



# The ?F? Factor

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**Mike Rouse** celebrates the 'short and exciting' book.

**'Thou shalt not read for pleasure ...'**

**Mike Rouse** comments on

**The ?F? Factor**

The ?F? factor wasn't there when I was young. I would read for hours. Anything I could get my hands on: Christmas annuals, books from jumble sales and especially my beloved comics - **Tip Top, Wonder, Illustrated Chips, Comic Cuts, Film Fun, Radio Fun, Dandy** -there were so many to choose from and sometimes, by a great stroke of luck, from friendly Americans at the local East Anglian bases, american coloured comic books or the comic supplements from the papers with Prince Valiant and the like.

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It was the comics above all that satisfied my reading. Later, **Classic Illustrated** and the small 64-page picture libraries told me stories of the classics in a form I could enjoy and understand. Even then in those carefree days my mother would occasionally say - 'You'll strain your eyes with all that reading, why not go outside and play?' or otherwise entreat me to get 'some fresh air' (we had some in the days of my youth).

But I was relatively free from the ?F? factor, as the young are. Then the harsh world crept up and suddenly it's: 'I thought you had work to do, how come you've got time to sit and read?'; or, when I was a young English teacher, the Head would arrive at the end of a lesson and enquire of my pupils, 'What work have you been doing?' And, believe me, reading did not count - only something written on paper was classified as 'work'.

Now, in middle-age, I'm in the full grip of the ?F? for 'Fidget' factor. Somewhere along the way an extra commandment was instilled in me: 'Thou shalt not read for pleasure' (you've got more important things to do). So, despite managing a Resource Centre, choosing all the fiction for over 1100 secondary pupils and teaching English, I get that guilty feeling if I'm reading for any length of time.

I'm probably too old to be cured, but what relieves the guilt are those blissfully short and exciting books that seem to be published in greater quantities. They're the publishing world's response to the 'Fidget' factor and all the other distractions that we face. From my observations the pressures begin to hit children in Year 8 and somewhere around that time it's impressed upon them that they have more important work to do than read.

For the educated Victorian child from a middle-class home, books could be made to last and run to hundreds of pages. Whenever I think that, I recall an old friend who I interviewed and taped many years ago. She grew up at the turn of the century and loved to read but, coming from a poor background, rarely had a book. Once she won one as a prize and her

mother allowed her to read it for half an hour on a Sunday morning as a treat. She had many household chores to do with several younger siblings, but it meant the book, 'my precious book', lasted so much longer.

Today we're surrounded by books, never perhaps have so many been published for children. And never has there been so much pressure on youngsters, not just from other leisure pursuits equally as valuable as reading, but from the pressure of guilt that reading is a waste of time. I envy the child who can simply let time stand still when immersed in a book. I hope with my own children I'll be able to let them be lost in a book, realising the value of that experience.

In the meantime, thank you for the short books, that I can finish before the 'Fidget' factor makes a coward of me. Recently, I've enjoyed: Adèle Geras's **My Grandmother's Stories** (Mammoth, 0 7497 1718 1, £2.99); Robert Westall's **The Christmas Cat** (Mammoth, 0 7497 1292 9, £2.99); Mary Rayner's **The Echoing Green** (Puffin, 0 14 036006 9, £3.25); Michael Morpurgo's **The Wreck of the Zanzibar** (Mammoth, 0 7497 2620 2, £2.99); Patricia MacLachlan's **Sarah, Plain and Tall** (Puffin, 0 14 032396 1, £2.99); and its sequel **Skylark** (Collins, 0 00 674962 3, £2.99); Gary Paulsen's **Nightjohn** (Macmillan, 0 330 33604 5, £3.50); Alan Gibbons' **Chicken** (Dolphin, 1 85881 051 5, £3.50); and Robert Swindells' **The Go-Ahead Gang** (Puffin, 0 14 036507 9, £3.25).

Now I hear a nagging voice from one of those famous National Curriculum documents on what our children should be reading. Would they be classified as 'demanding reads'?

Not a bad list, though. Something for nearly everyone. Good writers, wonderfully satisfying, but short books. However, if our yardstick is a long-dead author and a long book, they don't measure up. It's quite apparent by now that I'm bedevilled by the 'Fidget' factor and racked with guilt and I haven't even mentioned my passion for picture books...

So, in my present state of mind, short is beautiful, as long as it keeps the 'F' factor at bay.

**Mike Rouse** is Manager at The Resource Centre, Soham Village College in Ely, Cambridgeshire.

We've given paperback details only of the books mentioned. Hardbacks are available in some cases.

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