On the Tightrope in Burningham-land

Brian Alderson on the career of John Burningham.

1963 saw the publication of Borka: the adventures of a goose with no feathers, the book which began John Burningham’s career as one of our most distinguished and innovative illustrators. Borka is now 40 and BfK is delighted to mark the anniversary with this appreciation of Burningham’s work by Brian Alderson.

Now Tracey, come away from that book. Darren don’t touch it. It’s dirty. You’ll get germs. It’ll damage all your latent aesthetic sensibilities.

Understandable words, madam, spoken as they could have been in 1975 when The Dog appeared among John Burningham’s Little Books and incontinently ‘peed on the flowers. The nation was appalled, but I am sure that the artist was innocent of all desire to shock. You see, these Little Books, with their plain, foregrounded colour-pencil drawings and their elementary language, offered children snatches of what might have been their own lives—losing a comfort blanket, putting up with a new baby? They took a child’s-eye view of things: ‘sometimes I don’t like Arthur/so Arthur goes home.’ and more children than mine, I’m sure, took a passing interest in dogs peeing on flowers (especially Papa’s best geraniums). And, madam, do look at that dog. With a few lines and some gingery shading the artist has caught the essence of the act. It is the eternal dog, micturating thus since he first evolved and Leonardo could not have done it better (contrast the crudity of the more specific excretory goings-on in Sendak’s Some Swell Pup).

Outside the day-to-day world

Elegant in their unpretentious presentation these Little Books are as good as anything that Burningham has created, but they are by no means typical and that’s not just because their small, square, child-size format differs from the big albums in various dimensions in which most of his stories appear. Three other concept book series: Number Play, First Words, and Play and Learn (which was initially done for Sainsbury’s) were also originally published in small formats, but they adhered much more closely to the customs of Burningham-land which lies a single step outside the day-to-day world so that the ordinary co-exists with the extraordinary without anyone needing to make a fuss about it. Thus the modest narrative of the Little Books is replaced by individually-conceived page-openings, separate from their fellows, where it’s perfectly feasible for the child protagonist to be sitting on a see-saw one minute and dancing with a thin pig and a fat pig the next (in Opposites) or to crawl around a farmyard before taking afternoon-tea in an armchair with a couple of monkeys (in cluck baa from First Words). The little volumes in this series were later expanded into small quartos, retitled, with the pictures re-organised and accompanied by some rudimentary rhyming couplets.

Fanciful into real

This undemonstrative incorporation of the fanciful into the real is with us from the beginning. Borka, the featherless goose, is knitted a grey woollen jersey as substitute by her mother, and later, unable to migrate with her companions, she...
finds herself working her passage? coiling ropes and suchlike? on a small steamboat. The low-key presentation of these preposterous events helps to suggest a complete normality, a narrative method that continues through Burningham's four following storybooks: **Trubloff** about a mouse learning to play a balalaika (!); **Humbert**, a scrapdealer's nag who saves the Lord Mayor's procession; **Cannonball Simp**, a castaway dog who saves the career of a circus clown; and **Harquin**, a foxcub who outwits the local hunt. (A PhD thesis is waiting to be written about the names of the residents in Burningham-land, from these creatures to chaps like Harvey Slumfenburger.)

It must be said that, as texts, these stories are a trifle laboured and harbour the danger of the formula becoming tedious if replicated much further. Hence one portion of the delight with which **Mr Gumpy's Outing** was greeted a couple of years after **Harquin**. (In between Burningham had engaged in one of his few ventures as collaborator on somebody else's story, having been commissioned by an American publisher to illustrate Letta Schatz's retelling of a Nigerian trickster tale, **The Extraordinary Tug-of-War**. Nothing but good came of this. The change to a landscape format permitting wide double-spread pictures, and the opportunity given to pace his way, luxuriously, through the forty-eight pages of a tale which offered wonderful opportunities for high comedy, must have been a refreshing experience. **The Extraordinary Tug-of-War** turned out to be not only a virtuoso performance but also, a venture that revealed to him the wider potentialities of picture-book art.)

