



Making the Charts - book style

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The Book Marketing Council, set up by the Publishers Association to increase book sales, runs promotions lasting a few weeks around a specific theme, usually featuring a Top 12 or Top 20 list of authors or titles, e.g. Best Novels of our Time, Authors USA. A third of their budget is devoted to promoting children's books, and previously we have seen the *Children's Choice* campaign (1984) and *Best Books for Babies* (1985). The 1986 promotion was *Teen Read*, an unusual attempt to target a group rarely identified as such in the book trade, where publishing and bookselling is divided into adults' and children's departments.

Preparations for **Teen Read** involved preliminary research by Michael Pountney, and a good deal of consumer research, for Maggie van Reenen, BMC's director, had decided on a change of policy. Instead of asking a panel of media celebrities to choose the Top 20 teenage books, the BMC would compile a pool of 100 likely best-sellers, and then appoint a teenage jury to select the Top 20. The usual practice of inviting publishers to submit titles for the promotion (which they would back with cash if chosen), was modified by asking booksellers and librarians to tell the BMC what was currently popular. Thus the Top 100 did have a basis in consumer opinion, as well as including a number of new titles which their publishers thought were likely to sell in the future, judging by their authors' previous track record.

The choice of titles for the Top 100 indicates a wide view of teenage reading and of the 11-14 age range intended as the main target of **Teen Read**. As well as many well-known teenage novels, there are books for older children, and a few adult titles. It was not the intention of this promotion to deal in detail with adult fiction read by teenagers, but instead to boost sales of the top end of children's publishing. The few adult books on the list are mainly SF and fantasy. There are novelties such as books about pop stars, a few humorous titles, a little poetry; but the main body of the list is prose fiction. Within this we find fantasy love stories, school stories, thrillers and formula romance.

In early October a colourful, fashionably-designed **Teen Read** newspaper was published and made available in bookshops. The Top 100 books were grouped in categories and annotated, and there were messages from authors, Grange Hill characters, and sports stars, together with competitions and news from the sponsors, Nike sports gear. Many teachers wrote to BMC for copies to use in the classroom, after seeing them in bookshops (there are NO MORE). Entries for the competitions were still coming in in December. The newspaper design and layout illustrates the whole concept of the campaign, which is that since teenagers were vulnerable to peer-group pressure, reading for pleasure has to be sold as a fashionable peer-group activity.

The jury selection process lasted for several months. Far from my original speculation that the jurors were bound to be

the children of media celebrities, they were instead chosen from schools in seven parts of the country (from Scotland to the south-east), which had agreed to involve their pupils in reading and reporting back. When choosing a juror to carry their votes to London they were not necessarily after a 'born reader', but for somebody who was lively, and good at discussion. In one case a highly reluctant reader was chosen - who had experienced a complete conversion after tackling **The Lord of the Rings!**

Finally the 12 jurors had a long weekend in London, and after 2 days of argument, some of it televised, they got down to 21 titles, could not bear to reject one of them, and chose a Top 21 by the evening of 13th October. I spoke to the three Londoners, who emphasised that the list was based on their personal choice and the votes of their schoolfriends which they had been mandated to bring. Individually they were quite scornful of the formula fiction. (Maggie van Reenen commented afterwards that their tastes had become more literary during the weekend!) On the near misses which didn't make the Top 21, there was enthusiasm for Cynthia Voigt's writing, especially **The Runner**, and Peck's **Are you in the house alone?** Any title *not* in the Top 100 you'd like to recommend? **The Borribles**. How should bookshops market books for teenagers? Separately, they thought, not among the children's books, in a section adjacent to adult fiction.

Now for a closer look at that Top 21. Maggie says that the list wasn't 'cooked' by BMC to provide a spread of genres and publishers: whatever balance there is between quality and popular fiction emerged from the jurors' discussions and wasn't directed by the foreman (Pete Johnson, an English lecturer). It is true that there is some duplication, e.g. two books about the aftermath of nuclear war, and a lot of fantasy, while there is no realistic adventure-thriller (there are not many of those for teenagers anyway). But if not 'directed' the jury seems to have been remarkably 'diplomatic', arriving at a neat spread of publishers and types of books.

Breaking down this Top 21 into categories we find:

Established teenage novels, well-known before the promotion: **Across the barricades**, **Buddy**, **It's my life**, **Tex**, **Forever**, **Goodnight Mr. Tom** (a children's book really); **Stranger with my face**; plus one teenage novel new to the British market: **Breaking up**.

Fantasy and SF: **The changeover**, **Children of the dust**, **The dark is rising**, **Lord of the Rings**, **When the wind blows**, **Hitchhiker's guide** (the last three are bridge-builders to adult fiction, and popular with all ages)

Humour: **The Adrian Mole** diaries (another bridge-builder from the adult list); **Spitting Image** (also TV tie-in).

