



Junior to Middling

Article Author:

[Chris Powling](#) [1]

[87](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Chris Powling reviews recent hardbacks.

Chris Powling takes his pick from new hardbacks

<!--break-->

Books which can carry young readers from the new fluency of Key Stage One through the new reluctance that tends to arrive around Key Stage Three depend on two crucial features: a turn-over-the-page momentum and an unashamed relish for language. Everything else is optional.

Julia Jarman's **The Jessame Stories** (Heinemann, 0 434 96392 5, £7.99), for instance, rely for their hook on children's 'satiated curiosity about the home-life of other children... in this case of Jessame Aduke Olusanya who's 'small looking up' compared with her mum who's 'tall looking down'. Mix in Granpa Williams, Uncle Sharp and Aunt Gbee (whose G is just about the only silent thing about her) and on offer is a family that manages to be completely ordinary yet quite irresistible.

So is the setting - Bethnal Green, with the Museum of Childhood close by. Jessame's exploits are described so exactly you feel you're inside her head, sharing them. Add Duncan Smith's bold, inventive line drawings and the book is a delight from start to finish.

The same could be said of Paula Danziger's **You Can't Eat Your Chicken Pox, Amber Brown** (Heinemann, 0 434 97569 9, £3.99). Here, the illustrations come from Tony Ross at his breezy, black-and-white best, but there's plenty of breezy black-and-white in the writing, too, since Amber describes her incident-prone trip from New York to Paris via London with the same frankness and engaging good humour she brings to her parents' imminent divorce. Of course, Paula Danziger incorporates shades of grey as well but Amber's growing awareness of the complexity of life is never allowed to compromise the childlike sharpness of her viewpoint. It's easy to underestimate the sheer skill that lies behind a sparky, first-person narrative like this.

Robert Nye's **Beowulf** (Orion, 1 85881 0310, £9.99) is much more obviously literary. First published in 1968, this hardback reprint feels like the return of an old friend - though one who's not without the odd flaw. I still groan at 'Out in the black fen something stirred' but this momentary lapse is soon overcome:

'A trail of blood was left on the mud where the creature crawled. This was because it fed on living things and had grown so far and swollen in its greed that bits of the people it had eaten dripped from its scummy lips and crooked teeth.'

Nye's writing grips as powerfully as Beowulf's famous fist... more powerfully, in my estimation, even than **Dragon Slayer** - Rosemary Sutcliff's version of this wonderful Old English poem.

Jean Ure's **Watchers at the Shrine** (Methuen, 0 416 18824 9, £9.99) also has a shortcoming: it's far too short. Yes, I

realise it's the final volume of the trilogy that began with **Plague 99** and continued with **Come Lucky April** but so compelling is this portrayal of post-disaster Britain a century and a half hence, and so important the theme of individual integrity pitted against group conformity, I'd have welcome much, much more. Jean Ure's writing relies on a sort of penny-plain directness to transmit her message. Put most 12-plus-year-old imaginations on the receiving end of prose like this, though, and they'll erupt into tuppence-coloured:

'Round a smouldering fire were squatted a group of perhaps twenty to thirty human beings -but such human beings as he had never in his life seen before.

Dwarfish, twisted, misshapen, they hunkered about the burning ember...'

For strong stomachs only.

Altogether gentler is Lesley Howarth's **Maphead** (Walker, 0 7445 2458 X, £8.99). Her first novel, **The Flower King**, was shortlisted for both the Whitbread and the Guardian awards so she's set herself the hardest of acts to follow. Could she possibly re-mobilise that glorious verbal exuberance, that tightrope-treading combination of the lush and the sharply precise?

No problem.

Not only that, there's a marked improvement in the plotting and structure of her story - certainly the weakest aspect of her earlier book. Now she tells the tale of Boothe, aka Maphead, whose father Powers is a visitor from the Subtle World which exists alongside our own. Boothe, however, being the offspring of Power's relationship with a woman struck by lightning during an electric storm, is both Subtle and Earthly... and longs to track down his real mother. And so he does, in a tale that's weird, moving and funny by turns.

Language, though, is its chief attraction. Maphead can project meaning pictorially onto his own scalp but he must master human speech if his quest is to succeed. Thus, in a writerly tour de force, his progress is measured by the very words he uses - often with hilarious effect:

'She fished out her book, "No waiting between nine and six. That sign over there. I'm booking your father."

Booking your father. Booking. Your father. Maphead ran it over twice, three times. Powers liked books. Books were ideal. But somewhere there was a threat, he was sure.

Suddenly he laughed sardonically. "Hey," he said, mimicking the acid tones of the man in the black shell-suit. "Hey. Get a life, why don't you?"

Whether setting a scene, describing events or analysing emotion, Lesley Howarth has a William Maybe-like ability to mint language afresh as she uses it. So, like that Old Master, she won't be to everyone's taste. Also like him, she has a touch of genius. Remember, you heard it here first.

Page Number:

28

Source URL (retrieved on Feb '20): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/87/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/junior-to-middling>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/chris-powling>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/87>