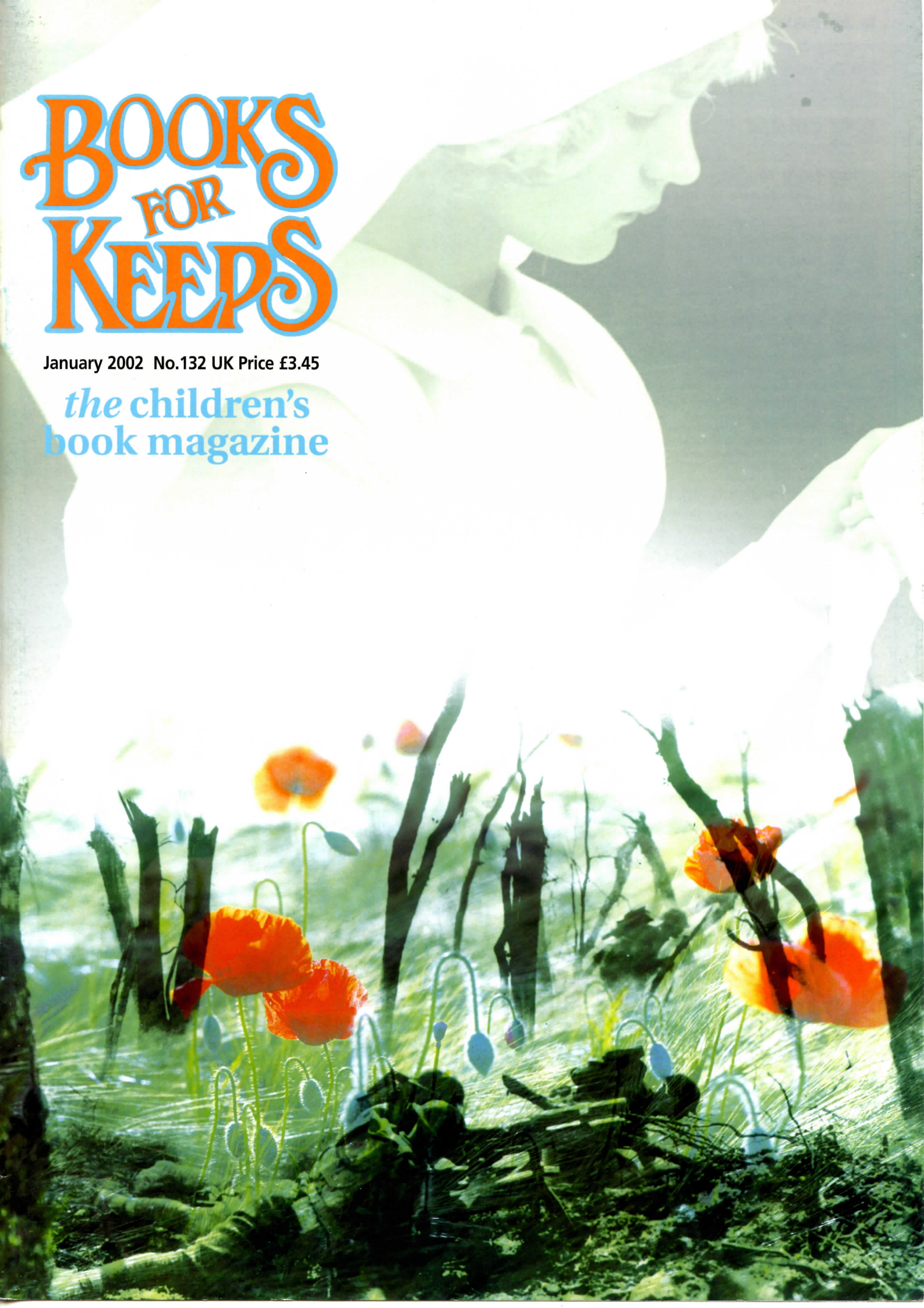


BOOKS FOR KEEPS

January 2002 No.132 UK Price £3.45

the children's
book magazine



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EDITORIAL



Rosemary Stones

In 1997 the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia published a report, **Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*** in which Islamophobia was defined as a 'useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims'. The consequences of Islamophobia, according to the report, 'is injustice, characterised by social exclusion; a sense of cultural inferiority among young British Muslims; and an increasing likelihood of serious social disorder'.

Following last year's 11 September attacks on the United States, a Home Office commissioned study from the University of Derby revealed that the British Muslim community was facing unprecedented hostility. The study also revealed that Muslims were complaining of growing discrimination long before that date. The **Times Educational Supplement** of 19 October 2001 reported on attacks, both verbal and physical, on Asian pupils.

Most of us who work with children and their literature acknowledge the role of books in promoting cultural diversity and combating racial and religious stereotyping to be potentially significant. In BfK's 1999 **A Multicultural Guide to Children's Books****, I commented in my introduction that 'Islamophobia appears to be on the increase'. It was also striking how few titles, both fiction and non-fiction, we could find to recommend in this Guide relevant to the contemporary realities, history and culture of the British Muslim community and of Muslims in the wider world.

One of the conclusions of Fouzi El-Asmar's 1986 study of Arab stereotypes in Hebrew children's literature, **Through the Hebrew Looking-Glass***** was that that literature 'aims to destroy any prospect of regarding the Arab with a measure of understanding

and respect' and that 'it aims to perpetuate a lowly and despicable image of the Arab'. A more recent study (1997) by Professor Bar-Tel of Tel Aviv university of Israeli school textbooks discovered that little had changed in the intervening years. Bar-Tel found widespread negative stereotyping of Arabs and few explicit references to peace and understanding: Arabs are widely portrayed as uneducated and primitive; in the religious sector, nearly two-thirds of Hebrew readers use labels such as 'wild mob' and 'aspiring for blood and robbery'.

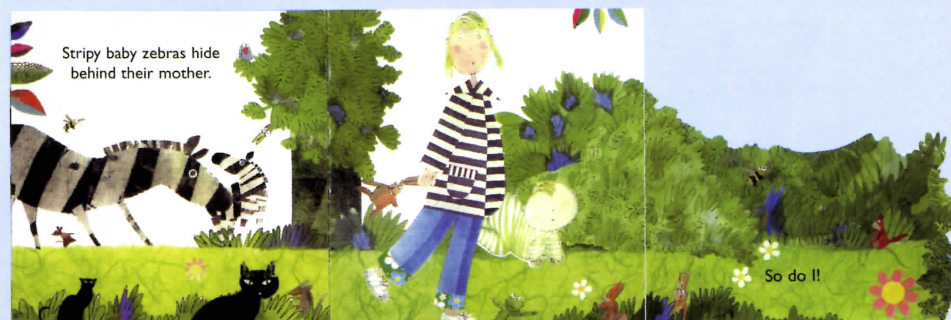
But what about the depiction of Muslims of whatever nationality in the books available to young readers in Britain? When racial violence is so clearly linked to anti-Muslim prejudice, there is a pressing need for books which challenge distorted and negative images. In our March edition, BfK will carry the first of a number of articles on this important issue.

Rosemary

* **Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All** is available from Central Books, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN at £11.40 inc p & p.

** **A Multicultural Guide to Children's Books** is available from BfK at £7.50.

*** **Through the Hebrew Looking-Glass** by Fouzi El-Asmar was published by Zed Press in 1986 and is now OP.



Babies Like Me, a flap book by Malachy Doyle, illustrated by Britta Teckentrup, gets a four-star review on page 19.

CoverStory

This issue's cover is from Theresa Breslin's **Remembrance**. Theresa Breslin is interviewed by George Hunt on page 10. Thanks to Transworld Children's Books for their help with this January cover.

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's book magazine

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NEW TEENAGE LISTS

Teenagers divide into three groups – the aspirant or wanna-be teens, the glad-to-be-teens and the ‘don’t patronise me, I’m a person’ teens. Publishers are once again rushing to launch new ‘teenage’ lists. Will they appeal? To whom? Will they last? **Julia Eccleshare** explores.

What is a teenage reader anyway? Is it the pre-teen – the ten, eleven or twelve-year-old who aspires to a life style less dependent on their parents? Or is it the teenager in the midst of that process of individuation? Do teenagers read anyway and, if so, what should be published for them? The ‘cross over’ success of Philip Pullman, J K Rowling, Melvin Burgess and the rest would imply that teenagers *are* reading and that is certainly the view of five UK publishers all of whom have committed themselves to new teenage lists.

THE GRAVEYARD OF TEEN LISTS

Teen books have always been hard to publish in the UK. Their content is difficult, their audience imprecise and their marketing strategy unclear. In sales terms, UK teenage fiction lists in the past have not worked, despite the inclusion of many highly suitable and outstanding books, mostly by American authors such as Robert Cormier, Mildred Taylor, S E Hinton and Cynthia Voigt.

It was in the 1970s that The Bodley Head paved the way for the modern teen lists by publishing some impressive ‘social issues’ Scandinavian titles such as *Mia* by Gunnar Beckman (1974) which dealt with the, until then, taboo topics of teenage sex. Branded teen lists followed from various publishers but they all had a relatively short shelf life. Puffin had already tried once with ‘Peacocks’ (1962). Including many US imports such as Beverley Cleary’s *Fifteen* and the more literary *The Girl of the Limberlost* by Eleanor Stratton Porter, they never really took off in terms of sales. Puffin tried again with ‘Puffin Plus’ in the more liberal climate of the late 1970s and revamped the list a decade later under the cooler sounding ‘Plus’. This fared no better and following its demise, the only way Puffin could publish Melvin Burgess’s controversial *Junk* was as a Penguin, though it was carried by the Puffin reps. and sold for teenagers. In the late

1980s, Collins Children’s Books started the best teenage list to date with their ‘Tracks’ series. Methuen ‘Teens’ list in the early 1980s also looked good with striking covers and a strong identity. And there were others, too.

NEW VENTURES

Undaunted by these ghosts, last year Collins launched ‘Flamingos’, Red Fox repackaged their older fiction into the striking ‘Definitions’ list while Hodder matched their existing literary teenage list, ‘Signature’, with ‘Bite’ aimed at mid list readers. This year Macmillan is launching ‘Young Picador’ while Little, Brown, with no experience in the children’s market, is building on their successful reputation in adult science fiction to create a teenage list.

Each publisher has a slightly different brief. All place emphasis on the ability of their titles to ‘stand alone’ but all see the time as right for the publishing of individual titles under a loose, collective series title while rejecting the ‘collectible’ approach that made ‘Point Horror’ such a hit. Sarah Davies, publishing director of Macmillan Children’s Books, points to the recent success of single novels – led, of course, by *Harry Potter* and Philip Pullman’s ‘His Dark Materials’ trilogy – as the main reason behind the collective move into this kind of publishing: ‘Over the last eighteen months there’s been a decline in the mass market series. Instead there is an awareness of the possibility of attaching individual weight to a novel. The main area of growth for this is the 10+ or teenage novels with success coming both from UK novels such as our own with Peter Dickinson’s *The Kin* and with titles imported from the US such as Louis Sachar’s *Holes*. We want to be able to publish more challenging books and this is the best way of doing it.’