**Elastic-sided storytelling**

Up to this point all the picture storybooks in which Burningham was involved followed a conventional pattern. A dilemma is posed which gives rise to dramatic events, however modest. One thing follows another along a determined course until a satisfying resolution is reached. **Mr Gumpy's Outing** introduced an alternative pattern: what might be called the elastic-sided story. For although the initial impulse and the final resolution are still there what lies between is scarcely determined at all; the author has given himself multi-choice options. Clearly Mr G needs more than a couple of children to get into his boat but it matters not a whit how many creatures join him (look at the raftful that John Yeoman offers Quentin Blake in **Sixes and Sevens**) or what those creatures might be. The only constraints are narrative effect? don't go on too long or the whole thing gets boring? and, at a fundamentally practical level, the number of pages available through which the cumulation may build.

Burningham's triumph in judging the pace and the rhythm of his text in **Mr Gumpy** caused him to realize the value to him of elastic-sided storytelling and much of his subsequent work derives its character from the way that he frolics among a wealth of random possibilities, the essential requirement being that he finds a closure congruent with his multiple choices. Thus, it makes no odds what farcical calamities overtake John Patrick Norman McHennessy along the road to learn so long as Sir gets his come-uppance at the end. Steven may be asked to bring home any variety of groceries in his shopping basket and may be delayed by any number of preposterous encounters so long as the reader is gleeful at his mother's concluding reprimand. Some quickfire examples of **Avocado Baby**'s strength are displayed before the climax when he chunks the bullies in the pond. **Where's Julius?**, to my mind, comes close to failure because it rambles on too wordily towards a tame and predictable final page, while **Would You Rather?** almost does go on forever. The delight which children take in having to choose amongst page-loads of ludicrous alternatives leads to endless creative extensions when you ask them to think up and illustrate their own sets of ghastly choices (?would you rather walk to school with mummy, or go in a stretch-limo with a tv, a cocktail cabinet, and a small-size skateboard-rink??).

**The importance of ?text?**

The attention paid here to the content and structure of Burningham's picture books is prompted partly by reservations that I have about our very own drum-majorette's last editorial in BfK where she drew a distinction between ?words people? and ?visual people?. This seems to me to be a double over-generalisation, which is almost instantly contradicted anyway by her own excellent summation of Charlotte Voake's **Ginger Finds a Home**. Picture books are inadequately reviewed in part because almost all children's books are inadequately reviewed (how do you get the space to discuss the processes that Rosemary would like to see criticised?) and ? more important here? ?words? are only part of what is
being illustrated. What matters is ?text?, by which I mean not just words but the nature of the story they tell (I have often argued that true oral tales should never be illustrated), the way words are paced alongside illustrations through the limited length of a standard picture book, and the degree to which the reader may find that they are matched by the artist's visualisation ? which will of course demand our ability to distinguish the different ways in which line and colour may be handled. What better example could be found than Granpa? The ?text? is what Burningham has to say about youth and age. The progress of the story, such as it is, follows the elastic-sided pattern with the choice and order of incidents and their connected illustrations being governed only by the denouement of the final three pages. A most delicate balance is achieved between what is said and not said as the pages are turned and it is this which gives the book its emotional depth. (Proof is hardly needed of the intensity invested in the original work, but doubters ought to look at the first German translation where the terse exchanges between child and grandfather are expanded into fatuous dialogue which goes so far as to intrude upon the silence of the last double-page spread. Both here, and in a crass British book of the film? which turns the brief story into a whirligig bande dessinée, one quails at the capacity of publishers to foul their own nests.)

?Each book is a new tightrope-walk?

Burningham-land is testing territory for anyone seeking to assess the relationship of illustrations and text in picture storybooks. In the few words that he was allowed to explain himself in the British Council's Magic Pencil catalogue he confesses (twice) ?I don?t have rules? and that each book is a new tightrope-walk, words which suggest a reliance on instinct. (You?d hardly expect someone like Anthony Browne to say such a thing.)

The tightrope exists from the very beginning and some of the excitement over Borka may have come from watching the author sway his way across it. Pedants may mutter ?Rouault? or ?François?, looking at some of the pictures, but the book a hodge-podge of instinctive Burningham reactions to his text, with every page-opening showing a different use of space and often a different stylistic weight. What seems to me of consequence for the future is the swerve out of a fairly heterogeneous representationalism (including two line-drawings) into a slashing, splodgy expressionist mode at pages 17-21, the point where Borka is deserted by her comrades.