School stories: **Batteries not included** (humorous SF in a school setting); **First term at Trebizon**.

Formula romance: **101 ways to meet Mr. Right**, **Malibu Summer**, The **Caitlin** trilogy.

Readers of **BfK** will be familiar with the 'quality' titles in this list. The American series titles I found quick to read, enjoyable, escapist, and not over-harmful except in the lack of any distinction in the writing, and a profusion of clichés which bordered on self-parody.

Batteries not included, the first one in the **Not quite human** series, has the advantage of appealing to reluctant boy readers. It's about a scientist who has made an android in the form of a teenage boy, and of the android's adventures in junior high school as he pretends to be real. Humour mainly derives from Chip's habit of taking idiomatic expressions like 'Keep your eyes peeled' literally.

The representative Sweet Dreams title is **101 ways to meet Mr. Right**, which I found diverting and even true to life describing the girl's feelings when she falls in love. A pity the boy's identity is given away in the blurb.

Sweet Valley High is a 30-book series about twin sisters at a Californian high school; the action alternates between family and boyfriend problems, and more dramatic events as in **Malibu Summer** where one girl saves a pop star's life and the other rescues a little girl from a flooded bridge. Apart from all the clichés about true love, it is again a pleasant diversion.

The **Caitlin** Trilogy is something else. Starting off like American high school soap opera, it turns into melodrama when rich, beautiful but spoilt and proud Caitlin accidentally injures a little boy, and lets his baby-sitter take the blame. From then on it resembles nothing so much as a Victorian novel where the sinful heroine strives to expiate her past, and throughout the other two volumes Caitlin seeks redemption. **East Lynne** crossed with **Gone with the Wind** (it's set in Virginia)! I found the story compulsive, the cliches appalling, and Caitlin herself impossible to believe in.

Like the **Sweet Valley High series**, **Caitlin** is 'created by Francine Pascal', and although it is of course legitimate to use another author's characters, or novelise a screen-play, I am deeply suspicious of the practice of omitting the author of the story's text from the cover and spine, thus selling the book on Pascal's name. What does 'creation' mean? A three-paragraph synopsis? A chapter-by-chapter outline? Anyway, Joanna Campbell is the 'real' author of this text.

I became interested in the **Teen Read** promotion because all this year I have been working on a booklist of fiction for teenagers, for the School Library Association. The criteria were that the books should be in paperback, published, fairly recently, and selected for their quality. There should be a balance between 'literary' titles which would probably appeal to a minority, and more popular books which go down well with reluctant readers.

By arranging my annotations according to genre I also hoped to demonstrate the variety of themes available. Some genres were specially devised: my categories were Family relationships and love stories (approximately a third of annotations), Adventure stories (including historical fiction), Fantasy/SF etc., Ethnic minority experiences, Heroines, School life and hobbies, and Humour.

Given that many of the Top 100 were outside the range of my criteria (no poetry, non-fiction or formula fiction), it was interesting to find that about 25 of them were also on my list, and that we also had several authors in common, though chose different titles. With the Top 21 I had 8 titles in common, and another 3 where I chose different books by the same author.

I sent a list of my chosen 165 titles to two ILEA librarians, asking them to indicate the books most (and least) popular with their pupils. Here are those titles most popular in one or the other school, which were also in the Top 100:

Forever, Buddy, Tex, Earthsea trilogy, **Adrian Mole** diaries, **It's my life, I love you, stupid!, A proper little Nooryeff** - and other books on my list were ticked to show moderate enthusiasm.

What is more interesting, though, for a teacher or librarian who has studied the Top 100, is to refresh their memory with some other titles from my list which were *not* chosen for **Teen Read**, but *are* popular with teenagers:

Tiger Eyes, Nobody's Family's going to Change, See you Thursday, My Darling my Hamburger, Confessions of a Teenage Baboon, Slake's Limbo, The Friends and Edith Jackson, Roll of Thunder hear my Cry, Fungus the Bogeyman, Lingard's Maggie quartet, My Darling Villain, Hey Dollface, Second Star to the Right, Your Friend Rebecca, A Formal Feeling, Sweet Frannie, Sam and Me, Breaking Training, This School is driving me Crazy, Empty World, Break of Dark, Piggy in the Middle, Running Scared and The Great Gilly Hopkins.

So where do we go from here? This being the first time the BMC had studied the teenage market, Maggie van Reenen commented, after reading the Top 100, that books for teenagers were a good idea, as they catered for readers who were not emotionally mature and lacked experience of life, but wanted to read about serious issues. They hope that the book trade will commission more research, and that the idea of a teenage book promotion will be taken up elsewhere, perhaps by a teenage magazine just as **Parents** have taken over the baby-book promotion.

