



The World of Children's Books Part 8 - THE AGE OF CHANGE

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[31](#) [2]

Article Category:

The World of Children's Books

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Robert Leeson is author and reviewer, practitioner and commentator, and a regular visitor to all parts of the World of Children's Books. An optimistic traveller, he pauses to put present time in perspective and sees publishers, librarians and teachers involved in and facing the challenge of THE AGE OF CHANGE.

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Fiction for the young is going through a period of crisis while it works out who it is for. Are the 'powerful privileges of the literary elite', as Margaret Meek calls them, to become human rights - shared by everyone? The future of the literature is linked very much with the expansion of democracy in all aspects of life. Reading, writing and the vote have been linked from the beginning. The future of literature for the young, with fiction at its heart, forms an important part of our striving for a better life for all. So the literature which came into existence to give children a more abundant life cannot now declare that it has no more lessons to teach and that when it says children it doesn't mean children.

Each of the separate parts of what is known as the children's book world, parents, teachers, librarians, publishers, writers and booksellers, has a very real interest in the future success of the literature. History shows that success depends upon the working together of those parts. The potential for this symbiotic relationship is enormous. Crisis, doubts, hesitations have arisen just when the means of making enormous advances had come to hand.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there were complaints of 'too many books'. There never were, though it seemed sometimes 'too many' titles were being published. But if publishers, even when they agreed there were 'too many', never seemed to heed the mournful cries, it was not due to ill-will or stupidity. Economic developments external to publishing caused them to depend upon borrowed money to service the storage and turnover of their incredibly varied produce (does any other trade have 250,000 stock items?). Thus publishers were driven more and more to boost turnover, not simply to raise profits, but to pay the bank. This led to shorter print runs on the one hand and a feverish interest in best-seller flagships for their sales campaign. Those same economic trends fed the belief in business circles that somehow private commerce might flourish if public expenditure could be reduced. For publishers, and for children's publishers especially, this was like cutting the veins to increase the blood circulation. Some publishing directors may privately treasure the high-income bracket tax cuts which have been the 'reward' for all the book budget cuts, the closed branch libraries and sacked librarians. But public sector misfortunes have been visited rapidly upon the private sector. Big cuts in library expenditure have been followed by massive drops in hardback book production.

This has not led, as might be presumed, to a rise in quality. Loss of confidence, sometimes disorientation as publishers look round for alternative markets, do not create an atmosphere in which new talents may be sought and encouraged. Courting the 'conscience' market, or cajoling parents into buying books for their offspring by advertising in child-ware shops, may help. Wild experiments with puzzle books, competition books, computer books, may generate some cash, but will leave the essential future market, an expanding young reading and buying public, insufficiently involved and affected.

One problem is that children's publishers do not sufficiently study nor easily understand this market, going generally by what has sold rather than what might sell, or even less, by what is wanted. If publishers' editors would sit, for example, in library selection meetings and see the books proffered by the trade, not neatly arranged in exhibition stands, but in piles where the repetitiveness of theme and treatment invites the careful-spending librarian's rejection, they might have second thoughts about their own policies. Consultation between publishers, librarians and teachers is at a fairly low level. Opportunities to meet are lost. The habit, for example, of publishers sending not editors but promotion people to library and education conferences indicates a one-way approach.

Editors by upbringing and education are not automatically in touch with the way of life and thinking of the majority of consumers. This may change over the years, as the proportion of ex-comprehensive pupils recruited rises and that of ex-private school pupils correspondingly drops. But the will to share experience is the main thing and any editor who is prepared to spend several weeks in the year, in classroom or library, sitting in on bookshop sessions at lunch time, observing discreetly what kids pick up and put down, what they say, would gain immense and valuable experience.

There has to be the will to develop lists as part of a literature which aims to appeal to young people right across the spectrum of ability and interest, instead of, as too often, the two-tier approach which puts prime editorial effort into producing potential prize winners and hives off the rest to specialist attention, producing books for the 'reluctant reader' and so on.

The trouble is not all on one side. Librarians and teachers will, or should, admit that they understand little of the problem of finding new writers, for example. Yet it is in this library-school network and through its lines of communication to the community, children and parents, that some of these problems may be most fruitfully discussed and perhaps tackled.

