



Series Fiction for Young Readers

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Annabel Gibb assesses recent books for 'beginner' and 'confident' readers.

The thorny question of what to offer young 'beginner readers' and their 'newly-confident' colleagues to read is not to mention how to define those young people is one often addressed by publishers, but not always helpfully from the point of view of those charged with choosing the books. **Annabel Gibb** assesses some recent series. <!--break-->

Many times in the past I have groaned inwardly at publishers' euphemistic blurbs in which much is promised but not much delivered. I was pleasantly surprised therefore by the current batch of recently-published books for new readers, most of which avoid extravagant claims and settle instead for a somewhat more realistic description of the intention and scope of the title.

Here, then, is a look at some recently-published series. My thanks are due to Class 3 at York Steiner School, who kindly helped me test a number of these books.

First readers

O'Brien Pandas?

For first readers beginning to make their own way through books?

Published for 'beginner readers', O'Brien Pandas, by various writers and illustrators vary in style and content, common features being heavy type used to emphasise certain words (often without any coherent or discernible reason), and a somewhat incongruous little panda symbol to search for among the line illustrations, a task more difficult than it sounds! Large print, a vocabulary high in phonically-regular words, and short sentences help, but potential readers would need a good basic sight vocabulary and the confidence to have a go at an unfamiliar book. The level of difficulty seems to progress slightly through the numbered volumes of the series.

The series' most successful characters include **Muckeen the Pig**, who narrowly escapes being sold at market, rescues the farmer's gold and lives happily ever after, **Fireman Sinead!** who proves that girls can be firefighters too, and Tom, the hero of **No Shoes for Tom!** and **A Garden for Tom**, who helps on the family farm through the seasons.

Ribbit, Ribbit! and **Granny's Teeth** are slightly irritating (children will probably find them hilarious) but give some insight into the effect our actions can have on others, while **Amy's Wonderful Nest** and **Katie's Caterpillars** provide some gently humorous natural history. Stephen Hall's illustrations in two of the volumes I found unattractive otherwise the line drawings are in the main appropriate, and the faintly Irish feel is pleasant.

Macdonald's Super Dad books

Bridge the gap between picture books and chapter books?

Shoo Rayner's two **Super Dad** books are also for beginner readers. With short sentences and a gently repetitive vocabulary, they focus affectionately on a boy and his Dad, who is always too busy or too tired to play. Until, that is, the day he spends disguised as **Super Hero**. Much fun ensues, and a new, deeper bond is forged between father and son, as evidenced by the sequel **Super Dad: The Super Hero** in which Dad's bravery and daring is put to severe test at the Fun Park. The cheerful pictures and affirming stories provide a good introduction to reading longer texts.

Mammoth's ?Blue Bananas?

?Exciting stories for beginner readers with clear type and bright pictures on every page.?

?A perfect way to share storytelling and build confidence.?

Mammoth's ?Blue Banana? series is described as ?exciting?, an epithet that I might quarrel with and with the assumption that excitement is the only emotion worth invoking. In fact, a range of other emotions are explored here by reputable writers and illustrators.

Thus, in Pippa Goodhart's **Happy Sad**, Toby and his mermaid friend realise that while they are happy together, each would miss his/her family were they to stay away too long ? a feeling with which many children will identify. There is a beautiful interweaving of text and illustration here, though the speech-bubbles which allegedly ?add to the fun? seem intrusive, disrupting the rhythm of the text with breezy conversational asides.

In **Peg**, folksy Eastern European-style illustrations and an almost rhyming text tell the traditional-sounding tale of a hen which fosters assorted eggs and proudly brings up the ill-matched collection of birds which eventually hatch out. A repetitive element and a bit of counting make it, like many of these titles, a good read-aloud for younger children, who might later choose it for early ?real-book? experience.

Monster Eyeballs by Jacqueline Wilson uses a great many speech bubbles to add to the story without overtly adding to the text, which is more repetitive in its vocabulary than most of the other titles in this series. Bel Mooney's well-known character Kitty is introduced in **Promise You Won't Be Cross**, where Kitty has a very bad day, but makes amends with a promise of her own. Other titles include **Clumsy Clumps the Baby Moon** and **Millie's Party**.