Although a mild criticism of the Top 21 was that 'the BMC are all set to promote just those titles which seem to be selling quite well already' (**TES**, 17.10.86.), Poutney's research showed that under 50% of the age-group 13-17 buy books, so any catching up on those top titles that was done by the non-readers would have increased sales to a new market. That was exactly what W.H. Smith reported during the promotion - new customers coming into the shops and heading for the teenage sections, with sales significantly increased.

With a promotion aimed at making new readers, rather than persuading existing book-buyers to switch their purchases in another direction, it's the marketing environment within the bookshop which works on that vital peer-group pressure. At a recent Children's Book Circle meeting on teenage reading, Elizabeth Attenborough of Puffin said that cross-merchandising would be a good idea. Instead of hiding teenage books among children's books, put them next to the magazines, LPs, cassettes and film tie-ins. We have to admit the power of the market: W.H. Smith stock more quality teenage fiction since they started selling **Sweet Dreams** in 1983, even if they still believe in putting teenage fiction in the children's section.

I wonder if children's paperback publishers who *don't* want to run a teenage imprint, would try to be more helpful to booksellers by packaging their occasional teenage title somehow differently from their children's paperbacks? The book trade has finally realised that with books selling well to children and parents, this book-buying habit must be preserved to adulthood, and that means catering for teenagers as a special group.

Jessica Yates was a comprehensive school librarian with ILEA for 9 years, and is now the mother of two young children and a freelance children's book reviewer. Her book list Teenager to Young Adult was published recently by the School Library Association. It contains over 150 recommendations and will be of interest and use to secondary teachers, librarians and school bookshop organisers, as well as perhaps to booksellers wondering what to put in a Young Adult section. Jessica also identifies 'controversial books you don't offer to under-13s'.

Teenage to Young Adult available from SLA, Liden Library, Barrington Close, Liden, Swindon SN3 6HF, £2.40 (£2.90 non-members). Cheques payable to SLA.

Teen Read Top Twenty-One

- **Across the Barricades** - Joan Lingard, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 02167 7, £6.50; Puffin, 014 03.0637 4, £ 1.75
- **Adrian Mole: The Secret Diary/The Growing Pains Batteries Included** - Sue Townsend, Methuen, £5.95 hbk, £1.95 pbk Seth McEvoy, Grafton, 0 583 30982 8, £1.95
- **Breaking Up** - Norma Klein, Pan Horizons, 0 330 29293 5, £1.75
- **Buddy** - Nigel Hinton, Dent, 0 460 06089 9, £7.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.1571 3, £1.75
- **Caitlin Trilogy** - Joanna Campbell, Transworld Bantam, £1.50 each
- **The Changeover** - Margaret Mahy, Dent, 0 460 06153 4, £6.95; Magnet, 0 416 52270 X, £1.75
- **Children of the Dust** - Louise Lawrence, Bodley Head, 0 370 30679 1, £4.50 pbk
- **The Dark Is Rising** - Susan Cooper, Bodley Head, 0 370 30815 8, £6.95; Puffin, 014 03.0799 0, £1.95
- **First Term at Trebizon** - Anne Digby, Grafton, 0 583 30427 3, £1.75
- **Forever** - Judy Blume, Gollancz, 0 575 02144 6, £5.95; Pan Horizons, 0 330 28533 5, £1.75
- **Good night Mr Tom** - Michelle Magorian, Viking Kestrel, 0 7226 5701 3, £7.50; Puffin, 014 03.1541 1, £2.25
- **Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy** - Douglas Adams, Pan, 0 330 25864 8, £1.95
- **It's My Life** - Robert Leeson, Fontana Lions, 0 00 671783 7, £1.75
- **Lord of the Rings Trilogy** - J.R. R. Tolkien, Allen & Unwin, 0 048 23200 9, £9.25; 0 048 23229 7, £8.95 pbk
- **Malibu Summer** - Kate Williams, Transworld Bantam, Sweet Valley High, 0 553 26050 2, £1.50
- **101 Ways to Meet Mr Right** - Janet Quin-Harkin, Transworld Bantam, Sweet Dreams, 0553 24946 0, £ 1.50
- **Spitting Image** - Lloyd, Fluck & Law, Faber, 0 571 13670 2, £3.95 pbk
- **Stranger With My Face** - Lois Duncan, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10913 2, £6.25; Pan Horizons, 0 330 29255 2, £1.75
- **Tex** - S E Hinton, Gollancz, 0 575 02710 X, £5 95:.. Fontana Lions, 0 00 671763 2, £1.95
- **When the Wind Blows** - Raymond Briggs. Hamish Hamilton, 0241 10721 0, £4.25; Penguin, 014 00.6606 3, £2.95

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