Return Ticket to Newcastle

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A complete chronological list of Janet and Allan Ahlberg’s books is given at the end of this article. It includes details of their dimensions and their quantity of pages in order to indicate the variety of formats etc that came into being, and while it does not include reprints or paperbacks in general, it does note editions and supplementary material which are at variance, or play games, with the original production.

Return Ticket to Newcastle: the collaborative work of Janet and Allan Ahlberg

Books for Keeps is delighted to be publishing this major assessment and comprehensive bibliography by Brian Alderson of the work of Janet and Allan Ahlberg. Its publication complements the exhibition at Seven Stories, the Centre for Children’s Books in Newcastle, “What’s in the Book? – the seventeen million books of Janet and Allan Ahlberg”, a celebration of the work of this highly successful and significant children’s illustrator/author team.

If you collect up the complete book-work of Janet and Allan Ahlberg in first editions (no easy task) and if you line it all up on a shelf in chronological order, a significant feature will become apparent. With the exception of titles in series, such as their very first books about the Brick Street Boys or their joint contributions to Allan’s more widely proliferating celebration of “Happy Families?”, you will find that hardly a single volume matches its fellows in shape, size, or graphic presentation. For many makers of picture books these days there is an understandable pressure towards uniformity?it makes economic sense to publishers and may offer a comfort zone of familiarity to artists and designers. But for the Ahlbergs every new book seems to have been allowed to dictate its own terms of existence.

Early volumes

Nor is that all. For the varying physical form of that shelf-load of books is emblematic too of a constantly shifting interplay of ideas between author and illustrator which prevents anyone who seeks to summarize their coupled genius from making quick and easy explanations. A thumbnail sketch of their earliest publications is enough to prove the point, for although it includes several picture storybooks, these share very little common ground?:

The Brick Street stories, beginning in 1975 with Here Are the Brick Street Boys, are firmly based in an urban primary school (not far from Lowrie-land?) and are ostensibly about everyday goings-on from which footballing matters are seldom absent. Both in Allan’s text however, with its accompanying speech-bubbles, and in Janet’s flat, cartoon-like illustrations there is a degree of exaggeration which converts mundane events into warm-hearted comedy. And that comedy turns to farce in their succeeding picture story, Burglar Bill of 1977. Bill’s ludicrous house-breaking activities land him with a baby whose mother is only discovered when she, as Burglar Betty, raids him and the two of them end up as reformed characters, getting wed and returning all their loot to its rightful owners. (Observe, for instance, the jerry-pot inscribed “H.M.S. Eagle” being poked back through a port-hole while a bewhiskered ship’s captain snores in his bunk.) Allan later noted that the original dummy book was bulkier in those days (48 pages) and less inclined to
remorse. In our original version [Burglar Bill] just retired happily ever after to a farm. It took some determined editing
to get him to give everything back.?

Early though the book?s place in the chronology may be, Janet is already found to be a master of her craft, her variably
framed or vignetted colour-pencil illustrations being close-packed with luscious detail (all the domestic clutter ? nobbled
or not ? that would be a feature in many a later book) and rejoicing in the portrayal of the characters given by the text
while (typically) drawing her own scenario for an omnipresent cat only briefly mentioned by Allan. Such command of
both technique and illustrative content is duplicated in another book of 1977 where pencil and watercolour take over,
alternating through the pages of Jeremiah in the Dark Woods. This marks the emergence of Allan?s interest in toying
with characters and incidents out of Nursery Tradition ? stolen tarts, three bears (with Margery Daw as Goldilocks), a
motor-cycling wolf on his way ?to see a little girl about her grandma?, the Mad Hatter, and a crocodile who has
swallowed a clock. There is nothing forced about the references (unlike a similar employment of such characters in
Anthony Browne?s confused and neurotic Into the Forest of 2004). They take what we are persuaded is a natural
place in Jeremiah?s day-long journey through the dark woods and his eventual return home with the aid of a friendly
dinosaur ? author?s voice and artist?s visualisation working in complete harmony. (In that same year of 1977 even more
evidence for the pair?s versatility shows up, with Allan?s short nonsense story, The Vanishment of Thomas Tull,
being illustrated by Janet in an almost art-deco style: black and white pen drawings, several of which nod cheerfully in
the direction of William Heath Robinson.)