Speech bubbles are used inconsistently through the Blue Bananas series ? sometimes appearing as asides, at other times integrated into the sequence of events, so that the reader must know when it is necessary to read them as part of the story and when they can be ignored and treated as part of the picture. This demands a degree of sophistication, organisation and skill in scanning which is unlikely to be available to readers at this level, and several of my testers found them confusing. The series also tactlessly proclaims itself as being for Key Stage 1, which seems unnecessary in view of all the other information given.

Reading by themselves

Longer sentences and less repetition mark this stage ? pictures tend to be line-drawn, and often in a comic or cartoon style, which can become tedious when one is subjected to a whole pile of them!

Collins ?Yellow Storybook?

In **The Littlest Dragon Goes for Goal**, the youngest dragon's ideas are constantly usurped by his nine older brothers ? though, as the smartest of the lot, he is bound to win out in the end. Two short stories in one volume provide an introduction to ?chapter books?.

Bloomsbury's ?The Tigers? series

?For children starting to read by themselves?

Bloomsbury's series, **The Tigers**, about a mixed-gender children's football team and their ghostly coach, provides fast-

moving, amusing stories for this reading stage. Large print, lots of dialogue, and short sentences, often with simple structures, make these ideal for reluctant 7-year-olds, though, again, there is sometimes confusion created by the placing of speech bubbles.

Macdonald yellow-spined ?Storybooks?

Macdonald ?Storybooks? described as ?ideal for encouraging literacy? (really?), offer **Mr Cool Cat** in their yellow-spined series suitable for newly confident readers. Illustrated alternately in colour and black and white, this is a good cumulative story with opportunities for prediction and a nice twist at the end. Jennifer?s awed wonder at Mr Cool Cat?s antics as he attracts ever more mice contrasts nicely with her father?s mounting despair of his *ever* catching any of them.

Andersen ?Tigers?

Andersen ?Tigers? give us **Eric and the Wishing Stone** , which concerns Eric?s gradual overcoming of prejudice as his Maths teacher turns into a candidate for a much-wished-for dad. The story rolls along well, debunking stereotypes, with exuberant line-illustrations varying in size to reflect their content.

Walker ?Story Books?

?Perfect for reading aloud to a child and for young readers to enjoy alone.?

Not all children, of course, want to revisit old friends when they have mastered reading, as Walker claims for these books. In some cases the subject-matter, fine as a ?read-aloud? to a 4 or 5-year-old, is just not going to grab the attention of a newly-fluent reader of 7 or 8. That said, these are in the main fine books, by well-known authors and illustrators, beautifully produced and an asset on any bookshelf. They make no obvious concessions to young readers: their suitability lies in the skilled clarity of the writing and the sensitivity with which they are illustrated.

In **Bert?s Wonderful News** , Sam McBratney tells of a 5-year-old?s concerns with friends, teeth, and, most of all, ?News?. The best News is Dad?s announcement of his impending marriage to Liz towards which we have been led gently in previous episodes. A lovely warm story to read aloud to youngsters: whether they would later want to read it for themselves is another matter. Most children would be 7 or 8 before having the stamina and vocabulary for this series, by which time they might well not want to read about someone so much younger.

William Mayne?s **In Natalie?s Garden** is, similarly, about an almost 4-year-old. Mayne, in his skilled and perceptive way, allows us right into her head, and that of her exceptionally patient and understanding Mum. The stream of consciousness of the 4-year-old with all her misunderstandings and zany logic makes this a fascinating but difficult read ? for an adult at least! Mayne is often said to write more for an adult understanding than for children. I think this volume, while endearing and very true to an adult perception of a child?s thought may not be immediately open to younger readers.

