



# Classics in Short No 118

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[219](#) [2]

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## Quentin Blake's books for beginners

Brian Alderson goes back to Blake's *Beginning Beginners*

### Dr Seuss

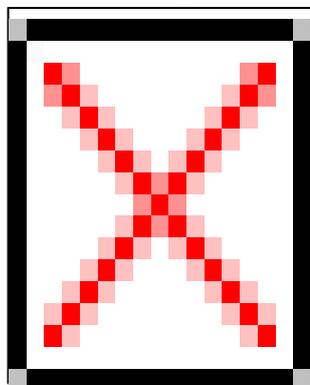
makes a brief appearance in Ghislaine Kenyon's monograph on Quentin Blake ([reviewed here](#) [3]). He comes in largely to account for the unexpected Seuss/Blake conjunction, Blake seemingly being the only artist to be commissioned to illustrate a Seuss text in the famous **Beginner Books** series. Unfortunately no connection is made to earlier passages where Kenyon mentions, say, the value of the use of 'real books' in the teaching of reading or where she cites at one point her own experience as a teacher in using the **Monster** books by Ellen Blance and Ann Cook which Blake illustrated.

### The omission

is compounded by what may be seen as a neglect of Quentin Blake's engagement with some 'Beginning Beginner Books' all his own, none of which is mentioned by Kenyon even though a case could be made for them as featuring among the gayest parts of the artist's theatrical performance. Perhaps it would add balance to the survey to introduce them here.

### In point of simplicity

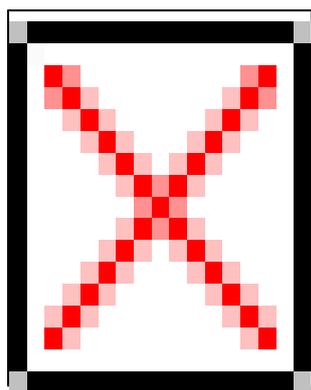
the list begins with **Quentin Blake's ABC** (Cape, 1989), whose opening spread shows the artist himself in his painter's



smock displaying a placard of the twenty-six letters to sundry children and a hairy dog. The shape of the placard resembles that of the tiny old abc's found on hornbooks except that here the letters appear in a volume over a foot tall and nine inches broad. Each letter of the alphabet, printed in upper and lower case, occupies a page in that format with each page-opening making up a rhyme: 'A is for Apples, some green and some red' faced significantly by 'B is for Breakfast we're having in bed'. Both illustrations are rich in Blakean energy and comedy but it is the inclusive 'we' that makes a community of participants in the picture, including a monkey and a cockatoo, and outside it the implied artist and the reader as well. From this point on 'we', 'us' or 'you' ('R is for Roller skates, watch

us fall down?) make frequent appearances until we, the readers, are waved good-bye with 'Z is for Zippers. That's all. That's the end.' (Incidentally, the problem of X is ingeniously solved by it becoming 'the ending for jack-in-the box'.)

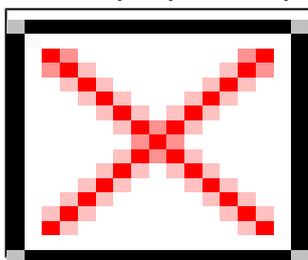
## Infant tradition



is found too a few years earlier in the only slightly smaller format of **Quentin Blake's Nursery Rhyme Book** (Cape, 1983). Here, as occurs with several anthologies that Blake has edited, a salient feature is the originality of the selection. He acknowledges his sources in those two foundation collections by Iona and Peter Opie: **The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes** and **The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book** (1951 and 1955) but has roamed through their assembled variants to find many lesser-known rhymes that, except in one instance, offer scope for illustration across a spread. (You can imagine the joyous exploitation of the possibilities of 'Jeremiah, blow the fire. Puff, puff, puff. / First you blow it gently/ Then you blow it rough.?) Due attention is paid to accuracy: you may count the twenty-seven different wigs of Gregory Griggs or the score-and-ten of the blue eggs laid by the blue hen, while there is clinching evidence of the picture-book artist shaping his complete 'story'. The second rhyme in the book shows a pretty maid by the sea jumping into the arms of a Punch figure while in the final rhyme they are found getting married attended by most of the characters whom we have already met.

## Inspiration

from the nursery rhymes may well have fed into the zest and racket that occurs in Blake's own rhyme book: **All Join In**



(Cape, 1990). For me this is comparable to **Mr Magnolia** and **Clown** (which Kenyon does discuss) as one of the greatest of all the man's original picture books. He is back on the title-page in his painter's smock introducing children (but no dog) to the seven sets of verses that make up the contents. But, being in the same metre and all involving people and animals making a din (BEEP...QUACK...WHEEE...), they make up variations on a theme which permits much wild cartooning. Here too 'we' authenticates the artist's presence at the carnival and there is an Important Message at the start that 'You can join in too'.

## The proponents

of reading schemes and 'synthetic phonics' may deplore the levity of my suggesting that these three decidedly unschematic picture books by Sir Quentin should have any place in a serious educational curriculum, so it is only fair to conclude by noting an early work in which the artist collaborated with his friend John Yeoman to produce a book that advertised itself as properly scientific, guaranteeing to parents success for their children at school. It was, moreover, available to almost everyone as a cheap paperback: **The Puffin Book of Impossible Records** (1975). In earnest of their endeavours both compilers are shown at the start actually working on their description of the arms of a cephalopod mollusc while there are over sixty further facts of interest even to the very young follow. An apology is made for some slight errors that may have crept in, but who would wish to doubt such records as that of Miss Angela Fraill of Woking who had left behind 485 umbrellas since she began using public transport in 1937 or of Dr Arnold Mobsby of Sidcup

who recorded in 1952 a centipede with 101 legs. This array of such facts must be very pleasing to our modern Gradgrinds.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

**Quentin Blake's ABC**, Red Fox, 978-1-8494-1688-7, £6.99

**Quentin Blake's Nursery Rhyme Book**, Red Fox, 978-1-8494-1690-0, £7.99

**All Join In**, Red Fox, 978-0-0999-6470-4, £7.99

**Mr Magnolia**, Red Fox, 978-1-8623-0807-7, £6.99

**Clown**, Red Fox, 978-0-0994-9361-7, £7.99

**The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes**, OUP, 978-0-1986-0088-6, £30.00

**The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book**, OUP, 978-0-1986-9112-9, £18.00

Page Number:

32

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