From August, Young Picador are launching with four titles: *Exodus* by Julie Bertagna, *The Facts Speak for Themselves* by Brock Cole, *Massive* by Julia Bell and *Malka* by Mirjam Pressler. ‘This list will primarily be about new books and new authors, not repackaging the backlist. It’s a deliberate mix of two strong UK novels by relatively new talents with an American import and a wonderful book in translation,’ says Davies. Macmillan’s confidence in the series has been reinforced by the considerable success they have been having with their recent ‘chick lit’ titles such as Meg Cabot’s *The Princess Diaries* and *All American Girl*. It is a success that has brought Julia Burchill to the list with *Sugar Rush*, her



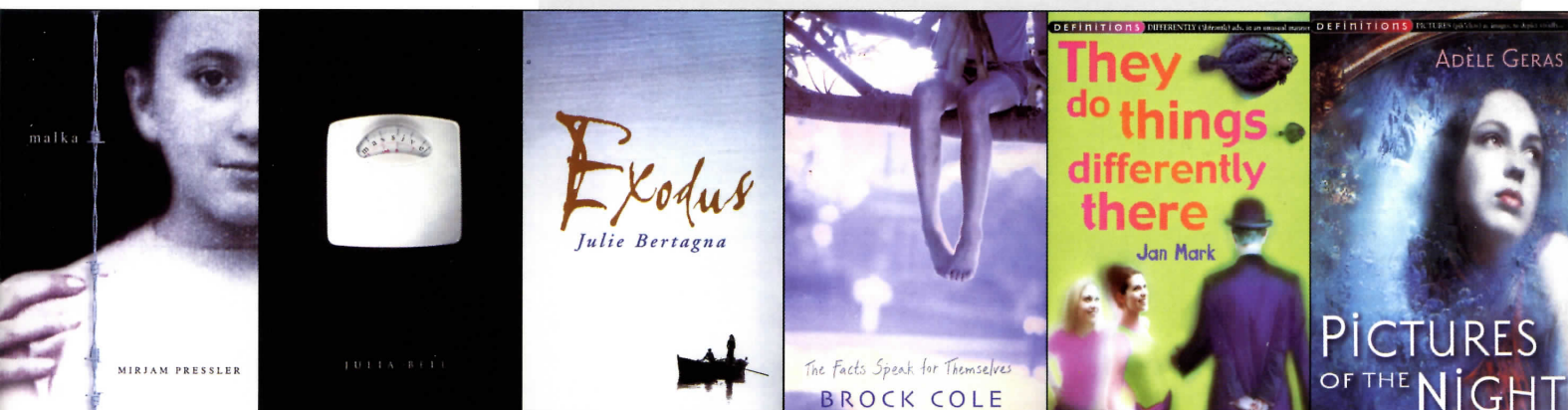
first children’s book. ‘It’s clearly a good time to publish for teenagers and especially to take on controversial books,’ says Davies. ‘Look at the amount of attention that Melvin Burgess’s *Lucky: My Life as a Bitch* has attracted.’

REPACKAGING THE BACKLIST

Unlike Macmillan’s ‘Young Picador’, ‘Definitions’ is not a list of new titles but a repackaging of old ones. Former head of publishing at Random House Children’s Books, Gill Evans arrived to find ‘a small but sophisticated heritage of older fiction, notably Dodie Smith’s *I Capture the Castle* and Aidan Chambers’s *Postcards from No-Man’s Land* alongside some acquisition of new writers. This immediately highlighted the issue of how to build on the strength of an exceptional backlist and to link this to promoting new writers into the same market.’ ‘Definitions’ is an eclectic list launched with the juxtaposed pairing of those first two titles with novels from Jan Mark and Helen Dunmore as well as the reissuing of Adèle Geras’s ‘Egerton Hall’ trilogy beginning with *The Tower Room*. ‘We see ‘Definitions’ as a vehicle to promote the backlist, to acquire previously published titles and also as a very desirable and attractive list which new writers would like to join,’ says Evans.

NEW BOOKS, NEW LOOKS

Collins, like Macmillan, is trading on the reputation of their adult literary imprint,





Collins flamingo



signature



LITTLE BROWN

atom

'Flamingo'. Publishing fiction director, Gillie Russell says, 'We have always had a tradition of publishing original and powerful novels for teenagers, but the creation of this imprint gives us the ability to launch new writers alongside some wonderful established authors, too.' This is borne out in the launch list which includes Margaret Mahy's **Twenty-four Hours** as well as a first novel, **The Starling Tree** by Julia Clarke and Ted Van Lieshout's prize-winning **Brothers**, a moving dialogue between two brothers, one dead and one alive, translated from the Dutch.

Hodder has segmented its teenage fiction. The newcomer 'Bite' – 'The sharpest new writing for young people' – is described as 'a contemporary fiction list for aspirational readers of 11 and up' and fits in neatly with the existing 'Silver' list for fantasy fiction and 'Signature' for literary fiction. Hodder have gone for bright and bold new-look covers as well as 'funky, witty and at times heartbreaking stories' including in the launch titles David Belbin's **Festival**, the story of four teenagers enjoying the ultimate summer at the Glastonbury Festival and Sue Mayfield's **Blue**, a powerful novel of bullying and betrayal. Later this year they are extending 'Bite' to include non-fiction with the publication of

agony-uncle Matthew Whyman's **XY** a 'no-holds-barred, edgy but factually accurate, guide to every aspect of being a boy'.

BRANDING AND POSITIONING

So, a wide range of subjects, old and new authors, and some clever use of names with resonance. So far so good and certainly children's books are more in the public eye than ever before with Pullman's **The Amber Spyglass** hitting the Booker longlist and the film of **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** notching up the biggest box office figures ever. But, the failure of teen lists before has always been bound up with their marketing. Teenagers have not in the past brought books. What will these books look like and where will they be sold?

Little, Brown is most likely to have the answer. Unlike the four children's publishers venturing into the teen arena, Little, Brown is an adult list which is attempting to reach new readers *below* their familiar audience with their 'Atom' list. They know that many of the readers of their adult science fiction titles are teenagers and their new list will cater more specifically for them but without being patronising. They will continue to use the sophisticated design that identifies their adult titles and the books will benefit from the marketing that already attracts adult readers to the list.

Children's publishers, moving up into this older age range, have the problem that their books tend to remain looking like children's books with illustrated covers rather than the design led covers adopted for most adult novels. Their books are also more likely to remain within children's bookshops or children's book departments – not places where teenagers like to be seen.

Breaking through these barriers is one important key to the success of these new series and certainly, branding and positioning are seen as the key by Macmillan who believe that the 'Young Picador' spines will get them onto adult shelves: 'Our aim is that they should be distinctive and sophisticated which will be the immediate attraction,' says Davies. 'Once bought, the quality of the titles will speak for themselves.'

At Red Fox, the umbrella title 'Definitions' – which is cunningly used across the top of each title with a witty definition of one of the words, or the whole title – links the books. 'Designed to bridge the gap between adult and children's fiction, it is a way of branding together our literary fiction in a sophisticated package for style-conscious teens,' says Evans. 'The branding is exceptionally light but effective, allowing for strong individual packaging while creating a solid list worth revisiting.' All that is true but the books remain looking like

children's books and, as such, will be bought by pre-teenagers, not teenagers themselves.

Gillie Russell describes the Collins 'Flamingo' titles as 'having a distinctive design, looking edgy and sophisticated' and they do, but whether they, or any of the others, will really fulfil the required potential of having a 'cool look which will have a strong appeal for teenagers' is less certain.

Honor Wilson-Fletcher, recently appointed as Sales and Marketing Director of Hodder Children's Books, comes from a bookselling background and, while she is committed to making 'Bite' as eye-catching as possible, she is also clear that children's books, even carefully formulated lists designed to speak to the eyes and hearts of teenagers, lag far behind the other merchandise designed for teenager purchasers – most notably music. More importantly for sales in bookshops, they lag behind adult books and in the current climate with children's books being seen as able to compete with adult books, there is often only one promotional opportunity.

Maybe what the books look like will not matter, nor will the problems that previous teenage lists encountered apply. Maybe these five publishers are right that now is the time to publish for teenagers though, judging by how quickly other Fast Moving Consumer Goods from CDs to fashion are reappraised and repackaged, they will not be able to spend long admiring their handiwork before the lists will need reappraisal. Certainly, across the market from the distinguished UK literary writing for teenagers led by Pullman, Burgess, Anne Fine and Aidan Chambers, all of whom have the ability to write without patronising their readers, to the fast-moving teen tiles of Rosie Rushton and Louise Rennison the books are there. And yes, teenagers have money, do shop and seem to want to read. But is targeting particular kinds of readers with particular kinds of books really the answer?

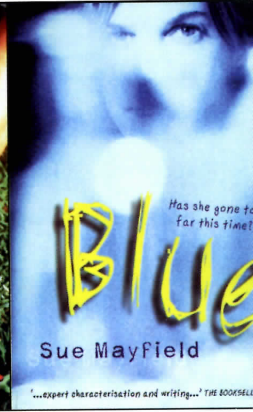
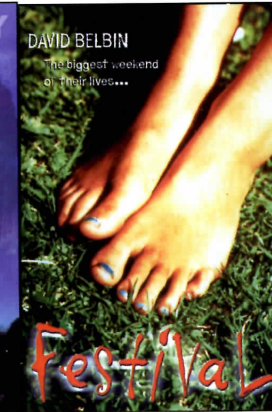
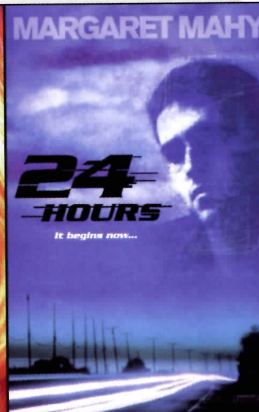
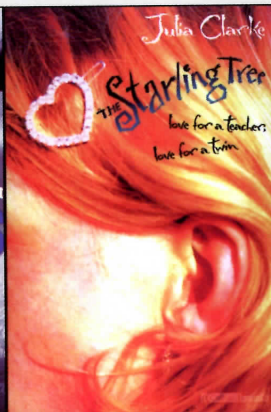
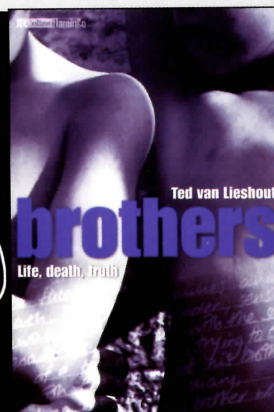
CROSSING BARRIERS?

Maybe the reason that teenage lists have failed in the past is that good books should cross barriers, not be confined within them. Children's publishers, more than any others, are increasingly determined to label books by their readers rather than by their content. In reading, at any rate, pre-teens want to be teenagers, teenagers want to be adults and, judging by those reading **Harry Potter**, adults want to be children. Authors, titles and covers sell books. In the long run, it will be the individual authors, such as those listed above, not series, that will be remembered by teenagers as the books that mattered to them. ■

Julia Eccleshare is the children's books editor of *The Guardian*.



Mark Swallow



Windows into Illustration: Jez Alborough

Jez Alborough's **Fix-It Duck** is his second picture book about the antics of Duck and his friends, Goat and Sheep. Alborough's focus on the dramatic tension within his Duck stories means that he plays creatively with tones, line, frames, perspectives and action sequences – drawing the reader into the pictures. Here he explains the techniques and thinking behind the climactic caravan crash spread.



'H - E - L - P !' bleats Sheep.

This illustration marks the climax in the story of **Fix-It Duck** and I really wanted to bring out the drama of the moment. I've done this by having the caravan break out of the border slightly in the first image. In the second frame when the caravan is really close it breaks out of the border and off the page. This gives the impression of it being almost on top of the reader (which effectively is the camera's viewpoint).

Sheep was originally going to be inside the caravan but I felt it would be more dramatic and funnier if I caught him leaping out at the last moment. I've used everything at my disposal to convey movement – speed lines behind the caravan, Sheep's hat coming off as he jumps, his ears and tail pinned back with wind and I must say I had a lot of fun drawing all Sheep's interior décor flying through the air.

I really wanted Sheep to stand out to give the impression he was coming towards the reader. I did this partly by making sure the only pure white in the picture was on Sheep's body (apart from the foam in the splash which is also close up). The tones on the upper side of the caravan were lightly shaded whereas elsewhere in the book they would be left white. I say 'left white' because it is the white of the paper left uncovered by the marker pens I use.

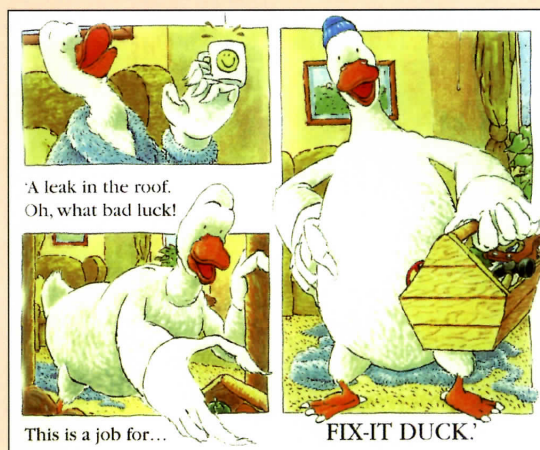
Because there are so many to choose from, you have to be very specific in your choice of colour. Do I want a number 303 green for that bush or a 304? I decide by holding a sample over my rough, checking it for compatibility with the other colours.

