



[Home](#) > [The One that Got Away](#)

The One that Got Away

Books Reviewed:

[The One that Got Away](#) [1]

Issue:

[241](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Brian Alderson](#) [3]

~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Aurelia, history consultant to the government of the day, would not have approved. Up there in the year 2099 she was producing a programme to show how little had changed over the previous hundred years of the country's social life. The government was worried that people were still getting the wrong idea about what things were like in the past, still taken in by the old people in their care homes afflicted by Kieselguhr's Syndrome with their distorted memories of the old days. Thus, it would not be good for an Advanced Literate boy in Year Six in 2099 to get hold of the other twenty-nine stories in Jan Mark's **One that Got Away**. Why ? it was nothing less than a compendium of all Granny's deluded recollections.

Kieselguhr's Syndrome is indeed the only story in the thirty of **The One that Got Away** that takes us outside the quiddities of family life set in what is mostly a Kentish suburb in the decades after 1945. Two thirds of the contents concern themselves variably with what children experience, or what they get up to, in the mostly stable, middle-class households of the period. Several are very slight: Mum's old school friend brings her repressed four-year-old to stay for a night and is appalled when Anthea introduces him to unexpected excitements through a walk in the park ? a bad leopard with red spots, a Greasy Witch... (*Nothing to be Afraid of*) ; two poor girls ? one of the few families where the father has scarpered ? show Maureen how to get rid of a wart (?Charming!); eldest and roughest of the Barmy Burtons likes to escape to peaceful contemplation among a family of marrows (*Marrow Hill*). Oddly, the last tale in the book, but hardly worthy of inclusion, is *William's Version* which looks to be a plagiarism of Mary Norton's wonderful **Paul's Tale**.

At least half of these domestic stories though are injected with mystery ? inexplicable ghost stories. Staying at Granny's for the first time at Christmas Stephanie and Marnie have their stockings stolen by Father Christmas's no-good brother who comes down the chimney in the middle of the night (*No Good Claus*); in *Uncle Matthew* Dad is haunted by his father's twin brother who was killed in the War and is up to no good, seemingly trying to take revenge on the survivors. Dad has learned to escape him but he is now moving up a generation to haunt his daughter as well.

Although several of the inclusions here have the air of being prompted to meet an occasion rather than by being a story urgently wanting to be told (there's a helpful list of first appearances at the end), Jan Mark's ability to captivate the reader by her conversational, storytelling voice, by her wit, and her gift for simile (?Min was visibly crumpling like a

wet tissue?, 'Miss Taylor had legs like bath loofahs stuffed into hairy black socks?...) comes to the fore in the nine other stories set in local schools which stimulate stronger plots, much entertaining dialogue, and give the opportunity for satire at the expense of adults, especially the teachers, as well as their reluctant charges. As the title of one of the best, *Send Three and Fourpence, we are Going to a Dance*, indicates, she is not above pinching a comic idea, but her handling of the elusive message 'Miss Middleton wants you to see her tomorrow before assembly and take a dead frog?' gives rise to sustained comedy at which Mark's gifts for characterisation and dialogue are pre-eminent. And the same could go for such splendid inventions as *Chutzpah* where a bolshie 'new girl' causes mayhem in a school which she has no intention of joining; or *Time and the Hour*, centering on a sweepstake (forbidden, of course) over administrative time-wasting; or, counter productively, *The Choice is Yours* where an innocent girl suffers through the sarcastic rigidity and rivalry of two teachers.

Aurelia would certainly have wished to suppress all evidence of a society that could permit all these deviations from the centrally controlled life 'Jan Mark is like one big Granny with a head full of deplorable memories' but what, I wonder, of the children of 2020? How, they may think, could all those same activities, events, intercommunications have taken place in those dim days without help from an i-pad or an i-phone or accounts with Facebook and Instagram? How could the poor sods have survived?

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-one-that-got-away>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/241>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/brian-alderson>