



# Turning Young Readers on to the Classics

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**Peter Hollindale** looks at editions aimed at young readers.

Can publishers help persuade young people to read the classics with editions specifically aimed at them? How can the 'active pleasure' of reading such titles be conveyed? And which of the great titles from the past should children have read before they leave school? **Peter Hollindale** discusses.

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English is not like most school subjects. Success in teaching and learning English cannot be measured by exam results or folders of course work. We cannot take a snapshot of achievement in a given year, process it through an exam board, and declare the job done. English as a 'subject' can only be judged years after the event, by the literacy of the adult population. Few people would relish re-taking a school test in Science at the age of 30. But we re-take a test in English, like it or not, every day of our adult lives. And the same applies to that part of English devoted to reading literature. Never mind the exams. Are the children still reading, for pleasure, 20 or 30 years on?

Last year some eminent persons were asked which great books children should have read before they leave school. The Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, reportedly chose Homer's **Odyssey**, **Hamlet**, **Don Quixote**, 'The Waste Land', and Joyce's **Ulysses**. The reaction of the media critic in my local paper was typical, I suspect: 'Is this man a little out of touch or plain bonkers?'

Well, just a little over-ambitious, shall we say? Somewhere there just might be teachers able to infect reluctant classes with their own enthusiasm for these works, though search parties would be pushed to find them. But without the incitement of someone else's contagious pleasure, all is usually lost. I would hesitate to pick even one mandatory classic as the essential yardstick of effective education. **Romeo and Juliet** would come closest, except that Britain is full of teachers bored stiff by over-teaching it, year in, year out.

From teachers, and ideally parents too, that exemplary active pleasure in reading 'the charisma of delight' comes first if the classics are to have a future in the lives of present-day children. The novelist E M Forster got it right years ago in his essay 'Does Culture Matter?': 'Bring out the enjoyment. If 'the Classics' are advertised as something dolorous and astringent, no one will sample them. But if the cultured person... is obviously having a good time, those who come across him will be tempted to share it and to find out how.'

## The book as persuader

Readers of classics are not made without the personal touch. The question for publishers is whether, or how, that personal touch can somehow be embodied, at one remove, in the book itself 'in its design and presentation, in decisions about adaptation and abridgement, in its use of supporting voices filling in for parent or teacher' its own ability, in other words, to communicate sheer pleasure in the classic it is offering. Teacher or parent may succeed or fail as a persuader, but so can the book as a physical object, a speaking text.

The new series of 'Bloomsbury Classics' is a classic case in itself 'of falling between two stools. Here are standard

titles indeed? **David Copperfield**, **Wuthering Heights**, **Jane Eyre** and **Pride and Prejudice**, with **Frankenstein** and **Treasure Island** thrown in for light relief. Each is seductively clad in bright covers, each enhanced by a tempting blurb. Uniformly announced as a 'fantastic new edition of an all-time classic?', the books begin with an introduction (sometimes stretching to all of two pages) by a modern author, explaining as a rule either how the writer came expecting boredom but, surprised by joy, devoured the book at a sitting, or how the book miraculously excelled the films based on it. You never know what might happen. After you have read **Frankenstein**, advises Benjamin Zephaniah, 'check out the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, then you're really rapping?'. Clearly Zephaniah has designs on Andrew Motion's post as Poet Laureate.

Common to all these introductions is the publisher's understandable desire to outflank boredom with cool cajolery from yesterday's unbored. The leap of style from a frenetic testimonial to the text itself can be incongruous to the point of absurdity, but some of them do work, and tell another story. Philip Reeve introduces **David Copperfield**. For reasons connected with his father's work, Reeve at the age of 12 spent a summer in a VW camper van in Cornwall, and in the evenings (camper vans not being equipped with televisions in those primitive days) his mother read **David Copperfield** to Reeve and his sister. 'I expect I was none too keen when my mum started reading us a thousand-page novel without a spaceship or an explosion anywhere in it. But it wasn't long before I was hooked.' Full marks to mum. And it is a safe bet that she not only loved the book herself but silently abridged and edited it for camper van consumption. There is no substitute for reading aloud, as a Children's Laureate, wiser in these things, has recently been arguing.

But what would Reeve at 12 have made of the book he introduces so effectively? Between the bright covers are several hundred pages of mostly unillustrated print, indistinguishable from any other cheap mainstream paperback. The books are unabridged, which is neither vice nor virtue but may call for more supportive design than these books get. At the end there is a section called 'Extra! Extra!' which in a different typeface and tabloid format gives numerous snippets of background information and period colour which might serve to flesh out school assignments. Many of the snippets service more than one novel. Finally, most blatantly utilitarian of all, is a McChokumchild appendix called 'Facts to Impress Your Teacher?.'

