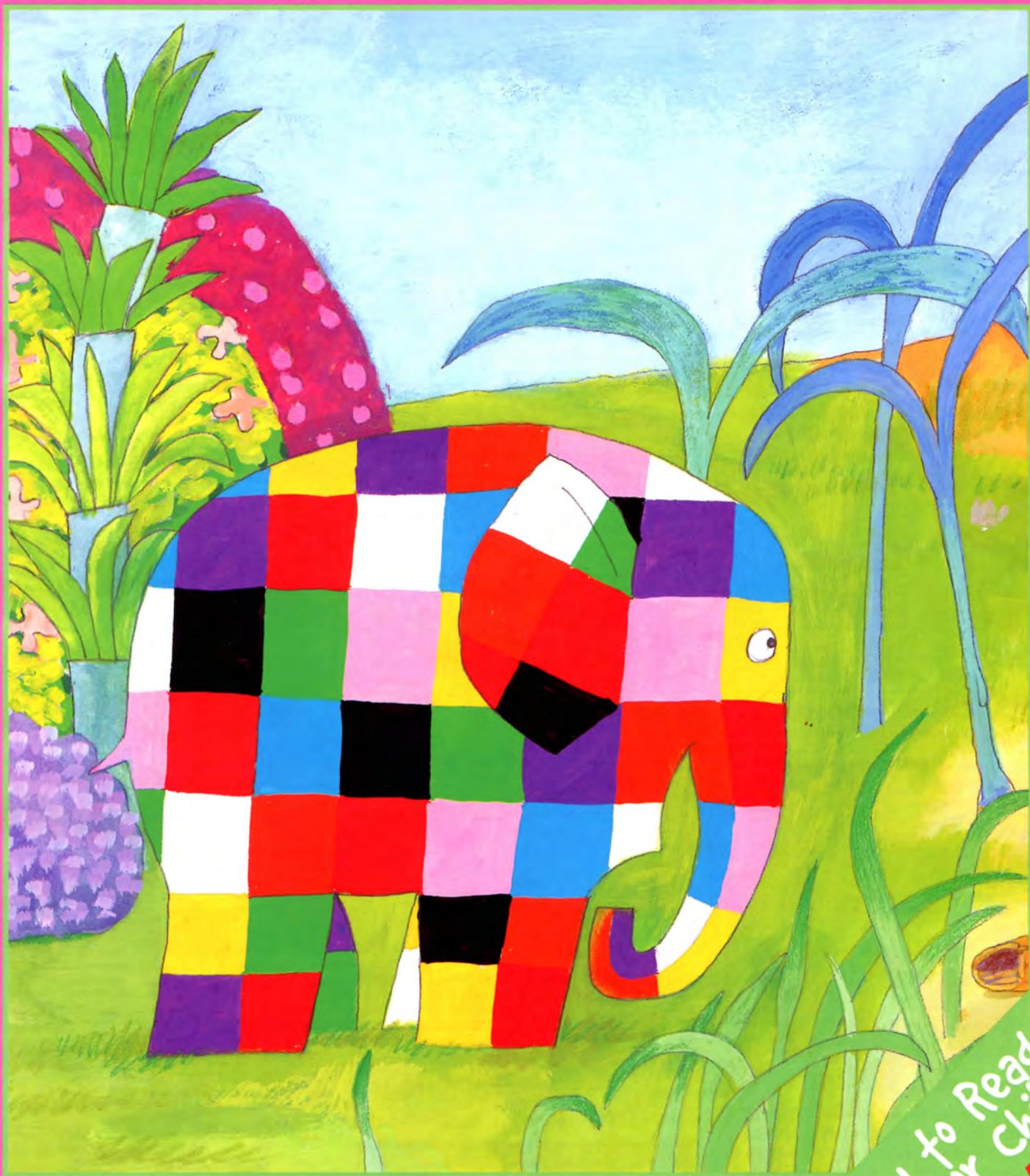


BOOKS FOR KEEPS

March 1998 No.109
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the children's book magazine



ELMER THE ELEPHANT • MEET JILL PATON WALSH
VOLUNTEER FOR READING?

How to Read
to Your Child:
**SPECIAL
INSERT**

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Cover Story

This issue's cover is from David McKee's new picture book, *Elmer Plays Hide-and-Seek*. David McKee is interviewed by Julia Eccleshare on page 3. Thanks to Andersen Press and Random Century for help in producing this March cover.

EDITORIAL



Rosemary Stones

Primary schools across the country are gearing up for the literacy hour, the key part of the Government's strategy to achieve its goal for all 11-year-olds to reach level 4 in English by 2002. The hour will require a mixture of group work and whole-class teaching involving working for part of the time on a shared text and reading a wide range of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. BfK will be focusing in forthcoming issues on books and ideas that will help make the literacy hour a time to look forward to.

In the November '97 issue of BfK I commented on the importance of empowering parents and encouraging them to share books with their babies and young children in the style of the innovative Bookstart Books for Babies project. Now comes the good news that Book Trust, with funding from the Basic Skills Agency, is in a position to make national Bookstart materials available to local authorities nationwide (see page 11 for details).

It has long been known that parents can play an important role in helping their children to read. At the end of 1997, Schools Standards Minister, Stephen Byers, announced that he expects them to spend 20 minutes a day reading with their child. Of course most parents want to do the best for their children and would be glad to help but for some the task may appear daunting. Just how should they go about it?

This issue of BfK includes an insert, *From the Beginning: How to Enjoy Books with Your Child*. Written by early reading experts Myra Barrs and Sue Ellis of The Centre for Language in Primary Education, *From the Beginning* is aimed directly at those who want to share books with their babies and young children and encourage them to read but do not know how.

Barrs and Ellis's approach is friendly, practical, relaxed and enthusiastic – a real empowering of parents and other carers. Additional copies can be ordered by readers who would like to have *From the Beginning* available to parents and other carers in their school, library, nursery or playgroup. ■

Extra copies of *From the Beginning: How to Enjoy Books with Your Child*, can be ordered from the Books for Keeps office (address, phone and fax below). Please indicate if you require a receipt.

No. of copies	Price	Payment
1	30p each	Stamps/postal order
2-5	15p each	Stamps/postal order
Over 6	10p each	Cheque/postal order/credit card



And when the food was laid and they were all at the table, Babu Yaga's eyes glowed like hot coals. "Now answer me correctly, or you will be my first course. What was it you came for?"



Immediately Too-Nice opened her mouth to say *A Toast for Horrid and Very-Horrid*. But she felt the Doll jumping up and down in her pocket and answered, "To get a good scare, of course, because that's what you're here for."

A spread from *The Wise Doll* by Hiawyn Oram, illustrated by Ruth Brown (Andersen), this issue's Editor's Choice (see page 20).

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David McKee

ELMER AT THIRTY



Elmer: The Story of a Patchwork Elephant was first published thirty years ago. Julia Eccleshare went to meet its creator, **David McKee**, now well known not only for his Elmer books but for his many other humorous and surreal picture books some of which contain important messages.

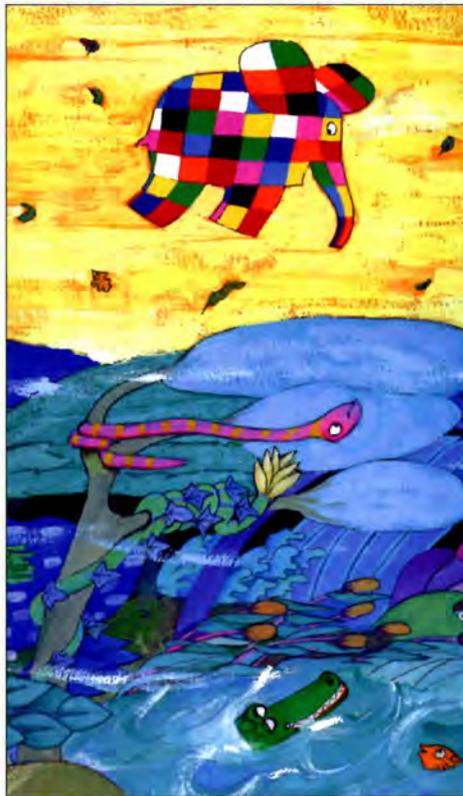
From the window of David McKee's London flat he has a comfortable view down into the street. While I was negotiating the one ways and parking meter system around his home, he was happily sketching the birds. The cute, fluffed up birds and the calm, modest manner provide cover for a huge talent and an energy that has driven David to his position of eminence among illustrators.

Elmer: A National Monument

David's success spans over thirty years with highlights including his second book *Two Can Toucan* (1964), *Tusk Tusk* (1978), *King Rollo and the Bread*, the first of the King Rollo stories (1979), *Not Now, Bernard* (1980), *Two Monsters* (1985) and of course *Elmer: The Story of a Patchwork Elephant* was first published in 1968. It was even followed by a sequel *Elmer Again and Again* (1975) but it was not until it was republished in 1989 that it became the book that sourced major merchandising and crossed out of the children's books ghetto. I asked David if he felt that Elmer overshadowed his other books. 'Elmer is important for me, partly because of the reaction I get to him from children and teachers. A bookseller in France said to me, "Elmer is a national monument". Also I know him very well and I enjoy the stories he tells me. In terms of publishing he has snowballed but I have never felt that he has been taken away from me.' That is because David never allowed this to happen. He refused to make an Elmer film. 'I didn't know enough about Elmer for 24 stories and it would have needed three or four major backers. There would have been too many masters and therefore it would not have been so pure by the end.'

Valuing What Matters in Life

Such restraint is typical. David takes his role as an entertainer extremely seriously, caring deeply about what children will get out of his books. 'We all have a responsibility about what we produce. I like to work for the adult the child will be and the child that the adult has been.' Some of his earlier books such as *Not Now, Bernard* and *Two Monsters* had clear and, by and large, popular messages. Of his recent book, *Charlotte's Piggy Bank* (1996), a book about valuing what really matters in life, he says, 'This may not be one of my most popular books but I consider it to be one of my most important.

Above: from *Elmer and the Wind*.Below: from *Charlotte's Piggy Bank*.

I hope that doesn't sound pretentious.'

David is so utterly unpretentious that the mere thought is ridiculous but *Charlotte's Piggy Bank* reflects his worries about current materialism. 'I love life and I'm very optimistic but it does worry me that we give so much value to material things. It's bad for those who apparently have nothing because they have nothing material. I'd like to get back to the value of people.' And it is not just the worship of money that David objects to, it is also the overvaluing of particular kinds of work. 'We give all this importance to what we do. But someone who sits by the sea and just tastes the feelings around him – that's success too. We don't value things that aren't quantified. What we should be doing is asking, "What is the value of the man?"' But, despite such apparent moralising, David observes life rather than judging it. Observing people is what fuels all his work; he always takes his sketch book when he goes for a walk. 'You hear a conversation and it helps to shape the characters and the story. It's a way of life, you can't stop observing and listening. Sometimes it's like being the first person to hear a story. The air is full of stories and, when one comes, you have to leave your head open to be influenced by it.' David's head has been receiving stories while his pen has been illustrating them for years now and his enthusiasm for work remains huge. 'I'm ill. My therapy is to work. I need to draw every day,' he says, but a less 'ill' person it would be hard to meet. He is wryly modest about himself and self-deprecating about his success, believing that he has had good chances. He stresses the importance of teamwork in creating a good book and is devoted to Klaus Flugge of Andersen Press for many reasons, including the fact that 'Klaus likes difficult books'.

Light and Colour

England is 'home' for David (it is where he pays his taxes) but he lives much of the time in Nice. 'It's because of the light and the colours. And because I feel very comfortable with the French way of life.' Maybe living in two countries also gives him the best chance of avoiding the publicity which he mostly shuns. 'It's the book that should talk. I'm frightened of the cult of the personality.' And he means it. ■

Julia Eccleshare is the Children's Books Editor of the Guardian.

VOLUNTEER READING HELP

'No! It's much too difficult for me!' is the familiar reaction to almost any book that is opened at my first meeting with the somewhat apprehensive six-year-old I have taken out of the classroom, 'for reading'. But what often attracts attention is the lid of my now rather well-worn suitcase of books and games, where the initials V R H are outlined uncertainly in green sticky tape. 'What's that mean?' can be a useful ice-breaker and my explanation that V R H stands for Volunteer Reading Help leads on to discussion about the meaning of the words. It often comes as a surprise to the children of inner London that someone might do something for someone else without getting paid for it.

The first sentence of the Handbook that is given to all Volunteer Reading Helpers sums up well the function of VRH. 'The aim of Volunteer Reading Help is to provide relaxed adult help for those children who do not find reading easy or who lack confidence in their own ability.' In other words, those who elect to give their time to this remarkable organisation do not teach children to read, for they are well aware that this is the prerogative of the teacher, the trained expert. Their aim is to help to build in each child the awareness of self-esteem, to enable the child to experience the joy of success and, above all, to show that books and reading can be not only a source of interest but also a source of great pleasure.

THE VOLUNTEERS

The volunteers, both men and women, range in age from eighteen to eighty and come from diverse backgrounds - banking, nursing, public transport, telephone operations, publishing, parenting, even teaching. No formal qualifications are required but each prospective VRH is rigorously interviewed and, if accepted, given a short training course before being assigned to a school, preferably near their home. Armed with a suitcase containing twenty-four carefully selected books and four games provided by their branch headquarters, the VRH is supported with further training, support group meetings, book exchanges, visits during the term and with newsletters.

Having committed themselves to the task for at least one year, a VRH works with each child individually, the same three children on every visit, going into school twice a week for three half-hour sessions. As the reading sessions must be held outside the classroom and no child may be taken off the school premises, it has been known for a school to be faced with a logistical problem which was only solved by bringing a previously-believed abandoned stockroom back into use.

HOW VRH CAME ABOUT

At the end of 1998 it will be twenty-five years since the first Volunteer Reading Helpers started work, seven of them in two London junior schools, and today there are over fourteen hundred volunteers in primary schools as far apart as Yorkshire and Dorset. Like a number of other successful

At the root of all learning is self-esteem - children in touch with their own strength and ability and confident enough to make mistakes without seeing themselves as failing. Judy Taylor Hough explains how Volunteer Reading Help provides children with reading difficulties with one-to-one experiences of being valued and included as they share books with their volunteer helper.



Kayann Porter (volunteer) with a student from Torriano Junior, Camden, London.

charitable organisations VRH was the brainchild of one inspired woman. As a governor of a London comprehensive school in the 1970s, Susan Belgrave was confronted with the problem of those children who had reached the age for secondary education without being able to read, a situation which presented almost unsurmountable difficulties for the child and which frequently led to truancy. Susan Belgrave stated her concerns at the time in an interview with Elaine Moss: 'Children don't go to school because they can't face what is going on there. They can't read, so they don't understand what they're supposed to do. They miss a day and then they miss two days...' She was convinced that the reading problem must be tackled in the primary school, with the then seemingly wild idea of providing one-to-one support for those children who were experiencing difficulties. Already hardpressed class teachers could not possibly be expected to manage such a thing themselves on a regular basis, so it must be provided by others.

In those days the Inner London Education Authority was responsible for education in the capital and in 1973 the Staff Inspector for Primary Education, Vivian Pape, was persuaded by Susan Belgrave to give his permission for a two-year trial of her idea in the recently established North Kensington Project Area. The scheme was run entirely from her home and by the end of the following year there were twenty-eight VRHs working in seven schools in three London Project Areas. By 1975 the ILEA were providing rooms for meetings and training and paying for a few hours' secretarial help, but it was not until 1980, when there were over one hundred volunteers, that VRH was able to move its administration out of Susan Belgrave's home and into ILEA office space. Several Trusts helped to fund day-to-day expenses and to pay the salary of a part-time Organising Secretary. That same year VRH became a registered charity and Lady Plowden and Peter Newsam became its first Patrons.

Today Volunteer Reading Help is supported by the DfEE, by schools, charitable trusts, private and public companies and by a growing number of Local Education Authorities. Lady Plowden and Sir Peter Newsam have been joined as Patrons by Sir John Milne, Sir Claus Moser, Lady Rees-Mogg, Prunella Scales and Sir Stephen Tumim. There is a national office in central London, with a staff of nine co-ordinating the work of twenty-eight branches throughout the country. There are 1,412 Volunteers helping 4,236 children and the numbers are growing every year.

EVERY CHILD IS INDIVIDUAL

Although every VRH has attended similar training courses and uses the books and games that come from the same carefully chosen resource, it is up to each one to awaken the child's interest in the written word in his or her own way. My own experience over seven years in an Inner London school has shown me that there is nothing gained by having any set plan or trying to keep to a timetable.



Above: Michael Bentley (volunteer) reading with a student from Fox Primary School in Kensington.
Below: Roma White (volunteer) with a student from St Mary's Primary School, London N1.

I started working with three ten-year-olds who were in that last, desperate year before secondary school, with the threat of never catching up hanging over them. I soon discovered that one child could, in fact, read quite well, but took little interest in the mechanics of it and failed to see what the point was. He was a keen footballer and a whizz on the computer, so writing a footballing story together, followed by him giving me a lesson on the computer made a good start. Then one day Stephen told me he was being taken on a family visit to Gloucester, a place he had never heard of and knew nothing about. So, on my next visit, I brought in a map. It took quite a long time for him to find Gloucester in the index, and then to solve how the map reference worked, but then we followed the route to Gloucester from central London, first by rail and then by road ('All those red lines look like things coming out of a heart,' was one comment). After we had read *The Tailor of Gloucester* and I had recited 'Doctor Foster', the trip was beginning to take on quite a different aspect.

Another ten-year-old was quite a different matter. She knew her letters and a number of words had somehow been retained in her mind but what Tracey really needed was someone to take an interest in *her*, someone who would read to her and share books with her. We had a marvellous time with fairy stories of the *Cinderella* kind and with playing games – for which you had to 'read' the rules before you could start. A few weeks later I met Tracey's Mum at the school fair and asked her if she could possibly spend some time each evening reading with her daughter. As soon as I had said it I realised that my suggestion was a lost cause. Tracey's Mum couldn't read, either.

