



## Editorial ? January 1996

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[96](#) [2]

Article Category:

Editorial

Byline:

News and comment from the Editor.

### Kinds Of Prospero

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If Sebastian Walker were introducing this month's **BfK** he'd direct the reader at once to our centre-spread authorgraph of Philippe Dupasquier. After this, a little reluctantly because he always preferred illustrators to authors, he'd indicate the articles by Beverley Naidoo and Susan Price. Only then, probably, would he refer to the pieces by Louis Baum, Julia Eccleshare and David Morton which give the issue its special focus - each of them an account of children's book trade facts and figures he'd regard as far from central to the enterprise.

How do we know this?

Well, one source is the interview he gave **BfK** in January 1985 when he was disarmingly off-hand about the contribution made by publishing houses, including his own, to the production of a good book. 'We're just the clerk and the nanny,' he insisted at the time. 'We do the dirty work of the commercial world.'

Of course, he had a point. Few would deny that a publishing team, however accomplished, exists to support other talents - the individual writers and artists who create, as Margaret Clark recommends on our back page, 'from the heart?'

Mere clerks, though? Only nannies? Not according to Maurice Sendak, a man by no means easy to impress, who summed up Sebastian Walker himself as 'a kind of Prospero?'. In her new biography, **Sebastian Walker 1942-91**, Mirabel Cecil borrows the phrase for her title... something of a high-risk strategy since she's writing about her own brother as well as someone still fresh in the memory of the children's book world. Yet she makes a splendid case for its accuracy.

Much of the book's success stems from its frankness. This is no simple parade of Walker triumphs since the company was formed in 1978: the money made, the prizes won, the innovations in design, production and marketing. True, these are given their due. So, though, is the odd, obsessive personality of the firm's founder. Mirabel Cecil's refusal to overlook her brother's shortcomings, from his snobbery to his ruthlessness, has the happy effect of endorsing her account of his virtues - not least the originality and legendary charm which made his early death from AIDS so tragic. Sebastian Walker was as complex and contradictory as any of the artists he cultivated.

Here, though, is another Prospero-figure:

*?... overwhelmed with business, his chief desire is to have still more. Every new proposal takes possession of his thoughts; he soon balances probabilities, engages in the project, brings it almost to completion, and then forsakes it for another, which he catches with the same alacrity, urges with the same vehemence, and abandons with the same coldness.?*

No, not Gordon Gekko. This is Samuel Johnson's description of Jack Whirler... better known as John Newbery, recognised by most literary historians as the pioneer of publishing for children in the eighteenth century. It comes from John Rowe Townsend's fascinating compilation **Trade and Plumb-Cake For Ever, Huzza!** published by Colt Books a year or so ago - a handy reminder that the Prospero Factor in children's books was there from the beginning and comes in a variety of shapes and forms.

Like Sebastian Walker, John Newbery was held in much affection by those who knew him - provided they weren't on the receiving end of his business methods, that is. In most other respects, the two might have belonged to different species. Where Newbery was a gregarious family man with a hint of Dick Whittington about him, for example, Walker was a shy, often solitary, perfectionist. Newbery, it's suspected, may also have written as well as published his children's books... something which would never have crossed Walker's mind. Indeed, the contrast between their subjects is signalled in the way each book looks: John Rowe Townsend's is chunky, common-sensical and 'adorned with cuts'; Mirabel Cecil's is cool, elegant and designerly.

Beware, though, here's a quotation from the one which could easily have come from the other:

*?... (the) sense of an autocratic and demanding though highly benevolent father is crucial to the understanding of (him) and his career... he treated his writers as though they too were his children. The role of provider was merely extended from these relationships to the more general one of uncle to all the children who bought or read his books.?*

Walker or Newbery?

Newbery, actually. Visitors to Walker's Vauxhall Walk Emporium, however, couldn't fail to spot a certain Plumb-Cake element in its nursery and dining room, its bottomless coffee pot and fresh orange juice apparently on tap. Trade it may be but for both men, it seems, the publishing of children's books - like the writing and illustrating of them - also comes best 'from the heart'.

Mirabel Cecil tells a story of an early audit at Walker Books when the accountants insisted *'?You've got to cut down on frivolities.?' Sebastian asked what they meant by frivolities.*

*'?Well, these fresh flowers," they said.*

*"I'll cut down on accountants before I cut down on fresh flowers," he replied crisply.?*

To that, I'm pretty sure, John Newbery would have responded with a loud 'Huzza!'.

Enjoy the issue.

**A Kind of Prospero - Sebastian Walker 1942-91**, Mirabel Cecil, Walker, 0 7445 4423 8, £14.99

**Trade and Plumb-Cake For Ever, Huzza! The Life and Work of John Newbery 1713-1767**, John Rowe Townsend, Colt Books, 0 905899 11 3, £24.95

Page Number:

3

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