



# The Treasury Wars

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**Brian Alderson** looks at the current crop of gift collections.

Fodder for a gullible public or books that will inspire children to read more? **Brian Alderson** examines the current Book Beautiful.

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In 1995 the **Hutchinson Treasury of Children's Literature** was published. The method of compilation (?lavish?, said the blurb, and ?chosen with care?) was to sling together a lot of texts chosen from the numerous, and once gallantly independent, publishers who now subsist as elements within Random House UK Ltd. The outcome was twenty quidsworth of small gobbets from great books and some amputated versions of picture-book masterpieces such as **Mr Gumpy's Outing** and **Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present**. Not really a treasury then, more a glossy testimony to the cupidity of conglomerate publishing and the gullibility of an innocent public.

Needless to say, the commercial success of this venture has encouraged *les autres*, and the Penguin Group has now cut up Hutchinson with the **Puffin Treasury of Children's Stories** - ?lavish?, says the press release, and ?carefully selected?. In point of fact, this latter claim is harder to substantiate than that for the Hutchinson job, which at least aimed for a fairly orderly sequencing of material, roughly aligned to the age of its expected readers. The **Puffin Treasury** kicks off with the Group's bestseller, **The Tale of Peter Rabbit** (accompanied by four and two halves of Beatrix Potter's illustrations) and then picks an inconsequential course through a multiplicity of gobbets (?Jo meets Apollyon?, ?Wart pulls the sword from the stone?, ?Dorothy rescues the Tin Woodman? ...) interspersed with a few complete tales like ?The Happy Prince?, or discrete chapters from story collections about characters like Professor Branestawm or Mr Majeika.

The rationale behind this hodge-podge rests on a belief that one glimpse of all these treasures is ?guaranteed to send children rushing to read the originals? - many of which are of course available as Puffins. But this guarantee lacks substantive proof, and for another, who is to say that a gobbet will not deter rather than inspire? Kaye Webb, to whose memory the work is dedicated, cordially disliked multiple extracts, and regretted that she had perforce to include them in some of her own anthologies. She placed her faith in complete books working their own magic for themselves.

The most discussible part of this Treasury is its policy for commissioning illustrations. Where Hutchinson tended to stick with original designs from first or early editions (however hacked about) Puffin have been bolder in seeking alternative interpretations. The various blurbs are non-committal about this, but by my reckoning twenty-seven of the Puffin Treasury's thirty-six items have been given new graphics, with predictably variable results. Mike Terry's vulgar chromatics do no good for ?How the Camel Got his Hump? or a ten-page excerpt from **The Wind in the Willows**, but Tony Ross in Joan Aiken's ?Humblepuppy? is a small revelation.

Ineluctably however, the illustrations for the snippets engender frustration, and perhaps **The Wizard of Oz** may serve as

a single example. That rather dim story has always seemed to me to owe its classic status to W W Denslow's graphic pyrotechnics rather than Baum's prose, and the pointlessness of abridgement is well seen in the Hutchinson volume where one drawing and one colour plate cannot hope to convey the inventiveness of Denslow's work. In the Puffin Treasury however a longer extract is given to Chris Riddell whose response suggests that he might be up to 'doing a Denslow' in his own distinctive style.

But of course the evidence lies in only five pictures - just as David Frankland's striking drawings for **The Hundred and One Dalmatians** are limited to four and Robin Bell Corfield's beautiful watercolours for **The Railway Children** to six. Children 'rushing to read the originals' will find no such thing illustrated by these perceptive artists, and the artists themselves have not had the discipline of thinking through a total illustrative sequence. The pictures, like the bits and pieces they illustrate, are part of a snapshot album when they ought to be part of a fully articulated movie.

The integrity that is so lacking in these Treasuries can at least be found in three other story collections, each unified through the work of a single author, a single illustrator, and what I suppose is now called a single design concept: **The Orchard Book of Mythical Birds and Beasts**, retold by Margaret Mayo and illustrated by Jane Ray; **The Barefoot Book of Stories from the Sea**, compiled by James Riordan, with illustrations by Amanda Hall; and **Beauty and the Beast and Other Stories**, retold by Adèle Geras, and illustrated by Louise Brierley.