Finally a word about the line which forms the structure on which the picture is built. If you took away the colours you would see that there are many different types of line – thick, thin, scratchy, jerky, flowing, heavy, light, black, brown etc. The line has a language all of its own and though you probably won't notice, it is changing all

the time, working hard to describe all the different shapes and textures.

In a song you have the lyrics coming together with the melody to produce the desired emotional response. In picture books you have the text and the illustrations to work with. Within the illustration you are playing off line against colour and just as with the text and illustration – the balance is vital. ■

Fix-It Duck is published by Collins, 0 00 710623 8, £9.99 hbk. Jez Alborough was a runner-up for the Mother Goose Award with his first book and this year's winner of the Norfolk Book Award.



Why Babies Need Books

By using picture books with their babies, parents can extend their awareness of the range of emotional responses that babies exhibit. Such books also engage both parents and babies at a profound level. Child psychotherapist, Susan Straub, explains.

We know that picture books for very young children provide art to look at, stories to hear, companionship, entertainment and information. Many parents instinctively understand, and feel the pleasures of cuddling up with their babies and books. Some appreciate the compact utility contained in reading to babies. Others parents are non-readers, and need an introduction into the rich realm of picture books.

But what do we understand about the baby's experience? A personal anecdote may help us think about why babies need books.

The reader as good parent

At two years, babies are trying out their independence. My two-year-old son Ben's favourite book was *The Story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf, with illustrations by Robert Lawson. He demanded that I read this story of an independent little bull many times a day. On the page following an illustration of Ferdinand gesturing with his outstretched hoof for his concerned looking mother to back off, the text continues: 'His mother saw that he was not lonesome, and because she was an understanding mother, even though she was a cow, she let him just sit there and be happy.' Each time I read that passage, Ben took his thumb or bottle out his mouth and said 'Good!' It was clear that he got me to speak these words many times per day so that we both could hear them. By rereading it often I might understand something crucial. Perhaps, like Ferdinand's mother, I would trust, and allow, my son to be himself.

Each baby chooses a favourite book and frequently demands to hear it. Why? Besides enjoying its familiarity, I suspect the repetition is akin to the practising which leads to mastery. Since the reader is often the parent, the child needs to make the reader master being a good parent as best he can. Additionally, because so much in a baby's day is out of his control and often chaotic, I think the faithfulness of a favourite book is reassuring and calming.

A 'baby canon'?

Do all books have the power of *Ferdinand*? Is there a not to be missed 'baby canon'? Is there an optimal moment to introduce a particular book for a particular child? The quick answers are yes and no. Like many others who put reading into the lives of young families, I have my opinions about specific books, but prefer to recommend sure-fire authors and illustrators. As for optimal timing, since there is ongoing repetition of issues for

all of us, we are constantly either going through an experience or trying to understand it. Therefore, older children, and even parents, like to revisit issues from childhood – such as being afraid of the dark, or missing mummy, or confronting the pains (and pleasures) of growing up.

Owl Babies

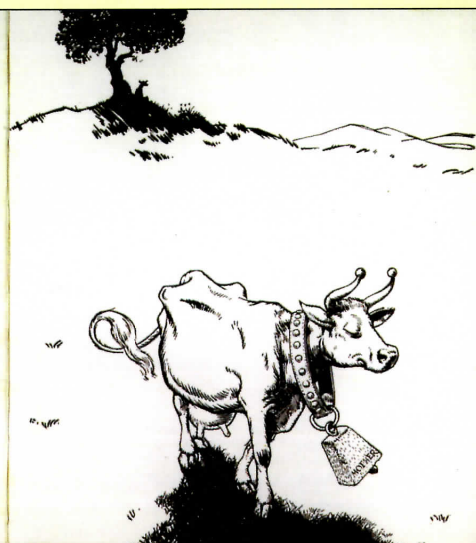
An excellent book for babies is Martin Waddell's *Owl Babies*, illustrated by Patrick Benson. It is a brilliant encapsulation of separation-anxiety. All of us, even newborn babies, respond to separating from the ones we love, even after we learn to make some sense of the separation. But deep inside, in that baby-part of each of us, these separations are disturbing and often difficult to discuss.

"Why don't you run and play with the other little bulls and skip and butt your head?" she would say.

But Ferdinand would shake his head. "I like it better here where I can sit just quietly and smell the flowers."



His mother saw that he was not lonesome, and because she was an understanding mother, even though she was a cow, she let him just sit there and be happy.



At first glance, *Owl Babies* appears dark and alarming, unlike most other picture books. These baby birds appear wide-eyed and vulnerable. Is this little book going to be a nature study?

Are we intrigued or put off by the birds' stares? Is it going to be scary?

The first spread does not comfort us much: it is a dark night revealing only part of a large old tree and some leafy branches. The next page begins with 'Once' and introduces an Owl Family, whose home is in a hole in the trunk of this tree. Things are getting personalized and a bit clearer.

Three sibling owls and their mother live in a comfy tree nest. However, one night, they awake and Mother is GONE. Each baby owl responds differently: "Where's mummy?" asked Sarah. "Oh my goodness!" said Percy. "I want my mummy!" said Bill.' The physically bigger (and older?) two think about the problem, trying to reassure themselves by coming up with reasons why she may have gone. They can think about Mother as a separate being, as a hunter and nurturer who needs to be absent in order to provide for her children. Bill, the smallest, feels only her absence. Unable to imagine life without her, 'I want my mummy' is his basic truth. Benson's illustrations invite us to sympathize with these owl babies' anxious states. Bill looks decidedly stricken.

Waiting is hard...

All three baby owls must wait. The 'not-knowing' stage is always the hardest. They cluster together for comfort on one branch of the tree. However, scary thoughts recur: "Suppose she got lost," said Sarah. "Or a fox got her!" said Percy. "I want my mummy!" said Bill. And the baby owls closed their owl eyes and wished their Owl Mother would come.' And, at long last, she returns. "WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?" their Owl Mother asked. "You knew I'd come back." The older two agree, while Bill replies, "I love my mummy!"

Is this the first time these baby owls awake in the night? Owls generally do hunt at night, so the mother owl's behaviour is predictable. But what do her babies know about the ordinary ways of owls? How were they prepared for this unusual experience? Mother Owl says, "You knew I'd come back" but her children's behaviour and anxiety indicate genuine worry. They even seem to exhibit some Kubler-Ross* stages of grieving in their rationalizing and praying-bargaining.

In the human world, our babies face similar separations. Despite the fun and helpful rehearsal games of peekaboo or hide and seek, or in bedtime and morning rituals, a baby often awakes unable to find Mother. In time, most babies develop the capacity to keep her alive through memory and can accept comfort from baby-sitting substitutes or a stuffed animal. Others cannot. They may feel she has gone forever; perhaps she is even dead. These babies cry inconsolably, needing the physical presence of Mother to soothe the pain of separation.

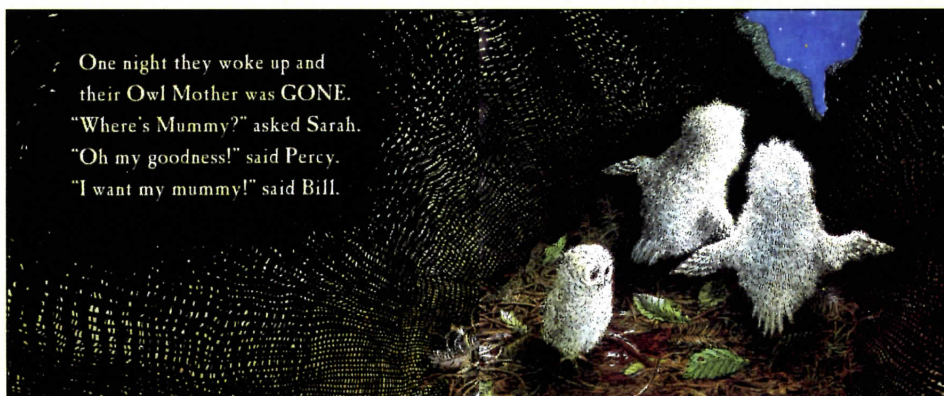
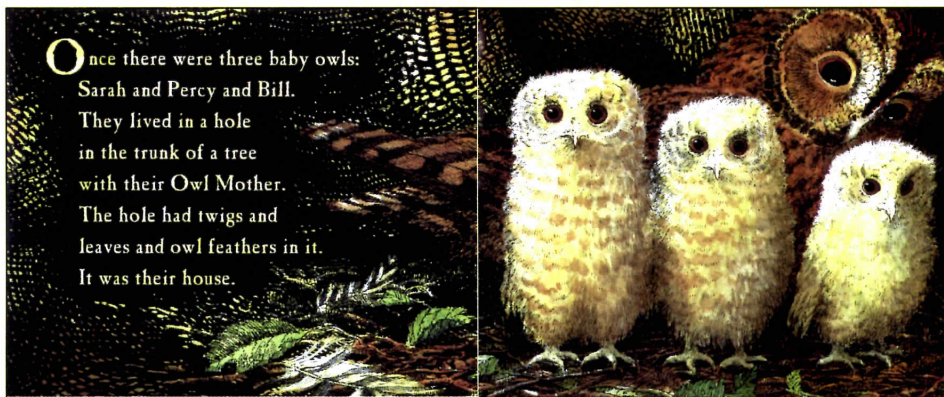
Using Owl Babies with teenage parents

The Read to Me programme is a series of workshops which encourages teenage mothers to read picture books to their babies. In a Brooklyn, New York, high school for pregnant and parenting teens, there is an on site daycare centre for their babies of 3-24 months. In one Read to Me session, we read *Owl Babies* aloud as a group and discussed it. The students loved it. Some remembered childhood fears of abandonment when picked up late from the school cafeteria. From their recollections it was an easy link to their

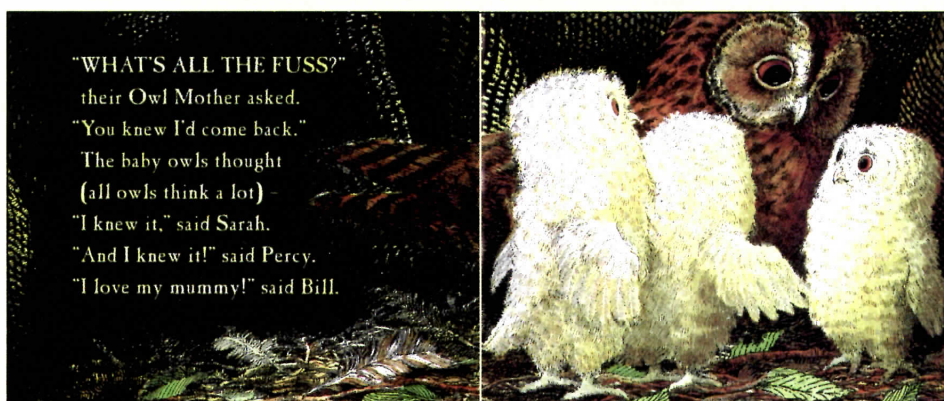
Once there were three baby owls:
Sarah and Percy and Bill.
They lived in a hole
in the trunk of a tree
with their Owl Mother.
The hole had twigs and
leaves and owl feathers in it.
It was their house.

One night they woke up and
their Owl Mother was GONE.
"Where's Mummy?" asked Sarah.
"Oh my goodness!" said Percy.
"I want my mummy!" said Bill.

"WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?"
their Owl Mother asked.
"You knew I'd come back."
The baby owls thought
(all owls think a lot) -
"I knew it," said Sarah.
"And I knew it!" said Percy.
"I love my mummy!" said Bill.



* Discussed in *On Death and Dying* by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970



own babies, many of whom cry when left in the daycare centre. Initially, they said, all of the babies protested about the separations. However, in time they adjusted to the pattern of drop off and pick up, got to know and trust their caregivers, and enjoyed their time in daycare. All the babies that is, except 4-month-old Imay, whose 13-year-old mum spoke of the acute and chronic nature of her baby's distress at parting from her. When apart from her mother, Imay wailed inconsolably, wearing out one after another of the kind women looking after her. However, her distress ended the second her young mother returned to hold her. Only the physical reconnection to her mother restored Imay's confidence and comfort. All of the student mums linked Imay with Owl Baby, Bill. There was an increased appreciation of Imay's experience and the way their own babies coped successfully with separation-anxieties. They could see a spectrum.