A MATTER OF CONFIDENCE

I now work with six- to seven-year-olds and with them it is largely a matter of confidence. To discover their reading level I start with

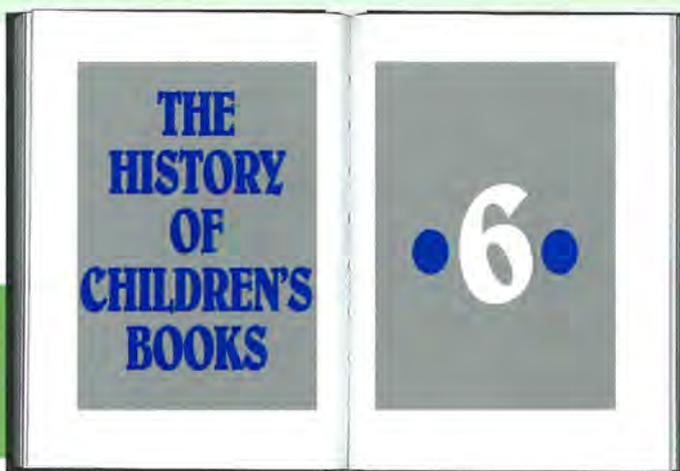


something very simple like *How Do I Put It On?* by Shigeo Watanabe or *Duck* by David Lloyd, both books they find funny. We then progress through all the favourites in the suitcase, with *Babar* proving a recent unexpected success, the character being familiar from television, and the introduction to the French setting and the purchase of shirts with separate collars, bowler hats and spats being source for endless discussion.

I also find doing crosswords of considerable help. Appearing to be a game, a crossword involves both reading and writing skills and is probably the child's first encounter with lateral thinking. Once the clue has been deciphered, it never fails to come as a surprise that there is yet a further stage to go. Last term we made our own alphabet book, upper and lower case letters, four words for each letter, chosen, drawn and captioned by the one whose turn it was that day. We cheated only with Xx, choosing words like 'axe' and 'box' and highlighting the x in the caption. Making a book also gave me the opportunity to introduce book-making terminology, for as well as a cover we had to ensure that there were decorated endpapers, a proper title page and a dedication.

VRH has proved not only of benefit to the children who are chosen to receive help; it also gives a sense of being needed and a good deal of pleasure to the adults who take part. One VRH wrote about just how she felt: 'To share in a small way in the blossoming of a child who is not a relative or a friend – a process in which good teachers are involved all the time – seems a rare privilege.' ■

Judy Taylor Hough is Chair of the Inner London branch of Volunteer Reading Help. For further information contact Volunteer Reading Help, Room 438, High Holborn House, 49/51 Bedford Row, London WC1V 6RL (Tel./Fax: 0171 404 6204).



The Years of Challenge

As public money for library spending began to be curtailed in the 1970s, publishers could no longer rely on steady library sales for their output. 'Bottom line' thinking began to rule. Meanwhile new social forces were also beginning to influence what was published for children. John Rowe Townsend explains.

In the 1960s the 'second golden age' of children's books was still in being, but might with hindsight be better described as an Indian summer. The economic climate was still favourable; new writers and artists were emerging and were able to make careers out of working for the children's lists. The criterion was literary or artistic merit. 'Quality' British books could expect to be published additionally in the United States, where the children's editors were Anglophile almost to a woman and powerful enough to publish what they chose. In the early 1970s, recession hit both countries. Book prices went up but library budgets did not; printing runs grew shorter and it became harder to keep books in print. Eventually the recession lifted, but the halcyon days were gone. Books were a commercial product, the 'bottom line' became more and more the test, and short-term approaches ruled.

Social Realism

At the same time, social considerations were coming into play and the content and ambience of children's books were being questioned. It had already been pointed out, by teachers and many others, that the traditional fictional family of white middle-class parents and two or three children was by no means universal, that children's books with working-class settings were rare and that characters with black or brown faces were conspicuously absent. Realism, although the dominant mode in the United States, had been rather looked down upon in Britain: 'The majority of genuine writers when writing for children turn instinctively to fantasy,' remarked one commentator, 'leaving the story of everyday life, with rare exceptions, to the second-rater.'

A few books with working-class settings appeared in the 1960s: Frederick Grice's *The Bonnie Pit Laddie* in 1960, Bill Naughton's *The Goalkeeper's Revenge* in 1961, my own *Gumble's Yard* in the same year, and Sylvia Sherry's *A Pair of Jesus Boots* in 1969; and these scattered forerunners were to be followed by the socially concerned work, among others, of Bernard Ashley and Jan Needle. Nina Bawden, already an established adult novelist, turned to writing for children in the 1960s, and in *A Handful of Thieves* (1967) and many later books wrote with refreshing naturalness and shrewd insight about the adventures of ordinary children in (mostly) everyday settings.

Racism and Sexism

A great deal of heat was generated in the 1960s and early 1970s by charges and denials of racism in children's books. The world has moved on since then; the debate on racial representation and portrayal continues, but (as recent correspondence in *BfK* indicates) in a generally temperate and constructive mood. One complaint which was undoubtedly justified was that British children's books were failing to reflect an increasingly multicultural society. White writers and their publishers hesitated to enter what was seen as a minefield, though a few (Bernard Ashley with his first book, *The Trouble with Donovan Croft* in 1974, Marjorie Darke with *The First of Midnight* in 1977, and one or two others) stepped in and were not blown up.

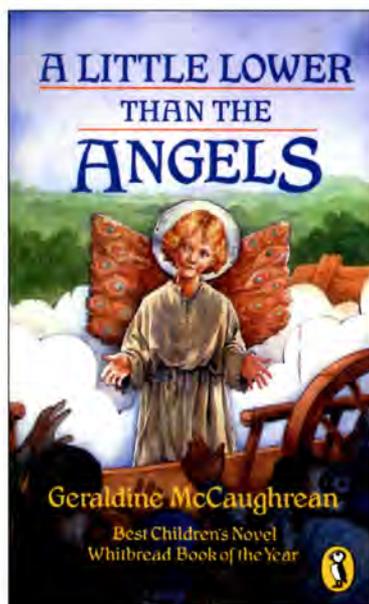


A satisfactory solution to this problem however required the emergence of black writers and artists. Petronella Breinburg and Errol Lloyd were early arrivals on the scene as author and illustrator of the picture-books *My Brother Sean* in 1973 and *Sean's Red Bike* (1975), and Errol Lloyd went it alone with his high-spirited *Nini at Carnival* in 1978. Arguably the most vigorous realism to be found in the 1970s was in Farrukh Dhondy's story collections about mixed communities in *East End at Your Feet* (1976) and *Come to Mecca* (1978).

The winds of change that whistled through the 1960s and 1970s also included the demands of feminists for equal treatment of girl characters in children's books and for the questioning of old sexist attitudes. Here again the world has moved on. My impression is that the campaigners won a clear victory, as can be seen by looking at the books around you today. Dominant or condescending fathers and brothers are hard to find except as figures of ridicule; women and girls are strong and self-reliant and are as likely as males to have the hero's role. How far corresponding changes have as yet taken place in society is another question.

Historical Fiction and Fantasy

The genres of children's literature in which British writers had traditionally excelled – historical novels and fantasy – survived in the chillier atmosphere that succeeded the golden age, but it was harder for new entrants to make their way, and much of the best work of the later 1970s and the 1980s was done by the established generation. Barbara Willard completed, with *The Keys of Mantlemass* in 1981, her sequence of novels that had begun



eleven years earlier with *The Lark and the Laurel* and was set in the Sussex weald in the troubled times between the Wars of the Roses and the English Civil War.

In *A Parcel of Patterns* (1983), Jill Paton Walsh told the story of the Derbyshire village of Eyam, which heroically isolated itself to prevent the spread of the Plague in 1665. Peter Carter's *The Sentinels* (1980) grappled with the murky realities of the last days of the slave trade; Ann Schlee's *Ask Me No Questions* (1976) was concerned with indifference to sick and starving children in a Victorian institution for paupers, and Susan Price made her name as a very young writer with *Twopence a Tub* (1975) about the hardships of mining families in a pit strike. Geraldine McCaughrean's *A Little Lower than the Angels* (1987), in which a boy plays an ambiguously angelic part in a troop of travelling players, presented a kaleidoscopic view of medieval England. Sadly, it has become more difficult for historical fiction to get published, and if published to stay in print.

Fantasy went through a prolonged post-Tolkien phase, and many 'secondary worlds' were created. No British writer equalled the 'Earthsea' quarter of the American Ursula Le Guin, which began with *A Wizard of Earthsea* in 1968 and was completed after a long gap by *Tehanu* in 1990. Diana Wynne Jones however created several such worlds, the most ingenious probably being the parallel England of *Charmed Life* (1977) and succeeding books about the master-enchanter 'Cat' Chant. Penelope Lively wrote a brilliant comic fantasy in *The*

Ghost of Thomas Kempe (1973), in which an old rogue from the past pops up to make trouble in the present day. Anthropomorphic animal fantasy – ‘ourselves in fur’ – has a long history, to which Dick King-Smith has made a sustained contribution with *The Sheep-Pig* (original of the film *Babe*) in 1983 and many other titles. Most recently, high fantasy has been shown to be still very much alive by the success of *His Dark Materials* (1995) and *The Subtle Knife* (1997), the first two volumes of Philip Pullman’s ambitious ‘Northern Lights’ trilogy.

Moral and Psychological Exploration

Of writers who came to prominence in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Jan Mark and Gillian Cross defy classification, having written well in several genres and for children of different ages. Realism of the tougher kind was here to stay. Janni Howker’s *The Nature of the Beast* (1985) portrayed the anger and frustration of a boy growing up in a collapsing industrial region. Robert Swindells in *Stone Cold* (1993) drew a grim picture of contemporary homelessness; Melvin Burgess’s *Junk* (1996) took the challenge to face facts, and dangers, as far as it had yet gone with a horrifying account of drug addiction. Anne Fine’s troubling *The Tulip Touch* (1996), about a child who appears to be actually evil, tested the limits of moral and psychological exploration in children’s books.

Commonwealth Writers

Writers from the Commonwealth enriched the fiction of the latter part of the century. Anita Desai wrote in *The Village by the Sea* (1982) of a family surviving precariously in an Indian fishing village faced by change. James Berry’s short stories in *A Thief in the Village* (1987) and *The Future-Telling Lady* (1991) brought the joys and longings of poor Jamaican children vividly to life. Jamila Gavin, in her *Wheel of Surya* trilogy (1992-7) told of two children’s trek through war-torn India at the time of independence, their arrival in England and later experiences in both countries. And Jamila Gavin wrote a near-perfect book for younger readers about two children and their naive but wise and loving grandfather in *Grandpa Chatterji* (1993).

Poetry and Picture Books

Allan and the late Janet Ahlberg, an author-and-artist team, rose quickly in the late 1970s to the front rank among picture-book creators. Each *Peach Pear Plum* (1978) and *Peepo!* (1981), both based on nursery games, were outstanding among books for the really small, and many other Ahlberg books brought humour and ingenuity to this genre. Anthony Browne, notable for visual wit and satire,

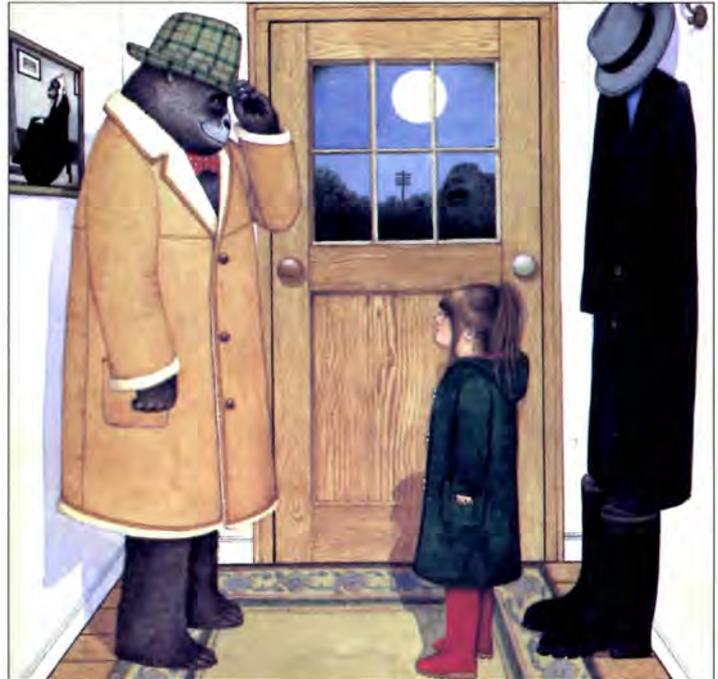
confirmed a growing reputation with *Gorilla* in 1983 and *Willy the Wimp* (a chimp) in 1984, gently evoking fellow-feeling for fellow-species. His later picture books have been original, imaginative, and often intriguingly concerned with ideas.

Poetry moved from garden to street with the appearance of Michael Rosen’s *Mind Your Own Business* (1974) and later collections; other poets in the down-to-earth mode included Roger McGough and Kit Wright. Anthologies appear continually and do not usually make literary history, but *A Caribbean Dozen*, edited by John Agard and Grace Nichols (1994), was outstanding in featuring a strong team of poets from that region.

The Present Day

With the books of the later 1990s, we are in the realm of current affairs rather than of history, and I have not tried to bring this account up to the last moment. I am sorry to have omitted mention of many good writers and artists, especially more recent arrivals who have yet to build up a body of work. I am sorry, too, that because of limited space, I have paid rather scant regard to books reaching us from America and elsewhere. Time, and the test of lasting acceptability to children, will decide which titles will survive from the wealth of material available today.

Children’s books face many problems, including the uncertainties of the trade,



‘They both crept downstairs, and Hannah put on her coat. The gorilla put on her father’s hat and coat. “A perfect fit,” he whispered.’ From Anthony Browne’s *Gorilla*.



confirmed a growing reputation with *Gorilla* in 1983 and *Willy the Wimp* (a chimp) in 1984, gently evoking fellow-feeling for fellow-species. His later picture books have been original, imaginative, and often intriguingly concerned with ideas.

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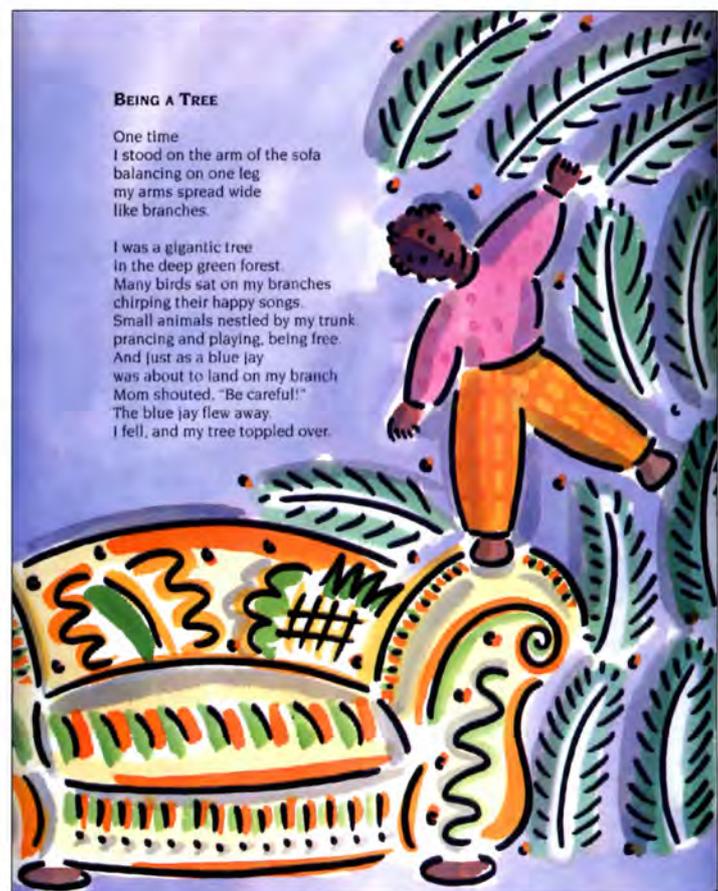


Illustration by Cathie Felstead to Opal Palmer Adisa’s ‘Being a Tree’ in *A Caribbean Dozen*.

cuts in school and library book budgets, and the ever-increasing competition from the electronic media; but they have survived earlier challenges and I believe they will survive the present ones. ■

John Rowe Townsend has been writing, and writing about, books for children and young people for many years. Three of his books – *Gumble’s Yard*, *The Intruder* and *Noah’s Castle* – have been serialised on television. His history of English-language children’s literature, *Written for Children*, published by The Bodley Head at £9.99, is in its sixth and, he says, final edition.

Authorgraph No.109

Jill Paton Walsh

Jill Paton Walsh interviewed by
Stephanie Nettell

Jill Paton Walsh's forebears were both energetic and idiosyncratic, and the bright little girl who was so often uncomfortable in their midst owes her creative independence not only to their genes but to the frustration and confusion they stirred up in her.

Her paternal grandfather, from a self-reliant working class background, rose through the Board of Trade after being spotted as a lift-boy reading Plato, and finished the war with little money but a row of medals for secret work against the Axis in Italy. About to retire, he was invited by the Pirelli company, who reckoned he knew more about their business than they did, to be managing director. So off he went to Italy and a wealthy old age – while his sister insisted on taking in washing till she died. Jill's father, deprived of university by the Depression, became the world's first television cameraman, a brilliant BBC engineer who died with 363 patents to his name.

'He was a perilous parent, for he didn't believe in stupidity the way other people don't believe in fairies. If you asked for help with your maths homework, you wouldn't go to bed until you understood it – I remember being up at two in the morning doing quadratic equations. More importantly, he was completely unprejudiced about women – being his daughter, not his son, didn't let me off anything.'

Her mother grew up in Burma, in a half-French, half-Irish family, prosperous traders running a mineral water factory in Rangoon; at eighteen she came home with her mother to North Finchley, where she met Jill's father. Jill was born there in 1937 – as Gillian Bliss, eldest of two girls and two boys. Around the outbreak of war, her mother's mother married again, and Jill acquired a Cornish grandfather, a self-made businessman, owner of magazine publishers Link House. After sharing a night of air-raids in Finchley he declared no one could live like that and packed the family off next morning to grandmother in St Ives.

And so began Jill Paton Walsh's almost umbilical tie with St Ives. When the others returned she remained, and until late '44,

"When I was little like you," said Gran, "we bought fish from the boatmen on the quay. A brace of bright mackerel for supper, still fresh and shining."



'... she wrote Hengest's Tale, followed by The Dolphin Crossing – in print for 30 years. Today she writes, tenderly, for the very young, stories of magic like Thomas and the Tinnors or lyrical picture books like When I Was Little Like You ...'

when her grandmother died, she 'was the only child of adoring grandparents in a spectacularly beautiful place. It marked me for life. As far as I'm concerned, St Ives is the place, where everything starts and where everything is liable to finish too – we have a flat there now, yards from my grandmother's house, with the same view as I had from my bedroom window as a child.'

