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There is something about these new collections of Faber children's poetry that excites the worst of my lower middle class prejudices. If a publisher had set out to produce 'poetry for boffins', this would be it.

The books' design is more likely to appeal to the adult collectors of the poets' work than children. The label 'Children's Poetry' hides away on the back cover; the lists of the authors' other books are predominantly adult titles; and the black and white drawings by three different illustrators have that kind of knowing naivety that shrieks sophistication.

Children's librarians will take one look and dismiss these as shelf sitters. Teachers, with classes used to Rosen, Wright, Ahlberg and company, may not look at all. In an age obsessed with marketing, it is refreshing to find a company apparently indifferent to selling the product. But it will not help these poems find an audience. All three poets are better known as writers for adults; and only Szirtes, it seems to me, is nearly at ease writing for children.

Paul Muldoon's The Noctuary of Narcissus Batt is a brilliant word play. Nothing makes it appropriate for children, although it comes in the from of an alphabet book about animals. Its playfulness is disengaged and ironic. There may be children who will like it, and have a dictionary at their elbow to get the best out of it. They will be a small minority.

Many of George Baker's poems were written for his own children. In particular, the sequence of poems about the eponymous 'Dibby Dubby Dhu' (illustrated as the poet disguised as a red Christmas tree?) seem to me to be on a par with those family jokes that are hilarious to one's loved ones but perplexing to everyone else. Yet there are some wonderful poems here, too, with the directness and richness of Blake or Stevenson. It would be a shame if teachers and anthologists and, through them, children, should miss them.
George Szirtes’ The Red-All-Over Riddle Book is the most child friendly of the three collections. Riddles are among the oldest forms of poetry: the idea at the heat of simile and metaphor. They are popular with children and still do the rounds of the playground. Szirtes makes the most of the form. Some of his poems are identification games: 'On the top sits fire,/ In the middle gold/ At the bottom grass' - traffic light. Others are thought-provoking: 'To some a source of pride/ To some a sheet of grief, / A kind of gaudy tie/ Or giant handkerchief.' - flag. Others have the aura of mystery that Anglo Saxon or medieval riddles have. The riddle of an apple tree begins: 'I saw a bride splendid in white garments./ I saw a woman with one hundred children/ The children plump and firm within her arms.' Rarely is Szirtes tempted into pretension or obscurity; and the answers to the riddles are given in the illustrations and at the back of the book. These poems will delight and stimulate junior and lower secondary children. They deserve a better production.

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