Making connections

Unlike the fictional owls, some babies do not jump with pleasure at Mother's return. These little ones, too angry about being frightened and abandoned to welcome her back, may respond by turning their backs on their mother, or even hitting her. How do we, the grown-ups, respond when angry? When frightened? When dealing with separation anxiety? Do we get headaches, become depressed or manic? Are we even aware of our feelings of abandonment?

We do not know from this one classroom activity what the Brooklyn babies thought of **Owl Babies**, nor if it became a favourite book that they would persuade mum to reread frequently throughout the day. But because of this little book, and its power to evoke a real problem and engage our empathy, these mothers became more thoughtful, more aware, and more connected with their babies. They were better able to contemplate, and appreciate, their babies' inner lives.

But what do we make of the owl mother's response upon her return, seeing her children so distressed? "WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?" their Owl Mother asked. "You knew I'd come back." Unfortunately, evidence shows us the contrary. The mother's absence causes her babies to be scared and insecure. Yet she brushes it off, implying that there is no need to worry. She implicitly asks the babies to trust her.

However, mothers do need to separate from their babies, even if it is only to take a shower or run to the shops. Teenage mothers bear an additional burden. Adolescence is a time to be in the world of other young people, not to be saddled with a needy, frightened infant. Conflict is almost inevitable. What if the Mother Owl had been at an all night party, carefree and childfree? What if she had been in the Owl Hospital for a broken wing? Does the reason for a mother's absence matter to a frightened, needy baby? What can a mother do to deal with the problems of separation?

By reading the compact **Owl Babies**, mothers extend their awareness of the range of emotional responses exhibited by their real babies to the issue of separation. In these twelve succinct, illustrated, board book pages, we have all had an enriched literary experience that allows us to better understand our children and ourselves. There is no better way of sharing time, and gaining insights, with a baby. ■

Owl Babies by Martin Waddell with illustrations by Patrick Benson is published by Walker (0 7445 2166 1, £9.99 hbk, 0 7445 3167 5, £4.99 pbk, 0 7445 4923 X, £3.99 board, 0 7445 6513 5, £12.99 big book).

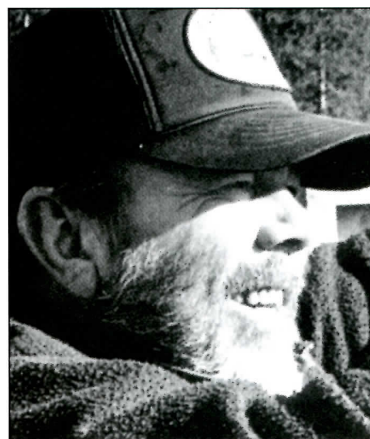
The Story of Ferdinand by Munro Leaf, illustrated by Robert Lawson, is now out of print.

Susan Straub trained as a child psychotherapist at the Tavistock Institute, London, and then did an MA in Clinical Social Work at New York University. In 1989 she created the mother-baby reading programme, Read to Me, in New York City. She is currently the Director of Read to Me. The Read to Me website address is: www.readtomeprogram.org or e-mail: susan@readtomeprogram.org

Inspiring

Jane Gardiner on the impact of **Harris and Me** on Tim, a boy who didn't like books...

My Year 10 GCSE class is an interesting and interested bunch to whom, in a rush of blood and enthusiasm during their very first lesson in September, I made a promise that they haven't forgotten. 'Do exactly what I say, when I say it and I promise that you will get a grade C'. Rash. But the statistics suggest that it's possible and the effort that many have put in makes it probable. During our recent target review Tim reminded me of that promise. And pointed out he hadn't got a C for his last piece of work. I left the girls who sit near him to take him through the usual questions that I ask at this point.



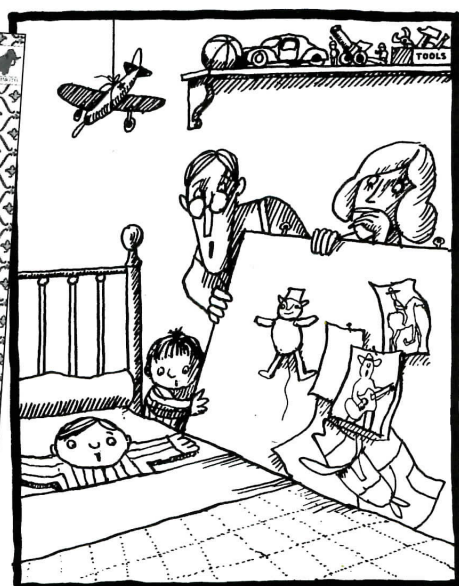
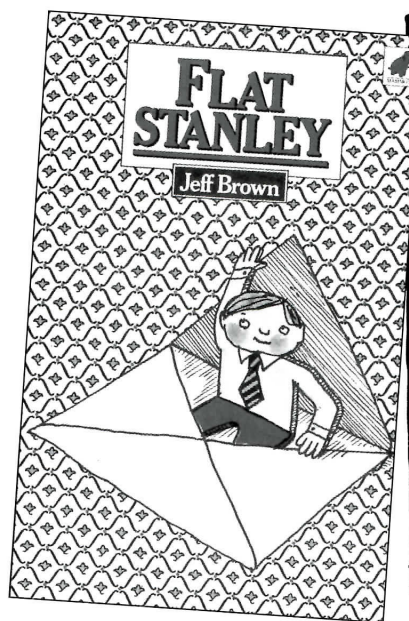
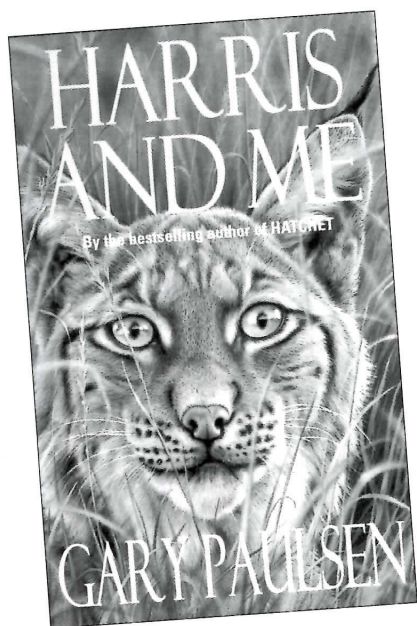
Gary Paulsen

When I returned he was looking jubilant. 'The good news, Mrs G, is that I've met every homework deadline and made far fewer silly errors this term.' He paused for me to be pleased which I was, but then his head went down as he burst out, 'But I'm still not reading, not books. I read the sports in the paper and even some of the news but not books.'

I love the way that books always equal fiction for teenage boys. 'I don't like books. I go to the library and I don't know what I want so I don't bother to take anything out.' So much for the books I'd been recommending on an almost weekly basis.

Later, when the rest had gone, we visited the school library discussing our favourite television en route. Tim, it appeared, liked comedy and action. He clearly needed **Harris and Me** – a story so hilarious that my husband actually fell off the sofa laughing whilst reading it – but would it be there? It was and Tim was able to borrow it in spite of having forgotten his library card *again*. **Harris and Me** hasn't got a very enticing cover, the new cover is actually worse than the old one, and I don't think that it starts in a really promising way unlike lots of Paulsen's others. **Hatchet**, for example has farting, flying and a fatal heart attack in its first five pages. **Harris and Me** is bleaker, darker but that highlights the hilarity of Ernie, the Tarzan swing episode, the motorised bicycle, and as for the electric fence... you'll have to read it for yourself. Tim did. He read the entire novel in a week and came back for more. I could have suggested more Paulsen, **Hatchet**, and its sequels, **Winter** and **The Return** but I didn't because I think Tim values comedy over action. He's busy with Philip Ridley at present, **Scribbleboy**, loving its blend of cartoon and reality, comic and serious. He might even read something the girls recommend after that. Who knows? It doesn't matter. He's acting like a reader, asking his friends what to read and telling everyone who'll listen, and quite a few who won't, about **Harris and Me**.

'Reluctant' Readers



Librarian Alison Forrest on a book that's anything but flat...

The joy for me as a librarian working during the school summer holidays, is talking to children about books. Spending all day as immersed as your customers is truly exciting and hardly feels like work at all. The toughest challenge comes however when you meet a reluctant reader – someone hanging around in the library because it's 'somewhere to go'. So this summer when Manpreet said to me: 'Find me a GOOD book', I began to earn my salary!

Manpreet, not being a regular reader, hadn't joined my Reading Club, where members swapped fun reads and reviewed books naturally. He also shared the problem of all 'reluctant readers' of having no background in reading – no database of successful reading experiences to inform a new choice, or indeed give confidence that he could read a whole book at all. When I asked, 'What sort of books do you like reading?' I was greeted with a depressing, 'Dunno', giving few clues as to what to recommend.

Discovering he liked The Simpsons on television, I pointed him in the direction of 'Pics and Puzzles', a fun leisure mix of graphic novels, picture books and jokebooks, much frequented by the boys we are desperately trying to attract. Triumphant at finding a Simpsons comic on the shelf, I was downcast by his response: 'It's too easy!' He wanted a 'real book'. This, I learnt later, was partly to please his father and partly the school – but also to challenge himself, the excitement of seeing if he really could manage a whole book of impenetrable text.

Funny books are often a good hook, so when I found Manpreet enjoyed humour, I thought Anthony Horowitz's 'Groosham Grange' books could just be the answer. 'Well, I like these.' I tried, but he took one look at the volume of text and said, 'That's too hard! I mean a GOOD book.' I was starting to worry.

I was beginning to build up a picture of Manpreet – in Year 5 at school, bored with the long summer, and pushed by parents and school, searching for something he felt might not even exist – a REALLY good book. All the books he had tried at school had been tarred with the academic – something you read for homework, to please someone else, but definitely not for fun. Some of the few books he could remember trying to read were the worst of the mechanical reading scheme titles, and his face told how engrossing they had been.

So I needed something funny of a reasonable length (not too daunting, but still a 'real' book) with a good cover and a gripping story – and I needed it now! And then I saw it – **Flat Stanley** leapt out at me from our pejoratively named 'Easy Reader' section. Swiftly hiding the Easy Reader sign, I handed Manpreet the book, to a rather lukewarm reception! As I began to explain Stanley's predicament, to all purposes a waiter tempting with the dish of the day, a smile spread over Manpreet's face and I knew I had made a sale. He pointed me to the cover and logically said, 'He couldn't do that himself' as Stanley sealed himself into the envelope. 'My Uncle lives in America,' he added – so Stanley had enough realism for him to identify with, whilst still being ridiculous enough to amuse him. For those of you who don't know this fabulous first reader, it concerns Stanley Lambchop, only half an inch thick after a notice board topples on to him in the night! This situation allows him to save the day in many adventures which form a sparkingly fresh 60 pages, despite being first published in 1968.

I was very happy when later that week Manpreet came back with his father in tow and told me how 'great' **Flat Stanley** is. He told me it was by far the longest book he had ever attempted, but as we all know, children will try for books they really want to read. I am convinced Manpreet will be next to plead for Harry Potter – and really read it!

That day in July, by luck as much as judgement, we helped transform Manpreet from a reluctant to enthusiastic reader. His difficulty had been a mixture of unwillingness and lack of technical ability – and the combination needed equal consideration. Obviously too, there is no standard rule for 'cracking' reluctant readers – joke books will work for some, Sci-Fi books for others. Manpreet will still need encouragement and guidance as he builds up his reading 'portfolio', but that is what I hope we will be there for in the coming months. Librarians are not just for the holidays! ■

Harris and Me by Gary Paulsen is published by Macmillan, 0 330 33695 9. £3.99 pbk.

Flat Stanley by Jeff Brown with illustrations by Tomi Ungerer is published by Mammoth, 0 7497 0137 4, £3.99 pbk.

Jane Gardiner is acting Head of English at Bottisham Village College, Cambridgeshire.