These works follow the formula for today's Book Beautiful. They are nearly a foot square, are handsomely printed and bound, and demonstrate the application of sumptuous artwork to traditional stories. Jane Ray goes in for marginal decorations and slightly schematic pictures which hint at the cultures from which Mayo's eleven mythical creatures are drawn; Amanda Hall uses a similar technique, curling vaguely ceramic designs above a pictorial sea-swell that rolls along under all the nine stories; and Louise Brierley turns in a set of head- and tailpieces with one or two double-spreads for each of Geras's retellings - pictures of visionary power. Not for her the conventions of sweetie-pie princesses or two-dimensional palaces. Her response to folktale is metaphysical rather than literal: Beauty's beauty internalised; Bluebeard's castle unspecifically ominous through the modelling of colour and shadow.

What lets these three books down though is their texts. Probably the nadir of the **Puffin Treasury** was the cloth-eared renderings of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' and 'The Frog Prince', and while none of these three retellers quite sinks to such leaden prose, they all tend to betray the latent power of their sources. Margaret Mayo needs some study-leave with Ted Hughes and Alan Garner to learn that Myth calls for a tauter language than her friendly, conversational tones. James Riordan, with all his experience, should surely know how inimical Folktale is to the dowdy phrasing that often intrudes on his present retellings ('Then, a deep-throated laugh burst from him and his white teeth flashed ...?'). Such clumsiness runs counter to the directness of the oral tale - not excluding H C Andersen's inventions, that turn up in some of these books - and Geras, *helas*, is as prone to it as everyone else. A writer's register may accommodate itself to a writerly tale like 'Beauty and the Beast', but will not do for the precisely managed oral effects of 'The Tinderbox' or the stark brevity of 'Bluebeard'. What sort of diction, for instance, is: 'His beard was of a blue as deep as oceans and flowed from his chin to his waist like a tumbling waterfall?' (And that's not so hot on colour descriptions either.)

Away from all this gloss and glitter, Humphrey Carpenter's **Puffin Book of Classic Children's Stories** looks an altogether more business-like affair. With over 400 pages of text and notes it might be thought to be demonstrating some kind of canon. But its short-winded parade of what used to be called 'elegant extracts' (31 books are mercilessly gutted to supply most of its contents) is even more wearisome than that in the **Puffin Treasury**. Nor do Diz Wallis's chapter headpieces - shadowy imitations of Ardizzone - offer much compensation for the loss of the Treasury's gaudy artwork.

Uniform with Carpenter's volume, however, **The Quentin Blake Book of Nonsense Stories** goes some way towards redeeming Kestrel-Viking-Penguin's once glorious reputation. The book is a companion to Blake's book of nonsense verse, which has just been reissued in paperback, and it follows the precedent set there of garnishing a few well-known inclusions, like Lear's 'Four Little Children', with nonsenses that are rare, obscure, overlooked, or, indeed, never-before-heard ... Two Christmassy jeux d'esprit by Russell Hoban have been rescued from **The Times Educational Supplement**, Jane Austen is laid under contribution for all twelve chapters of her novel **The Beautifull Cassandra** (occupying just five pages); Blake himself has translated two *absurdites* by Alphonse Allais; and perhaps the funniest

thing in the book is 'Explosions in a Tree' from the letters of Evelyn Waugh. Needless to say, Blake's pen-drawings on nearly every page enhance the cheerful mayhem, and help to show that simplicity and integrity are decidedly more treasurable than vacuous pomp.

**Brian Alderson** is the chief children's books consultant for **The Times** and a lecturer and writer on the history of children's literature.

*Details of books discussed:*

**The Hutchinson Treasury of Children's Literature**, edited by Alison Sage, Hutchinson, 0 09 176144 1, £19.95

**The Puffin Treasury of Children's Stories**, selected by Anna Trenter, various illustrators, Puffin, 0 670 87009 9, £25.00

**The Orchard Book of Mythical' Birds and Beasts**, retold by Margaret Mayo, ill. Jane Ray, Orchard, 1 85213 754 1, £12.99

**The Barefoot Book of Stories from the Sea**, compiled by James Riordan, ill. Amanda Hall, Barefoot, 1 898000 09 3, €12.99

**Beauty and the Beast and Other Stories**, retold by Adele Geras, ill. Louise Brierley, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 13533 8, £14.99

**The Puffin Book of Classic Children's Stories**, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, ill. Diz Wallis, Viking, 0 670 81311 9, £14.99

**The Quentin Blake Book of Nonsense Stories**, selected and illustrated by Quentin Blake, Viking, 0 670 86982 1, £14.99

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