



King Matt the First

Books Reviewed:

[King Matt the First](#) [1]

Issue:

[154](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Pam Harwood](#) [3]

~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3

First published in Poland in 1923, this unusual fable has now been deservedly translated and reissued. It can be thought of as George Orwell for young children. The author was a Polish paediatrician, an early advocate of children's rights, who pioneered progressive orphanages in Poland. In 1942 he carried his beliefs heroically to the final test, by accompanying the children of his orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto to the death camp at Treblinka, spurning opportunities to save himself. Something of this heroic spirit is present in the hero of his story, ten-year-old King Matt the First, later known as Matt the Reformer, who inherits kingly power as a child and defies the experience and wiles of his Ministers, neighbouring Kings and other adults to introduce reforms for the betterment of his people generally and children in particular. The story has its comic side. Some of Matt's reforms, involving the free distribution of childhood goodies, have predictably chaotic results. But essentially this is a serious story, balancing an idealised depiction of empowered childhood against Matt's painful education in the ways of the world and the implacable realities of realpolitik. As Matt learns to decode the world - too late to save his country, despite his childish bravery - he learns the hard way why some of the hidebound prejudices and irrationalities of adult life are necessary for survival. Some of Poland's historical insecurities, caught between Germany and Russia, are evident in Matt's predicament. The book is eventful and entertaining (not least the exploits of Matt's friend, the resourceful black girl Klu Klu) but Matt's kingly childhood of resolute, anxious endeavour is at heart lonely and sad, and his plight is only a magnified reflection of the fate of grown-ups and nations. Described as a 'forgotten masterpiece', the book is very much of its time, and children encouraged to read it now as an amusing tale of children overruling adults will be jolted by its ending. There is fun here, but not much comfort.

Running Order:

37

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/king-matt-the-first>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/154>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/pam-harwood>