Alison Forrest is Team Leader, Children's, at Hounslow Library Services.

Readers who would like to contribute to this 'Reluctant Reader' series are invited to submit an account of their experience (500 words) to the Editor. Please mark your submission 'Reluctant Readers'.

Authorgraph No.132

Theresa Breslin

Theresa Breslin interviewed by George Hunt

A palpable sense of place and of history informs all of Theresa Breslin's novels, including those which hurl their protagonists into distant realms and eras. She was brought up and still lives in Kirkintilloch, near Glasgow, where she has raised four children, and where, until two years ago, she worked as a public librarian. The sustained interaction with both local communities and amassed information that this vocation involves were some of the most powerful factors in her becoming a writer.

'I worked for a long while in the mobile library, and one of our stops was at Gartcosh, a wee village really, though it did have a huge steel works. We used to stop at the shop there for our sandwiches, and there was an old fashioned primary school where the children were doing a local history project on the steel works. There was no written history to draw on, of course, so the children went out into the community to collect the stories from the older people. They learned that the steelworks started as an ironworks over a hundred years ago, and when the war began all the men had to go to the front and the women had to stay behind to work on small armaments. Those that were painting the metal with red lead got an extra shilling or so and a pint of milk to ward off lead poisoning. When the blitz arrived the women could recognise whether the aircraft going over were enemies or friendly because of the synchronisation of the engines. We helped the children collect these stories together and to bind them into books.'

This participation in the creation of literature from the raw material of lived history and geography was later to inspire Breslin to become an author, together with the impetus she received from joining a Workers' Educational Association creative writing course in the late 1980s. One of her stories, never published, won first prize.

'I knew then that I could tell a story, but I also felt at a loss because I thought that I'd told the only story I had in my head. But one of the most encouraging things the tutor said was that often the best stories are those that are going on around you all the time.'

One of the biggest stories of that time involved the wholesale de-

industrialisation of the north, and its destructive effects on individuals and communities. The closure of the Gartcosh steelworks gave Breslin, and everybody else in the area, first hand experience of the human cost of mass redundancy. A number of other factors brought about her decision to write about this from a child's point of view: her first story had been told in the voice of a child; she herself had been a keen reader of romantic school stories in her own childhood, and the Sweet Valley High series was seeping into children's culture in the UK.

'I know everybody's got to dream, but I thought, why not write a story set in one of our schools as it is just now, with our problems, our stories, our jokes?'

The outcome was **Simon's Challenge**, a story set in a community, based on Gartcosh, in which most of the workforce have recently been sacked. The hero of the story is a child whose father has left home, ostensibly to look for work, though it is clearly implied that he is fleeing a desperate sense of futility. Simon is left to help his mum look after his baby sister and to dream an impossible dream about owning a computer. His challenge emerges when he witnesses a robbery at a computer shop and is recruited to help track the culprit. The book won the 1987 Kathleen Fidler award (a prize specifically targeted at new authors for 8-12 year olds) and Breslin's career was underway.

Many of the themes that characterise her subsequent fiction were present in that first novel: a concern for vulnerable people; realistic depictions of locale, character and social issues; an appreciation of professional skills and techniques (in this case teaching and police work); an insistence that courage, decency and perseverance can alleviate problems, but never guarantee an entirely happy ending.

One of the most influential of the thirty odd books that have followed **Simon's Challenge** is **Bullies in School**, published in 1993, which originated in a request made to Breslin by a bullied child who wanted somebody to write about the issue. As a librarian, she was already well aware of the hurt children who used the library as a haven. The real hero of this book is Mrs Allan, the school librarian, who takes Siobhan, a victim of bullying,

under her wing. During an expedition to a learning resource centre, Siobhan borrows a serpent-brooch, once belonging to a Celtic warrior-princess, which gives her the power, or at least the confidence, to defeat her tormentors. But no sooner has she successfully asserted herself against them than she begins to reflect their own cruelties back upon them. Only when the ambiguous power of the talisman is supplemented by reason and compassion is the problem uneasily resolved. This book, which contains an admirably lucid practical appendix advising children on how to deal with bullying, brought Breslin an immense amount of mail.

'I had letters not just from bullied children but from siblings and other kids who hadn't realised what it feels like to be a victim. I think that this is an important point about this sort of fiction: it's not just about consoling victims, but enabling everybody to develop empathy.'

It is implied in **Bullies at School** that Siobhan might be dyspraxic, and the related issue of dyslexia is at the heart of Breslin's best known book, **Whispers in the Graveyard** which won the Carnegie Prize in 1994. This was inspired by Breslin's observations of a bright and cheerful pre-school child who enjoyed the read-aloud sessions at the library, but became more and more withdrawn after starting school and realising that the stories she'd loved 'were trapped inside books, in a code she couldn't master'. The book opens in a cemetery which is the haven for Solomon, a creative and imaginative child, full of anger at the teacher who mocks his learning difficulties, his verbally gifted but illiterate and alcoholic father, his mother who has deserted him. The story is driven by the links between these immediate anxieties and the history that binds Solomon to the dead who surround him: the graveyard is the former home of a wise-woman burned for witchcraft centuries ago, and when it is disturbed by engineers, her vengeful spirit is liberated. Breslin uses the intercession of a charismatic teacher, Ms Talmur, to braid the strands of individual psychology, community history and supernatural suspense into a compelling and convincing narrative. At the end of it, Ms Talmur has helped to restore Solomon's self-confidence, but as



she leaves his life she reminds him that there will never be any easy answers for him.

Vulnerability and courage are also at the heart of **Kezzie** and **A Homecoming for Kezzie** (1995), books informed by her own family history. Beginning in a struggling mining community in 1937, they describe an orphan's search for a lost sister who has been deported to Canada under the notorious juvenile emigration scheme. The sequel opens with the advent of war, and focuses on the heroine's struggle for self-realisation during the social turmoil that accompanied the military strife.

Female perspectives on combat recur in **Death or Glory Boys**, perhaps her most controversial novel. Inspired by a close relative who entered the military after being attracted by a recruitment pitch offering cheap vodka in the mess and free boots, only to find herself to be a genuine crackshot, this is the story of four friends who embark on an army officer training scheme. The most cynical of them is a pacifist who is along for what he can learn about his ideological opponents, but it is he who is discovered to be the most promising officer. Meanwhile, the security forces are hunting down a maverick terrorist. The two stories cross when the terrorist is very nastily 'taken out' by a sniper before the eyes of the potential recruit. Breslin's appreciative descriptions of professional skill here extend to those of the marksman and the military trainer, in a way that lead some

reviewers (including the current writer) to mistake this for uncritical admiration.

'So many people didn't read that book properly. I was writing it at the time of the Gulf war, when there was all that enthusiasm for fighting. I wanted to describe what it is that leads people to find combat glamorous, and if you're writing for teenagers you've got to be honest and accurate about the attractions. It's like writing about drugs: you can say over and over and over again that it's all wrong and destructive, but they're not going to listen because they know there's another side to it. It would have been disingenuous of me, and completely futile, to have tried to write as if there was nothing alluring about the military.'

Breslin's fiction in recent years has diversified. The **Dream Master** novels (two published and one in the pipeline) still feature bullying and centre on a child with a learning problem, but Cy is a child who is able to navigate through his own dreams into adventures amongst remote civilisations, whilst running the risk of having the denizens of these dreams invade his own waking life. Breslin's passion for the connectedness of past and present, far and near, is expressed here in extravagant, lighthearted adventures arising from these collisions. Woven into the fun and wordplay are some acerbic reflections on the structure of narrative and the constraints of educational systems.

Breslin's latest novel is a more serious and substantial work. **Remembrance** (2001) is a meticulously researched account of the changes wrought by the first world war on the lives of five young people from a small community based on Kirkintilloch. Two of them are women for whom the collapse of the old order provides a means of empowerment (a theme resumed from the **Kezzie** books), while the young men, driven by complex and contradictory passions, enter the slaughter.

'I started writing the book using just the voice of the under-age recruit, but the more I learned about the war – what really happened then was beyond belief – the more I wanted to say, so the more voices I needed. I started writing letters between the characters, based on some real soldier's letters. They were talking about rats and starvation and bombardment, while at home the newspapers were full of absolute lies and adverts for domestic servants.'

Towards the end of the novel, there is a crucial episode when Alex, the under-age recruit, seeking vengeance for a brother killed at the Somme, levels his bayonet at the throat of a wounded German. Though Breslin completed **Remembrance** before the so-called 'war against terrorism' began, her recent visit to a writers' conference in the USA, when the possibility of Afghan and American communities communicating through literature was mooted, underlined the relevance of this episode to the current struggle. One could see Alex's choice at the point of this personal and historical confrontation – between steel and flesh, between remorseless force and vulnerable humanity – as a condensation of all the major concerns of Breslin's work. ■

Photograph courtesy of Transworld Children's Books.

George Hunt is lecturer in Education at the University of Edinburgh.

The Books

Whispers in the Graveyard, Mammoth, 0 7497 4480 4, £4.99 pbk

Kezzie, Mammoth, 0 7497 1771 8, £4.50 pbk (to be reissued in July)

A Homecoming for Kezzie, Mammoth, 0 7497 2592 3, £3.99 (to be reissued in July)

Death or Glory Boys, to be reissued by Mammoth in July.

The Dream Master, Doubleday, 0 385 41029 8, £10.99 hbk, Corgi Yearling, 0 440 86382 1, £3.99 pbk

Dream Master Nightmare!, Doubleday, 0 385 41036 0, £10.99 hbk, Corgi Yearling, 0 440 86432 1, £3.99 pbk

Remembrance, Doubleday, 0 385 60204 9, £10.99 hbk

Further information about Theresa Breslin can be found in **An Interview with Theresa Breslin**, Lindsey Fraser, Mammoth 'Telling Tales', 0 7497 3867 7, £1.99 pbk.

Studying Children's Literature

Now that children's literature is a respected subject of advanced study, students look for 'specialist' guides to the books they are bound to read. They also look for experienced critics to help them to select primary texts, and to understand the relevance of history and culture to literature more generally. The new series from Continuum, 'Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature', offers this kind of support. **Margaret Meek** assesses its contribution.

Five volumes in the 'Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature' series have already appeared; one, **Frightening Fiction**, was reviewed in BfK No.130. The common features of the books are: an introductory overview of the theme, three or four chapters about individual writers or linked commentaries about authors and books. There are also references, bibliographies and an index. The patterning of the theme and critical approaches are refractions of the skills of the individual 'international experts'.

Children's books about families

Family Fictions encompasses the traditional scope of children's fiction, reflecting the relations of children and parents, doctrinal and social divisions, the evolution of book production over time, and readers' opportunities to encounter the influence of outstanding thinkers and artists. The Introduction offers a short, conventional history of children's books about families, where the themes are poverty, class distinction, mother-child relations, and the increased contemporary awareness of abandonment, disaffections and social abuse, in both UK and US examples. Betsy Byars' stories are examined in some depth. There is, however, a definite imbalance between this overview and the more detailed accounts of only three contemporary writers, two of whom, Wilson and Gleitzman, are remarkably similar.

Nicholas Tucker produces convincing evidence that Anne Fine is 'the most uncompromising of authors'. He sees her as 'capable of sending back dispatches to the adult world about the current state of childhood of a quality that simply demands to be heard and a truthfulness that has to be heeded'. This account of a range of books examined in some depth lets the reader see there is no sure way to guarantee safety and happiness for young children or teenagers, in books as in life. Tucker says that hope is 'hard won' in Fine's novels, but it is there. Dialogue, Fine's

strongest skill, carries the onward thrust of the plots. The psychological insights that have always distinguished Tucker's writing about children's books come to the fore in his presentation of Jacqueline Wilson as a writer who never tells children what to think. Hitherto my reading of her work has been compromised by the generation gap between her characters and my interest in them, but I take the point that she can 'offer readers a complete spectrum of their own emotional highs and lows'.

Nikki Gamble has farther to go with Morris Gleitzman to persuade me that he needs serious explication. I appreciate the display of modernist quirkiness in his stories, and recognise children's need for 'another of the same'. But thoughtful students must encounter sharper, more cogent criticism of what is at stake in books where adults are seen to have the power to make decisions, when children can only comment and not be heard.