Holidays in St Ives continued until her grandfather's death in 1949, then it was almost thirty years before she returned. She had got stuck with *Goldengrove*: the plot demanded buying paint and she couldn't remember the shops – every landscape detail, yes, but not the shops. 'I had started out disguising the place, but realised it was too well-known, and it seemed so important to write what I remembered.'

That journey was critical. 'Although I was well into my thirties, I realised that I had never in my entire life set out alone, not

knowing where I would sleep that night. A strange, liberating feeling.' More startling was the book she bought at Paddington: Quentin Bell's life of Virginia Woolf. 'This was before the Bloomsbury vogue, and I didn't know that *To the Lighthouse* was about St Ives – it says it's set on Skye. It felt extremely odd, for the manuscript of *Goldengrove* I'd left behind was being written in a Woolfian mode – I didn't know why, what the unconscious pull was. I got on the train and there it was: my day, my lighthouse. Indeed, the house Woolf lived in is about 100 yards from my grandmother's, with our flat between.

'I wandered down to the quay, and there was a man in a tattered blue sweater (as there so often is), and I asked, "Do you remember a boat called *The Little Gil*?" He stared at me and said, "You 'ad a brother younger'n you, didn' you?", and I had this immense sense of homecoming.'

St Ives was her childhood sunshine, but there was harsher weather. Her mother's family had 'walked out of Burma in front of the Japanese, and come home, initially to us, with funny accents and no idea how to

make a cup of tea for themselves.' There were tensions. 'They thought a woman's role was to be pretty, complaisant, charming. Good French and playing the piano were all right, but any other culture was insufferable pretension.'

Nor did St Michael's Convent approve of clever girls, and had never aimed at university. Nicknamed 'Ignorance' because of her surname and good marks, she felt isolated, and, on a recent visit ('it's a very different place now'), was amazed to find they had arranged lunch with some contemporaries – people who had once mercilessly mocked her sporting skills. 'I have a damaged right arm, a birth injury, but no one was let off anything, so some unfortunate netball team always had to let me in.

'With hindsight, growing up amid this conflicting stereotyping did me good: all those pressures caused me to define who I jolly well was and what I was jolly well going to be like. It was repellent to me that I should be influenced by any of them.'

Oxford was a watershed. 'Totally wonderful. For the first time I was connected to an outside world that shared my values.' Finally allowed by St Michael's new head to read in the library, she had had no idea of lit crit, but also no concept that one read only to pass exams. 'So I was the dummy of my group but also the only truly self-winding person. I would never have got in if I'd been groomed at Cheltenham Ladies; as it was I was just this raging reader who didn't know anything.' She opted for philological courses: her familiarity with Anglo-Saxon words is that of 'people I've known all their life, not just met them in a funny fancy dress in Modern English.'

All this has led her to view literature as a huge garden where one area is as fertile as any other, and to see the elitist Leavisite commitment to the realistic novel (dismissing Beowulfian fantasy, SF or children's literature) as 'complete illiteracy'. Can it be only accident that the Oxford of C S Lewis and Tolkien proved such a seed-bed for children's writers that she can make a list of 18 well-regarded names?

But such 'hierarchical intellectual snobberies' persist. 'I was appalled by the *vitriolic* put-down I got from certain quarters for having the effrontery while being a children's author to write a book like *Knowledge of Angels*' (the adult novel that was well-received in America but rejected by 19 British publishers before she published it herself and reached the Booker shortlist). 'One reason for rejecting it was that "the phrases 'well-established children's writer' and 'novel of ideas' just don't go together"! The world of children's books is largely free of this cultural triumphalism and spite, so the adult literary landscape came as an unpleasant surprise.'

This contempt lurks in something else that fires her up. 'The mechanism that causes the "dumbing down" of children's literature, which has been precipitous recently, is contempt for children. Let it not be forgotten that in order to dumb down the literature you offer them you have to entertain them in contempt. You lower the expectation of what they are capable of, and because they are programmed to fulfil our expectations you can render them cretinous if you are vulgar and contemptuous enough.'

Jill began writing children's books as an alternative to going crazy. For a while after Oxford she taught English but, marooned in a south London suburb, with an untalkative husband and three children under four, she felt a misfit once again. They missed her income, she missed her students, and she saw the need for books for children. Her first, an Anglo-Saxon story with chapters tailored to the school



with a beautiful iridescent surface and a simple form, shaped and sustained by an invisible message within it which a dignified self-respecting adult can reasonably offer to a self-respecting child.'

Jill's literary life has been rich: she has taught creative writing, run courses for teachers and for gifted children extracted from Surrey schools, been a frequent judge, sat on innumerable committees, written half a dozen adult novels and, with John Rowe Townsend – a powerful influence and model – established an innovative specialist imprint, Green Bay, which they run from their home near Cambridge. Hence a CBE and Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature.

When Jill Paton Walsh speaks with passion of the honourable reason to write for children, is she remembering that lonely girl who felt vindicated when she reached Oxford? 'I don't know who the literary, intuitive members of the new generations are, but I know I can address them with a message that might reach them. Unfortunately only with the help of intermediaries. And if the intermediaries become clothed and contemptuous of their charges, the chances that you can find your audience, and the chances that your audience can find themselves in the culture of the world they're born into, diminish rapidly. And that's a disaster.'

'In the end it's pygmies pulling down giants. And I don't mean giant authors, I mean giant children!' ■

term, was unpublishably didactic, but encouraged by Kevin Crossley-Holland at Macmillan she wrote *Hengest's Tale*, followed by *The Dolphin Crossing* – in print for 30 years.

Today she writes, tenderly, for the very young, stories of magic like *Thomas and the Tinnors* or lyrical picture books like *When I Was Little Like You* or *When Grandma Came*. This is because she enjoys the co-operative process of picture books, and even more because she is inspired by the grandchildren of her partner of many years, John Rowe Townsend. With many of her 33 titles for older readers, she also finds it no longer easy 'to quarry the same layer in my subterranean mind', and, although she has never had a proposal rejected, she *does* feel the current climate is not hers.

'And I don't think I could write a better book than I've written already.' She is thinking of *Gaffer Samson's Luck*, one of her many major award winners. It comes closest to the ideal she set out in the TLS when still a novice: 'Like a soap bubble,

Some of Jill Paton Walsh's many titles:

Thomas and the Tinnors, Macdonald, 0 7500 1533 0, £3.99 pbk

Birdy and the Ghosties, Macdonald, 0 7500 0684 6, £3.99 pbk

Matthew and the Sea Singer, Macdonald, 0 7500 1176 9, £3.99 pbk

The Dolphin Crossing, Puffin Modern Classic, 0 14 036624 5, £5.99 pbk, Puffin, 0 14 030457 6, £3.99 pbk

Gaffer Samson's Luck, Puffin, 0 14 031765 1, £3.99 pbk
Fireweed, Puffin, 0 14 030560 2, £3.99 pbk

A Parcel of Patterns, Puffin, 0 14 036259 2, £3.99 pbk
Grace, Puffin, 0 14 034729 1, £4.99 pbk

When Grandma Came, ill. Sophy Williams, Puffin, 0 14 054327 9, £4.99 pbk

Connie Came to Play, ill. Stephen Lambert, Viking, 0 670 86210 X, £9.99 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 055615 X, £4.99 pbk

When I Was Little Like You, ill. Stephen Lambert, Viking, 0 670 86799 3, £10.99 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 055829 2, £4.99 pbk (July 98)

Stephanie Nettell is a critic, author and journalist on children's books.

NEWS

NEW GOVERNMENT –
NEW INITIATIVES?

BfK invites Tim Godfray, Chief Executive of the Booksellers' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, to explain what he expects from New Labour.

Don't Tax Reading!

It is very heartening to see that the Government has put Education at the top of its agenda. Both Chris Smith and Mark Fisher have shown personally great interest in the book trade and we are grateful to them for their support. In this new climate we are working with the Government to promote World Book Day on 23rd April 1998. Ten million school children in the UK and Ireland will be given £1.00 off vouchers in April which they can take into those bookshops which have elected to support WBD. A special book *The Children's Book of Books* will be produced to commemorate the day. We are also working with the Government to support the National Year of Reading, which will begin in September.

It is particularly pleasing to note that the Government has given a specific commitment not to extend VAT to books and newspapers during the lifetime of this Parliament.

Chris Smith and Mark Fisher would be the first to agree that books represent the major means by which individuals – but particularly children – acquire education, informal and formal, providing the basis of reading skills, inquiry, comprehension and individual enterprise. Books build and transmit culture, science and history, and encourage and maintain literacy.

The European Commission wishes to bring VAT rates into line throughout the European Union. At present, under transitional arrangements, the UK is entitled to apply a zero rate to books, newspapers and periodicals, under the EC Sixth VAT Directive.

The European Commission does not want any member state in the future to be able to



allocate a zero rate for any products, goods or services. Commissioner Monti suggests that 'some sort of continuation of a reduced VAT rate under the new common system might be considered'. At present, this reduced rate looks as if it will be no less than 5%.

We very much hope that Chris Smith, Mark Fisher and their colleagues within the Government will ensure, when the European Governments agree a common VAT system, that provision is made for member states to continue to allocate a zero VAT rate, should they wish to do so. In addition, we urge our Government to insist that changes to EC VAT rates can only be made in the future if all member states in the Council agree to a particular change; also, that the VAT Committee is not given the authority to fix specific rates.

Even in the darkest days of the Second World War books were not taxed in the UK. Books feed the mind. We do hope that Chris Smith and Mark Fisher will say to their other colleagues in the Labour Party now – and beyond the lifetime of this Parliament – *Don't Tax Reading!*

WORLD BOOK
DAY VOUCHERS

School packs, posters and booklets will be sent to schools suggesting how children can get involved in World Book Day on 23rd April but the really AMAZING news is that a free £1 book voucher will be distributed to every child from reception class age to 18-year-olds in full-time education in sixth form and further education colleges. As Philip Pullman says, 'Giving children vouchers to buy books is like giving them the key to new worlds.'

The voucher can be exchanged at participating booksellers for £1 off the price of any other book (one voucher per book). They must be redeemed by 4th May. For children unable or reluctant to spend more than their voucher, *The Children's Book of Books*, an anthology of 'extracts from favourite books' chosen by 'celebrities' (from Chris Evans to Tony Blair) will be available at £1. However, BfK thinks a better bet for younger readers would be one of Red Fox's 'Mini-Treasures' at 99p each (reviewed page 19) or for older readers one of Orion's themed story collections (*Go for Goal*, *Spine Chillers*, *Stars in Your Eyes* etc, selected by Wendy Cooling, Dolphin Story Collection) at £1 each. For secondary school students Wordsworth classics are still among the cheapest in town...



In association with the BBC

Slump in School
Book Spending

Despite the Government's call to improve literacy standards, a survey published at the beginning of January by the Educational Publishers' Council reveals that schools are now spending less on books than in 1995. The School Book Buying Survey 1996-97 shows that one in five UK primary schools spent less than £5 per head last year and almost one in six UK secondary schools spent less than £10 per head. The recommended amounts put forward by Book Trust are £54 per head at primary level and £67 at secondary. Book Trust Chairman and former Senior Chief Inspector of Schools Professor Eric Bolton says: 'The government has announced that 1998/99 is to be the National Year of Reading and has earmarked £19 million to support it. Yet EPC's figures show that the gap is widening between what schools should be spending on books and what they do spend. These realities must be faced and tackled if we are to make progress.'

Public Library
Loans

According to the latest survey of public library loans from Public Lending Right (PLR) loans of children's non-fiction were up from 4.6% of national loans to 6%. Children's fiction loans decreased from 23% in 1995-96 to 22.3% in 1996-97. The five most borrowed children's authors were R L Stine (*Point Horror*), Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Roald Dahl, Ann M Martin (*The Baby-Sitters Club*) and Enid

Blyton. This is the same top five as last year but R L Stine has pushed his way up from number five to the top position.

Sainsbury's
Literacy Scheme

Newham Council education department and Sainsbury's East Ham branch have developed a child literacy scheme. Six 'recipe' cards and matching book marks highlighting the ways parents can help with early reading were sent to local schools. There were also vouchers offering 30p off books. Sales of the branch's 18 children's titles increased between 50% and 70%.

Walker QUEST

Mirabel Cecil, sister of the late Sebastian Walker who founded Walker Books, has set up a new trust, a QUEST (qualifying employee share ownership trust) in order to sell the 49% of the company owned by her family. The new trust will issue shares in Walker Books to beneficiaries. Before his death in 1991 Sebastian Walker set up the Walker Books Employee Trust which owned 51% of the company.

Ladybird
Redundancies

Ladybird, part of the Pearson group, is handing over the responsibility for its trade sales accounts to Penguin, also a Pearson company. Thirteen redundancies including reps and warehouse staff will result.

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

From the Beginning: How to Enjoy Books with Your Child

As a parent or carer, you play a very important part in helping your child to read. Encouraging children to develop a love of books and an interest in written language helps to provide a firm foundation for learning to read. Children stand a better chance of doing well at school when they already enjoy listening to rhymes and stories, when they enjoy reading and being read to and are used to talking about books. These are valuable experiences to build on when children go to school.

At Books for Keeps we believe that children should have the opportunity to enjoy sharing books from a very young age – even before their first birthday! But of course it is never too late to start sharing books with your child. This leaflet written by early reading experts Myra Barrs and Sue Ellis of The Centre for Language in Primary Education suggests lots of practical ways for parents and carers to enjoy sharing books with young children.



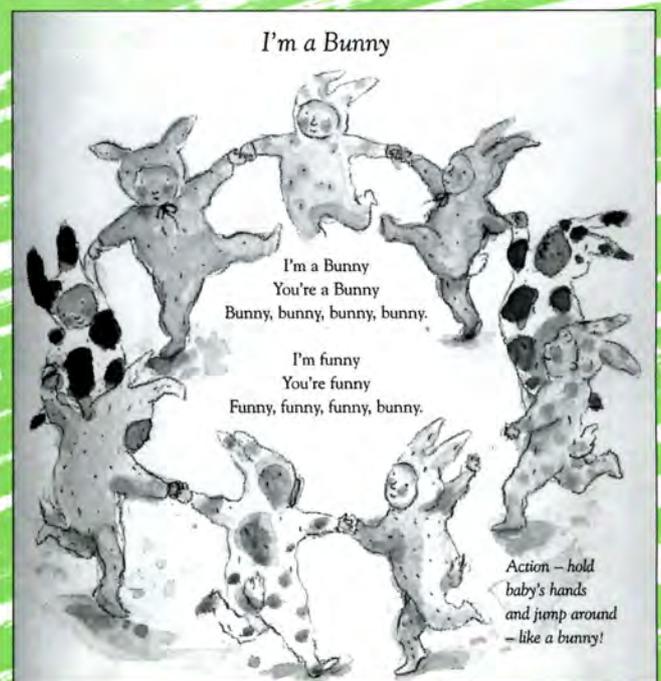
Sue Ellis (left) and Myra Barrs of the CLPE sharing books with young readers.

Here are some ways you can help:

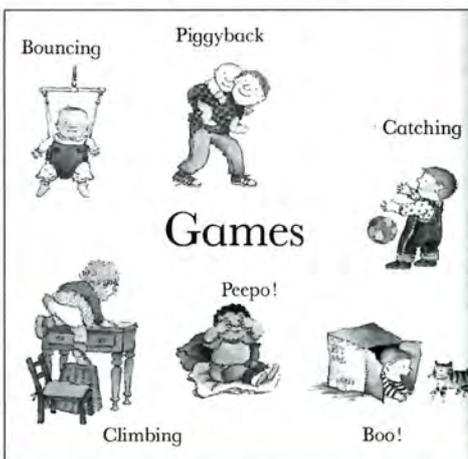
- ★ Small babies love being sung to and read to and they like it when you tell them nursery rhymes and stories.
- ★ Settling down to look at a book together can be a relaxing and rewarding experience for both parent and child in an often hectic day. Try to share books together every day: at bedtime, in the afternoon, while waiting at the doctor's surgery or sitting on the bus!
- ★ Children are surrounded by words in the home (on cereal packets, for example) and written signs in the street, on buses, in supermarkets, etc. They will soon want to know what these 'say'. You can point out these words and make it into a game.

Children pick up all sorts of information about reading from television. They may recognise the titles of their favourite programmes, or the brand names of products they know in advertisements.

There are many collections of rhymes aimed at the very young. **Rub-a-Dub-Dub** by Ernest Henry and Joanna Walsh (Bloomsbury) has suggestions for actions to accompany the rhymes.



An action page from **Rub-a-Dub-Dub**.



From *The Baby's Catalogue* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg (Viking/Puffin). Children enjoy pointing out the details and naming the objects in this popular book.

- ★ Encourage your child to choose books for you to read aloud or to share together. He or she might have a favourite that has to be read over and over again!

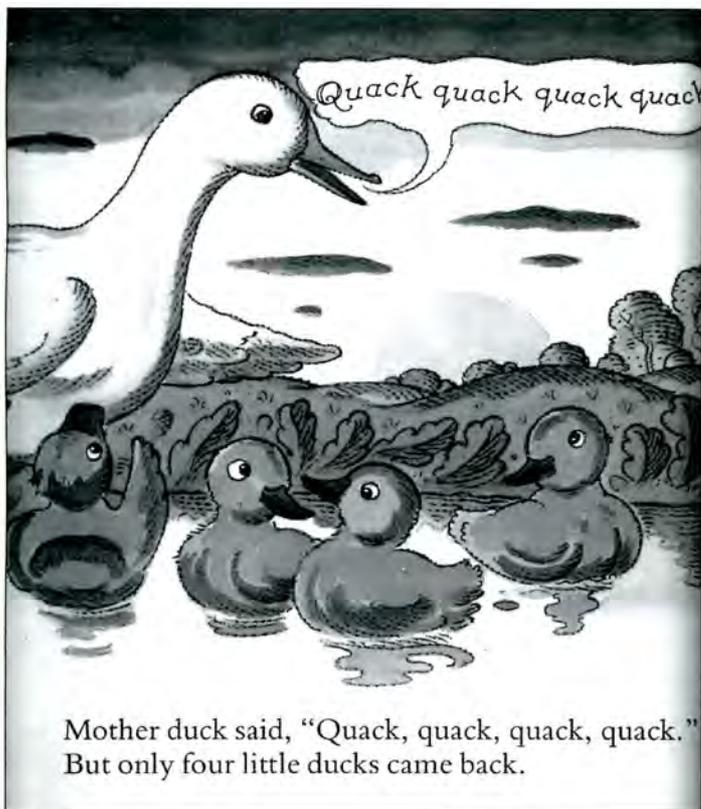
★ What's So Important About Reading Aloud?

