just before I called you, darling. It must have been that that made me think of it."

"Yes?" he said politely, putting down the carrier.

"So if you nip along, dear, you can easily catch him up. And I do want that stuff out of the way."

"Catch him up?" he asked, standing still in the doorway.

"Yea, dear, *catch him up*", she answered rather sharply (the Efficient Young Mother knows when to be Firm).

"He can't possibly be more than a very short way down the road."

Before she had finished Eric was outside the door and running. This was a technique he knew. It" was the same as getting into icy cold water. If it was the end, if the Pig-man seized him by the hand and dragged him off to his hut, well, so much the worse. Swinging the paper carrier in his hand, he ran fast through the dusk.

The back view of the Pig-man was much as he had expected it to be. A SLOW, rather lurching gait, hunched shoulders, an old hat crusnea down on his head (to hide his ears?) and the pail in bis hand Plod, plod, as if he were

tired. Perhaps this was just a ruse, though, probably he could pounce quickly enough when his wicked little eyes saw a nice tasty little boy or something ... did the Pig-man eat birds? Or cats?

Eric stopped. He opened his mouth to call to the Pig--man, but, the first time he tried, nothing came out except a small rasping squeak. His heart was banging like fireworks going off. He could hardly hear anything.

"Mr Pig-man!" he called, and this time the words came out clear and rather high.

The jogging old figure stopped, turned, and looked at him. Eric could not see properly from where he stood. But he had to see Everything, even his fear, sank and drowned in the raging tide of his curiosity. He moved forward. With each step he saw more clearly. The Pig-man was just an ordinary old man.

"Hello, sonny. Got some stuff there for the old grunt-ers?"

Eric nodded, mutely, and held out his offering. What old grunters? What did he mean?

The Pig-man put down his bucket. He had ordinary hands, ordinary arms. He took the lid off. Eric held out the paper carrier, and the Pig-man's hand actually touched his own for a second. A flood of gratitude rose up inside him. The Pig-man tipped the scraps into the bucket and handed the carrier back.

"Thanks, sonny", he said.

"Who's it for?" Eric asked, with another rush of articu-lateness. His voice seemed to have a life of its own.

The Pig-man straightened up, puzzled. Then he laughed, in a gurgling sort of way, but not like a pig at all.

"Arh Aarh Harh Harh", the Pig-man went. "Not for me, if that's watcher mean, arh harh."

He put the lid back on the bucket. "It's for the old grunters", he said. "The old porkers. Just what they likes. Only not fruit skins. I leave a note, sometimes, about what not to put in. Never fruit skins. It gives 'em the belly-ache."

He was called the Pig-man because he had some pigs that he looked after.

"Thank you", said Eric. "Good-night." He ran back towards the house, hearing the Pig-man, the ordinary old man, the ordinary usual normal old man, say in his just ordinary old man's voice, "Good-night, sonny."

So that was how you did it. You just went straight ahead, not worrying about this or that. Like getting into cold water. You just did it.

He slowed down as he got to the gate. For instance, if there was a question that you wanted to know the answer to, and you had always just felt you couldn't ask, the thing to do was to ask it. Just straight out, like going up to the Pig-man. Difficult things, troubles, questions, you just treated them like the Pig-man.

So that was it!

The warm light shone through the crack of the door. He opened it and went in. His mother was standing at the table, her hands still working the cake mixture about. She would let him scrape out the basin, and the spoon - he would ask for the spoon, too. But not straight away. There was a more important thing first.

He put the paper carrier down and went up to her. "Mum", he said. "Why can't Dad be with us even if Donald is here? I mean, why can't he live with us as well as Donald?"

His mother turned and went to the sink. She put the tap on and held her hands under it.

"Darling", she called.

"Yes?" came Donald's voice.

"D'you know what he's just said?"

"What?"

"He's just asked ..." She turned the tap off and dried her hands, not looking at Eric. "He wants to know why we can't have Jack to live with us."

There was a silence, then Donald said, quietly, so that his voice only just reached Eric's ears. "That's a hard one."

"You can scrape out the basin", his mother said to Eric. She lifted him up and kissed him. Then she rubbed her cheek along his, leaving a wet smear, "Poor little Ekky", she said in a funny voice.

She put him down and he began to scrape out the pudding-basin, certain at least of one thing, that grown-ups were mad and silly and he hated them all, all, *all*.