



# Marion Lloyd: an editor's life in children's books

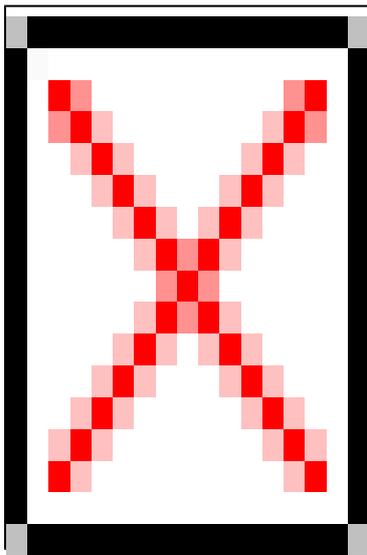
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**Marion Lloyd** lays bare the inner world of publishing



The Publisher of Scholastic's children's fiction imprint, Marion Lloyd Books, Marion

Lloyd started her career in 1972 as the editor of Armada Books, then moving to be Editorial Director of children's books at Pan. This was followed by a stint at Red House Book Club, then Editorial Director for Fiction at Pan Macmillan before moving to Scholastic to set up her eponymous list. Marion's books have won the Smarties Prize, the Guardian children's Fiction Prize, the Newbery Medal and the Costa Books Award. In a speech to mark her retirement, Marion Lloyd offered many insights into and wry comments on the world of children's publishing. **Books for Keeps** presents some extracts.

## **The first accident of my career was to get a job in publishing?**

?I had no intention of joining the book business, because I was a perverse teenager from a literary family. My great-great grandfather was Charles Dickens. I learned to read early and remember the thrill of being given a brand new Enid Blyton at Christmas ? the work of genius that is **The Circus of Adventure** ? and the sadness of finishing it by Boxing Day. I fell into publishing through pure luck because I happened to be in the right place at the right time. It was the beginning of the boom years for children's paperbacks. When I recruited an editorial assistant two years ago, I had 347 applications, all from young people with impressive degrees, and relevant work experience. I never had to face that sort of competition and I am overawed by the dedication and hard work needed to start in this business today.?

## **A manuscript arrived on my desk?**

?It was 1972, and I was the 20 year-old, entirely incompetent and inexperienced editor of Armada paperbacks, a list of popular fiction series which published Enid Blyton. It also published Malcolm Saville whose books were slipping downhill. A manuscript arrived on my desk, with a yellow memo from the editor who published the hardback editions saying, ?Here's the latest from Malcolm. It's the usual tosh, but you might like to read it and add any editorial comments since you'll be putting it into paperback next year.? I wrote a letter: ?Dear Malcolm Saville, I can't tell you how proud and honoured I am to have become your paperback publisher. I have loved all your books since I was a

child? This new story is astonishingly brilliant, and I am so excited at the prospect of putting it into the Armada list. I returned the manuscript. A few days later a letter arrived from the venerable author, attached to which was a piece of yellow paper that made me feel instantly faint. It was the editor's memo, which I had accidentally enclosed in the package.

### **Crazy But True?**

We sold 100,000 copies of the first **Armada Book of Fun**. We sold 200,000 copies of a collection of trivia called **Crazy But True**. It was compiled by a slightly dodgy freelance writer, one of whose regular jobs was writing the captions for the photos of naked women in **Men Only** magazine. He supplied the required number of words every month and liked inventing names and personalities for the busty babes as he never got to see the photos. When he told me this, I said it would be funny if he called one of the pin-ups of the month Marion. This he duly did, only to be told by the **Men Only** editor that Marion was *not* a sexy name.

### **Almost everything Armada published made money?**

Mary Danby and I had brainstorming meetings in her kitchen, came up with ideas for books and went straight out to commission them. They all appealed to popular tastes and were cheap and quick to get to market. Our turnover reached £1million – an awful lot of books sold at 25p. But the profit margins were tight. Extents were very carefully controlled. 128 pages was the preferred length. 160 was OK, 192 was too expensive. Because they were so standardised, we hardly ever needed to produce costings. Years later, in times that required a more exacting approach and costing forms that had to be accurately completed and signed off by managers before books could be bought, I sorely missed that easy freewheeling seat-of-the-pants publishing.

### **Upmarket and downmarket books?**

The children's book world made a clear distinction between upmarket and downmarket books. I shared an office with Rosemary Sandberg, editor of THE QUALITY lists, Lions and Picture Lions. She published writers who were reviewed and won prizes – Alan Garner, Joan Aiken, Robert Westall, Lloyd Alexander, Richard Scarry, Judith Kerr. She was friends with the great children's publishers like Tom Maschler at Cape, Margaret Clark at The Bodley Head, Judith Elliot at Heinemann. They looked down their noses at pony books. Which I didn't mind, as WE were reaching millions of children, and lots of them wrote to us about their favourite Armada titles. My dear friend and colleague, Alyx Price, still has a letter from me replying to her question, aged nine, about when were all the Chalet School titles going to be in print, as she needed to collect them all.