Reading aloud is one of the best ways you can help your child to learn to read and write – and it is never too early to start! As they share books with parents, children learn to turn the pages, to talk about the story and the pictures, to join in with parts they know well, and, gradually, to recognise words on the page. All this helps to build their confidence and interest and plays an important part in their development as successful readers.

Reading aloud to children also helps them to understand how books work. They learn that stories have a meaning and they learn to predict what will happen next. Children begin to make connections between what happens in books and their own lives.

Through reading aloud, children become familiar with the individual rhythms and 'tunes' of each story. They enjoy hearing the predictable rhythm of a nursery rhyme or the different voices in a story. Sometimes they will join in by humming along, by finishing a rhyme or by echoing what you have said. They also learn to tell stories in their own way. These experiences are a great help when children come to read the words themselves.

By reading aloud you can introduce your child to all sorts of different books and to the different worlds each book opens up. Children like variety and will enjoy traditional tales and modern stories, nursery rhymes and poetry, songs and information books.



Mother duck said, "Quack, quack, quack, quack."
But only four little ducks came back.

From **Five Little Ducks** by Ian Beck (Orchard). A counting rhyme with lots of repetition.

★ How Do I Get My Child to Join In?

As children get to know a book they will begin to remember the story and join in as you read, especially with repeated

phrases. They may enjoy the satisfaction of guessing the rhyme in a poem or finishing a well-known phrase in a story, so it is helpful to pause a moment for them to do so. Some books actually encourage children to join in, making it easy for them to play a big part in reading with you. Talking about the story and pictures adds to children's enjoyment and understanding. If your child asks questions or interrupts the reading by pointing to words they know or talking about the pictures, this is a good sign that they are interested and want to find out more.



From **Old Hat, New Hat** by Stan and Jan Berenstain (Collins). The repetition of the words 'old hat' and 'new hat' gives the child lots of opportunities to join in this funny, lively story.

You can also help children to talk about a book by saying things like, 'I wonder why that happened?' or, 'Can you guess what's going to happen next?' Children will often be reminded of their own experience by the books you read together and one story can spark many others! Talking about books together is one of the best ways for children to get involved in stories and to feel like readers.

Of course the pictures also help to tell the story and, in some books, tell more of the story than the words alone. Young children often talk their way through a favourite book using the pictures to guide them. They might remember the story by heart or use their own words. This is not 'cheating' but part of beginning to read. As children get older the pictures continue to help them make good guesses about words they do not know.

Another way young children like to join in is by using knowledge of words they already know, like their name, to spot familiar letters and words in the books they share with you. You can respond to this interest by helping them to see the connections between, and patterns, in words, eg.

Parent: 'What does "Spotty" sound like?'

Child: 'Potty!'



Read it together

This story of *Ten in the Bed* is a variation on the traditional nursery rhyme which is well known to many children.

It's a memorable counting rhyme which helps children to count down from ten to one – and back again.

The gentle, detailed illustrations offer lots to talk about together. They provide the humour and the surprise of an additional story in which the toys fall out of bed!

There were ten in the bed and the little one said, "Roll over, roll over!"



The strong rhythm, rhyme and repetitive language of the story encourage children to join in the reading.

...and the little one said ...



You may find that children use the story when playing with some of their own toys.

With books they know well children can have a go at reading to you. Their enjoyment of the story is more important than getting every word right.

I say, "Roll over, roll over." And they all fall out!



We hope you enjoy reading this book together.

Each title in Walker's series of picture books 'Reading Together' includes two spreads with related ideas for ways the parent can encourage the child to join in. This spread is from *Ten in the Bed*, written and illustrated by Penny Dale.

★ Re-reading

It is important to keep re-reading old favourites – children get a lot of confidence and pleasure from books they know well. When children begin learning to read, their knowledge of a familiar book will help them as they start to notice more about the words on the page. You can encourage them to look more carefully at the words and letters in books they know well.

Even when children begin to read for themselves, they may still want to re-read a familiar book quite frequently or have it read to them. This does not mean they are standing still in their reading: progress is not always a matter of going on to the next book. Even experienced readers enjoy re-reading. Tapes of favourite stories provide another way for children to hear stories again and can help them with matching the words they hear to the words on the page.

By hearing a book again and again, young children often get to know a story so well that they can retell it in their own words. Re-reading makes retelling possible and this is a valuable way for children to learn how the story goes. You can encourage your child to retell a story to you using the book cover or the pictures.

★ Acting out Stories

Children may enjoy acting a story, sometimes using the language of the book. This gives them a chance to try out what they have learned and make it their own. They are also learning how to be a storyteller and how to make up dialogue. You can encourage this kind of play by providing them with a few dressing-up clothes and home-made props.

The wheels on the bus go round and ...

round, All day long.



Some stories are fun to perform together. You can act them out at home, or even when you are walking along! *The Wheels on the Bus* (Walker 'Reading Together' series) is a good example of a popular rhyme that can be acted. Children also like to act stories using toy animals or small figures. They may draw a picture of a story and talk their way through it, or they might change stories by making up their own versions. All these kinds of play acting will be a useful basis for their later story writing.

★ Beginning to Read and Write

Between the ages of four and seven, many children will begin trying to read for themselves. They do this in very different ways. At first, some may 'read' the book by remembering the story and making up their own words. Others may want to get every word right, and be unwilling to

And two lovely sisters
who play on the flute –



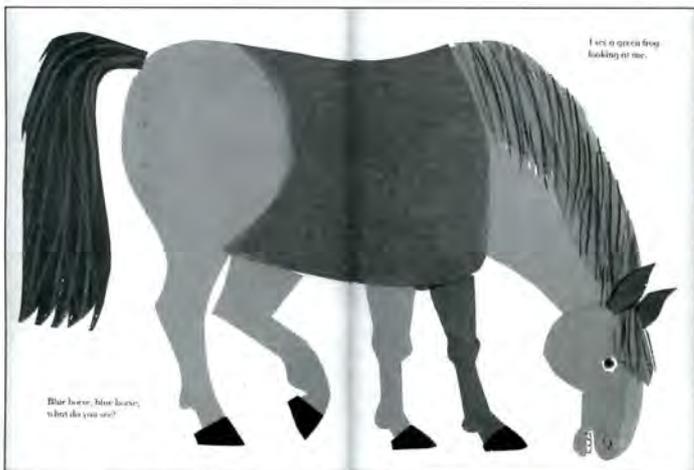
But Mr Magnolia has only one boot.

From **Mister Magnolia** by
Quentin Blake (Capel/Picture
Lions). A wonderful
combination of a rhyming text
with humorous illustration.



guess at all. It is important to respond to children as individuals. Gradually let them take over as much of the reading as they can and want to. They may need to be helped to look more carefully at the actual words, or they may have to be encouraged to move the story along and worry less about mistakes. A good rule is to back off if a child seems to be getting anxious, or reluctant to read. Rather than jumping in each time your child stumbles over a word, it can be more helpful to give occasional prompts or a word to keep a story flowing.

Children learn a lot about reading from their own attempts at writing. When they write, they have to think carefully about how words sound and how they look. You can encourage your child to write from very early on by asking him or her to put their name in birthday cards or by sending signed drawings and messages to relatives and friends. They may also enjoy making labels or notices or dictating stories to you.



From **Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?** by Bill Martin and Eric Carle (Hamish Hamilton/Picture Puffin). The pattern of the text encourages the child to predict what comes next in this rhythmical story.

★ Always Remember

Small children learn by imitation. If your child sees you enjoying reading and especially enjoying reading with him/her, the chances are she/he will enjoy it too!

If you would like to help your child but have difficulty with reading and writing, your local library will be able to advise about literacy classes in your area.

★ Where to Go for Books

Libraries are free. They have no age limits and they welcome babies and small children as members. Most libraries have a children's section full of wonderful books that your child can borrow. And if you or your child want advice about what to choose, you can ask the librarian. Some libraries have story telling sessions or Parent and Toddler mornings so you can find out about the books other children have enjoyed.

Of course library books have to be returned and your child may want to have their own copy of a favourite book. Children's departments in bookshops usually have staff who can help you choose. Books also make wonderful presents for birthdays. Like toys, books can become much loved friends and your child will enjoy having their own collection. ■

Books for Keeps is a children's book review magazine that comes out six times a year. Useful, informative and readable, **Books for Keeps** will help you choose the right books for your children. It is available on subscription at £17.40 per year. Further details from **Books for Keeps**, 6 Brightfield Road, Lee, London SE12 8QF (telephone 0181 852 4953, fax 0181 318 7580).

The text for this article is an amended extract from **Reading Together: The Parents' Handbook*** (Walker, £2.99) by Myra Barrs and Sue Ellis. It is reproduced, together with photographs from the book, by kind permission of the authors and of Walker Books.

* Reading Together is published on 23 April 1998.

BfKREVIEWS

Reviews (of both hardback and paperback fiction and non-fiction) are grouped for convenience into both age categories and under teaching range. Within each section, you will find reviews for younger children at the beginning. Books and children being varied and adaptable, we suggest that you look either side of your area. More detailed recommendations for use can often be found within the review.

RATING

Unmissable ★★★★★
 Very Good ★★★★★
 Good ★★★
 Fair ★★
 Sad ★

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

Brian Alderson is the chief children's book consultant for *The Times*.

Clive Barnes is Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City.

David Bennett is Senior Teacher and Head of the English Faculty at George Spencer School, Nottinghamshire.

Jill Bennett is the author of *Learning to Read with Picture Books*. She is Early Years Co-ordinator and teacher at Chatsworth Infant School in Hounslow, Middlesex.

Roy Blatchford is UK Director of Reading is Fundamental and Series Editor of Longman Literature.

Valerie Coghlan is Librarian at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin.

Robert Dunbar lectures in English and children's literature at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin.

John Farndon is a non-fiction author and consultant.

Vivian French is a writer. Her latest book is *Aesop's Funky Fables* (see page 20).

Nikki Gamble is Head of English at the School of Education, Anglia Polytechnic University.

Annabel Gibb works as a supply teacher in primary schools in Leeds.

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Books About Children's Books

Signs of Childness in Children's Books

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Peter Hollindale, *Thimble Press*, 144pp, 0 903355 44 2, £8.95 pbk

Hollindale has set himself the task of defining the particular quality in children's literature. His interest is describing how good writing for children is necessarily based on identification between the writer and his intended audience. He argues for the importance of a richly varied imaginary world of childhood which

can 'enrich and diversify' the sense of what it means to be a child. The need for books which offer the child reader an encounter with unfamiliar dimensions of childhood is intensified by its ever-briefer duration. Puberty now impinges, significantly in the primary years, and child audiences are provided

with increasing amounts of television, film and popular music which have little interest in their distinctive experiences as children. Hollindale is anxious about the standardised construction of childhood and youth which the commercially-driven mass media offer, and believes that there is no substitute for the book, and in particular for the book's capacity to widen a child's experience through identification with other children.

He proposes a new term with which to evaluate the quality of children's books, which he calls their 'childness'. This neologism is intended to avoid the denigratory or at least condescending connotations of both 'childish' and 'childlike'. Hollindale produces quotations from both Shakespeare and George Macdonald to legitimise the use of this term, but I suspect that these exalted origins should alert us to the real difficulty of absorbing such a word usefully in modern discourse. Despite feeling thoroughly sympathetic to the fundamental argument of the book, I continued to chew over the claims of 'childness', and failed to digest it with any enthusiasm. Hollindale's definition is subtle, drawing attention to the interaction for the child between the sense of self and the images encountered in the cultural world, and also to the role of memory in the adult's picture of the proper concerns of a child. But if we are driven to new critical terms in order to debate writing for children, we are certainly entering a rather specialised form of literacy criticism in which only experts are likely to feel at home. This seems to present a danger for the future of children's literature, which must depend on the lively engagement of ordinary parents and teachers in particular.

However, the book is full of vivid and interesting discussion of a rich variety of texts, which is valuable and instructive. This provides a splendid introduction to many books that the average reader may not have come across, as well as challenging her/him to engage with particular interpretations of familiar stories. I particularly enjoyed Hollindale's

ideas about Doherty's *White Peak Farm* contrasted with Lawrence's treatment of the Brangwen family in *The Rainbow*, and his account of Paulsen's *The Voyage of the Frog* and a number of other stories linked with learning to swim or sail, with their Conradian echoes. If one combs the book for ideas for worthwhile reading for children of all ages, there is a lot to learn. There is a good description of the literature of 'youth', usefully differentiated from 'adolescence' and the preoccupations of the main themes of 'young adult' novels.

It is therefore to be recommended to enthusiastic readers as a source book and for its many critical insights into individual writers and books, but the rather precious formulation of its thesis may nevertheless irritate. Perhaps an attempt to write in an academically respectable way about strongly-felt convictions (with most of which I am in agreement) has in fact interfered in the writing of a truly readable book. MR

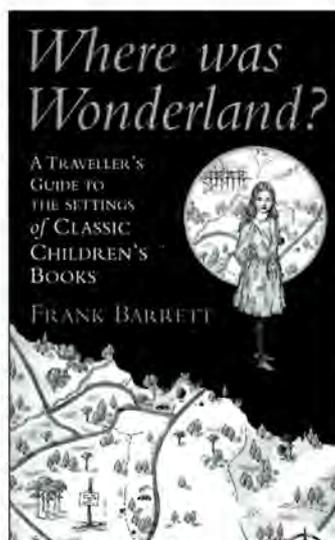
Where was Wonderland? - A traveller's guide to the settings of classic children's books

NON-FICTION ★★

Frank Barrett, Hamlyn, 208pp, 0 600 59345 2, £6.99 pbk

There is something about children's literature which induces in newspaper journalists a form of senile dementia. Adult rationality gives way to abject whimsy. This is most prominently displayed by Barrett (travel editor, no less, of the *Mail on Sunday*) in his obsessive conviction that everyone in contact with children's books is either casting a spell or is subject to the same.

Visiting Regents Park, the 'magic' of *The 101 Dalmatians* returns to him. *Watership Down* is 'a magical spot ... with the wind whispering in the trees'. Peter Pan proves to be 'a magical boy who never gets older'. *The Secret Garden* has 'many magic ingredients'. Life with the Champion



of the World's father is (guess what?) 'magical', while 'a treasured part of our growing-up' can be found in 'the tales of magical Beatrix Potter characters such as Peter Rabbit and Pigling Bland' ... and we are still only up to page 66.

The glimpse of the author's command of the English language in those quotations perhaps deserves fuller exhibition. How about this: 'Beatrix Potter is arguably the Lake District's most successful writer, perhaps even more popular than the great poet Wordsworth. But her life began in quite different circumstances.'

An equivalent sloppiness marks the substance of this travel guide to classic children's books and 'the dreamy "other world" for which good books are the only (?) passport'. To begin with, what of Barrett's view of the limits of his territory? A *Christmas Carol* and *Lorna Doone* are, I suppose, children's books by adoption, but *Cider with Rosie* is surely only one by virtue of exam syllabi, and *Rob Roy* is probably present only because of the movie (although Barrett claims - on who knows what evidence - that Scott is now 'seen as a writer of books which

are mainly read by young people').

His charabanc tour through the 22 titles that make up his final choice is routeless to a degree which shakes confidence in Barrett's role as traveller as well as writer. Once we have got past *Wonderland* (the rabbit-hole is apparently located just off the Oxford ring road - not far perhaps from 'Christ Church College') we start to take an alphabetic direction: Adams ... Awdry ... Barrie ... Blackmore ..., but once past Dahl we veer off to Potter ... Bawden (*Carrie's War*) ... Grahame ... and the sequence disintegrates. It ends with St Exupéry and *The Little Prince*, but, disappointingly, there are no recommendations for guest-houses on Asteroid B-162.

Our wayward journey is not eased by the commentary of the tour-guide whose formulaic description of each classic site undermines his desire to wow the customers. Plodding through a set sequence of Introduction, Story Précis (often quite dreadful), Author Biography (ditto), and Tour, he is at his best when he gets to Further Information and sets down the useful facts about the presence of related gift shops and museums.

All these shortcomings are regrettable, not least because Barrett's initial idea was so full of potential. With a careful analysis of the varying ways in which the landscapes of children's literature are created for the reader, and with a rather more engaged and literate exposition, a guide could take the traveller not across sundry car-parks but towards a more discriminating awareness of the role of 'setting' as a character within story. BA

PS. From our Lakeland correspondent: Mrs Tiggy-Winkle lived at Newlands, which is a long way from Sawrey; and if you go two miles east of Low Ludderburn you are moving away from Arthur Ransome's grave rather than towards it!

REVIEWS Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant



Rub-a-Dub-Dub

POETRY ★★★★★

Ernest Henry, ill. Joanna Walsh, Bloomsbury, 64pp, 0 7475 2656 7, £9.99 hbk

Of the 47 poems for babies and toddlers in this small, square hardback approximately half are new, the remainder are traditional nursery rhymes. There are four sections, the

final one of lullabies, each with an introductory blank (almost) page to personalise with your baby's photo. Actions are suggested to accompany some of the poems and the mood is one of participatory playfulness. Some poems, 'More Car' for instance, remind me of young children's own early language play, and some trip off the tongue more easily than others: I had to read 'Peep Boo!!' several times before getting it right!

Walsh's gentle pencil and watercolour illustrations (which remind one rather of Charlotte Voake) reflect our multi-racial society - albeit somewhat cosily. The numerous images of infants and others are diverting and the overall page design is varied and consistently pleasing. Although clearly aimed at babies and their carers this book would also be enjoyed by their slightly older brothers and sisters, either at home or school. JB

This Little Pig

0 333 67936 9

Incy Wincy Spider

0 333 67938 5

The Elephant

0 333 67937 7



Colin and Jacqui Hawkins, Campbell 'Jolly Pops', 12pp, £2.99 each board

These do-the-actions-to-the-rhyme small board books are a repackaging from the mid-1980s - and have stood the test of time delightfully. The illustrations are witty, animated and invite the young reader to join in with words and actions. The final spread of each book has an inventive piece of paper engineering, making the adult reader rather wish every spread

sported similar technology. If books for this age range are all about encouraging parent-and-child cuddle and laughter, then these 'Jolly Pops' should be in every baby's book-start hamper. RB

Spider School

★★★★

Francesca Simon, ill. Peta Coplans, Dolphin, 32pp, 1 85881 433 2, £4.50 pbk

This is a challenging picture book -

the Year One and Year Two children who reviewed it for me had diametrically opposing opinions. Most enjoyed it – they loved the humour and gloried in the details of Kate's first day at a nightmare school where books are not allowed and spiders and snails are served up for dinner! The other children were concerned about children changing schools in real life. This book might make them more nervous rather than make them laugh at their fears. What if the book got into the hands of 'little ones just about to start school', they might be 'really put off'! As the story unfolds it becomes clear that Kate is having a nightmare but this is not overtly stated and a surprisingly high percentage of the children did not grasp this important fact.

