



Editor's Page ? September 1990

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News and comment from the Editor.

Why bother with books?

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This may seem a strange question from a magazine like ours but, in an age when so much else competes for children's attention, we need to be sharply and constantly aware of why reading matters and of the conditions which best promote it. **BfK 64**, miscellaneous though it is, re-examines some of our basic beliefs.

On page 4, for instance, HMI Trevor Dickinson's 'The Need for Story' is an affirmation of a whole professional career - as, in its different way, is Margaret Meek's celebration of the novels of Rosemary Sutcliff, 'Of the Minstrel Kind' on page 28. Similarly, Faith Jaques's **Orchard Book of Nursery Rhymes**, discussed on page 25, crowns more than forty years' worth of commitment to the notion that books help us to be more fully and satisfyingly human. As Trevor Dickinson puts it:

*'I know that being a reader doesn't guarantee that we know **ourselves** or that we're more sensitive to those who share our space. Nonetheless, I can't escape the faith that our sustained contact with the efforts of good writers to grapple with life's eternal questions at least gives us the chance to be a little better. It gives us less excuse for not being so.'*

Interestingly, Dr John Quicke's non-fiction article on page 20 comes to much the same conclusion - that the most important thing books can do for handicapped people is to make it clear that's what they are, *people*. Not that our distinctive ability to represent ourselves to ourselves comes easily. Charles Causley's lifelong wrestle with words is explored in Morag Styles' Authorgraph across our centre-spread - with our front cover bringing a **BfK** first: a complete poem from his re-issued **Figgie Hobbin**, newly and magnificently illustrated by Gerald Rose. For a rather different perspective on the rigours and perils of communication, though, turn to page 26 and Mary Hoffman's 'Separated by the Same Language?' which takes a cool look at the tension between US and UK English in children's books. Are youngsters really as bothered by transatlantic differences in vocabulary and idiom as some editors maintain?

Maybe we should ask a librarian ... while we've got some around. For one of the most depressing features of current LMS budgeting is the threat it poses to School Library Services. That's why we make no apology for Margaret Koberl's reminder, on page 22, of what they have to offer - an account based on her own Lancashire service but applying nationwide. So do the figures cited by the Publishers Association for essential spending on schoolbooks (back page) and Eunice McMullen's worrying report on the Pan/Macmillan School Library Competition (page 30). Altogether, these pieces set the current debate about reading standards in a context that's wider than some are willing to allow - it being both more comfortable, and cheaper, to suggest that teaching methods are all that's at issue. But can we really dismiss as irrelevant the booming sales of computers, videos and TV channels-in-the-sky throughout a decade in which school book-purchasing has slumped by thirty-five percent?

In short, it's our view that questions about what children can read are inseparable in the end from questions about what they do read . or perhaps *should* be reading. Helping to identify the latter is where **BfK** comes in.

Enjoy the issue!

Chris

A new Sponsor for BfK

A magazine like **Books for Keeps** can expand in only two ways. The first, and best way, is through a substantial increase in its subscriptions-so, dear reader, please promote us shamelessly to colleagues, family, friends, acquaintances and the person sitting opposite you on the bus since our shoe-string budget falls well short of the usual advertising outlets. Word-of-mouth recommendation really is crucial to us.

Another way to expand, though, is through appropriate sponsorship. This, as a short-term measure, enables an increase in what we can offer ... with more therefore to be recommended by word of mouth. So **BfK** was delighted to accept the sponsorship of the British Council in 1988, and we're happy now to announce a three-year sponsorship agreement with Books for Children, the nation's leading quality children's book club (see their advertisement on the facing page). Books for Children's generosity in sponsoring projects in the children's book world is well-established: the Club already funds both the Eleanor Farjeon and Mother Goose Awards and last October enabled a major exhibition of children's book

illustration to be mounted at the Commonwealth Institute in London. It's an organisation **BfK** knows well since our current editor has been a member of the Club's Book Selection Panel since it was launched more than thirteen years ago. We're very happy indeed to be associated with a company whose track record in promoting the best in children's books is exemplary.

How, then, will we use the additional funds sponsorship makes available to us? Well, till now the number of pages in each issue of **BfK** has been wholly determined by the amount of advertising that's carried. Our plan is to expand our standard 24 page issue to a standard 28 pages regardless of advertising. The additional pages will be used both to increase the scope of our reviewing - of hardbacks and audio-tapes in particular - and to extend our coverage of news items. The January 1991 issue, we hope, should see the changes in place.

Thank you, Books for Children!

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