The Ladybird Story: Children’s Books for Everyone

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210 [2]

Byline: Rosemary Stones reviews a book that tells the story behind the little books that shaped so many people’s childhoods.

2015 sees the 100th anniversary of Ladybird. Rosemary Stones reviews a book that tells the story behind the little books that shaped so many people’s childhoods.

2014 saw the publication of a spoof Ladybird Key Words Reading Scheme title, We Go to the Gallery (No. 1a?) by Miriam Elia, an amusing parody for adults of the contemporary art scene. In one spread, Peter and Jane are with mummy at Tate Britain looking at Martin Creed’s empty room installation, Lights going on and off?:

There is nothing in the room.

Peter is confused.

Jane is confused.

Mummy is happy.

?There is nothing in the room because God is dead,? says Mummy.

?Oh dear,? says Peter.

Elia’s ?Ladybird?, published in the familiar standard mini hardback format of 4½ x 7 inches and, true to the Keys Words Scheme design, with each text-page faced by an illustration (referencing Martin Aitchison or J.H. Wingfield, both of the Ladybird stable), assumes that the adult readers she addresses will get the joke. That familiarity with the Ladybird brand can be so taken for granted is one of the aspects of the publishing phenomenon that was Ladybird Books addressed by Lorraine Johnson and Brian Alderson in The Ladybird Story, their fascinating
Both scholarly and chatty, their account of this sometimes ground breaking list can astonish. **Understanding Maps**, for example, was used to train recruits on the Falklands expedition. (My own experience of bookselling in the late 1970s included selling a copy of **The Computer** from the ?How It Works? series to an adult as the most clearly written and helpful account for beginners available.) This is not to forget that some of the books produced, constrained as they were by their restricted format and by what the authors describe as ?the randomness? of the Ladybird editorial policy, could be guilty of leaden prose, sentimentality and conventionally stereotypical artwork. ?The passionate embrace of imaginative literature,? the authors remark, ?would never be matched by, or even required of, the Loughborough team?. Interestingly, the authors provide context with examples of contemporaneous titles from more ?literary? publishers that cover the same ground.

Everyone has their favourite Ladybirds and readers may cavil if they find that space has not been devoted to the titles that afforded them/their children particular delight. Hopefully they will also understand that that would have been an impossibility given the sheer numbers of Ladybirds published over the years. I take the opportunity of this review to raise a glass to the Ladybirds aimed at the very youngest ?readers? (to the discussion of which little space is allocated). **Baby?s First Book**, for instance, was first published in 1954 and its beautifully painted representational artwork of everyday objects of interest to babies (keys, taps, a teddy bear etc) was innovative and child centred long before the Alhbergs? **The Baby?s Catalogue** was even dreamt of.

Ladybird?s most commercially successful enterprise was their bold venture into the schools market and the teaching of reading in the 1960s with their Key Words Reading Scheme. Based on research into the frequency with which certain words occur in the English language by William Murray and Joe McNally, the early books starring Peter and Jane use a look-and-say method with constant repetition, producing a robotic yet memorable narrative that is a gift to parody (as Ms Elia demonstrates above). The debate engendered in the late ?70s by the social critics (of which I was one) on the stereotypical presentation of gender, race and class in the series (to the bemusement of the Loughborough team) is entertainingly discussed and extensively illustrated with before and after artwork from the original and revamped series.

To my mind the greatest achievement of the Ladybird list from **Bunnikin?s Picnic Party** (1940) onwards was its democratic nature. The authors point out that its very lack of pretentiousness coupled with a low price point (2/6d for many years) meant that Ladybird were able to sell their product in both bookshops and non-traditional outlets such as newsagents, corner shops and later on petrol stations and supermarkets. Woolworth?s was a major stockist and for many parents unfamiliar with bookshops or libraries, Ladybird books became synonymous with children?s books. The familiar format with its sturdy board covers and the collectability of the series within the list had tremendous appeal both to parents and to young readers. As the authors remark: ?Hardly any child in the country had been untouched by one kind of Ladybird or another over the middle decades of the twentieth century?.

So what happened to Ladybird? In 1996 its Loughborough home with its state of the art presses and local employees fell under the axe of Penguin?s then hatchet man, Anthony Forbes-Watson, as did the distinctive format of the majority of its titles and this despite the fact that sales still exceeded 30 million a year. The departing employees were presented with a specially printed limited edition facsimile copy of **Tootles the Taxi** and Loughborough station removed the notices welcoming arrivals to ?The Home of Ladybird Books?. ?Sic transit gloria mundi? as the authors might have said. The now London based Ladybird imprint still exists but today?s titles (which include Topsy & Tim and Peppa Pig) are indistinguishable from the output of other publishers.

Lorraine Johnson and Brian Alderson?s account (more his than hers?) takes us from the Loughborough printing business established in the middle of the nineteenth century through to this tragic demise, explaining along the way how technological advances enabled different kinds of production alongside the diversification of the retail business. This history together with the extensive bibliography (more hers than his?) will be a boon to both publishing historians and Ladybird collectors while the general readers will find many nostalgic delights within its pages.

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