Burningham has no hesitation about altering his graphic methods in that way if he feels like it ? a point which I mentioned in my article on Mr Gumpy in BfK 140. The apparent randomness with which events are sometimes selected for his elastic-sided stories can be matched by an apparent randomness in the graphics, in what initially look like hastily sketched scenes and portraits or in the mixing of such sketches with forceful and often dramatic colour-work. His command of colour, whether using colour pencils or a variety of other media, is complete and can be seen in full fig in the pictorial exercises of his early ABC, which is almost an anthology of twenty-six different ways to get paint on to paper, and in its near-contemporary Seasons, the first edition of which had four leaves which opened up into triple-size posters. (That period also saw sets of pictorial friezes on themes like Jungle-land or Bird-land.) The media can be inextricably mixed: ?I use a bit of everything,? he says in Magic Pencil, ?always have ? ink, crayon, gouache, acrylic, photographs, cut paper, anything? and what seems finally to count is what the paint can do for the drama and the weather of his storybooks. One can be sorry that he resorted to photographs in Cloudland; his own skies have more to offer, and the line-drawings would have been better integrated.

As occurred in Borka, so we find later on that a rough and ready distinction tends to be made in the artwork between the scenes of the everyday, which may be fairly subdued affairs in pen and ink or coloured pencil, and the fantasy that runs alongside. The ?Shirley? books are the most clear-cut examples. See the rudimentary picture of the sea-side visitors: mother peaceably knitting in her beach-chair next to father, prone under an open newspaper. ?We ought to be getting back soon? say the words, but there is Shirley and her dog on the facing page, in a glory of mauve, pink and yellow, unearthing the treasure of a pirate-isle.

But look again at those parents, oblivious to their child?s rampant imagination on a chilly English beach (?Of course it?s far too cold for swimming, Shirley?). They are easy prey for the satirist or the social critic (what would Steadman have done to them?) but here they are in Burningham-land where the criteria are different. The reader does not despise so much as feel sorry for them ? ?men who lose their fairylands? said Belloc. They are innocent participants in what is now
a forty-year-old comedy, ornate with scenes of baroque eccentricity, but whose laughter is never derisory and whose purposes are ruled by an uncomplicated compassion. The tightrope-walk may make us laugh, or hold our breath, but the outcome is more resonant. As Tom Maschler notes in his preface to the anniversary edition of Borka: ?the aspect of his talent that I admire above all is his capacity to move readers?. Go look at Courtney to see with what delicacy a touching story may be fashioned from total absurdity.

The traditions of the moral tale

In the last dozen years or so Burningham?s capacity to move readers? has enlarged itself in radical ways. The simple, elastic structure which Burningham has made his own has continued to show its adaptability in japes like Harvey Slumfenburger?s Christmas Present, a picture-book shaggy-dog story, and the recent Magic Bed. The plot thickened though when Oil! Get off our Train was published and the Burningham tightrope was seen to be carrying him across the perilous tracts of Social Concern. That district has been a natural habitat for sanctimonious writers of children?s books ever since the eighteenth century and Oil!?s purpose in defending threatened wildlife against the depredations of Man place it firmly within the traditions of the moral tale. But where most social missionaries, even today, end up by dishing out sermons or sog, Burningham works obliquely within a fantasy dreamscape, embedding his message in a picture-book text of great complexity, reflected by the increase of its length from thirty-two to forty-eight pages. The repetitious structure, both of words and illustrations, is extended; relationships between the real and the imagined (that amazing train, those personalized animals) are constantly shifting; and the whole is underpinned by a joie de vivre which strengthens its purpose (the wonderful final pay-off). It is a model for its genre ? but an inimitable one.

Well ? inimitable by all but its author, who followed it up with a sort of sequel, which also used the device of counterpointing an aggressive title with a pacific theme: Whadayamean. Here, the onlooker thinks, the tightrope will throw the executant deep into the mire, for he has decided that no less a person than God must be First Cause of his story ? a non-conformist God sorrowing over Jerusalem, or, perhaps more exactly, a God of the Tao. The case for conservation which featured in Oil! is now opened up to include pacifism, financial reform, and religious ecumenicism, which make up a nice cargo for another forty-eight page picture book and ? in deference to the God of balance ? forbid any assessment here beyond wonderment that the tightrope-walker most certainly did not fall off.