Much the most significant of all these varied early volumes is surely the one that followed the first of the Brick Street
stories: The Old Joke Book of 1976. In itself it is a tremendous romp, fashioned as a set of individual pages or double-
page spreads which could almost be part of those comics of the 1930s and 40s like Rainbow and Film Fun ? jam-
packed with corny jokes, traditional (?What?s a myth?? ? ?A female moth?) and ? so far as one can tell ? new-minted
(bees on strike for ?shorter flowers and more honey?). Silent visual jokes also abound, either in the fancy frames given
to the strip pictures or as extras to the verbal witticisms (a hot dog saying ?Woof?, thin towers full of monsters for ?The
Bogies on Holiday? ? did Raymond Briggs ever see that strip?). However, the incidents and characters who recur
through these pages also offer a premonitory view of the joys that are to be offered before long ? only one postman
perhaps, but all sorts of burglars, babies, skeletons, teddy-bears, two-headed monsters, witches, worms, cowboys,
bandits and figures from folktale (?Why isn?t Cinderella in the team?? ? ?Because she runs away from the ball?).
Almost the only Ahlberg device that seems to be missing is what was to become one of their favourites: a fully-
articulated cut-through building showing what may be going on in all the rooms at once.

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This stageful of pantomime characters has now been given a chance to climb out of the circumscribed pages of their
books to put on a long-running performance in the Sebastian Walker Gallery of Seven Stories: the Centre for Children?s
Books in Newcastle upon Tyne. ?What?s in the Book?? has been devised, and largely mounted, by Allan Ahlberg,
working alongside the institution?s exhibition team, and it follows what is maturing as the Centre?s ideal pattern for
such shows: a display full of insights into the making of children?s books which, at the same time, offers creative
opportunities for entertainment and play to visiting children. There?s a place for writing letters to such celebrated
persons as ?Mr Ahlberg? and ?Mr Shearer? which may be posted in a big red pillar-box; you can watch a video of Allan
talking about and reading from his books of verse, or see the film of Janet and Allan at work that was shown on ?Blue
Peter?; there?s a child-high set-up of the peepshow from The Jolly Pocket Postman, and wall-to-wall jokes. (A witty
adaptation has been made of Janet?s pen drawings in The Ha Ha Bonk Book whereby the characters who feature
throughout its pages, such as the robot, the octopus, the tea-pot etc., now parade in a low-level, baby-high skirting that
runs round the whole exhibition making puns and sharp remarks as they go. I have a particular fondness for the youth
togged up in a football shirt with a bucket on his head -- not least because he connects back to the Centre?s great
exhibition, Daft as a Bucket, devoted to the Ahlbergs? friend and sometime collaborator, Colin McNaughton.)

In his study of modern illustrators, The Telling Line (1989), Douglas Martin refers to Allan and Janet in composite
fashion as a ?two-headed illustrator?, acknowledging their shared involvement in the making of every book. That may
not seem to be entirely the case if you take seriously Allan?s throwaway quotation near the start of the show:

I do the words (takes me about a day) and Janet does the pictures (takes her about six months). Then we send the words and the pictures to the publisher and the publisher sends us some money. And I get half for my day?s work, and Janet gets half for her six months? work: the basis of a happy marriage...

But the joke is belied elsewhere, when he writes of their pummelling a book into shape, ?playing tennis with it?, and when it becomes clear how far he, as author, needs not just to write his text but to pace it through the 32 (or whatever) pages of the finished book in order to maximise its effect and to give his companion full scope for the enhancing illustrations.

No exhibition can hope to show the dynamic of that collaboration, nor do more than hint at the batting back and forth of ideas and criticisms between the two heads. Janet may indicate something of this when she mentions ?a ludicrous conversation about talking biscuits? but Allan confirms that eventual responsibility lay with himself for words and with Janet for pictures. ? His intrusion on her territory in suggesting that she use a different method for drawing the characters? eyes in Peepo! , replacing her usual ?dot? method with a more fully detailed drawing, was not to be the harbinger of a lasting revolution in responsibility.