### **The huge sales of Judy Blume's books paid all our salaries?**

I joined Pan as Editorial Director of their children's list, Piccolo. This was the home of the queens of American teen fiction, Judy Blume and Paula Danziger. When Judy Blume came over for UK tours she filled the Albert Hall. Publishing for teenagers came of age in the late 1980s, and Pan developed teenage publishing into a market-leading brand, Horizons. American writers understood the teen audience better than British ones. We hoovered up rights to Norma Klein, Lois Duncan, Richard Peck, ME Kerr, and the only titles that didn't sell were the few by British authors. They seemed to be too worthily heavy-handed, too grim and gloomy, to satisfy Horizon readers. Years later I was interviewing a secretary who had read every Horizon that I had ever published. Alice Burden got the job but she got so over-excited when she received her first personal email from Judy Blume that I almost had to send her home.

### **Debut novels by British authors came my way?**

An earnest school teacher from Oxford called Philip Pullman wrote two novels whose sales were very average. Celia Rees, another teacher, wrote some gritty thrillers which didn't do particularly well. Elizabeth Laird stole my heart with her first novel about a girl whose baby brother has a fatal illness. Sharon Creech's first book made me hope she might be my new Judy Blume. Who would have predicted that these writers would write bestsellers, win prizes and become famous? I didn't. In a culture where a debut novel now needs to be a big hit or die, none of them would have made the

grade. They needed to develop their talents in a slow burn, to find their voice over three, or four or even half a dozen books. Our investment in untried beginners was low. We could afford to nurture Philip, Celia and the rest at a moderate pace, helped by support for good new children's fiction from customers outside the main retail channels – public library suppliers, school bookshops, school library suppliers, mail order bookclubs like the Red House.?

### **By now I had real confidence in my editorial skills?**

?The best times of my job are spent at the editorial coalface, the nitty-gritty process of refining the words on the page. It's slow. I can't edit fast *and* well. But I'm fast to get going, and have always tried to read a delivered manuscript as soon as it arrives. If you can read it the day you get it, you win a million points with the author. And if you can't, let them know straight away. I have two brains for reading. The first one is emotional and instinctive, the one belonging to the story-loving child. After I've experienced the story with that brain, I switch on my editor's brain and start to THINK about how the story works. If there are problems, identifying exactly what they are is often hard. But understanding them leads to remedies. I believe editorial rigour is crucial to good publishing, and in a future world of self-publishing and a faster-track journey from writer to reader, it will be more important than ever.?

### **I wrote a memo saying 'Eva is better than J K Rowling'?**

?It wasn't until Harry Potter overwhelmed the book market in the late '90s that I woke up to the fact that we had a writer of magical books on our list who was badly underexploited. I wrote a memo saying; 'Eva is better than J K Rowling. Her secret platform at Kings Cross station was there long before the Hogwarts Express arrived.' We put proper marketing money behind the whole Eva Ibbotson list and the popularity of magic, monsters and ghosts gave us the perfect opportunity to relaunch her career. Eva wrote **Journey to the River Sea**, which won prizes and made her lots of money, and inspired my own journey to the city in which it was set. As I sat in the gilded auditorium of the opera house in the jungle city of Manaus, a thousand miles up the Amazon, I thought about my own journey in children's books and how far I had come from my humble start. Somehow, without my being properly conscious of it, the little bookworm girl had hatched into a fully-fledged publisher of confidence and skill.?

### **Where were those wonderful books that I longed to give my heart to?**

?I had never started a list from nothing. And my new books had to be the very best. I didn't know where I would find them as I started my beachcombing quest. We can't manufacture the great novels (though our accountants would like us to). We have to keep looking, keep the faith in finding the best, and wait for them to find us.?

### **I would never again look at an Arab woman in a burka without seeing the human being inside it?**

?I found a very topical teen novel about a funny, modern Muslim girl trying to survive at a school where the cool kids alienate her because she decides to wear the hijab. Soon after I bought **Does My Head Look Big in This?** the July 7th terrorist bomb attacks hit London. It suddenly seemed very important for kids to hear the very entertaining – and never ever preachy – voice of this lovable Muslim character.?

### **I have used the word 'love' too many times?**

?But most of the best occasions, and greatest successes, in my four decades in children's books seem to have been times where a lot of love has produced the best results. I have found that my love of stories to begin with, then my love of the craft of storytelling, and being allowed to get very excited about both of them, have given me a happy and very satisfying career.?

### **I don't feel comfortable in the spotlight...**

?The invisibility that defines an editor's work suits me. At the end of my job when readers open the book that I have produced and published, and lose themselves in the story, they have no idea that I exist.?

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