Three more in this series are more certainly for older children ? 6-8s perhaps ? and therefore readable by the fluent among those. Henrietta Branford?s **Dipper?s Island** is a collection of four stories through the seasons, featuring a group of river folk, miniatures in a full-sized world. Gentle, perhaps whimsical, their mood flows like the river, and drifts with the seasons ? captivating some of my young testers. In Jenny Nimmo?s **Toby in the Dark** , a family left in the care of bullying Mrs Malevant while mum and dad are away are helped by an old toy to restore the house to happiness. In **The Boy who Walked on Water** Vivian French tells three stories with echoes of the folk-tale ? I especially liked the title story, which has all the superstition and magic of an old tale.

Mammoth ?Storybooks?

?Stories for building confidence?

?The best in words and pictures?

Well ? the usual pinch of salt is to be taken here about Mammoth's claims for their 'Storybooks?', but they make a good stab at it in these jolly four-chapter books. Pets form a common theme here ? the best of the three is Helen Dunmore's **Allie's Rabbit** , where Allie's feelings and relationships are explored in an unflustered way. Dunmore's acute observation of children, and her subtlety in dropping her observations into the story is impressive, and much less jarring than Cally Poplak's **No More Pets** , where Beth is left exhausted (along with the reader) by her controlling, on-top-of-it-all mum. **Thief in the Garden** completes the trio with a sympathetic look at life with a distressed and disoriented grandpa, helped to care again after gran's death by adopting a stray cat helped by his grandsons.

Macdonald's red-spined 'Storybooks'

'Perfect for confident readers.'

Macdonald's red-spined Storybooks step in here, still 'encouraging literacy?'. Thank goodness for that.

There does not seem much progression in these titles from Macdonald's yellow spined Storybooks, at least in content. Humour is still very much to the fore in Jeremy Strong's **Max and the Haunted Castle** . Max's mad inventor dad helps him give the Grabbly lads their comeuppance, all told with ugly, crude cartoon-style pictures. **The Vile Smile** has echoes of a fairy-tale ('grumpy princess gets her prince' type) but because the humour is uppermost, the language is contemporary and rather flippant, and this is echoed in the pictures.

Walker

Historical settings to enhance KSII study of various periods provides another medium for publishers. **Gladiators never Blink** , a skit on Roman life in which two dim British slaves are helped to escape by a bright girl colleague, needs to be read with tongue firmly in cheek. Hilarity abounds ? or so the cover claims. Heavy-handed, I found it, though it raised a giggle or two with my 12-year-old tester, and was improved by being read aloud.

Macdonald 'Historical Storybooks'

A more straightforward approach is taken by Macdonald in their 'Historical Storybooks' which mix fact into a fictional context, supplemented by a chronology of events at the front and a glossary and further information section at the back. Fully illustrated in colour and black and white, they give a taste of life at the time in an enjoyable and easily-read form.

Mammoth 'Reads'

'Short novels for fluent readers'

'The best in words and pictures'

That extravagant claim to be the best again ? but this time Mammoth deliver. For some reason fluent readers deserve proper pencil drawings at last, rather than the cartoon-style still prevalent in the earlier stages. Here they enhance the atmosphere of the novel beautifully.

Tiny the Terrier answers the need for a short, easy-to-read novel of high quality, in which our emotions are engaged, suitable for those who have recently become fluent, and many more besides. For over-9s, the story concerns Tom, whose mum has gone away to recover from a still-birth: a mysterious ghost dog comes to help Tom cope, and ultimately helps him save his mother in the re-run of the crash in which the dog had died. The labelling on this one is unobtrusive and inoffensive and hopefully would not deter well-launched readers from a fine, if at times clumsily-told story, while leading them confidently on to browsing the library and bookshop shelves for more experiences in literature ? unlabelled this time!

Annabel Gibb is a Learning Support tutor.

BOOKS DISCUSSED:

O'Brien ?Pandas?, £3.99 each pbk:

Muckeen the Pig

Fergus Lyons, 0 86278 528 6

Fireman Sinead!

Anna Donovan, ill. Susan Cooper, 0 86278 529 4

No Shoes for Tom!

Una Leavy, ill. Margaret Suggs, 0 86278 526 X

A Garden for Tom

Una Leavy, ill. Margaret Suggs, 0 86278 568 5

Ribbit, Ribbit!