Fantasy fiction

Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction is a tightly packed volume of critical analysis of narratives where the laws of nature are suspended or amended. Beginning in the depth of folklore, fantasy seems to defy definition and categorization and challenges what usually counts as reality. Here the authors compress what other commentators have said about the history and range of fantasy before analysing the books of three of the most innovative practitioners of the genre, whose work has always had close attention. The critics assume that their readers have already some acquaintance with the texts. In his introduction, Peter Hunt shows how serious writers, having absorbed past examples of the genre, reinvent it.

Millicent Lenz says that **The Wizard of Earthsea** is about personal death, and how a young man may learn wisdom and pass it on to others. After setting the trilogy in its tradition, she proceeds to trace the psychological development of the characters, as a way of 'portraying the author's creation process'. Her detailed exegesis pays sensitive tribute to Le Guin's imaginative power. But for young readers and critics to be at home in *Earthsea*, they have first to know how the story goes, before plunging into its depths. Lenz also writes about 'His Dark Materials', by Philip Pullman, who currently receives most critical attention for high seriousness and narrative daring. Lenz traces the antecedents of this epic, saying that the subject is 'nothing less than the story of how human beings, at this time in history, might evolve a higher level of

consciousness'. So far, we have had adult responses to this creation. Young readers bring to it their cyberspace understanding of parallel worlds so we need their versions. The way to recover the power and glory of extended metaphor of 'alternative worlds' lies open, so these remarkable books should not be overwritten with interpretive commentary. This is a good place for adult readers who find children's literature less than 'the real thing' to meet an amazing writer in the hands of a steadfast critic.

Hunt's chapter on Terry Pratchett is a splendid example of how to write about modern fantasy that combines the speed of radio or TV comic badinage with unexpected phrases that turn the reader's thinking over to consider the improbable. He makes an important claim, that 'text and the single reader's imagination are no longer what the reading experience is about'. Now, 'combining' imaginations 'form a fluid, corporate fantasy' in the alternative worlds of modern childhood, where children play computer games that encourage them to make their own moral decisions and to invent ways of implementing them. Pratchett's *Discworld* is the place to try this out.

The nature of war

Children at War is the most dramatic, coherent and readable of these three volumes. It shows how the format of the series allows the authors scope to explore a range of textual forms on the same theme. Careful attention to detail invites speculative understanding about the nature of war, a topic that engages many writers and young readers. The authors' sources include popular journalism, storypapers (comics), school stories, poems, memoirs and picture books. Their decision to summarize important narratives at length and to allow 'the texts to speak for themselves through quotation' gives the book its distinctive character.

Geoff Fox's overview moves from late 19th-century adventures for boys, all jingoism, confident national identity and playing field metaphors, to the ambivalences in tales of recent conflicts. He chooses a German book, *No Hero for the Kaiser*, to present the impact of war on ordinary people. He redeems the comics of WW2 as 'economically told, fairly demanding in vocabulary and accurate in syntax' and finds, in later *Chalet School* stories, anti-Nazism and European unity firmly promoted. By his command of detail, his range of sympathy and his skill in weaving narratives into a 'lived' account of their time, he shows how authors read wars,



beyond the actions to the historical and cultural complexities that provoke them. He extends his share of books about WW2 to include some from mainland Europe, so as to offer his readers 'a more ambivalent experience of war, usually from the standpoint of the victims'.

Writing about recent novels, Kate Agnew links the horrors of events and the protagonists' notions of a kindly moral self, as in *War Game*, where the disorganised, friendly football match is contrasted with the hideous, disorganised conflict in the trenches. Her account is an example of 'new' reading, where the words and the pictures extend the meaning by discordance, rather than matching. Other strong examples show how, in wartime, children have to take on adult responsibilities but without the necessary, accompanying power. Discussing *The Machine Gunners* Agnew shows that the children 'have done nothing more evil than to mimic the adult world, recreating it more successfully than it created itself'. The intensity of these war books has found favour with teenage readers in ways that these two insightful critics describe acutely and accurately. Together they make a strong case for the importance of the topic in a rounded, scholarly volume that indicates their commitment to children's books more generally.

Altogether, it is clear that this is a publishing venture that promises well. ■

Margaret Meek is Emeritus Reader at the University of London Institute of Education.

BOOKS DISCUSSED

Family Fictions: Anne Fine, Morris Gleitzman, Jacqueline Wilson and others

★★★

Nicholas Tucker and Nikki Gamble, 128pp, 0 8264 4878 X

Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction: Ursula Le Guin, Terry Pratchett, Philip Pullman and others

★★★

Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, 184pp, 0 8264 4937 9

Children at War: from the First World War to the Gulf

★★★★

Kate Agnew and Geoff Fox, 200pp, 0 8264 4848 8

Continuum 'Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature' series, £14.99 each pbk

The Craft of Writing?

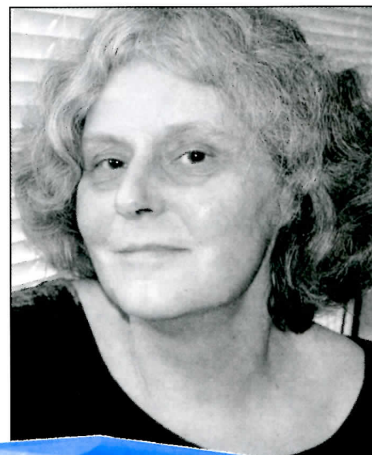
As J K Rowling, Philip Pullman and Jacqueline Wilson continue to dominate the best seller lists, publishers have high hopes for frontlist fiction publishing. With increasing pressure from the base line, the number of novels published for children continues to grow and, as in the case of Eoin Colfer's **Artemis Fowl***, a lucky few have huge marketing campaigns put behind them. But how well are their authors being served by editors? Is there any interest in, or commitment to, good writing? **Jan Mark** discusses her experience of being edited.

My first editor was Patrick Hardy**, charming and ruthless. I knew how to write; the fact that I had written a book did not mean that I knew very much about how books are written. Patrick, aware of this, praised it lavishly and told me to shorten the first two chapters. I couldn't see why, they were not all that long anyway. 'Do it,' said Patrick, steely-eyed. 'I know what I'm talking about.'

Looking back I suspect that there was not all that much that needed to come out and since he was no blue-penciller I had to make up my own mind about what to cut, which was the object of the exercise. The lavish praise was good for my self-esteem, but he was not unduly interested in my self-esteem. His first duty was to the book which, as an editor, he was reading on behalf of everyone who would read it subsequently, and he knew perfectly well that if I did not immediately learn to be edited I might dig my heels in over the second book, on the grounds that there had been nothing wrong with the way I wrote the first one.

I remain deeply grateful. The third book was edited by someone even more ruthless: 'You'll need to take out about 7,000 words.' This was one tenth of the total, not a cosmetic nip-and-tuck but heroic surgery. I bit the bullet and rewrote. Afterwards he told me merrily that if I had refused he would have published it anyway, by which time it was too late to refuse again. I was deeply grateful. I have lost count of my editors over the years. Most have been excellent colleagues, whether or not I enjoyed their methods; some have been adequate and a couple, I am convinced, described themselves as editors because they could not spell amoeba, but the practices instilled in me by those early martinets saw me through because I had never been allowed to think that the work I delivered was as good as it got. It was only as good as I could make it on my own.

It is fatally easy to convince yourself that something will be enjoyable to read because you enjoyed writing it. This is where the kindly ruthless editor steps in. 'OK, you've had your fun. Now, take it out. It's bad. It's so bad it's embarrassing.' (I quote) 'I know what I'm talking about.' Every new writer should have one, a crocodile with gently smiling jaws, heart of gold, will of iron and a critical faculty of pure Carborundum.



Photograph courtesy of Hodder Children's Books.



Noel Coward once described an actor's performance as a triumph of mind over matter – never mind over doesn't matter, a desperate attitude in publishing, especially where the first duty is to the balance sheet. We currently labour under the delusion that there is a tremendous interest in children's books; children's books are at last being taken seriously; children's books are the New Rock and Roll. This is not in fact the case; there is an enormous interest in best sellers. The attention paid to the bulk of children's fiction is as cursory as ever. The top ten children's best sellers listed in **The Bookseller** usually features no more than three or four names (contrast the adult listings). These are the ones that garner the interest. They must be on to something.

So, how to gain a readership for your latest protégée? Children are not so easily lured by glamour shots of pouting bimbos as the sapient adults. Look at that **Bookseller** list again; protective mimicry. The more closely the work resembles everything else the faster it will leave the shelves – there is safety in numbers. Fantasy is hot; it is also a fast-breeder and increasingly self-referential. Once the province of the highly innovative, logicians, linguists, anthropologists, it is becoming annexed by the wholly derivative for whom the attraction of the genre seems to be that you can just make it up as you go along. Given an inexperienced editor subscribing to the same creed, mutual satisfaction is assured.

A new writer submits a novel, a work of fantasy, say. It fulfils all the requirements; people with peculiar names practising dingbat rituals in far-off worlds ruled by magic, always ruled by magic so that if the plot runs into a brick wall you just wave your wand and remove the wall. By dint of having a good idea buried inside it somewhere it wins a prize. It sells. The editor's acuity 'This will do' – is vindicated, the writer's inexperience is hailed as mastery of the form (you can't move at the moment for master storytellers) and the book mutates into a trilogy, a series. Champagne and complacency all round. Nothing is going to get any better, ever. Why should it? ■

Jan Mark won the Carnegie Medal in 1976 for **Thunder and Lightnings** and in 1983 for **Handles**. Her latest book is **Heathrow Nights**, published by Hodder 'Signature', 0 340 77411 8, £4.99 pbk.

*Eoin Colfer's **Artemis Fowl** is published by Viking.

**Patrick Hardy was Editorial Director of Kestrel Books (the then hardback imprint of Penguin children's books) in the 1970s before starting his own list, Patrick Hardy Books, just before his untimely death. The annual Patrick Hardy lecture is held in his memory.

NEWS

Children's Books in the Top Ten

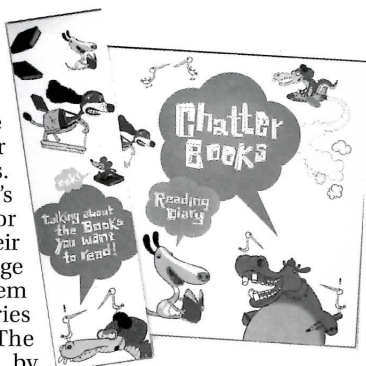
A top ten hardback fiction chart compiled by Waterstone's for *The Guardian* of 20 October included three children's books. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (Cape) at No.1 was followed at No.2 by Julia Donaldson's *Room on a Broom* (Macmillan) with Jacqueline Wilson's *Dustbin Baby* (Doubleday) at No.3 and *The Bad Beginning: A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket at No.10. Children's books are often left out of standard bestseller charts.

Nation's Favourite Children's Poem

A BBC poll has found the nation's favourite children's poem. It is Edward Lear's 'The Owl and the Pussycat'.

Orange Chatterbooks

An exciting national reading group scheme for children in public libraries has been launched by the Orange Prize for Fiction. It is to be co-ordinated by Launchpad, the development agency for children's library services. Jacqueline Wilson is the project's patron. The reading groups, for 4-12 year olds, will meet in their local library and be given a range of attractive materials to get them started, including reading diaries and 'post-it' review notes. The project has been piloted by Manchester, Kensington & Chelsea, and Plymouth libraries and 50 library authorities are now involved. Further information from Tricia Kings: tk113@hotmail.com



Bookstart in Wales

Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning at the National Assembly for Wales, has announced £600,000 of extra funding for the Bookstart Project in Wales. The new funding comes from the National Basic Skills Strategy for Wales which is administered by The Basic Skills Agency. Bookstart is based on the simple, but proven idea that sharing books with babies from an early age benefits their development in many different ways, educationally, socially and emotionally. There are now 210 schemes in the UK covering 92% of the UK and since 1999 all 22 local authorities in Wales have had their own Bookstart schemes.