The expansion of the scale and ambition of Burningham?s work in these two books is in part characterised by a tension between comedy and high seriousness, innocence and irony, and subtle perceptions masked by an apparent simplicity. But as though to prove that simplicity works very well on its own, Whadayamean was followed by that most perfect of bedtime books, Husherbye. Formulae, however successful, are suddenly cast aside. Instead of the concertina of central variations we get what are, in effect, two six-finger exercises as child, animals, the man in the moon are brought to the end of their day and are then serially tucked up for the night. A new register is found for the words, lulling, half-rhymed verses, and there is a beautifully-judged progression of the drawings and paintings as they pace the two sequences of the text. Apprehensive persons, remembering times past, may be assured that not a dog is in sight.


The following list supplies a chronology of all the titles mentioned in the article. Except where noted, all were first published by Jonathan Cape and most are still available from Random House in either Cape hardback or Red Fox paperback. Titles not available are marked o/p.

1963 Borka: the adventures of a goose with no feathers, available as a standard edition, 0 224 60077 X, £9.99 hbk, or a presentation anniversary edition with a preface by Tom Maschler and a note by the author, 0 224 06494 0, £10.99 hbk, and 0 09 940067 7, £5.99 pbk

1964 John Burningham?s ABC, o/p
Trubloff: the mouse who wanted to play the balalaika, 0 09 941428 7, £5.99 pbk
1965 Humbert, Mr Firkin and the Lord Mayor of London, 0 09 941322 1, £4.99 pbk
1966 Cannonball Simp (now published as Simp), 0 09 940077 4, £5.99 pbk
Bird-land (frieze), o/p
1967 Harquin: the fox who went down to the valley, 0 09 982510 4, £4.99 pbk
1968 Jungle-land (frieze), o/p
The Extraordinary Tug-of-War, retold by Letta Schatz, Bodley Head, o/p
1969 Seasons, o/p
1970 Mr Gumpy?s Outing, 0 09 940879 1, £5.99 pbk
1973 Mr Gumpy?s Motor Car, 0 09 941795 2, £5.99 pbk
1974-5 ?The Little Books?, eight titles, o/p
1977 Come away from the water, Shirley, 0 09 989940 X, £5.99 pbk
1978 Time to get out of the bath, Shirley, 0 224 01372 6, £9.99 hbk, 0 09 920051 1, £5.99 pbk
1978 Would You Rather?, 0 224 01635 0, £9.99 hbk, 0 09 920041 4, £5.99 pbk
1980 The Shopping Basket, 0 09 989930 2, £5.99 pbk
1982 Avocado Baby, 0 09 920061 9, £5.99 pbk
1983 ?Number Play?, Walker Books, o/p
1984 Granpa, 0 09 943408 3, £5.99 pbk
1984-5 ?First Words?, six titles including cluck baa, Walker Books, o/p
1985 ?Play and Learn?, Walker Books, now available as a board-book series, £3.99 each (Opposites, 0 7445 9679 3; Letters, 0 7445 9680 7; Colours, 0 7445 9677 7; Numbers, 0 7445 9678 5)
1986 Where? s Julius?, 0 224 02411 6, £9.99 hbk, 0 09 941429 5, £5.99 pbk
1987 John Patrick Norman McHennessy: the boy who was always late, 0 09 975200 X, £5.99 pbk
1989 Oi! Get off our Train, 0 09 985340 X, £5.99 pbk
1993 Harvey Slumfenburger?s Christmas Present, Walker Books, 0 7445 7805 1, £4.99 pbk
1994 Courtney, 0 224 03868 0, £9.99 hbk, 0 09 966681 2, £4.99 pbk
1996 Cloudland, 0 09 971161 3, £6.99 pbk
1999 Whadayamean, 0 224 04753 1, £9.99 hbk, 0 09 926668 7, £4.99 pbk
2000 Husherbye, 0 09 940864 3, £5.99 pbk
No attempt was made in the article to deal with the large quarto ?travelogues? Around the World in Eighty Days (1972), England (1992), and France (1998), or with the delicious sketches accompanying his celebration of senior citizenry: The Time of Your Life: getting on with getting on (Bloomsbury 2002). Nor have I considered two examples of JB?s illustrations of other people?s texts: Ian Fleming?s Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang (1964) and Kenneth Grahame?s The Wind in the Willows (1983).

A Travelling Light Theatre Company production of Cloudland, with live music, dance and puppetry, is on tour around the UK until the end of February 2004. For further information, contact Travelling Light on 0117 377 3166 or at www.travlight.co.uk [3]

Links: