

# children's

# The best of thieves

Two Good Thieves (11+)

by Daniel Finn

Macmillan, £9.99 \* £9.49; 387pp

City of Ghosts (13+)

by Bali Rai

Doubleday, £12.99 \* £11.69; 400pp

Amanda Craig

Slum children fascinated us long before the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*; Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (or *Oliver!*, the musical inspired by it) has captivated generations by describing just how quick a child must be to survive on his or her wits. Stealing, lying and running away — all things that are forbidden to a child from an early age — are essential survival skills. Of course, it's this that also makes them such fun to imagine.

Daniel Finn's *Two Good Thieves* is, like recent novels by Anthony Horowitz, Josh Doder and Mal Peet, set in a South American barrio. Lawless, stinking, faithless and made bearable only by personal loyalties, it is so much worse than anything described by Dickens that the adult reader may flinch before buying this for a child, but to avoid what is fast becoming a new genre is to miss out on a terrific new talent.

Demi and Baz are the best thieves in the

barrio. A boy and a girl, they work for the "queen of thieves", the terrifying red-head Fay, herself in fear of Señor Moro. Each child has a particular talent: Demi is such a fast pickpocket, "moving through the sea of slow people like an eel", that he can rob a victim unnoticed; Baz can make herself virtually invisible as his lookout. Together, they make a team, passing stolen goods to each other just as the Artful Dodger taught Oliver Twist. Yet when they steal a valuable ring from the police chief's wife, all hell breaks loose.

The plot is expertly handled, though readers will need a little patience in the first third of the story as Finn builds up the rich setting and characters with a mass of vivid, dramatic detail and dialogue, as the children's uneasy yet trusting relationship with Fay is explored. Their argot is rendered much as real South Americans speak English here, which is both funny and convincing. But once the two thieves have seen another slum child shot dead at a railway station, the tension never eases. One of their friends, Raoul, is taken away to the dreaded Mountain, where kids are worked to death picking over the city's rubbish for recycling; they try to rescue him. Gradually, as we see events through Baz's eyes, we realise how they have been set up. Cocky Demi and thoughtful Baz are in the kind of danger that is sufficiently realistic to be utterly unpredictable and really scary.

Dramatic, fast-paced and full of the kind

## This book gives heart to those millions in the Third World's urban underclass

of passionate compassion that never intrudes, *Two Good Thieves* is a treat. Like *Slumdog Millionaire*, it gives personality and heart to those millions who make up the Third World's urban underclass; my only worry is that, by putting them into such an exotic setting, it makes child poverty seem comfortably remote.

Bali Rai's *City of Ghosts* is also about something that will seem far away. Set during the incipient collapse of the British Empire in India, and the revolution that swelled in Amritsar in 1919, it's a tale of young love and war.

Impoverished Gurdial is besotted with Sohni, the daughter of a rich, evil merchant, and she with him. His best friend Jeevan is being sucked into the kind of politics that leads inexorably to murder; Bissan Singh, a survivor of the First World War, has his own love to yearn for.

Complex, dramatic and full of Rai's insight into Asian cultural conflict, *City of Ghosts* suffers from splitting its narrative viewpoints, but it is still a heart-rending tale from a talented author.



**BARRIO BUDDIES** Personal loyalties are key in Daniel Finn's *Two Good Thieves*