Dechrau Da
Bookstart

World Book Day

This year's World Book Day will be on Thursday 14 March. This year's aim is to encourage the whole family to Get Caught Reading. Events and activities will be held nationwide in schools, libraries, workplaces and bookshops to celebrate reading and books in a huge variety of ways. Over the next few months, schools and bookshops will be making plans to take part in World Book Day. Every event will be posted on the WBD website - www.worldbookday.com. In the meantime, look out for a Read Around the World marathon storytelling session at Brixham CE Infant School in Devon, a family book evening at Littlehampton Community School in Sussex and WBD activities at the Royal Blind School in Edinburgh. Libraries across the country will be masterminding a wealth of activities and events designed to encourage people of all ages to enjoy books and reading.

Thanks to Book Tokens Ltd, principal sponsor of World Book Day 2002, and publishers and booksellers, over 13 million children - every schoolchild in full-time education - will receive a £1 World Book Day Book Token via their school which can be redeemed for three weeks around World Book Day itself. There will also be five special World Book Day £1 books for five different age ranges by leading children's

Useful Organisations No.19: Booktrust

Book House
45 East Hill
London SW18 2QZ

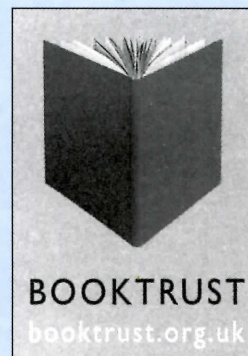
Telephone: 020 8516 2977

Fax: 020 8516 2978

E-mail: kim@booktrust.org.uk

Website: www.booktrusted.com

Booktrust, an independent charity, promotes books and reading to people of all ages, and runs a number of successful reading projects, including Bookstart, the national scheme enabling over 650,000 babies across the UK to receive a free Bookstart pack including a free book and information for parents and carers about sharing books with babies. The organisation also manages numerous literary prizes, including the Booker Prize, Orange Prize, Nestlé



Smarties Book Prize and the Kurt Maschler Award, and offers a telephone book information service. A wide range of resources and publications on all aspects of children's literature is available, including a termly magazine, *Children's Book News*, and Booktrust's guide to the best paperback books of the year, *100 Best Books*. Booktrust produces resources for National Children's Book Week, which usually takes place in the first week of October. For further details and on-line resources, visit the website at www.booktrusted.com

authors. They can all be exchanged for the £1 World Book Day Book Token. Further information from www.worldbookday.com

World Book Day supports Book Aid International by helping them to provide over 750,000 selected books and journals each year to support learning and skills' development in over 60 developing countries throughout the world. To date, over £150,000 has been raised by schools on World Book Day for Book Aid International. Further information from www.bookaid.org

Bedtime Reading Week

Bedtime Reading Week coincides with World Book Day 2002 and runs from 11 to 17 March. A national initiative launched last year, it is aimed at encouraging people of all ages to spend just a few minutes a day reading aloud to their loved ones - be it children, friends or partners. Visit the Bedtime Reading Week website at www.bedtime-readingweek.co.uk

More About Harry Potter

- A survey by the literacy charity Reading Is Fundamental has found that **Harry Potter** is helping to make reading a more popular leisure activity. Of the children involved in RIF's projects who had read one **Harry Potter** book, 70% said that it encouraged them to read other books.
- Opticians report that **Harry Potter** is helping children who wear spectacles to feel less stigmatised.
- A Waterstone's survey has found that **Harry Potter** is the most familiar book character among UK readers. Characters from the books are now more recognizable than those from Enid Blyton's 'Famous Five' series.

REGIONAL PRIZE

Sheffield Book Award

Living With Vampires by Jeremy Strong and illustrated by Scoular Anderson (Barrington Stoke) has won the Shorter Novel Section of the Sheffield Children's Book Award. The winners are voted for by children from 93 local schools.

Jo Melling
15 Winterstoke Gardens, London
NW7 2RA

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

Audio books are rated for the quality of the reading, not the book.

Unmissable ★★★★★
Very Good ★★★★★
Good ★★★
Fair ★★
Poor ★

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

Gwynneth Bailey is Language Coordinator at Aldborough County Primary School, Norwich.

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 Coordinator and a teacher at Chatsworth Infant School in Hounslow, Middlesex.

Mary Cadogan is co-author of *You're a Brick, Angela*, and a writer, critic and broadcaster.

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.

Julia Eccleshare is the children's books editor of *The Guardian*.

Geoff Fox edits the journal, *Children's Literature in Education*, and is an honorary Research Fellow at Exeter University School of Education.

Nikki Gamble is a freelance education and children's book consultant, and project director of Live Writing:Online.

Annabel Gibb lives in York and is a Learning Support Tutor.

Peter Hollindale, formerly at the University of York, is now a freelance writer and teacher.

Robert Hull is a poet and anthologist.

George Hunt is lecturer in Education at the University of Edinburgh.

Adrian Jackson is General Adviser – English, West Sussex.

Andrew Kidd is Headteacher at Duke Street Primary School in Chorley, Lancashire.

Rudolf Loewenstein is a Dominican friar working in a London parish.

Margaret Mallett is Visiting Tutor in Primary English, Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

Ted Percy, until he retired, was Divisional Children's Librarian with Buckinghamshire County Library.

Val Randall teaches English at Mansfield High School, North East Lancashire.

Elizabeth Schlenther is Editor, English children's books for gwales.com, The Welsh Books Council's website.

Rosemary Stones is Editor of *Books for Keeps*.

Helen Taylor teaches at Homerton College, Cambridge and is the director of The Voices Project – a literature in the community project and festival in Cambridgeshire.

Sue Unstead was a publisher of children's non-fiction for 25 years and is now a freelance editorial consultant and writer.

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Books About Children's Books

Tintin: The Complete Companion

★★★

Michael Farr, John Murray,
208pp, 0 7195 5522 1, £19.99
hbk

It is always intriguing to spend time inside someone else's obsession and this splendidly designed and produced volume certainly allows its reader to do that. Michael Farr, the dustjacket asserts, is 'Now the leading British expert on all aspects of Tintin' (what does that 'Now' imply?). His meticulously compiled book gives its lay reader no reason to doubt the assertion. Mr Farr is clear that his hero is 'the most recognisable figure in all fiction'. He does not set out to write a critical appraisal of Hergé's work – there is little discussion here, for example, of artistic techniques, the crafting of narrative or Tintin's enduring appeal. This is indeed a 'companion', crammed with information.

The Tintin aficionado would probably read with the primary texts at hand, for the straightforward structure deals in detail with each of Tintin's adventures from *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* (1929) to the 'tantalisingly incomplete' *Tintin and Alph-Art* some 54 years later. This simple organisation serves Farr's purposes well. He is concerned to give us Hergé's sources, to reflect the way the artist responded to contemporary events and to trace such developments as the reworking of the stories as they went into colour versions or what is gained and lost in translation (the books sell four million copies annually in more than fifty languages). The numerous illustrations include not only extracts from the adventures but also the images Farr has found in Hergé's files which the artist used extensively with great attention to accuracy and detail. The origins of Hergé's dynamic and entertaining cast list are explored: Captain Haddock, Professor Calculus, Bianca Castafiore, Thomson and Thompson, General Alcazar and – Tintin's own Professor Moriarty – the villainous Roberto Rastapopolous. The structure also allows Farr to trace the relationship between Hergé's troubled personal life and his work and to touch lightly on the political difficulties the artist got into during the second world war. There is considerable interest here

for the browsing student of literary phenomena. For Tintin devotees, any recommendation (let alone a star rating) would be mere irrelevance. For them, this is required reading. GF

The Reader in the Writer: The links between the study of literature and writing development at Key Stage 2

★★★★★

Myra Barrs and Valerie Cork,
Centre for Language in
Primary Education, 264pp,
1 872267 25 4, £16.50 pbk
(£14.50 subscribers)

This handsomely produced and thought-provoking study poses important questions about the teaching of reading and writing, including the often assumed relationship between them, and provides evidence for the significance of often undervalued practice. With writing at KS2 a major national focus and the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy often leading to practices the very opposite of those advocated here, this is also timely. Much teaching of the NLS would be enriched by the methods described here; although, in the two years since the research took place, there have been very positive developments in the teaching of writing through the NLS, particularly in explicit attention to language features in shared and guided writing.

The research study focused on four questions with Year 5 classes in five schools during the year 1998-99:

- What do children take from their reading of literary texts, and how do we know?
- How far do certain classroom practices support children in learning about writing from literary texts?
- Are the experiences which help children to develop as writers the same as those which help them to develop as readers?
- What kinds of literary texts are particularly supportive to children learning to write?

The study is particularly inspiring in the detail of the approaches to reading. It has not always seemed a

self-evident truth that to develop writing and writers, teachers and children draw on reading. And, as importantly, that talk and listening have anything to do with writing. The study shows that they are not separable; the learning from one informs the learning of the other. Here, writing arises out of a rich compound of talk, listening and reading that is always rooted in thinking and meaning. Drama also assumes a key role, with links to children's increased ability to recast the narration.

Developing a language ear is a major emphasis, with children 'reading through the ears' as teachers perform texts aloud and they themselves listen to their own writing. Effective teachers here also encourage children to publish their work through reading it aloud rather than just putting it on display. We can understand that here too texts, children's own texts, are measured by the writers and the listeners against their aural understanding which is being grown through those readings and dramatisations. The study shows again the need for children to *sound like* writers: to be apprentice musicians learning to orchestrate their narratives, to make their pens create and recreate the compositions that they have heard and continue to hear in their heads.

The additional ingredient is 'high quality texts', in this case *Fire, Bed and Bone* and *The Green Children*, a retelling of a folk-tale, used with all the classes. The research highlights the impact of 'emotionally powerful texts' along with other important conclusions. Texts have to be worth children spending time on. These teachers resist that early misperceived view of the NLS that you could only read bits of texts and do bitty work. They work for extended periods of time on whole texts; and they use a range of methods, including drama, to engage the pupils in the meanings and life of those texts. They also provide further evidence for the important role of folk tales in pupils' 'narrative education' and point to the lessons about links between speech and writing embedded in these stories.

The writing samples show clearly the effectiveness of the work and the experiences and the assessments show the gains made in writing by these children. It is an approach that works. For the authors of the study

what matters too is that it is based on thought and feeling and personal growth. The 'growth of feeling' is noted and valued in these young writers. Not the kind of thing encapsulated in spare NLS objectives or SATs criteria.

In many ways this seems to be the antithesis of the Literacy Hour approach and in that first year of implementation it would generally have felt like it too. In Scholes' words about the teaching of reading, quoted in this book, there is 'too much in it of art or craft to yield entirely – or even largely – to methodization'. This study sees development beyond 'formal lessons'.

There is still much to be learnt from this study and to be embedded in literacy practice. It would be very good to have more common appreciation of the power of texts, the importance of high quality and whole texts, and the absolutely essential part that talk and listening, discussion and drama have to play in developing as a writer.

The timing of this research indicates that teachers had not yet explored the ways that shared writing, especially modelling and demonstrating, are extensions of that drama work they have done. Guided writing too is only briefly referred to.

Since 1998, teachers have begun to 'grow' the NLS too and there is an increasing amount of high quality, confident writing from primary children of all ages which has a debt to further teaching approaches not strongly represented here. These children too are fully engaged in the circle of reading and writing. They write as a reader and read as a writer. Explicitly shown the writer's craft and shown how to make these techniques work for them, successful writing is suddenly a much less secret affair. Their explanations of what is so enjoyable about their favourite authors sound like comments from a fellow writer. They have developed their ear and also their eye for language.

This is a book which teachers of literacy should know. It is wise and thoughtful, inspiring and committed and rooted in life and literature and learning. I look forward to a sequel which continues to dig away at these questions and follows the developments in the research group for this book, both teachers and children, two years on and more. AJ

Now Out in Paperback

Three, four and five star hardbacks or trade paperbacks previously reviewed in BfK and now published as mass market paperbacks.

UNDER 5s PRE-SCHOOL/ NURSERY/INFANT

Hushabye

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

John Burningham, Red Fox,
32pp, 0 09 940864 3, £5.99

Reviewed BfK 124, September 2000:

'Sleep in this lullaby is sometimes a blissful state of consciousnessless ("The baby's asleep/in the boat that's afloat, and is rocking on watery

waves.") but more often a desperately needed sinking into oblivion after a difficult and strenuous day. Not all life, not all sleep then, can be simple, easy and blissful, the watcher by the cradle appears to tell us.'