The book provided a very valuable vehicle for discussion allowing children to consider what they thought and knew about school, about the school environment, about school dinners, about how teachers spoke to them, about what they took for granted and about why they attend school at all! Handled sensitively *Spider School* delivers a great deal but there are some risks attached! JS

Fowl Play: the case of the vanishing chickens

★★★

Jonathan Allen, Dolphin, 40pp, 1 85881 431 6, £4.50 pbk

Hubert Hound is security adviser down at Oak Tree Farm, and when half a dozen prize chickens go missing from the coop and show up dead in Foxy's larder, it looks like an open and shut case. However, would a professional like Foxy leave such obvious clues behind him? And who is the door to door salesman who has been selling dodgy poultry meat to the local carnivores? This very entertaining picture book presents Hubert's investigation in the manner of a detective pre-primer, with the clues neatly summarised for the children's perusal and consideration before the culprit is revealed. This would be a very good book to share with a group of beginner readers, who might enjoy the opportunity to argue their own cases. GH



On the boat there was a group of musicians who played accordions and fiddles to entertain the passengers. People clapped and sang along to the music.

Travelling in Grandma's Day

Faye Gardner with Anne Callender, 0 237 51711 6

School Life in Grandma's Day

Faye Gardner with Anne Richardson, 0 237 51710 8

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Evans 'In Grandma's Day', 32pp, £8.99 each hbk

Houses and Homes

0 7502 2123 2

School

0 7502 2124 0

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Kath Cox and Pat Hughes, Wayland 'History from Photographs', 32pp, £4 99 each pbk

These two series provide a useful and complementary set of resources for the teaching of History in the primary school. The publishers have made considerable efforts to make the materials relevant to both Key Stage One and Key Stage Two. Both series provide good support for children through indexes, glossaries and suggested further reading lists; the book information on the back cover is also accessible to children rather than directed solely at the adult. Wayland includes books from other publishers (a point applauded by our Year Two reviewers as 'generous'!) in

NEW Talent

Come On, Daisy!

★★★★

Jane Simmons, Orchard, 32pp, 1 86039 541 4, £9.99 hbk

What could be more dramatic and yet satisfying for a small child than a story about losing your mother only to find her again. Intensely curious, Daisy Duckling explores the world of water and reeds around her, only to lose sight of Mamma Duck. Anxiety grows as sinister rustling noises get closer but then Mamma swims into view.

Simmons' painterly style with its striking effects of texture and surface decoration and her palette with its sombre, shadowy greens and browns evoke the world of the river well while also creating a duckling endearingly full of enthusiasm and zest for life. The lack of a subjunctive jars at one point in the occasionally



clumsy text and the cover typography is fussy but overall this is an accomplished picture book debut for this new artist. RS



From School.

their further reading list as well as ideas for places to visit and excellent teachers' notes.

Wayland's 'History from Photographs' series has well chosen 'then and now' photographs with captions at different reading levels to encourage group participation. The photographs are an excellent selection and provide a wealth of information allowing the books to be accessed at many different levels. Considerable care and attention to detail has been taken to ensure that

stereotyping is minimised and that children are not misled; a good example of this is the strategic use of current black and white photographs so that children do not assume that they only existed in the past. The photographs allow us an intimate look at similarities and differences, some of which make a dramatic impact. The modern dwellings in *Houses and Homes* are rather sanitised but this is a quibble. This series in particular would lend itself well to the Literacy hour if turned into 'big books'; a larger format would allow valuable interaction with class or group, helping to put non-fiction firmly on the agenda.

Evans' 'In Grandma's Day' series gives us a more intimate look at history through the eyes of two (very young looking) grannies. Family photographs and delightful detail such as contemporary posters, tickets and badges give these titles a 'scrapbook' feel. The chatty style of the texts means that the independent access range narrows slightly but these books are still a superb resource for any child at the top end of Key Stage One when shared with an interested adult and fascinating as well as supportively laid out for pupils gathering information for Key Stage Two project work. JS

REVIEWS 5-8 Infant/Junior

The Red Fox Monster

0 7445 5459 4

Red Fox and the Baby Bunnies

0 7445 5458 6

★★★★

Alan Baron, Walker 'The Giggle Club', 24pp, £1.99 each pbk

These enjoyable picture books about the ever hungry Red Fox are part of 'The Giggle Club' series which fills a gap in the school library as its titles have a reasonably limited vocabulary and lots of repetition which make them immediately accessible as shared readers. With their rather anarchic humour, they are also very



attractive to a broad section of children in the infant age range. With little adult support, these books are becoming a craze with young children wanting to read them as fast

as possible so as to 'collect' as many titles as they can. JS

Tidy Titch

★★★★

Pat Hutchins, 0 09 922022 9

Tiny Ted

★★★★

Peter Bowman, 0 09 922032 6

Alfie's Alphabet

★★★★★

Shirley Hughes, 0 09 922042 3

The Snow Angel

★★★★★

Angela McAllister, ill. Claire Fletcher, 0 09 922002 4

Two Monsters

★★★★★

David McKee, 0 09 922012 1

Oscar got the blame

★★★★★

Tony Ross, 0 09 921992 1

Red Fox 'Mini Treasures', 32pp, 99p each pbk

Size is not everything but it is amazing how it can change a book's character and appeal. Some of these



miniature editions (10.5 x 14cm) of full-size picture books suffer from being reduced. Illustrations conceived and executed in a larger format lose some of their clarity, crispness and detail: it is difficult to identify all the toys cluttering the bedrooms of Titch's brother and sister in *Tidy Titch*, for example, or to spot Tiny Ted at all in the first illustration to that title. This shortcoming is not present in *Alfie's Alphabet*, the only 'original' Mini Treasure. The typeface here is also larger and as a result the book can still be shared by child and adult.

On the other hand, the pleasures experienced when reading the original versions are somehow magnified when revisited through the pages of miniature versions which can be taken out of a pocket and read in all manner of unlikely or secret places. Their smallness gives these titles an almost seductive appeal and at ninety-nine pence – less than the price of a birthday card – they are also easily affordable. **JB**

Tea in the Sugar Bowl, Potato in My Shoe

POETRY ★★★★★

Michael Rosen, ill. Quentin Blake, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 4926 4, £9.99 hbk, 0 7445 5438 1, £4.99 pbk

The title gives a flavour of this repackaging of the nine musings from four of Rosen's earlier books. Typically he plays with words and ideas taking us from a catastrophic breakfast through to a more peaceful bedtime with visits to the seaside and doctors in between. Each episode is illustrated in Blake's inimitable, zany style. Giving children time to allow themselves similar flights of fancy to those in the author's 'What if ...' is something I fear is being squeezed out thanks to today's over-packed curriculum: if this volume offers nothing more than an opportunity to ponder that question, it is worth every penny. **JB**

Aesop's Funky Fables

★★★★

Vivian French, ill. Korky Paul, Hamish Hamilton, 80pp, 0 241 13620 2, £12.99 hbk

French has retold ten of Aesop's best known fables in a large, handsome picture book format, half of them in rap-like staccato verse and the rest in prose enlivened by spicy dialogue and block capital sound effects. Paul's strident, cartoonish illustrations amplify the megaphone effects of this treatment. The intrusion of dire adjectives like

Editor's Choice

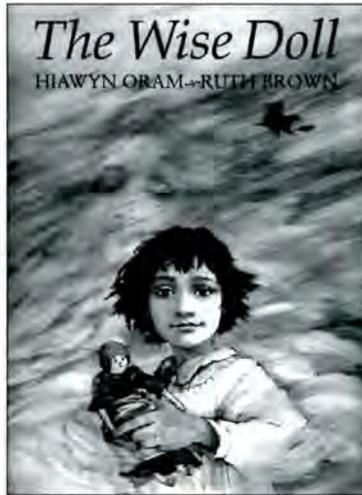
The Wise Doll

★★★★★

Hiawyn Oram, ill. Ruth Brown, Andersen, 32pp, 0 86264 774 6, £9.99 hbk

A version of a traditional Russian tale, this powerful picture book tells how Too-Nice is sent by her sisters, Horrid and Very-Horrid, to fetch them a toad from the house of the witch, Baba Yaga. Fortunately for Too-Nice she has a wise doll, given to her by her dead mother, to advise her how to complete the tasks the witch sets her. She not only escapes unscathed but the toad gobbles up her horrid sisters allowing her to stop being too nice and become 'Just About Right'.

Brown's dramatic, dark hued illustrations provide clues to the underlying meaning of this highly charged story. The Too Nice Child, the Horrid Child and Very Horrid Child seen in the witch's Many-Ways Mirror are, of course, the same child whose wise doll (internal good



object) 'does the work' (of integration of the personality) as Too-Nice sleeps. Too-Nice can even begin to use Baba Yaga (the other symbolic mother in this story) creatively as she finally gazes unafraid into the witch's eyes which 'glowed like hot coals'. As with *Where the Wild Things Are* which famously addresses earlier developmental conflicts, children will also enjoy and understand this deeply satisfying and imaginative picture book. **RS**



'funky' into the titles of collections of traditional tales always gives me the sort of sinking feeling that many people must experience when they see venerable artists squandering their dignity by attempting to be trendy, and I must admit that the raucousness of some of these versions did nothing to enhance my enjoyment of them. However the children I showed this book to did enjoy the look and the feel of it, and the opportunities it offers for recitation and performance would be welcomed by many teachers. **GH**

Balloon Lagoon and the Magic Islands of Poetry

POETRY ★★★★★

Adrian Mitchell, ill. Tony Ross, Orchard, 112pp, 1 86039 446 9, £9.99 hbk

Balloon Lagoon includes not only much of Mitchell's earlier work for children, previously available only in anthologies or out of print collections, but many new poems. It is also the best of his collections to look at, with spiky line drawings by

Tony Ross, and an arrangement in sections like the map of a forgotten poetic explorer: Elephantasia, The Rampages, The Woofmiaou Isles.

For those, like me, who have been struck in the past by the poet's dark or angry side (represented here by 'Dumb Insolence' and the brilliant 'Back in the Playground Blues'), there is a new mellow Mitchell, grandparent and golden retriever lover, to enjoy and admire. You will not find a better elegy for a dead pup than 'For Number Ten': 'There are some insects and some flowers/Whose life is spent in twenty-four hours.'

As always, there is his mischievous and provocative imagination, which delights and disturbs with strange connections, wild word coining, stomping playground rhythms, denunciations of cruelty and injustice and affirmations of commitment and compassion. 'Tinkling the Ivories' tells us 'There was an elephant/called Art Tatum/He played a piano/whose keys were human teeth,' and 'Turn Turn Turn' warns us 'There is a time for considering elephants/There is no time for not considering elephants.'

The collection's presentation favours infant and junior school age children, but there are poems here for secondary children (and adults too). **CB**

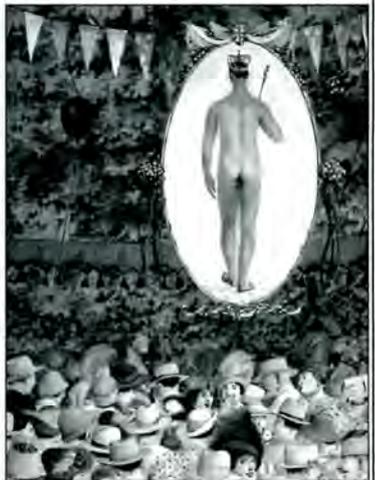
The Emperor's New Clothes

★★★★

Hans Christian Andersen, translated by Naomi Lewis, ill. Angela Barrett, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 3753 3, £10.99 hbk

Lewis presents a plain and powerful retelling of a tale that needs no embroidering. The relevance of a yarn about a pair of spivs marketing a non-existent commodity, and using the vanity and insecurity of an entire nation in order to convince the populace of its indispensable value,

has a cultural, political and religious relevance which is blazingly radiant. Read this to infants and juniors, but do not forget to persuade older children to discuss its implications too.



Barrett has set the tale in the pre Great War *belle époque*, with a sleazily effete emperor surrounded by lap dogs and sycophants. The verisimilitude of her paintings of the fashions and ephemera of the time are impressive. Perhaps she could be persuaded to do a 1990s version some time? **GH**

Tales of Wonder and Magic

★★★★★

Compiled by Berlie Doherty, ill. Juan Wijngaard, Walker, 112pp, 0 7445 4401 7, £12.99 hbk



'Chura and Marwe' from *Tales of Wonder and Magic*.

Dreams and wishes are the stuff of folktales and this collection of nine stories from different countries amply expresses the longing, the dreaming, of people from a variety of cultures, including Africa, Australia, Canada, Wales and the Shetland Islands. They are complemented by an original story by Doherty, 'The girl who couldn't walk', which with a nice twist shows that wishes are not always predictable. Juan Wijngaard's illustrations delicately catch the mood of each tale and bring an extra dimension to the magic in the text. His page-side decorations also enhance each opening in what is a beautifully presented book. **VC**

Little Swan

0 09 921822 4

Louisa's Secret

0 09 921832 1

Louisa in the Wings

0 09 921842 9

Louisa and Phoebe

0 09 921852 6

★★★★

Adèle Geras, ill. Karen Popham, Red Fox 'Little Swan', 64pp, £2.99 each pbk

At the age of seven Louisa begins ballet lessons and from then on a love of dance becomes of crucial importance to her. The books in this series track four separate incidents involving Louisa and her ballet class. Two of the books do this from Louisa's own perspective and two do so from that of her sister Annie. This device gives a depth and a liveliness to what could have been no more than an average format series. Louisa's exploits are mainly of interest to children who are as interested as she is in ballet, but they are nicely flavoured with her growing self-awareness and Annie's trenchant comments from the sidelines. VC

When People Die

Sarah Levete, 0 7496 2817 0

Our New Baby

Jen Green, 0 7496 2818 9

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Illustrated by Christopher O'Neill, Franklin Watts 'How do I feel about' series, 24pp, £9.99 each hbk

In *When People Die* five children discuss their ideas about death: why and how people die, the inevitability of death, what happens after death and their feelings following the death



Ima and Ben, how can you help if you know someone whose friend or relative has died?

"If you know someone who is grieving, be especially kind to him or her. It can make a big difference if you show you care, even if your friend isn't ready to play or to have fun yet. When you are unhappy, friends can really help to make you feel better."

**From When People Die.**

of a person or pet they have loved. Coping strategies are introduced, and while the children often seem more mature and didactic than one would expect of 7- to 8-year-olds, the facts are covered well, and there are many excellent discussion points.

Our New Baby also uses an interview technique to discuss with four children their reactions to the arrival of younger brothers and sisters. Two of the children are 'expectant siblings', while the other two already have younger brothers and sisters and can discuss the problems in retrospect. As the children are aged 7 to 8, the book covers the basic facts of life, both before and after birth, but the emphasis is on feelings. There is lots about anger and hurt and being fed up and jealous; but the children also talk about the happiness and excitement a new baby brings. In both picture books a combination of multiracial photographs and cartoons helps make the information accessible. Didactic, but very good for discussion. ES

What's Up?

NON-FICTION ★

0 7496 2713 1

Yum-Yum!

NON-FICTION ★★★

0 7496 2712 3

Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Franklin Watts 'Wonderwise', 32pp, £8.99 each hbk

In *What's Up?* two children climb tree, skyscraper and mountain in their quest to find out 'what could be higher?'. Confusion then sets in as they travel further and further from earth to find something 'higher' than moon, sun or stars. At this point the authors give in and admit that they meant 'further' - the words 'taller', 'higher' and 'further' are easily enough confused by young children without a book that confuses them further. In addition, a supplementary text adds both visual distraction and information which swings between being irrelevant and rather too advanced for the potential audience for a large, brightly-coloured picture book. Confusion piled on confusion - avoid it!

Much more successfully, *Yum-Yum!* illustrates a possible (if unrealistically long) food chain, supported by a nicely repetitive text and pictures giving a clue to the identity of the next animal in the chain. Once again there is a supplementary text giving further information about the various animals involved, though this information is not always relevant to the theme of the book.