Getting to know the reader sounds a fairly trite aim, but I would hazard a guess that lack of such knowledge is one of the greatest obstacles to giving children's literature a broader appeal. Yet the readers, nearly 8 million of them, from 5 to 18, are there to be met. It is from the school library that two thirds of the children may get hold of a book. A properly run school library should have most children visit it, one way or another.

The school librarian is the most active of all intermediaries, can do the most good or the most harm, in bridging the gap between reading under compulsion and reading for pleasure. Where the school library is connected with, providing room for, or running the school bookshop the influence on taste and choice as well as the knowledge of it is considerable in the best cases. It is an area of knowledge little tapped by those who make books. For the visiting writer, the school librarian is a key figure, particularly if seen as ally and not outcast by the English Department. The modern well-run school library is the ideal place for the writer to meet the reader, and that goes for other book-makers. The school bookshop is the perfect example of a successful public/private operation. It retains the merit of the market, in that the girl or boy can choose, buy and own the book they wish. But one has to face the fact that it would not exist without public backing. This it gets in the form of funds from school or parents, and a great deal of unpaid work by teachers, school librarians, often pupils and parents.

The opening of 6 - 7,000 school bookshops in a period when some commercial bookshops have closed, and others were kept going only by the dedication of their owners, is a remarkable thing. Even more remarkable is the fact that if one were to ask the MD of the average publishing house, did you know that nearly 7,000 new retail outlets had opened since the 1960's? - the response would be a baffled stare. School bookshops account for some £3 million worth of sales each year, by one estimate. For many young people - and in some cases their parents - they bring a bookshop within reach for

the first time. A school bookshop can also be a community bookshop.

The number of school bookshops could double before saturation point is reached, since 'shop' in this context can mean anything from a special room with display stands, to a box of books on a table in the hall of a village school on a Friday afternoon. What limits the potential for development is the failure to take school bookshops seriously - both on the part of many publishers (at top level rather than the children's department) and on the part of many schools. The existence of the bookshop along with the library is a guide to how seriously the school takes reading. My own observations show, unfortunately, that a number of schools regard books, other than specific texts, as either irrelevant or a positive distraction from the serious business of getting students through the exam funnel. But the same observations (in nearly 500 schools) show that in a sympathetic school the efforts of one or two teachers keen on reading for pleasure can transform the situation. One can assert that until such opportunities to borrow, buy and keep are freely available to all children, no final judgement can be made upon whether books appeal to them or not.

Yet no school on its own can offer the range of books which a properly stocked area library provides, nor the opportunity of linking reading with spare time activity which the club atmosphere of such a library, run by welcoming staff, can give. It is in the area library that the community can best give to all children an equal opportunity to enjoy the widest variety of books, often in association with audio visual material, games and vital information. Librarians who see it as their duty to safeguard books from children are a vanishing species. The librarians who are trying to make the library a place where young people spend their spare time comfortably and enjoyably, increase in number. Here again the cuts have come at a moment of real breakthrough in attracting youngsters beyond the one third who regularly use libraries.

A key question, is, who is the typical library user? Peter H. Mann in his pamphlet **Book Publishing, Book Selling and Book Reading** (1979) has something to say on the subject which reinforces McLellan's evidence about the 'social profile' of the library customer.

As middle class people read more than working class people so there is a danger of thinking of reading being a predominantly middle class activity. This is a dangerously wrong viewpoint. The working classes are roughly twice the size of the middle classes, so if one looks at a profile by class of those people now reading books, more than half of them will be working class.

Assumptions about book reading and borrowing, have to be revised in favour of a broader view of the reader and potential reader.

The area library is very much involved in the business of winning readers, and a key problem is not simply whether the library is gloomy and forbidding or modern, light, well-stocked and entertaining, but what choice of books it offers.

At this point in the argument, murmurings are sometimes heard from those who feel writers are going to be put to the rack to make them produce books for the 'down market' child whether they like it or not. No unwilling horse should be led to water. One of the most significant developments of the 1970s was the arrival of new authors from social and geographical areas outside the old magic circle. A reviewed literature means a fresh stock of authors supplementing the existing. There is room for both.