Anne Marie Herron, ill. Stephen Hall, 0 86278 527 8

Granny's Teeth

Brianóg Brady Dawson, ill. Michael Connor, 0 86278 570 7

Amy's Wonderful Nest

Gordon Snell, ill. Fergus Lyons, 0 86278 530 8

Katie's Caterpillars

Stephanie Dagg, ill. Stephen Hall, 0 86278 572 3

Macdonald's ?Super Dad? books, Shoo Rayner, £3.50 each pbk:

Super Dad , 0 7500 2694 4

Super Dad: The Super Hero , 0 7500 2706 1

Mammoth ?Blue Bananas?, £3.99 each pbk:

Happy Sad , Pippa Goodhart, ill. Stephen Lambert, 0 7497 3336 5

Peg , Maddie Stewart, ill. Bee Willey, 0 7497 3260 1

Monster Eyeballs , Jacqueline Wilson, ill. Stephen Lewis, 0 7497 2814 0

Promise You Won't Be Cross , Bel Mooney, ill. Margaret Chamberlain, 0 7497 3747 6

Clumsy Clumps the Baby Moon , Julie Bertagna, ill. Anthony Lewis, 0 7497 3005 6

Millie's Party , Paul Stewart, ill. Bernard Lodge, 48pp, 0 7497 3248 2, £3.99 pbk

Collins ?Yellow Storybook?, £3.50 pbk:

The Littlest Dragon Goes for Goal , Margaret Ryan, ill. Jamie Smith, 0 00 675413 9

Bloomsbury ?The Tigers? series, Janet Burchett and Sara Vogler, ill. Guy Parker-Rees, £3.99 each pbk

1: Ghost Goalie , 0 7475 3846 8

2: Save the Pitch , 0 7475 3847 6

3:The Terrible Trainer , 0 7475 3850 6

4: The Cup Final , 0 7475 3851 4

5: Tigers on Television , 0 7475 4275 9

6: Ghost Striker , 0 7475 4280 5

Macdonald ?Storybooks? (yellow spines), £4.50 pbk:

Mr Cool Cat , Rebecca Lisle, ill. Eleanor Taylor, 0 7500 2676 6

Andersen ?Tigers?, £6.99 hbk

Eric and the Wishing Stone , Barbara Mitchel-Hill, 0 86264 848 3

Walker ?Story Books?, £3.50 each pbk

Bert?s Wonderful News , Sam McBratney, ill. Brita Granström, 0 7445 6396 8

In Natalie?s Garden , William Mayne, ill. Penny Dale, 0 7445 6393 3

Dipper?s Island , Henrietta Branford, ill. Patrick Benson, 0 7445 6901 X

Toby in the Dark , Jenny Nimmo, ill. Helen Craig, 0 7445 6976 1

The Boy who Walked on Water , Vivian French, ill. Chris Fisher, 0 7445 6397 6

Mammoth ?Storybooks?, £3.99 each pbk

Allie?s Rabbit , Helen Dunmore, ill. Simone Lia, 0 7497 3530 9

No More Pets! , Cally Poplak, ill. Alison Bartlett, 0 7497 3671 2

Thief in the Garden , Elizabeth Arnold, ill. Ailie Busby, 0 7497 3598 8

Macdonald ?Storybooks? (red spines), £4.50 each pbk:

Max and the Haunted Castle , Jeremy Strong, ill. David Mostyn, 0 7500 2680 4

The Vile Smile , Jamie Rix, ill. Ross Collins, 0 7500 2696 0

Walker

Gladiators never Blink ,

Macdonald ?Historical Storybooks?, £4.50 each pbk:

Harry?s Battle of Britain , Andrew Donkin, ill. Linda Clark, 0 7500 2674 X

The Hunt for William Shakespeare , Roy Apps, ill. Gini Wade, 0 7500 2635 9

Mammoth ?Reads?, £3.99 pbk:

Tiny the Terrier , Linda Kempton, ill. Chris Chapman, 0 7497 3503 1

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