Both these books finish with a page of 'useful words'. I would be surprised if the likely audience for picture books of this sort need or would use a glossary, particularly one which repeats almost word for word an explanation already found in the main text, or includes words unconnected to the book's theme. AG

Do the Doors Open by Magic? and other supermarket questions

0 19 910462 X

Why is Soap So Slippery? and other bathtime questions

0 19 910464 6

Why is the Sky Blue? and other outdoor questions

0 19 910458 1

**Why do Stars Twinkle? and other nighttime questions**

0 19 910460 3

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Catherine Ripley, ill. Scot Ritchie, Oxford, 32pp, £3.99 each pbk

This is a brilliant formula - Ripley asks exactly the right questions and answers them in a way which is satisfyingly full enough to prevent too many follow-up 'why' questions without confusing us all with too much detail. The balance between the amount of information given and the accessible language is particularly clever and will make these books an immediate asset to any school or family library. Ritchie's illustrations give support but also plenty of detail. JS

REVIEWS 8-10 Junior/Middle**Lassie, Come-Home**

★★★★★

Retold by Rosemary Wells, ill. Susan Jeffers, Puffin Picture Story Book, 48pp, 0 14 055746 6, £5.99 pbk



The story, which in other hands could be overly sentimental, is given a hard

edge through the use of the Victorian setting and some powerful descriptive writing by Wells. Jeffers too conveys something of the harshness of the times in her sparse interiors and dark and dramatic landscape as well as her skill as an animal painter. JB

Farm Boy

★★★★★

Michael Morpurgo, ill. Michael Foreman, Pavilion, 80pp, 1 85793 874 7, £12.99 hbk

This is an extremely beautiful book. It is beautiful in its presentation, layout and design (by Janet James) and, strikingly, in the clearly sympathetic relationship between text and illustrations: its endpapers, in the form of reproductions of rural advertisements from the post-World War One years, provide an attractive and appropriate frame for both. In terms of structure, the technique is that

of the story within the story, a device which here has the effect of reinforcing the central themes of family, continuity and tradition. 'I come from a family of farmers going back generations and generations,' reveals our principal narrator, by way of introduction to the three 'farm boys' whose interweaving stories we are privileged to share. While the various voices of the different generations blend effortlessly, cumulatively providing an evocative, humorous and nostalgic picture of English (Devon) country life over some eighty years, the contribution which stands out most dramatically

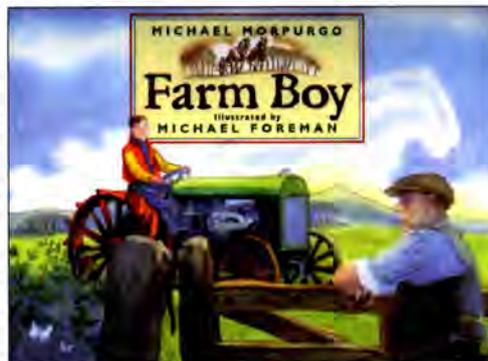
is the one given verbatim in Grandpa's own idiom, a remarkable feat of Morpurgo recreation. If there are such things as contemporary classics then this, surely, is one of them. RD

Lord Fox and other spine chilling tales

★★★★★

Robert Nye, ill. Sophy Williams, Orion, 88pp, 1 85881 234 8, £14.99 hbk

Nye (best known for such pungent and tumultuous adult books as *Falstaff*, *Faust* and *Merlin*) here turns his gift for rich language and intense imagery to a set of rather X-certificate folk tales from around the world. The title tale is a version of the Bluebeard myth, featuring a room full of butchered brides and a severed hand with which the serial killer is eventually confronted. This is a story which has been recently retold by both Angela Carter and Susan Price, and Nye emulates these writers in the ardour with which he depicts these and similar atrocities: a voracious wooden baby that swallows almost a whole village before being disembowelled by a giggling old



crone; a trio of beautiful young witches who steal and stockpile eyeballs; a sentient knife that prowls the air, restlessly seeking blood. The collection also contains milder magic more tenderly told, including lovely versions of Thomas the Rhymer and Orpheus and Eurydice, and a real heart-breaker from China to open the collection. This is a feast of yarns for all ages, with Williams' fiery pastels providing a sumptuous glow to read them by. **GH**

My Granny's Great Escape

★★★

Jeremy Strong, ill. Nick Sharratt, Viking, 96pp, 0 670 87297 0, £9.99 hbk

The theme of this story is frustrated love and its eventual victory in the face of adversity. The lovers are Nicholas's 62-year-old granny and Lancelot, the Hell's Angel father of prim and proper Mr Tugg next door. Lancelot at 65 not only rides a motorbike, he also has a pony tail and keeps pigeons. This makes him a highly unsuitable suitor in the eyes of Nicholas's father, and he and Mr Tugg are united in their efforts to thwart old love. After an escape via knotted sheets lowered from granny's bedroom window, a burglary that was not, a mad dash in Lancelot's motorbike plus sidecar and a ride in a hot-air balloon all is well, and the star-crossed lovers are wed in a castle, albeit one of the bouncing sort. Sharratt's illustrations nicely complement this modern romantic tale. **VC**

The Horribly Haunted School

★★★

Margaret Mahy, ill. Robert Staerose, Hamish Hamilton, 128pp, 0 241 13753 5, £10.99 hbk

Preoccupied with her attempt to win the National Jigsaw Puzzle Championship, Mrs Merryandrew dumps her son Monty at his new school, the Brinsley Codd School for Sensible Thought. As he is allergic to ghosts, Monty knows instantly that the school is haunted. There are some weird characters in this bizarre tale: used car salesman Scruncley Filcher, Avery Crispin – the rickshaw man, and the stereotyped jealous deputy head with a guilty secret, Mr Sogbucket. The plot does not go off quite so tangentially as Mahy's recent *Tingleberries*, *Tuckertubs* & *Telephones* and it all comes together at the end but be prepared to explain some of the more adult puns and phrases. The 'Department for National Despair' is a Pythonesque concept which is not easily explained to a nine-year-old. Skillfully detailed black and white hatched illustrations assist the audience only partially. An acquired taste. **AK**

Aquila

★★★

Andrew Norriss, Puffin, 144pp, 0 14 038365 4, £3.99 pbk

A Roman spaceship named after the Latin word for 'eagle'? Sounds an unlikely starting point for a successful story but this adventure is one which upper junior children will enjoy as a relatively undemanding read. I am not sure whether this book

preceded the BBC TV series which I did not catch but which apparently contained some pretty good special effects, or if it is a TV tie-in. The book certainly reads like a screenplay, moving to and fro scenes.

Basically two Year 7 schoolboys, Tom and Geoff, running off to avoid actually having to do any work on a geography field trip, discover a buried Roman spaceship in perfect working order. What has to be done to make it work leads to some trial and error piloting experiments. There are some interesting episodes as the boys attempt to ascertain the extent of its capabilities whilst trying to keep the machine a secret. **AK**

Nutcracker

★★★

E T A Hoffmann, ill. Roberto Innocenti, Cape, 136pp, 0 224 04642 X, £19.99 hbk

The Illustrated Book of Ballet Stories

★★★

Introduced by Darcy Bussell, written by Barbara Newman, ill. Gill Tomblin, Dorling Kindersley, 64pp, 0 7513 5615 8, £9.99 hbk



The Orchard Book of Opera Stories

★★★★

Retold by Adèle Geras, various illustrators, Orchard, 128pp, 86039 249 0, £14.99 hbk

As a child I was banned from reading Hoffmann's *Nutcracker* because it gave my older brother such dreadful nightmares. Are the children of today made of sterner stuff? Will the death of Dame Mouserinks 'scrabbling in her own blood' raise a mere titter? Innocenti's illustrations in this heavy, large format gift book are not calculated to allay any fears; they are deep, dark and terrifyingly atmospheric. I found the story both curious and disturbing; a cracker of a period piece, but not the ideal introduction to the ballet of the same name. Is it, perhaps, the irresistible attraction of ballet to the pink satin slippers young that has prompted this edition? Much better to buy them *The Illustrated Book of Ballet Stories*, where they can not only read about Tchaikovsky's jolly rendering of the 'Nutcracker' but also find out all kinds of fascinating and informative facts about the world of ballet. You get real photos as well as pictures; not

a literary tour de force, but bound to appeal to all aspiring to the tutu – and their name is legion.

Every Saturday morning halls are flooded with pirouetting little girls, but where are the little opera buffs clamouring to go to opera lessons? It could happen. If anyone can make opera stories attractive and accessible the wonderful Geras can – and there is an editorial touch of genius in the choice of the eight different illustrators (Ian Beck, Louise Brierley, Emma Chichester Clark, Susan Field, Katya Mikhailovsky, Sheila Moxley, Jane Ray and Sophie Windham). All the same, the emotional thrust of opera is in the music and the manner of the singing, not the plot line; are these stories good enough of themselves to justify such a beautifully crafted book? Suicide, murder, trickery, love and shooting foxes; are these themes that children regularly choose? Or are they justified because they are 'the stories of the opera', and therefore classifiable as 'educational'? I suspect grandparents and gift givers will rave, but children may not. Then again, they may beg to go to the real thing to see what it is all about, and they will arrive understanding the story of 'The Love for Three Oranges'. I never thought anyone would ever do that. Geras is a wonder **VF**

Aunty Dot's Incredible Adventure Atlas

FACTION ★★★★★

Eljay Yildirim, Collins, 40pp, 0 00 197931 0, £9.99 hbk novelty

This novelty book packed with letters (reminiscent of *The Jolly Postman*) traces the adventures of a prize drawing-winning couple from 'Dunblarne, County Willow' on their 'holiday of a lifetime' trip round the world. As they travel, 'Aunty Dot' collects mementoes, takes photos, paints pictures and above all writes characterful letters to Mary and Michael back on the old sod. This means we get not only facts and pictures – familiar or less so – but also the attitudes and impressions of a middle-everything Irish lady, game for anything and surprised by all of it. Humour abounds. Aunty Dot's letters must be extracted from their airmail envelopes to be read, and there are further good touches ('Nostromo' sardines, for example).

This is a delightful scrapbook and, as such things do, will yield its best when, much loved, it is visited, revisited and shared with others. **TP**



How are Babies Made?

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Alastair Smith, ill. Maria Wheatley, Usborne 'Flip Flaps', 16pp, 0 7460 2502 5, £3.99 pbk novelty

What Happens to your Food?

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Alastair Smith, ill. Maria Wheatley, Usborne 'Flip Flaps', 16pp, 0 7460 2504 1, £3.99 pbk

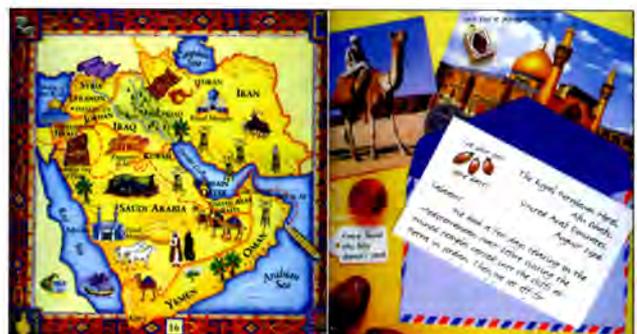
The Amazing Pull-Out Pop-Up Body in a Book

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

David Hawcock, Dorling Kindersley, 20pp, 0 7513 5652 2, £12.99 hbk novelty

In *How are Babies Made?* flap-lifting works well to uncover the mysteries of pregnancy and intra-uterine growth. Bright and optimistic pictures show the process in a good light and their narrative quality combines with a friendly text to make this very suitable for older readers with learning difficulties as well as for the junior target group to whom its endearing qualities will be immediately apparent. The same virtues distinguish *What Happens to your Food?* where flaps are often used to look beneath the surface as we follow a burger from gob to bog. Again a friendly text (e.g. 'food tube' not 'alimentary canal') aids assimilation.

Much of the information in these two titles can be confirmed by examination of the *Body in a Book* – as can the fact that the brain is the size of three family-sized pizzas. Using a hammer and two nails (not supplied) hang this book from a wall by means of the pre-punched holes and marvel at the muscles, bones and viscera of a 4ft 6 inch replica, pausing occasionally to read the related captions. The best bit is getting the



A spread from *Aunty Dot's Incredible Adventure Atlas*.

model to start dismembering itself by grabbing its own clavicles. Advice which provides plenty of rewards for a short attention span. TP

Dear Daniel: Letters from Antarctica

NON-FICTION ★★★★★
Sara Wheeler, Macdonald, 48pp, 0 7500 2144 6, £10.99 hbk

Amazon Diary: The Jungle Adventures of Alex Winters

NON-FICTION ★★★
Hudson Talbott and Mark Greenberg, Puffin, 48pp, 0 14 056249 4, £5.99 pbk

Here are two information books in the guise of diaries, suitable for 8-12 year-olds. *Amazon Diary* is a fictionalised account of a stay in the rainforest with a 'lost' tribe of Amazonian Indians and *Dear Daniel* is a record of travel writer Sara Wheeler's time spent in Antarctica.

Dear Daniel is the more conventional production. Each double page deals with a particular aspect of life on the frozen continent, say transport or dress, and is introduced by a letter from Sara to her godson, Daniel. The best parts of the book are Sara Wheeler's own photographs of herself, people and places, which, although sometimes not of the highest quality, have a real immediacy.

I wish Macdonald had been more adventurous in their presentation, because struggling to escape from the straitjacket of a topic book is a piece of travel writing for children which conveys the kind of feeling for place which can only come from having been there. It includes bizarre details like Sara's friend Lucia curling up in a wooden crate to keep warm and the traditional Christmas at the South Pole 'Race Around the World' which would be hard to find in any other children's book on Antarctica.

On the other hand, *Amazon Diary* could have done with a little less 'adventure' and derring-do. The presentation is marvellous. It is in the style of a scrap-book, with a diary written in clear longhand, snap-shot photographs, drawings and paintings, jokey marginal notes, mementoes 'sellotaped' in, and a wealth of anecdotal information on the Yanomamis; all as if it could have been written by marooned sixth grader, Alex Winters. But I have misgivings about the (invented?) drama in which one of the tribe's young women is kidnapped by another tribe and rescued only by Alex's clever stratagem and the use of a tape recorder. This not only stretches credulity, it also smacks of a kind of imperial tale (white intelligence and technological 'magic' save the day) which belongs a century ago. It is Indiana Jones anthropology.

Both books have an emphasis on direct experience and personal viewpoint which makes a refreshing

change from the blandness of many information books whose authors have not ventured beyond the word processor and the picture library. But such an approach brings a responsibility to broaden the reader's access to information. Wheeler recognises this with a bibliography and list of helpful organisations. Talbot and Greenberg refer us only to the Amazonia Foundation. CB

The Even More Amazing Science Pop-Up Book

NON-FICTION ★★★★★
Jay Young, Franklin Watts, 14pp, 0 7496 2560 0, £15.99 hbk novelty

This ingenious 3D exploration of scientific ideas is a follow-up to *The Most Amazing Pop-Up Science Book*. The first book contained a working record player, microscope, periscope, kaleidoscope, sundial, compass and camera obscura. This new pop-up contains six information packed spreads complete with a working gravity clock, binoculars, scales, telephone, abacus and phenakistoscope (a Victorian optical toy producing moving pictures).

Suitable for older junior children, this titles goes for maximum information at the expense of easy-on-the-eye layout. The centrepiece of each spread is a carefully crafted card engineered pop-up. This is



surrounded by half a dozen or so pieces of text, supported by small (sometimes very small) colour photographs or illustrations which seek to explain scientific concepts such as potential energy, stereoscopic vision, virtual reality, gravity and how computers work. Strangely in this spread there is no mention of the Internet.

The pop-ups are fairly sturdy but at £15.99 this book is going to be one that is for private use or selective use in the classroom rather than free hands-on. Keeping children's hands off this excellent science resource will be the problem! AK

REVIEWS 10-12 Middle/Secondary

ROVERANDOM



J.R.R. TOLKIEN

EDITED BY CHRISTINA SCULL & WAYNE G. HAMMOND

Roverandom

★★★

J R R Tolkien, HarperCollins, 128pp, 0 261 10353 9, £12.99 hbk

It may seem extraordinary that a complete, illustrated children's story by J R R Tolkien should have remained unpublished until now; three factors probably caused its initial rejection by Allen and Unwin in 1937 as a successor to *The Hobbit*. First, it was set in the real world, not Middle-earth; second, it had a typical, Blytonesque theme of a dog enchanted into a toy who has adventures in Fairyland and is finally reunited with his master; third, *Roverandom's* Good Fairy is a sand-sorcerer or Psamathist, obviously the

literary property of one E Nesbit. These elements, entirely appropriate to a private family story developed to console Tolkien's son Michael for the loss of his toy dog at the seaside in 1925, did not suit commercial publication.

However, now that Tolkien's own epics have been thoroughly pillaged by the fantasists and wargames, we may forgive the Psamathos and admire firstly the direct, loving way in which Tolkien writes from the trapped dog's point of view; then the magical scenes on the Moon, with their echoes of *Peter Pan* as sleeping Earth children spend their dreamtime at play there; and the Mer-king's palace (shades of Hans Andersen and *The Water Babies*). There is a vision of Elvenhome from Tolkien's own *Silmarillion*; and two menacing monsters, a moon-dragon and the great Sea-serpent.

This is a collector's item for personal and school libraries; or you could wait for a paperback edition where perhaps the scholarly and most useful introduction could be located after the text, so that child-readers could get straight into the story - a jolly good traditional children's tale. JY

The Beast of Whixall Moss

★★★★★

Pauline Fisk, Walker, 128pp, 0 7445 4174 3, £8.99 hbk

Perceptive youngsters should recognise this as an unusual, short, allegory. Unhappy Jack discovers a fabulous beast with gentle manners and six heads on a boat, rundown and managed by a father and

PAULINE FISK

The Beast of Whixall Moss

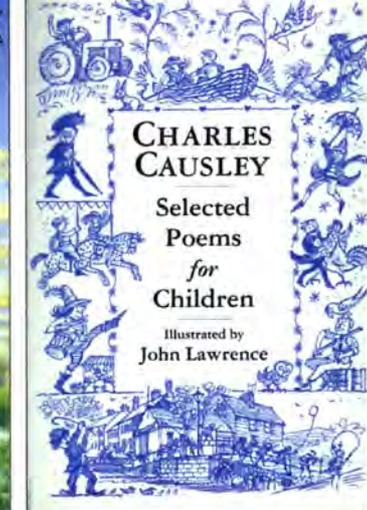


daughter, nervy and close to breaking.

At first the creature brings great contentment to Jack's own family, but then, they too become stressed and full of anxiety. Yet when the beast has moved on Jack and his mother realise what they had learnt from the contact.

'This was what it meant to have vision ... not striving for things, hoping until hope had gone ... nor grasping for things in a frenzy of desire ... But, amid the ordinary things of life, unasked for and unheralded, this act of sight.'

A very unusual imaginative book, which will take some thinking about, e.g. could Whixall really be 'wish all'? DB



Selected Poems for Children

POETRY ★★★★★

Charles Causley, ill. John Lawrence, Macmillan, 144pp, 0 330 35404 3, £5.99 pbk

There are 76 poems in this splendid collection, nearly enough for one per year of Causley's life, and each of them a lapidary masterpiece. The poet's experiences as a primary school teacher, a chronicler of the folklore of his native Cornwall, and a life long lover of the grim and glorious sea, are evident throughout the book, emerging as intriguing observations on mortality and the supernatural, and the cruelty and beauty of the natural world. Causley's use of rhythm and rhyme reflects the

cadences of folk music and the oral traditions of children at play creating a body of accessible, thought provoking verse that combines light heartedness with profundity. There is scarcely a human concern that is left unexamined in this anthology; it is a book to share and cherish. GH

The Ashton Affair

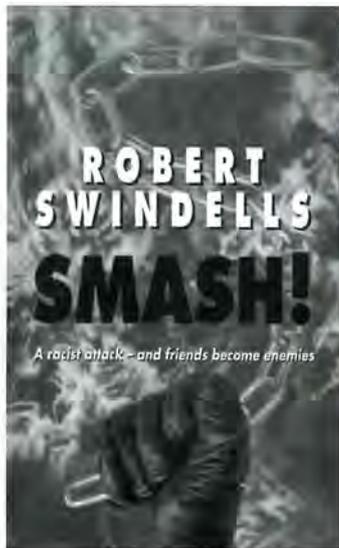
★★★

Ann Thwaite, Hippo, 160pp, 0 590 13885 5, £3.50 pbk

11-year-old Jan and her friends set up a secret club, go brambling, ride their bikes and practise tracking each other in the woods. Then they find a purpose for their skills of detection – Jan's mum meets an old boyfriend after many years and the children set out to discover whether the couple's meetings are innocent or the threat to her parents' marriage that Jan worries about.