Sheer love of drawing

It is inevitable therefore that the immediate and continuing joy of ?What?s in the Book?? rests in its exposition of Janet?s graphic skills. Allan estimates that she must have done over 1500 finished drawings for their total oeuvre, to say nothing of the uncountable roughs (which she never threw away) and, to my mind, it is these roughs that make up the heart of the show. Wondrous, certainly, is the expressiveness of her finished vignettes or the natural elegance in the composition and the colouring of her watercolours, with attendant overlays, for books like The Jolly Pocket Postman . And look too at the daring of her new technique in It was a Dark and Stormy Night , where she worked with colour pencils on blow-ups of her original line drawings. But, as Allan himself says, there was a freedom and spontaneity in her rough preliminary sketches, in the storyboards and dummy books, and even in the worked-up drafts, that bear witness to her dedication to perfecting the job in hand and to her sheer love of drawing. Exemplary, for instance, are the emergent pencil designs for a page of Each Peach Pear Plum , with sketches of mops, mangles, buckets and so on all round the edge, or ? astounding -- the two highly detailed variant drawings-in-little for the cover of that book.

One may regret that this concentration on Janet?s work tends to deflect attention from the wordsmith on the other side of the drawing-board, for very little is to be found on such books as Thomas Tull , or Son of a Gun , or The Bear that Nobody Wanted where Janet was junior partner. Their texts do though deserve consideration if only because they show so clearly Allan?s role as storyteller, ready always to bring in the reader or listener as third party in the creation of the book. (And that, of course, holds good too for other books such as the collection of verse Please Mrs Butler , undertaken with Fritz Wegner as illustrator while Janet was at her ?six months? labour with another book ? perhaps The Baby?s Catalogue , or the little-known fold-out books in the ?Daisychains? series. These intermediate works done with other illustrators are noted in the book-list below.)

There is no rigid plan for the exhibition, no adherence to chronology or attempt at the difficult job of isolating themes (stories set in homes and schools? farcical stories? stories that owe much to folktales? etc.). Instead there is a wealth of anecdote about how things came about: daughter Jessica liking to play with envelopes when the post arrived, leading to the five years labour on The Jolly Postman , or the forgotten draft of The Cinderella Show turning up in a drawer and finding itself almost immediately converted into a published book. (Allan also explains how those three 1977 books came to be published so close together ? the result of their scattering manuscripts broadcast to the trade and then having three accepted almost simultaneously by different publishers.)

Only towards the last stages of the show does its underlying burden become fully apparent ? even to those with buckets on their heads. For it forms an expansive memorial, however belated, to Janet Ahlberg and to what has been lost to family, friends, and the wider world though her all-too-early death. Some confirmation of that may be seen in the extent
to which Allan has drawn upon his own ?memento?, Janet?s Last Book of 1996, in preparing the exhibition, and it is there as well as on the walls of the Sebastian Walker Gallery that you may see how, for her, Illustration was ingrained in the business of living. ?A talented forger?, says Allan of her delicious plagiarisms of Dennis the Menace and Krazy Kat in the making of birthday cards for himself and Jessica and, indeed, ?forgery? is one of the continuing delights of the cards and booklets found in the Jolly Postman?s successions of mail bags.

Most mournful though are the evidences of projects yet to come and beached at the last: a scheme for three parallel comic strips that would get entangled with each other; a book full of deliberate mistakes at which the reader was required to shout ?Sausages?; a book inspired by Jessica announcing on a placard that she was bored. How that could happen in a family that has fostered so much life-enhancing gaiety is hard to see, especially amid the lavish evidence at Seven Stories. And what an appropriate place to display it too, for did not the couple first meet on the last bus to Sunderland after a day out in Newcastle upon Tyne?

The Seven Stories exhibition closes in January 2007.


Janet and Allan Ahlberg: their books

The following list is a chronological tally of all the books composed by Allan and Janet Ahlberg. Books published in the same year are given in alphabetical order. In addition to date, title and publisher, each main entry give details of the page-dimensions and the number of pages of the book, together with a note on variations which may occur at reprint stage and any notable promotional or other addenda which may shed light on its publishing history. Paperback editions are rarely noticed even though they may often be published in a different format. All books are illustrated wholly or partly in colour except where noted as ?b/w only?.