This is why creative writing in schools is of importance far beyond the English Department. I have tried to show historically how writing (the means to command) has been given much less importance in education than reading (the means to obey), particularly where the schooling of working-class children is concerned. *They*, after all, are the descendants of that story making population whose oral tales, often in local dialect, were relegated to second class status and obscurity, by print and the social attitudes of those who controlled it. As the Opies' **Lore and Language of School Children** (1959) has shown, much of the oral tradition has survived in the school yard. Bringing that creativity of the spoken word into the school classroom, and taking it out into the wider community through the medium of writing, is an important part of the renewal of a literature which will make sense to the young. Its social potential is enormous.

Giving the 'privilege of the literary elite' to the 'ordinary' child, then, involves a challenge to the existing order.

Creative writing, in its broadest sense of allowing children to bring into existence from their own minds and selves what was not there before, however modest that may seem to an outside observer, is more than a question of restoring a cultural heritage to its rightful owners. It is a vital necessity for development of language and literature. For it is the invisible majority which constantly renews the spoken language, to the fury of pedants, inventing new words and recalling old ones from the past, changing their meaning by using them 'wrongly' just as it is the 'guardians' of the obsessively correct use of written language who are slowly squeezing it to death.

Speech among the majority of children varies widely still from area to area and constantly from month to month and year to year. Any writer attempting to quote verbatim the latest street talk in dialogue may find when the book is published nine months later that the terms are already out of date. Yet it is the speech rhythms, idioms, cadences, metaphors of this spoken language which is the resource from which the literature may be renewed.

A little late in the day, the strength, variety and value of 'non-standard English' is gaining recognition. Why restrict oneself to the handful of synonyms in a thesaurus when each county dialect offers a complete stock of its own? The very richness of non-standard English is in itself a challenge to the whole system of education and literature, but a challenge that must be met. London schools at the moment are grappling (or not grappling) with new streams of language like Creole. In the Spring 1984 issue of **Dragons Teeth** magazine, children's writer Petronella Breinburg discussed this problem, contrasting claims about 'multi-cultural education' with 'an objective attempt to eradicate the social speech and language of one cultural group, e.g. the blacks of Caribbean background'. Her conversations with Black pupils vividly recall the experience of working-class pupils in pre-war grammar schools where the local dialect was the object of 'eradication' and the confused and contradictory response this evoked in the pupils who were being culturally 'straightened out'.

What is striking is that the dynamic writing from within the black community, for example from writers like Linton Kwesi Johnson, proved to appeal to young people both white and black, and the 'non-standard' nature of the language proved no barrier, but part of its appeal.

Can mainstream publishers make sure of these new generations of young writers? Some, perhaps. One or two are making the effort. It is a matter of whether the publishing system is flexible enough. But there are alternatives to orthodox publishing: there are community publishers, neighbourhood councils, bookshops, literacy classes, worker writers' circles, WEA classes, teachers' centres, schools themselves, local libraries. Sometimes 'local' publication is anything but restricted. Centerprise reached a sale of over 10,000 copies with the poems of Vivian Usherwood.

In these publications local dialect, local language colour is not a disadvantage as it might seem to publishers with their national base and heavy central capital involvement. Nor is it essential that the critical apparatus should be able to digest or even understand the alternative publication, provided it can meet the critical response of its readers. The verdict of Art Council pundits that the works published by worker writers' circles lack literary merit is being reluctantly abandoned.

Mainstream publishers *can* work with the alternative publishing network; indeed they neglect it at their peril, because this is where new writers are most likely to appear. So far the alternative publishers have not made great inroads into the field of fiction for the young. There have been some feminist stories for small children, some teenage writings, original and re-told folk stories from ethnic minorities. These are modest beginnings. The important thing is that, unlike the alternative movement of Chartists days, they are not abandoning the 'wide and fruitful plain' of young reading to others.

Our new Renaissance, like our New Reformation, undoubtedly means a great deal of change and upset for conventional attitudes in the children's book world. Both have all the problems of the new, and the promise. The book will survive the age of change if the new is recognised and welcomed by the established, if all the public and private elements work together for a new literature looking outwards for its new readers.

This article is an edited extract from **Reading and Righting**, a new book by **Robert Leeson**, published this month by Collins. We are grateful to Collins and Bob Leeson for permission to use this material. For more about this book and

Bob Leeson, see Editor's Page and the Authorgraph.

Page Number:

4

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