The story is supposedly told from a distance of 20 years by the adult Jan – a device which seems pointless as the tone is that of an 11-year-old and there is no direct adult comment. Odd details which do not ring quite true and incidents which lead nowhere flaw this ultimately uneventful but readable book which might be useful for children facing similar worries about their parents' relationships, though the implausibly happy ending could only happen in a book! AG

of the richness of human resources. Rachel can cope and she can solve the mysteries in what becomes a very dramatic climax. This book is both exciting and thought-provoking. AJ



Smash!

★★★★

Robert Swindells, Hamish Hamilton, 192pp, 0 241 13689 X, £10.99 hbk

As the millennium approaches, the town council of Shadderton decides to commemorate it with a development dedicated to racial harmony in the town. But as the project involves the relocation of Asian families to a white council estate, the local fascists mobilise to exploit the potential for confrontation. At the same time, members of the Muslim community, enraged by a racist attack on a child, begin to organise direct retaliation. Meanwhile, a group of local entrepreneurs, with motives transcending racial loyalty, start to feed fivers to the flames.

The resultant plague of escalating violence is described from the viewpoints of Stephen and Ashraf and their families, former friends who end up in opposing battalions. The account of how Stephen is slowly sucked into the quagmire fantasies of the nazi group makes particularly disturbing reading.

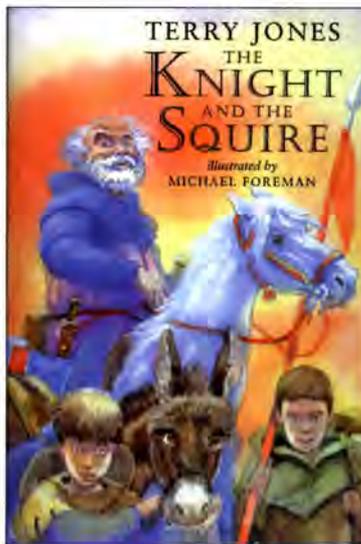
Swindells' customary procedure, packing action and dialogue into brief, concise chapters that nimbly bound from one perspective to another, carries the story along at a vertiginous pace, and he even finds room at the end for a characteristic knife edge chase. However, the dismally sinister essence of the conflict is never trivialised, and its relevance is highlighted by the lively descriptions of home and school life within which the violence uncoils. GH

The Knight and the Squire

★★★★

Terry Jones, ill. Michael Foreman, Pavilion, 288pp, 1 86205 044 9, £12.99 hbk

It would be totally against the spirit of this enjoyable romp of a novel to be po-facedly serious about it. Relax, sit back and follow the non-stop adventures of our engaging young hero, Tom, as he chases his dream of



leaving behind his 14th-century English village to travel to far off crusades in Arabia or Asia. Read sympathetically as the dream has to be abandoned and Tom settles instead for closer-to-home France and contemporary military engagements there. In the company of a new young friend called (sometimes) Alan and the Falstaffian knight Sir John Hawkey, Tom embarks on his journey, giving Jones the opportunity to create a diverting gallery of picaresque characters and a succession of highly-charged episodic encounters: it must be said, however, that the principal 'twist' of the story will have been spotted by most readers before it is actually made clear. If we insist on going beneath the entertaining surface the novel comes to be about two old friends – appearance and reality – and Tom's early appreciation that they are not always the same thing. Foreman's numerous black and white illustrations convey the sweep, humour and larger-than-life dimensions of the text. RD

In the Next Three Seconds

NON-FICTION ★★

Rowland Morgan, ill. Rod and Kira Josey, Hamlyn, 32pp, 0 600 58937 4, £12.99 hbk

The World in One Day

NON-FICTION ★★★

Russell Ash, Dorling Kindersley, 32pp, 0 7513 5618 2, £12.99 hbk

Two giant, full colour titles for the anoraks amongst us – both filled with completely useless information. What shall it profit a man to know that in the next three seconds Irish people will drink 200 potfuls of tea, in the next three minutes French people will save a copse of 600 trees by recycling paper or that every day more than 820,000 golf balls are sold and the human race farts enough hydrogen to fill 13 Hindenburg airships? Of the two *The World in One Day* is crammed with much more information than its rival and has some interesting stuff amongst a lot of meaningless statistics and contrived comparisons. SR

Roman Town

Hazel Mary Martell, ill. Mark Bergin, 0 7496 2564 3

Egyptian Town

Scott Steedman, ill. David Antram, 0 7496 2563 5

NON-FICTION ★★★

Watts 'Metropolis', 48pp, £10.99 each hbk

This is a new series, entitled 'Metropolis', which plugs into KS3 history and offers an interesting 'interactive' design idea. The influence of computer technology is clear. Each book opens with a birds-eye view of a city and the reader is invited to zoom in or click on to particular areas, to investigate aspects of the city's social, economic and cultural life. A series of double page spreads follows; looking more closely at, say, the docks, the forum, fishing, farming or the temple. After that, comes a text which gives a 'time traveller's guide' to each city, including climate and clothes, eating out and where to stay. Finally, there is a 'guided tour' of major buildings and locations.

It is an attractive idea that encourages a holistic approach and there is some fascinating detail in the texts, which show a depth of knowledge about their subjects. I like, too, the emphasis given to architecture, and the physical feel of a place and time and its everyday interests and difficulties. But there are drawbacks. The idea of a 'typical' city is inevitably artificial and the tourist approach is anachronistic. The design of the book is itself an obstacle. The books divide between a first half dominated by illustration and a second half given over to text (incidentally repeating the earlier illustrations as backdrop). The birds-eye views in the first half are not especially informative in themselves and are accompanied by boxes of text in small type face and smaller pictures. The illustrations are very 'clean', a picture which is sometimes contradicted by the text: *Roman Town* speaks of deep wagon ruts in the road surfaces which are nowhere visible in the illustrations. The index is poor and the relation between the different sources of information in the books is not thought through. Comparing these titles with the new editions of Usborne's 20-year-old 'Time Traveller's' series, I am inclined to think that the older series is more successful in conveying information visually. CB

The Concise Oxford School Dictionary

Compiled by Joyce M Hawkins, Andrew Delahunty and Fred McDonald, 0 19 910430 1

The Concise Oxford School Thesaurus

Compiled by Alan Spooner, 0 19 910431 X

NON-FICTION ★★★

Oxford, 480pp, £5.99 each hbk

Traditionally, dictionaries have occupied a place of dull, forbidding authority at school – ready and waiting to pounce on the child who does not know what a word means. 'Go and look it up in your dictionary,' teachers might say, as if sending the



Iron Heads

★★★★

Susan Gates, Oxford, 160pp, 0 19 271755 3, £5.99 pbk

Rachel is dangerously lost in the mist that shrouds Pilot Island yet the islanders and now Stevie, her dyspraxic brother, instinctively know where they are. Previous newcomers to the island have not been successful: her father's predecessor drowned and her house burnt down. The same thing happened to the lighthouse keeper. What could be just a story of the odd and unusual is the basis for a more subtle exploration of difference where human gifts are balanced out in new ways: Rachel struggles to deal with the fact that Stevie does not depend on her, that he is more in control than she is. The scene where Rachel is taught to use all her other senses when sight fails her in the fog is a powerful example

unfortunate before some demon headmaster for a punishment worse than death.

Fortunately, school dictionaries are changing, and the new **Concise Oxford School Dictionary**, aimed at lower secondary school children, is relatively modern and approachable. The layout is clean, airy and, with sans-serif letters for the entries, friendly without being lightweight.

The compilers have opted not to *define* words, but to *explain* what they mean as briefly and simply as possible – and they are right to, for a young reader will get the essence of the meaning instantly. If the COSD loses just a little in worthlessness authority, it more than makes up for it in directness and usability – directness and usability which should make the young reader happy to consult it, rather than run away from it. Some of the explanations are masterpieces of clarity and brevity. It explains daydream, for instance, as 'pleasant thoughts of something you would like to happen'.

Unlike some other school dictionaries, it is sensibly sparing in its use of examples – and uses them only where it genuinely helps to clarify the meaning, as in the third meaning of dash, 'a small amount', 'Add a dash of brandy'. There are also useful inclusions of word origins and difficult or controversial words.

On the whole, it is up-to-date and sound in its inclusion of new words and meanings. Yet it is not always consistent. It includes 'gay' but not 'straight', 'internet' but not 'website'. And it steers clear of anything which is even remotely slangy. Thus people in the Oxford world do not have bums, arses or backsides. They have very polite bottoms. And to be cool is simply to be chilly or detached. As for more recent slang, like 'wicked', 'naff' and 'nurd' and modern trivial pursuits like bungee-jumping, net surfing and scratch-cards, there is not a trace.

There is still a whiff of Oxford stuffiness about the dictionary – even in the choice of cover design, which is traditional Oxford, with the navy blue and colours of an old school blazer. It is sound and accessible, and the best on the market for the age range. Yet by erring on the safe side, it may fail to make itself the young reader's friend and miss encouraging an interest in words that genuinely expands wordpower – which is perhaps what a dictionary should aim to do.

The COSD's partner is the **Concise Oxford School Thesaurus** and benefits from the same strengths. It is simply and clearly laid out, direct and easy-to-understand, and contains all the obvious words presented in an admirably lucid way. With alternatives listed under every word, alphabetically, it is infinitely easier to use than the ponderous adult classic **Roget's** and makes finding alternative words as straightforward as possible. But where are the unobvious, the quirky, the genuinely modern and sophisticated? JF



From **Poo You and The Potoroo's Loo**.

Poo You and The Potoroo's Loo

David Bellamy, 1 85578 095 X

Brainbox

Steven Rose and Alexander Lichtenfels, 1 85578 096 8

NON-FICTION

★★★★

Illustrated by Mic Rolph, Portland Press
'Making Sense of Science', 32pp, £6.99 each pbk

The idea behind Portland Press's 'Making Sense of Science' series is to get a prominent scientist to write a small, friendly book about their own speciality. It is a great series concept and has spawned a series of original, fascinating titles in which the author's passion for their subject – and knowledge of what is important – pays real dividends. Rose and Lichtenfels' **Brainbox** is about the brain and how it works, while Bellamy's **Poo ...** is about faeces – both unusual and exciting topics for books at this level. Series editor Fran Balkwill has coaxed some clear, punchy text from both sets of authors – and David Bellamy makes the most of the scatological humour of his topic. You learn a great deal quickly and painlessly. And yet there is something just a little disappointing about both books. Text and pictures do not work well together and the artworks, while charming in some places, are rather 'arty' and dull. Bellamy's **Poo** rides over this with its infectious humour and fascinating insights into ecological connections, but **Brainbox** can sometimes seem just a little too worthy. JF

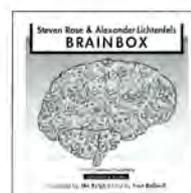
Illustrated by
Mic Rolph



Poo, You and the Potoroo's Loo

Did you know you are a prime poo-lluter of our planet? Cats are very poo-ticular and the potoroo's loo helps the gum tree grow. Birds pwoo while walking, perching and (unfortunately) flying. In this serious but funny book for young readers David Bellamy explains how the poo cycle could operate properly.

1 85578 095 X October 1997



Brainbox

What happens when you read? Your eyes see, your mind thinks, your fingers turn the pages. This is all organized by your brain. What does your brain look like? What is it made of? Steven Rose explains what is so special about your brain.

1 85578 096 8 October 1997

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BAU10971A

REVIEWS 12+ Secondary

Mine

★★★

Caroline Pitcher, Mammoth, 128pp,
0 7497 2875 2, £4.50 pbk

Shelley hears voices from the past. At first she refuses to listen but as Addie and Joanie's stories unfold she is compelled to learn more. **Mine** tells how 17-year-old Shelley comes face to face with the truth about her own family circumstances which are thrown into relief by the personal histories of Addie and Joanie. The three girls have a common bond – they feel unloved and unwanted. 'I am a prisoner here. I want to be released by love,' says Addie. Shelley confronts her past and finds that love was close by all the time. Set in a remote Derbyshire village steeped in lead mining history, Pitcher's poetic prose and precise figurative language evoke a powerful sense of time and place. It is a pity that the dialogue lacks the same liveliness but this does not seriously detract from this engaging story. NG



Don't Mess With Angels

★★★

Susan Gates, Walker, 112 pp,
0 7445 4152 2, £8.99 hbk

This is, in effect, a tale of two sisters. Alice, the narrator, is thirteen and totally convinced that she will never match the academic distinction of Sarah, seven years her senior, who is absorbed in her scientific studies at university. These stories involve regular visits to a graveyard where, on a particular grave, Sarah plants nettles in order to test their potential as cleansing agents of the soil polluted by the embalming fluid leaking from decomposing corpses. But Alice also has a reason for visiting this particular grave: it serves as a sheltered and isolated meeting place for her and not-quite-boyfriend Nicky. The sisters' lives, which initially seem to be pursuing completely different courses, come into violent collision when an ancient legend surrounding this favourite grave and its occupants begins, quite frighteningly and almost literally, to rise from the dead. It all amounts to a satisfying enough story of its kind, toppling occasionally into melodrama. And beneath the Gothic effects there is an interesting psychological portrayal of two young women's growth to mutual understanding and respect.

RD

Other Colours

★★★★

Catherine Johnson, Livewire,
144pp, 0 7043 4945 0, £4.99 pbk

Louise, the book's central character, lived happily in metropolitan Paris with her Caribbean father and Welsh mother until the tragic death of her father. When her mother returns with her to Wales, remarries a white man and has a baby, Louise feels an outsider in her own family in addition to her sense of alienation from the wider society. She eventually decides to run away to London and though this proves a futile gesture, her eyes are nonetheless opened to the possibilities of a fulfilling life in a multi-cultural environment in which she can be socially and politically engaged and in which she can be more intimately in touch with her true artistic and creative self. A satisfying, relevant and thought-provoking read with, incidentally, a touch of romance thrown in for good measure.

EL

No Roof in Bosnia

★★★★

Els de Groen, translated by
Patricia Crampton,
Spindlewood, 160pp,
0 907349 73 0, £10.95 hbk

Five teenagers from four communities – Muslim, Serb, Croat and Romany – hide out in the mountains to escape guerrilla warfare. As friendships develop their individual stories are revealed and we learn about the background to the conflict. Simply told, the portrayal of fear and hardship is convincing. We are made aware of the atrocities of war but the violence is never gratuitous. Although set in a specific time, the interest in the human condition is universal. 'I must know where evil comes from if I am to

believe in something good again' (Mila). This novel is a truly compelling story of human courage and frailty in which there are no easy answers to be found. Recently nominated for the IBBY honours list.

NG



The Other Side of Silence

★★★★★

Margaret Mahy, Puffin, 192pp,
0 14 037803 0, £4.99 pbk

With a young heroine called Hero and numerous references to myth and fairy tale – not to mention chapters alternately entitled 'True Life' and 'Real Life' – this entrancing story could serve as a primary text for a course on intertextuality; as a second, or subsequent, reading will confirm, the number of levels on which it can be appreciated is staggering. For Hero, a decision not to talk is a way of attaining individuality in a family and background where, as she expresses it, 'words flow away like wasting water' and where self-imposed silence thus becomes 'an alternative authority'. In establishing this authority she becomes a regular visitor to the eerie Credence House and in time learns the frightening truth about the mother and daughter who are its inhabitants. But there is also the other house, called home, where Hero and her own mother have a relationship to explore and develop. This is a clever, subtle and witty novel, with a wonderful cast of offbeat characters; there is hardly a page which does not afford a penetrating insight into the strange territory we refer to as 'family life'. Highly recommended.

RD

In the Deep End

★★★★★

Kate Cann, Women's Press
'Livewire', 224pp,
0 7043 4948 5, £4.99 pbk

A worthy sequel to the thoughtful *Diving In*, *In the Deep End* continues the relationship between Coll and Art: she in love for the first time, he in love after a series of shallow relationships – but unable to commit. This book contains some of the best writing about love and sex that I have ever read in a book for young people. Coll's increasing passion for Art is so beautifully charted that I defy any reader to remain unmoved. It is

perhaps the credibility of the book which is so impressive: young adults captured so convincingly, sympathetically, *knowingly*. The ending is an affirmation of the strength of women and their emotions. Coll is a marvellous role model for young women contemplating crossing that terrifying but exhilarating bridge into a physical relationship.

This book, alongside the many excellent guides to sex around these days, completes the picture in a way which is both emotionally stunning and morally unshakeable.

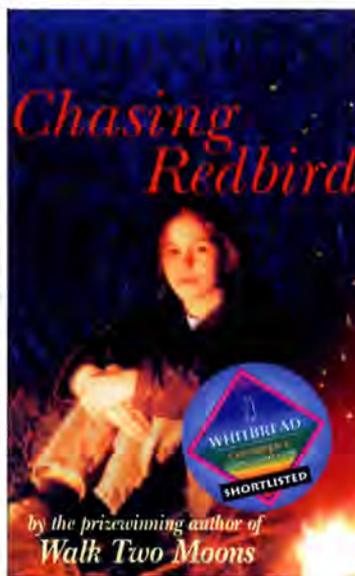
VR

Chasing Redbird

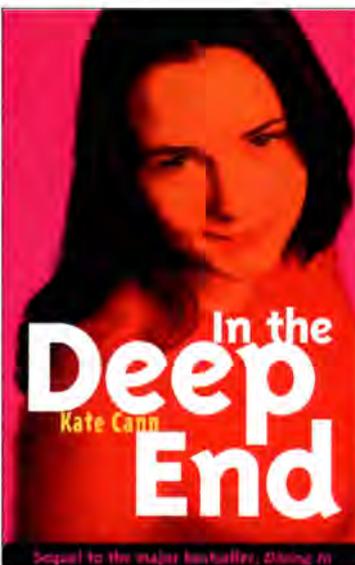
★★★★★

Sharon Creech, Macmillan,
224pp, 0 330 34213 4, £3.99
pbk

Zinny Taylor has a life 'as tangled as spaghetti' and which, after the death of her beloved aunt, Jessie, threatens to overwhelm her completely. In order to untangle her problems she escapes from her seven boisterous siblings and the confusing attentions of Jake Boone to clear an old trail across a remote part of the hill country in which she lives.



This physical task is metaphorical, too: Zinny finds a route through her concerns and uncovers her aunt and uncle's secrets along the way, finally answering questions and expunging childhood guilt.



The real achievements of this book are Creech's ability to capture the shifting sands of a child's thoughts and reasoning mechanisms and her ability to paint a stark, unsentimental picture of intense grief.

VR

Get Back, Pimple!