1975

Here Are the Brick Street Boys, Collins, 202 x 200mm, 32pp

First of ?The Brick Street Boys? series, followed by A Place to Play; and Sam the Referee (both 1975) and Fred?s Dream; and The Great Marathon Football Match (both 1976)

1976

The Old Joke Book, Kestrel, 245 x 185mm, [32]pp

Issued with a Klawvana Flying Butterfly, designed to jump out at the reader like a jumping-jack when the book is opened.

1977

Burglar Bill, Heinemann, 195 x 150mm, [32]pp

Jeremiah in the Dark Woods, Kestrel, 220 x 180mm, 48pp

Page-openings alternate colour with monochrome. In the paperback ed. of 1980 in Collins?s Fontana Lions series the colour was replaced by monochrome half-tone.

The Vanishment of Thomas Tull, Black, 207 x 135mm, 56pp, b/w only

1978

Cops and Robbers, Heinemann, 195 x 150mm, [32]pp
Each Peach Pear Plum, Kestrel, 188 x 245mm, [32]pp
A miniature ed., 98 x 124mm, in glazed paper boards was published by Viking in 1991.

1979

The Little Worm Book, Granada, 148 x 130mm, [32]pp
In the paperback ed. of 1989 in Collins’s Picture Lions series the format was increased to 210 x 157mm and, in consequence, the title changed to The Worm Book.

The One and Only Two Heads and Two Wheels Two Heads, Collins, 224 x 161mm, [32]pp each

Son of a Gun, Heinemann, 215 x 130mm, 126pp, b/w only

1980

Funnybones, Heinemann, 249 x 149mm, [32]pp
An abridged ed. with illustrations re-arranged was published in 1998 by Heinemann Young Books as Shine a Light: a novelty ?Torch Book? with transparent discs which enables images to be projected in enlarged form on to a wall or the like.

Later books in the ?Funnybones? series were illustrated in the same style by Andre Amstutz.

Mr Biff the Boxer, Kestrel, 190 x 147mm, [24]pp
First in the ?Happy Families? series which would extend to twenty titles illustrated by several other artists. Janet’s only other illustrations in the series were for Mrs Wobble the Waitress (also 1980), and the books were simultaneously published as Puffin paperbacks. These eds. were later issued in a plastic pack with a cassette tape, the stories being read by Jan Francis and Richard Briers.

In 1988 the Quicksilver Theatre for Children toured with a dramatised version of Mrs Wobble.

In 1980 Allan also published his ballad, A Pair of Sinners, with illustrations by John Lawrence.

1981

Peepo! Kestrel, 202 x 224mm, [32]pp
A miniature ed. similar to Each Peach above, but 98 x 111mm, was published by Viking in 1991, and a board-book ed. (150 x 170mm) was published by the same in 1997.

1982

The Baby’s Catalogue, Kestrel, 210 x 225mm, [32]pp
A frieze based on the illustrations and designed by Douglas Martin was published by Puffin Books in 1993.

The Ha Ha Bonk Book, Kestrel/Puffin, 198 x 125mm, 96pp, b/w
In 1982 Allan also published the first six little volumes in the ?Help Your Child to Read? series, illustrated by Eric Hill. Six further volumes appeared in 1983.

1983
Ready, Teddy, Go! Heinemann, 210 x 100mm overall, 6 panel fold-out

First of a group of ?Daisychains?: shape-books of thin card opening out to show the first figure linked to five others all standing on quasi plinths which carry five-line stanzas by AA. Also published in 1983 were Summer Snowmen; That?s My Baby; and Which Witch? In 1985 appeared One True Santa. Four other titles in the series were illustrated by Andre Amstutz.

In 1983 Allan also published Please Mrs Butler, illustrated by Fritz Wegner, and Ten in a Bed, illustrated by Andre Amstutz.

1984

Playmates, Viking Kestrel, 222 x 165mm, 16 french-fold card leaves

A ?Slot Book? published with a companion volume: Yum Yum. Pictures of various objects (a piece of cheese, a baby?s bottle...) are slotted into the leaves and may be removed and placed in empty slots in full-page pictures (a monster, a robot...). A loose folded card of spares is included.

Another novelty series appeared in 1984 when Allan collaborated with Colin McNaughton on the four ?Foldaways? titles, and this may have led to their work together on the ?Red Nose Readers? which began to appear in 1985 and 1986.