Bloomsbury Classics are an attempt to bridge the educational and trade paperback markets with conventional cheap printings of classic texts from the National Curriculum tricked out with a factual resource and beguiling exhortations. The double marketing is there in the blurb: 'there's something for everyone? whether you're studying for an exam or simply want to tuck in for fun?'. No doubt they will sell, but as spurs to lifelong pleasure in classic fiction they are not a patch on Philip Reeve's mum.

### **Lavish illustration**

At the opposite extreme are the versions of classics published by Walker Books. These are works of art? literally so, because all are lavishly illustrated, and care and thought has plainly gone into every detail of typeface, page size and quality of paper. There is no question here of fidelity to an unabridged text. Where the full original is appropriate and accessible, as with Conan Doyle's **The Hound of the Baskervilles**, this is what we get. The book has an essentially two-tone colour scheme which extends not only to Pam Smy's splendid creepy illustrations but to the neat blue print of the text. Repeatedly highlighting the eminences, hollows and sinister undulations of the Dartmoor landscape, Smy's pictures respond to the imaginative heart of the story. They do not merely decorate the prose, but guide young readers to the very root of its power.

Elsewhere adaptation is the order of the day. Jan Needle has adapted and translated **The Hunchback of Notre Dame**, and abridged Melville's **Moby Dick**. In their original form both these works might seem as deterrently forbidding for young readers as Joyce's **Ulysses** or most of Shelley's poetry, but with the difference that they are both great stories which, even in pared-down form, convey an authentic sense of the major themes that drive them. Hugo's **Hunchback of Notre Dame** is one of the world's great laments for the plight of the outsider, and great indictments of superstitious tyranny. Read Jan Needle's skilful narrative and you will know this, perhaps with enough remembered indignation to seek out the full original in later life. Pictorial support is a matter of taste, so I can only state a personal view that David Hughes's irritating faux-naif illustrations, along with quasi-biblical paragraph setting, were nearly but not quite enough

to spoil the book.

## Respect for the original

**Moby Dick** is a bigger challenge still, but Needle and his illustrator, Patrick Benson, succeed triumphantly with it. Few adult readers nowadays get to terms with Melville's prodigious, all-inclusive masterpiece, despite the fact that present-day attitudes to whaling have silently modernised it, making it a classic that time has brought closer to us. It remains a stupendous allegory of good and evil. Needle gives us plenty of Melville's original great prose, and his linking narratives are not only storytelling summary but interpretation – a model of inconspicuous teaching. The book is proof that the essence of many great works, with true respect for the original, can be placed within the compass of young readers.

But not all books can. Some 'classic' works, including at least three of those apparently ennobled by Andrew Motion, are far too difficult for all but a tiny minority of school pupils. These are works which cannot be introduced through adaptation and retelling, because their life consists only in the original language, and (unlike **Moby Dick**) in all of it, complete and unabridged. To insert them prematurely in a child's or teenager's experience is the standard formula for killing off a lifetime of potential pleasure. An enjoyable encounter with 'easy classics' or 'classics made easy' (phrases to excite derision from those who would deny that **The Hound of the Baskervilles** is a classic at all) is the best hope we have of creating an adventurous adult reader.

So what *are* the 'classics' after all? They are the world's great stories, from the Bible or Greek myth or other cultures, which do not depend on the original language but will always demand retellings. And they are major individual works which *do* depend on their original language, but can be 'translated' in various ways, so that some at least of their linguistic power is kept. Marcia Williams's witty and faithfully ribald comic book version of nine **Canterbury Tales** even finds room for 'tasters' of Chaucer's medieval English, with the wise advice: 'Read it aloud or you'll go bonkers!'

Time and linguistic change mean that most 'individual' classics will eventually die, though the stories they tell may be rewritten and retold. Literature is a self-renewing organism, and the 'permanent classic' is an illusion. So there is no call to be ashamed of the compromises that can bring classics within children's reach. The trick is to compromise well.

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*Bloomsbury Classics (£4.99 each pbk):*

**David Copperfield**, Charles Dickens, introduced by Philip Reeve, 978 0 7475 8752 1

**Frankenstein**, Mary Shelley, introduced by Benjamin Zephaniah, 978 0 7475 8751 4

**Jane Eyre**, Charlotte Brontë, introduced by Celia Rees, 978 0 7475 8749 1

**Pride and Prejudice**, Jane Austen, introduced by Meg Cabot, 978 0 7475 8748 4

**Treasure Island**, Robert Louis Stevenson, introduced by Darren Shan, 978 0 7475 8747 7

**Wuthering Heights**, Emily Brontë, introduced by Jennifer Donnelly, 978 0 7475 8750 7

*Walker:*

**The Hound of the Baskervilles**, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, ill. Pam Smy, 978 1 84428 137 4, £9.99 pbk

**The Hunchback of Notre Dame**, Victor Hugo, translated and adapted by Jan Needle, ill. David Hughes, 978 1 84428 658 4, £12.99 pbk

**Moby Dick**, Herman Melville, presented by Jan Needle, ill. Patrick Benson, 978 0 7445 8622 0, £16.99 hbk



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