POETRY ★★★★★

John Agard, Puffin, 112pp,
0 14 037621 6, £4.99 pbk

This collection of poems by the prolific Agard is dedicated to his children, in memory of their teenage joys and fears, and, as the title suggests, the content of much of the volume reflects youthful preoccupations. It is a little unfortunate that this particular poem was chosen to name the collection, as it is one of the collection's very few damp squibs, and the concerns that are expressed in the book range far beyond anxieties about acne. Agard uses rhythms from blues, rap, rock and nursery rhymes in a range encompassing celebration, protest, off beat observation, and 'just for the fun of it' wordplay. The subject matter of the poems is similarly comprehensive, the focus on adolescent preoccupations not excluding broader political and philosophical themes. The last two poems, one looking back on a lost childhood and the other forward to an unknown future, are particularly effective.

GH

Mixed Feelings

★★★★

Edited by Miriam Hodgson,
Mammoth, 144pp,
0 7497 3283 0, £4.50 pbk

The only weakness in this collection of stories by ten celebrated women authors is the lack of any real flaws in the mother and daughter relationships they describe.

Jamila Gavin's 'Forbidden Clothes' contains the most moving and credible portrait of dissent as 16-year-old Nasreen abandons her western ways to conform to the stifling prospect of an arranged marriage. The remainder of the stories focus on the mutual love and support between mothers and daughters but with no real attempt to probe deeper into this often most troubled and complex of relationships. However, the stories are varied and convincing: Annie Dalton's often humorous account of a single mother and her daughter and Jacqueline Wilson's exploration of the tensions of a teenage pregnancy are especially affecting.

The biographical information at the back of the book needs some updating, as the original was published in 1992 but it does provide useful information for those wishing to read more by one of the authors appearing in this anthology.

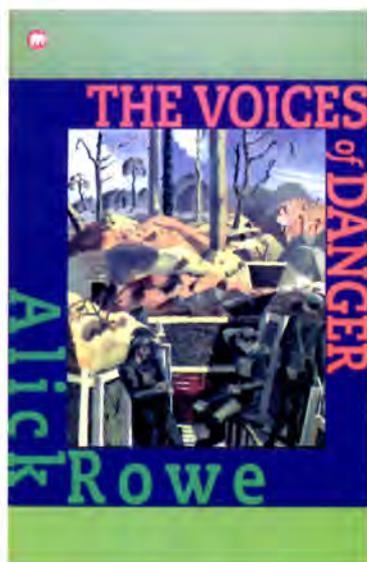
VR

The Voices of Danger

★★★★★

Alick Rowe, Mammoth, 240pp,
0 7497 0412 8, £4.99 pbk

'Do you know what war is?' asks the sensitive and disenchanted RSM Alcock at one point in this powerful and challenging novel, subsequently going on to provide his own answer: 'Old Men killing Young Men. That's what war is.' Much later, in tragic circumstances, the two young men who are at the story's centre recall his



words and recognize their truth in relation to their own experiences in the horrors of World War One. This is a book full of anger at what humans are capable of doing in the name of patriotism. Alex and Seb, the working class lads whom we meet initially as 16-year-old choristers in an English cathedral school, pursue their military dream as far as the Somme, only to witness the dream become the nightmare which, as Alex eventually understands, has indelibly 'marked' them. As for Tarrington, the young aristocrat who had bullied his way through school with them, aspirations of fame and power are to crumble also when all three destinies entwine once more on foreign fields. Rowe portrays brilliantly the developing personalities in this triangle of relationships, giving us a young adult novel of remarkable strength of purpose. **RD**

These are handsome books for secondary students: fascinating, well written (for the most part), and produced with an excellent eye for organisation and design. More than any other world history for children that I have seen, they succeed in giving an overall view of developments across the world at a particular time.

Each book is introduced by a short chapter on a significant figure in the history of western civilisation; although the significance of a great artist and scientist like da Vinci is different from that of Marie Antoinette, the representative, and victim, of a failing political order. The choice of figures illustrates the foci of the series; which uses thematic chapters, like Famous Rulers and Leaders, Discovery and Invention, and The Creative World, to bring together and compare developments across different geographical areas and cultures.

The consistent arrangement of the volumes in the series, whose six books run from Tutankhamun to Abraham Lincoln, allows the reader to trace the history of a country like Japan over a number of centuries and at the same time consider it in the context of other societies.

Each volume is relatively thin: and there is more than a hint of a prolific author recycling material. One book can have space for no more than an introduction to any particular area or people. And it is still Euro-centred history. But, all that said, the non-European world is so knowledgeably and appreciatively drawn, particularly in the sumptuous use of indigenous arts and artefacts, that a world of many cultures and viewpoints, each with distinct preoccupations and achievements but in continuous interaction, clearly emerges. This is an excellent corrective to the parochialism of much National Curriculum history.

My main disappointment with the books is that they have no bibliography. When so many subjects are merely touched on and, hopefully, readers are left wanting to know more, they should have help and encouragement. **CB**

Drugs

NON-FICTION ★★★

Anita Naik, ill. Sarah Nayler, Hodder 'Wise Guides', 144pp, 0 340 69973 6, £3.99 pbk

Drugs

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Adrian King, Wayland 'Face the Facts', 48pp, 0 7502 2158 5, £5.99 pbk

Both these books about drugs set the issues in the wider Health Education context of making your own decisions based on the evidence. Naik's book is a B format paperback but with no contents page or index it is very difficult to navigate. Quizzes, quotes from 'typical teenagers' and some deliberately amateurish line drawings break up a fairly substantial text that demands a committed reader.

King's book is part of a series for youngsters with Special Needs but I was not aware of that till I read the back-cover blurb. It has 48 full colour pages in a larger format with well-spaced text and page layout and mixed type-faces giving the feel of a

teenage magazine. With a contents page and (rudimentary) index any pupil (or adult come to that) will find their way easily to the basic information on the main drugs. **SR**

The Rise of the Nazis

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Charles Freeman, 0 7502 2080 5

The Holocaust

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

R G Grant, 0 7502 2083 X

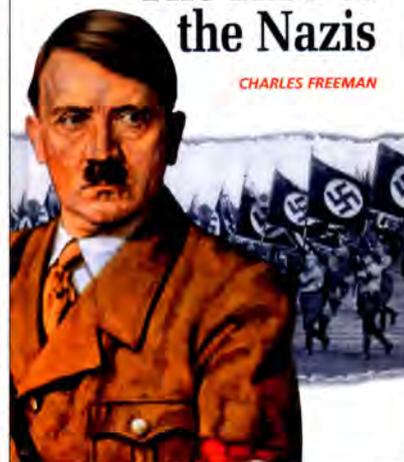
Wayland 'New Perspectives', 64pp, £10.99 each hbk

Many children now seem to know surprisingly little about World War II and the Holocaust despite the many documentaries and war films on TV (perhaps these are not shown on Sky). These two books cope splendidly with presenting their subject matter clearly and thoughtfully to their teenage audience using a good mix of narrative, contemporary photographs, maps, statistics and personal memoir. **The Holocaust** is particularly strong placing the obscurity of The Final Solution clearly in the context of the historical persecution of the Jews and the political circumstances in Germany in the 20s and 30s. It leads inexorably to the author's chilling conclusion that 'The utter darkness of the Holocaust' overwhelms our understanding and defies the healing power of time. **SR**

NEW PERSPECTIVES

The Rise of the Nazis

CHARLES FREEMAN



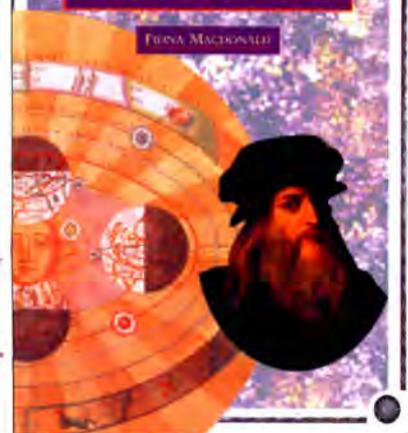
practical and achievable goals. Grillet avoids dogma and concentrates instead on exploring easily recognisable scenarios to clarify thinking and provide defences against the emotional and physical bullying to which young, less confident women are often subjected. A bibliography encourages those who wish to continue to explore an area which is presented in a thought-provoking and entertaining way. **VR**

Picture books reviewed this issue relevant to older readers:

- The Wise Doll (see page 20)
- Aesop's Funky Fables (see page 20)
- The Emperor's New Clothes (see page 20)
- Lord Fox and other spine chilling tales (see page 21)

THE WORLD IN THE TIME OF LEONARDO DA VINCI

FIONA MACDONALD



The World in the Time of Leonardo da Vinci

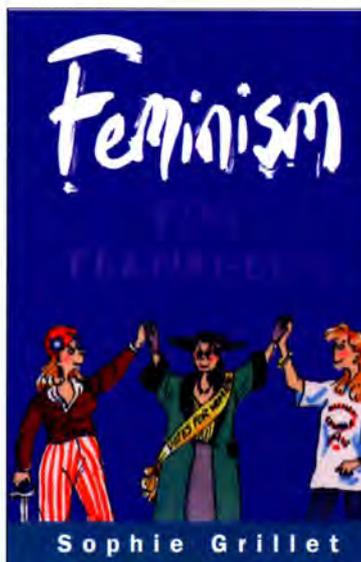
1 85561 701 3

The World in the Time of Marie Antoinette

1 85561 708 0

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Fiona Macdonald, Belitha, 48pp, £9.99 each hbk



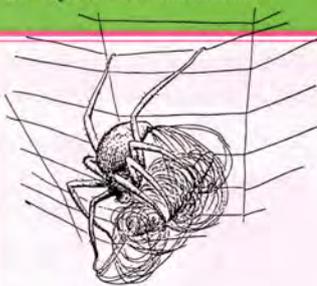
Feminism for Teenagers

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Sophie Grillet, Piccadilly, 144pp, 1 85340 400 4, £9.99 hbk, 1 85340 405 5, £5.99 pbk

This contentious – and, perhaps, unfashionable – concept is explored historically and philosophically in yet another of Piccadilly's reliable guides for teenagers.

The text is enlivened by the use of cartoons which identify key issues and opposing viewpoints to help those who find large chunks of prose daunting. The book is coherently divided into five sections: examining women's roles at home, at work, in politics and in relationships. The last section points the way forward with



CLASSICS IN SHORT No.8

Helen Levene

A 'terrific', 'radiant', 'humble' American?
Clinton? Hardly! It's Wilbur in ...

First published:

1952

Genre:

Farmyard animal tale

Who for:

Children of seven upwards including arachnophobics!

What's it about?

Friendship, self-sacrifice, tolerance, trust, growing up, life and death.

All that in one book?

Yes. Each theme is subtly interwoven into an uncomplicated, thoroughly absorbing story which children readily understand and relate to.

What happens?

Eight-year-old Fern Arable rescues the runty pig of the litter from the chop and raises him by bottle. She names him Wilbur and, from day one, she is totally besotted with him – and him with her. When Wilbur is five weeks old, Mr Arable says he is big enough to sell. Fern is devastated, but luckily for them both Mr Arable agrees to sell the pig to Fern's Uncle Homer who lives down the road.

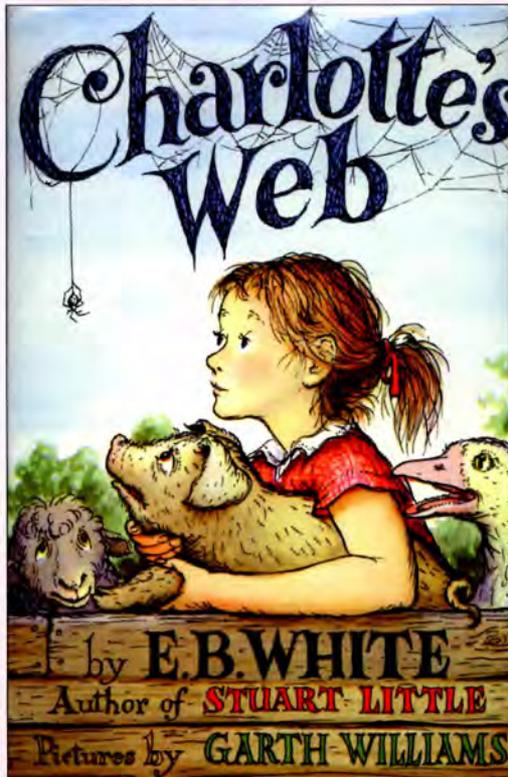
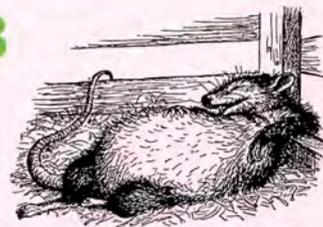
At first life for Wilbur is very pleasant in Uncle Homer's farmyard barn. But as Fern's visits dwindle during the bad weather Wilbur becomes lonely, dejected and off his food. None of the other animals will play with him. No one seems to want to be his friend, that is until Charlotte the spider introduces herself to him from her web high up in the barn's doorway.

Charlotte is an *Arachnea Cavatica*. Wilbur thinks she is beautiful and is delighted to have been chosen as her special friend. He becomes fat and contented. One day, the old sheep tells Wilbur that he is being fattened up to be killed at Christmas time. Poor Wilbur takes the news very badly, but Charlotte comes to the rescue with a brilliant plan to save him: by weaving words of praise about Wilbur in her web, she tricks Uncle Homer and the other humans into believing that a miracle has happened, and that Wilbur is somehow special. Wilbur's fame as 'Some Pig' spreads throughout the County and visitors come from far and wide to see the web and admire the anointed pig.

Meanwhile, Fern's mother is worried about her daughter's preoccupation with Wilbur and the barn animals, and seeks Dr Dorian's advice. He predicts that the day will come when Fern's attention is attracted by someone else. And sure enough, at the County Fair, safe in the knowledge that Wilbur has been saved, she goes forth in search of new adventures with Henry Fussy.

Wilbur is awarded a special prize at the Fair and Charlotte produces one final message in her web: the word 'Humble' – which she feels most accurately describes her self-effacing friend, and one which the humans find deeply touching. Her mission complete, Charlotte is ready to lay her eggs. Too exhausted to return to Uncle Homer's barn with the others, she remains in her corner of the pig-pen at the Fair and explains to Wilbur that she is going to die. It is almost too much for the pig to bear, but in return for her love and devotion to him, he is determined to look after her babies. He bribes Templeton, the rat, to cut down Charlotte's egg sac. Wilbur then carries the sac safely and carefully in his mouth as they journey back to the barn. With one last wave of a leg to Wilbur, Charlotte dies.

As time passes, Charlotte's babies emerge – all 514 of them. Wilbur is overjoyed and dismayed all at once when the young spiders take off into the wide world. However, three remain to make



their home where Charlotte's had been, in the doorway of the barn. Three special friends for Wilbur, who likes nothing better than to tell them all the wonderful stories that their mother, his very best friend, had told him.

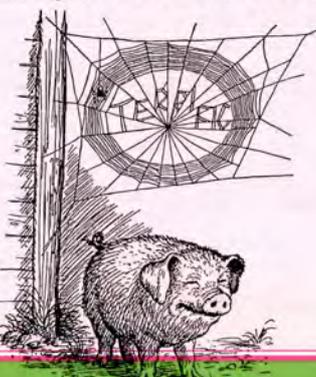
Most moving moment?

When Charlotte, having achieved her two main tasks – to save Wilbur from the slaughterhouse, and to lay her eggs – whispers goodbye to her friend before she dies, alone.

Classic qualities:

There are many reasons why the story of Wilbur the pig and his unusual friend Charlotte the spider, has become a classic. Enjoyed by generations of children, the encompassing theme of friendship and trust is a universal and timeless one. Although the story is imaginary, it is founded on reality through the author's close observation and deep affection for his own animals in the barn on his farm in Maine. His simple, yet carefully crafted prose brings the animal and human characters so convincingly to life that readers quite genuinely believe them to be real (and consequently are careful not to tread on a spider for she may be someone's friend!).

Charlotte's Web is also a fable of a child growing up, a process that necessarily involves the hope of good mothering (here provided for Wilbur by Fern and then Charlotte) as well as an eventual confrontation with aspects of reality that are painful – in this case the fact that Charlotte must die. The benign aspects of developmental growth are seen in Wilbur's transformation from helpless piglet to a grown up pig able to concern himself about others – he repays the love and concern he has received from Charlotte by loving and protecting her babies after her death. A wonderful



sense of the cycle of life emerges from the story with its theme of death and rebirth.

Each animal has its own individual voice and traits – Templeton the rat is only out for himself, open to bribery and often irritable. Charlotte is almost an archetypal figure encompassing both the terrifying and the loving aspects of the mother in the infant imagination – she is a real spider who entraps her victims and sucks their blood but she is also a loyal friend to Wilbur. Wilbur is frightened of dying but proves able to grow and develop into a good friend himself. Readers empathize with these characters and recognize the various characteristics in their own behaviour. They also identify strongly with the human characters, particularly Fern's natural, easy-going relationship with the animals, and understand when at the end of the story she moves on to interest in boys.

From the start, the story flows smoothly along through times of joy and sadness, comedy and tragedy. Whilst keeping sentimentality in check, E B White successfully includes his readers in the acceptance of the inevitability of death and poses other philosophical notions through the voice of the wise and articulate spider. All this, combined with the highly evocative atmosphere of rustic life, creates a charming, wonderfully warm and happy story.

Most memorable quotation:

'It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.'

About the author:

E B (Elwyn Brooks) White was born in Mount Vernon, New York in 1899. He graduated from Cornell University in 1921, during which time he also served in the United States Army in the First World War. After a few years of trying various jobs, he joined the editorial staff of the famous *New Yorker* magazine which was still in its infancy. From then his literary career began to take shape. He wrote verse, satirical sketches, and essays, often contributing to *Harper's* magazine. He was fond of children and concerned for the future of the planet, campaigning against H-bomb tests and pollution.

He wrote many adult books which were published both in the USA and UK. In 1938 he moved to the countryside of New England. On his farm in Maine, he kept the animals which provided the inspiration for *Charlotte's Web*. He only wrote three children's books – his first *Stuart Little* (1946) took him nearly twenty years to complete and was rejected by two major publishing houses in the States before being taken by *Harper's*. Then came *Charlotte's Web* (1952), and finally *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970). He was married and had one son. He died in 1985.

Gongs:

During his career he received the American Library Association's Laura Ingalls Wilder medal (1970) given every five years to an author who has made a long-lasting contribution to children's literature. He was also awarded honorary degrees from seven colleges and universities. ■

Charlotte's Web with illustrations by Garth Williams is published in hardback by Hamish Hamilton (0 241 90098 0, £8.99) and in paperback by Puffin (0 14 030185 2, £4.99) and Puffin Modern Classic (0 14 036449 8, £5.99).

Helen Levene works in publishing.