



# The Ghost of Able Mabel | The Cleaning Witch | Hands Off Our Hens! | Big Puss, Little Mouse

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The Young Hippo series ('Young Hippo Magic', 'Young Hippo Animal', etc.) aims to provide some-thing exciting and involving for that notoriously difficult group to satisfy - the seven to nine year olds who have mastered the skill of reading, but haven't yet caught the reading habit. The novels discussed here are relatively short, divided into short chapters, and liberally illustrated with line or line and wash drawings, imaginatively dispersed throughout the pages. They were much appreciated by the class of eight-year-olds I tried then out on who returned to them eagerly in spare moments. They particularly mentioned how funny the books were in their different ways. I was interested to note how the superficially mundane stories had a strong secondary theme exploring a child's relationship to the world and her/his peers, giving a much richer texture than I had anticipated. The stories are well enough written to suggest that the series is worth looking out for, in contrast to much existing material for children at this stage.

In **The Ghost of Able Mabel** young Sam braves the dark misty moor to retrieve his grandfather's gold from the inn haunted by Able Mable. The story is told in a rather tongue-in-cheek melodramatic style, with characters 'as cheerful as cherry pie' and happenings on 'dark and stormy nights'; this intended humour may be lost on the less sophisticated reader. Atmosphere is built up well, making a story that is tense but not too scary, and Sam's bravery, determination and quick-thinking give it more substance than might be expected.

**The Cleaning Witch** is Grizelda Grimthorpe, out of work until she takes a job as a school cleaner. As she magically restores a run-down but happy school to sparkling order, she saves it from closure. A humorous tale, told with affection for the rather incompetent headteacher and the welcoming children. The occasional unusual word is included to stretch the inexperienced, but well held in context to give clarity.

In **Hands Off Our Hens!** Ben has come to a new village from his home in Scotland. Finding himself lonely and isolated, he becomes involved with a flock of feral hens and the Pakistani doctor who cares for them. When moves are made to remove the hens Ben runs a solitary campaign to save them. The story involves Ben in some 'white lies' which result in him being knocked down on the main road while trying to save the hens - an area for discussion if the book is being used by a class. Through the doctor Ben learns that being the odd one out needn't matter, and his accident leads at last to friendship with a boy in his class. In addition, Ben's self-esteem is enhanced by the success of his campaign giving the book a very positive feel.

**Big Puss, Little Mouse** is also concerned with friendship. Little Mouse teases scaredy-cat Big Puss until Little Mouse needs to be rescued and Big Puss puts fear aside to save him, leading to firm friendship. A rather slight tale compared to the others perhaps, but reflecting a common childhood experience, and a constructive 'happy ending'.

Running Order:

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