1986

The Cinderella Show, Viking Kestrel, 140 x 103mm, [36]pp, b/w

The Jolly Postman, Heinemann, 150 x 190mm, [24]pp including free endpapers, interleaved with six ?envelopes?, containing various missives. In so far as these are separate productions they deserve separate descriptions:-

a) a folded manuscript letter with drawings from Goldilocks to Mr and Mrs Bear
b) a double folded Freepost advertisement from Hobgoblin Supplies Ltd to the Occupant of Gingerbread Bungalow, The Woods
c) a picture postcard ?Thinking of you on our Magic Carpet Tour? from Jack to Mr V. Bigg at Mile High House, Beanstalk Gardens
d) a folded letter from The Peter Piper Press to H.R.H. Cinderella enclosing a copy of their forthcoming 8-page book on her life (illustrated in colour) for her approval
e) a folded business letter from Meeny, Miny, Mo & Co., Solicitors to B.B.Wolf Esq. about occupancy of Miss Riding-Hood?s grandma?s cottage
f) a birthday card, enclosing a £1 note, from Mrs Bunting and Baby to Goldilocks

In 1999 a larger format edition, 195 x 253 mm, was published by Viking (now Puffin).

A publicity postcard was devised for the book?s first publication, incorporating a plastic cover within which was a game of dexterity, designed by Janet: juggling little balls into small holes along the postman?s route. Produced by Messrs Blisters of Bath.

In 1994 Heinemann published The Jolly Postman Postcard Collection: 30 postcards to keep or send.

In 1986 Allan also published Woof!, illustrated by Fritz Wegner.

1987
The Clothes Horse and Other Stories, Viking Kestrel, 220 x 180mm, 32pp

1988

Starting School, Viking Kestrel, 207 x 227mm, [32]pp

In 1988 Allan also published The Mighty Slide: stories in verse illustrated by Charlotte Voake.

1989

Bye Bye Baby, Heinemann, 230 x 208mm, [32]pp

In 1989 Allan also published the book of verses Heard it in the Playground illustrated by Fritz Wegner.

1991

The Jolly Christmas Postman, Heinemann, 180 x 205mm, make-up as in The Jolly Postman, above. The contents are:-

a) a Christmas card to Baby Bear and Brother from Goldilocks and Sister
b) a single-fold race-game Beware! printed on card and sent from Mr Wolf to R.R.Hood
c) Humpty’s Jigsaw sent to him as a get-well present from All the King’s Men
d) The Toy Town Christmas Annual, a 12-page compendium published by The Peter Piper Press sent with the tiny 4-leaf concertina production of Simple Simon’s Complete Book of Knowledge to The Gingerbread Boy in Toytown
e) a double-fold copy of The Wolf Spotter’s Guide inscribed ?For Mr Wolf. A cheeky Xmas from You-Know-Who and her Grandma!?
f) a 5-panel peepshow given by the nursery-rhyme characters who feature in it to ?Our good old pal The Postman?

In 1999 a larger format edition, 193 x 220mm, was published by Viking (Puffin).

1992

The Bear Nobody Wanted, Viking, 233 x 155mm, 142pp, b/w

1993

It Was a Dark and Stormy Night, Viking, 295 x 240mm, [32]pp

1994

Allan published The Giant Baby illustrated by Fritz Wegner, a story deriving from his play The Giant’s Baby that had been first performed at the Polka Theatre in 1990.

1995

The Jolly Pocket Postman, Heinemann, 185 x 180mm, make-up similar to the previous Postman books. The contents are:-

a) a card from the postman to the reader accompanying a magnifying lens
b) a card disc inviting a visit to the party in the woods
c) a Jolly Telegram to the Postman with a pop-out spider

d) a 6-fold panorama which continues the story of the shrinking postman and includes reference to the Gingerbread Boy and H.C.Andersen?s tale of the tin soldier

e) a single-fold gift map of The Yellow Brick Road, marked out with glitter and featuring many nursery landmarks such as Mr McGregor?s Garden

f) a 12-page storybook *If the Tyre had not been Flat*, given to the Postman for bed-time reading by Dorothy and Alice. It contains a pocket of its own secreting a greetings postcard from the Emerald City.


1996


Printed for private circulation by the author.

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