Rain

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Manya Stojic, David Bennett
Books, 32pp, 1 85602 413 X,
£3.99

Reviewed BfK 125, November 2000:

"It was hot. Everything was hot and dry" begins this exciting, heat filled picture book which has the animals of the savanna excitedly passing on the news to each other that the rain is coming. The text reads aloud beautifully and is illustrated in a bold, free, painterly style.'

Ellie and the Butterfly Kitten

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Gillian Lobel, ill. Karin

Littlewood, Orchard, 32pp,
1 84121 632 1, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 127, March 2001:

'While Ellie loves staying with her Nanna, she misses mum. When she and Nanna find a tiny kitten, Ellie lavishes attention on her. But the kitten needs her own mum. Little girls and little kittens are happiest when with their mothers. Bold splashes and streaks of colour glow and reflect Ellie's moods, both sad and happy. A lovely production.'

The Puffin Book of Amazing Animal Poems

POETRY ★★★★★

Puffin, 128pp, 0 14 130774 9, £6.99

Reviewed BfK 128, May 2001:

'A collection of over 100 traditional and contemporary poems about all sorts of animals from many different cultures. Each of the six sections is illustrated by a different artist and combine to produce a lively colourful romp through the animal kingdom. There is something here for everyone, but especially for nursery and infant age groups.'

5-8 INFANT/JUNIOR

Tales of Wonder and Magic

FICTION ★★★★★

Collected by Berlie Doherty, ill. Juan Wijngaard, Walker, 112pp, 0 7445 8147 8, £9.99

Reviewed BfK 109, March 1998:

'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. Wijngaard's illustrations delicately catch the mood of each tale and bring an extra dimension to the magic in the text.'

My Uncle is a Hunkle says Clarice Bean

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Lauren Child, Orchard, 32pp, 1 84121 624 0, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 126, January 2001:

'Feisty Clarice Bean returns to share with readers another peek at family life. The illustrations are zany and chaotic paste-ups plastered with drawings, photos, wall-, wrapping- and other printed papers and images. The text too is marvellously manipulated using a plethora of print shapes, sizes and styles to reflect and control the pace and timing of this hilarious romp.'

Katie and the Sunflowers

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

James Mayhew, Orchard, 32pp, 1 84121 634 8, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 127, March 2001:

'This delightful fantasy story sees Katie visiting the gallery on a rainy day and interacting with five post-Impressionist paintings. The vibrant illustrations are clever adaptations of the originals and the storyline flows gently from one masterpiece to another. We return to reality with a single page giving basic information about the three post-Impressionists highlighted in the story.'

8-10 JUNIOR/MIDDLE

Hair in Funny Places

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Babette Cole, Red Fox, 32pp, 0 09 926626 1, £5.99

Reviewed BfK 119, November 1999:

'The workings of the pituitary gland have seldom had such a wittily upfront version of their activities presented to young readers as in this entertaining picture book. Narrator Ted (a large teddy bear) explains to his (female) owner how her parents would have developed in puberty when Mr and Mrs Hormone got to work mixing their potions and sending them round their bodies.'

The Road to Somewhere

FICTION ★★★★★

Helen Armstrong, ill. Harry Horse, Dolphin, 128pp, 1 84255 052 7, £4.50

Reviewed BfK 127, March 2001:

'When Cow tells Ratty that farmer is sending her to never-come-back, action is needed. Ratty is known to be a good thinker and he comes up with a plan to leave the farm and find Somewhere-else. Initially rather arch, this agreeable first novel soon gets into its stride with touches of humour and increasingly engaging characters.'

10-12 MIDDLE/SECONDARY

Wild Blood (Switchers 3)

FICTION ★★★★★

Kate Thompson, Red Fox, 176pp, 0 09 941763 4, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 118, September 1999:

'Coming up to the fifteenth birthday which terminates her ability to "switch" from human to animal and back, Tess is in a dilemma: which permanent identity will she now assume? This novel celebrates the power of tradition and ancestry to influence our heroine's life and traces her understanding of how there is much in that life not susceptible to logical explanation.'

Exploring World Art

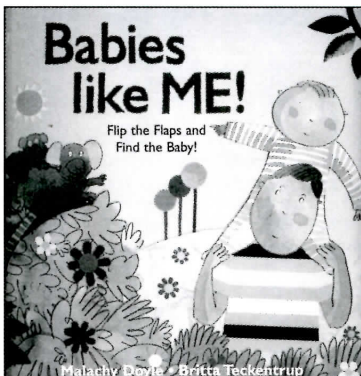
NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Andrea Belloli, Frances Lincoln, 112pp, 0 7112 1895 1, £9.99

Reviewed BfK 121, March 2000:

'An attractive introduction to world art which is less concerned with technique and chronology than with the meaning and purposes of a work of art, and the opportunity it offers to show different ways of looking at the world. Belloli gives each work a double page spread and groups them under five broad headings within which she offers exciting juxtapositions - eg an Aztec calendar stone follows a Persian pen box decorated with the signs of the Zodiac.'

REVIEWS Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant



Babies like ME!

★★★★★

Malachy Doyle, ill. Britta Teckentrup, Frances Lincoln, 16pp, 0 7112 1735 1, £9.99 hbk novelty

A flap book with some well thought out paper engineering which makes comparisons between human and animal behaviour. Thus, a human baby is seen tucked into a sling carried by dad just as a young seahorse is carried in its father's pouch. Other animals include stripey zebras, speedy little ostriches, slippery baby otters and tiny marmosets. The language used is simple but memorable, and the illustrations are colourful and detailed. There is such a lot to talk about as the pages are lifted or turned. For a first book experience for a baby, this could be a real winner. Good to see Doyle writing for such a young audience. GB

Hen goes to Market

★★★

Mark Birchall, Andersen, 18pp, 1 84270 009 X, £8.99 hbk novelty

When hen goes shopping we visit each stall with her as she chooses items from her shopping list. The text poses questions: 'Do I want apples or bananas?' and having searched the pictures, we can pull the tab to find out. Through the mechanics, the chosen bananas disappear from the stall, popping into Hen's basket, whilst the fruit is given a positive tick on the shopping list. There are intriguing flaps to lift for further discussion, bright, stylised illustrations and the ending has a lovely twist. Great fun! GB

Goodbye, Hello!

Shen Roddie, ill. Carol Thompson, 0 7513 7252 8

Silly Goose and Daft Duck Try to Catch a Rainbow

Sally Grindley, ill. Adrian Reynolds, 0 7513 3529 0

Ten in a Bed

Jan Ormerod, 0 7513 7272 2

★★

Dorling Kindersley 'Toddler Story Books', 24pp, £3.99 each pbk

DK have broken away from their photos-on-white-background style

here to produce a series (currently 30 titles) of large square 'toddler-friendly' books with sturdy covers and tough untearable pages.

In *Goodbye, Hello!* Thompson's bright, page-filling watercolours support a banal text 'celebrating toddlers' exciting achievements'. Thus 'goodbye nappy, hello potty!' and so on throughout the day, until nap-time means 'no goodbyes... because it's always Hello, Ted!' Apart from being unrealistic - does anyone gather up the baby food to throw away when Junior graduates to 'grown-up food'? - it is hard to know what a toddler's view of all this 'achievement' would be.

Silly Goose and Daft Duck live up to their epithets in a very silly story for an older toddler. Silly Goose's nest is 'too brown, and brown is boring' so off they go to find something pretty to cheer it up. Their uninspiring search (any toddler could do better) culminates in Clever Fox suggesting that they dig a hole to catch a rainbow - he will provide the net. They are rescued from their inevitable fate by Grizzly Bear with whom we leave them, still waiting for that elusive rainbow to fall into their hole. My tester, groomed on *Rosie's Walk* etc, now, at 3½, knows that a fox means doom in storyland - but this concept is not as straightforward or obvious to toddlers as adult writers often imagine. The indeterminate ending is unsatisfactory for little ones too - the joke too obscure for the under 4s. The illustrations are cartoony and not entirely successful, though I liked Clever Fox's nonchalant presence.

In *Ten in a Bed*, Amelia wakes up with nine characterful soft toys. One by one she gets them up to share her activities as she parallels Mum and Dad dealing with her baby sibling. Ormerod's gentle observations of the baby's life, and of the imitative character of a pre-schooler's play, is as accurate as ever, though I was sad that she missed the opportunity to show a breastfeeding baby; the text however lacks the cadence necessary to echo the original song, and a few readings are needed to work out how best to read it aloud.

Although this is the best of an indifferent bunch, DK have still not hit the mark here - I feel they just do not understand the experience of 'toddlers' (whoever they are) and the elements needed for a really enriching read for this age group, who should not just be seen as an easy market. AG

Pudding Face

★★

Bettina Paterson, 0 439 99890 5

Racing Bears

★★★

Steve Lavis, 0 439 99913 8

Ness the Nurse

★★★★

Nick Sharratt, 0 439 99912 X
Scholastic 'Storyboards', 16pp, £4.99 each board
'Storyboards' is a new series of jumbo



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Kettle Chambers, 21 Stone Street,
Cranbrook, Kent. TN17 3HF

sized board books, designed, I assume, for younger children who want a book to look at by themselves, but find standard picture books too awkward or fragile just yet. Each title promises 'a real story', which, within the seven spreads available, presents a real challenge to their creators.

Pudding Face is the least appealing. Pudding Face is a small elephant who asks, whenever he eats, whether breakfast or supper, 'What's for pudding?' There is the germ of a good idea here, but the elephants are largely inanimate and barely distinguishable from one another. It is often not clear what is being eaten at the different meals which are shown at each opening, which may reflect Pudding Face's perception of everything being inadequate beside pudding, but will fail to excite the reader. Nor are children likely to empathise with a main character who has a playground insult for a name.

Racing Bears is better. Big Bear and Small Bear clearly have a relationship with one another and with Big Bear's shiny blue car. Small Bear's disappointment at being passed by Hare on a bicycle and Tortoise on his little scooter is soon forgotten as they finally speed down the hill. The change of pace is cleverly indicated by a change of point of view, as the car turns to face the reader on the brink of its descent. The bold pictures and strong colours, with no extraneous detail, make the most of the simple story.

Sharratt's **Ness the Nurse** is in rhyme and brilliant colour. There is a gallery of patients with childhood scrapes who need plasters: 'One for Rose, who's bashed her nose,' and 'One for Flo, who's stubbed her toe.' Eye catching design, plenty of humour, and the chance to count down the plasters as they are claimed by each of the patients, makes this the best of the three – a lesson in how it should be done. **CB**

Flora's Blanket

★★★★

Debi Gliori, Orchard, 32pp,
1 84121 555 4, £9.99 hbk

Once again Gliori has created a book full of empathy and family love. Little Flora Rabbit just cannot sleep without her special blanket. There are offers of blankets from siblings Norah and Cora, Sam, Tom and Max, but none of these, of course, will do. There have been many different story versions of this theme over the years but Gliori brings freshness to the subject, and her appealing illustrations will win the hearts of many small readers (and their families) who will return to this book endlessly. **GB**

Three Cheers for Ostrich!

★★★★

Francesca Simon, ill. Neal Layton,
Gullane, 32pp, 1 86233 179 0, £9.99 hbk

Poor Ostrich! Why is there always someone older, bigger, faster, cleverer, and stronger than he is? It makes him so sad that he sticks his head in the sand. Mother asks why he is upset, and after hearing the problem, asks him, 'But who is the kindest?' All the other animals claim they are, but retracing the story proves that in fact it was Ostrich at every turn. This message about different strengths and values is conveyed with great energy and fun. The illustrations support the action well, and the resolution demands one returns to the subtext earlier in the book to find out what really happened, reading the pictures carefully and reflecting on the merits of size, strength and speed. Kindness wins the day! **GB**

Toffee's New Friend

★★★

Sally Chambers, Piccadilly, 32pp,
1 85340 654 6, £4.99 pbk

Moving house is always an anxious time but in this story it is not the chief protagonist, marmalade cat Toffee, who is doing the moving. The new kitten on the block is the reason for Toffee's anxiety: the kitten is keen to get to know

Toffee but her forays into Toffee's territory are, at first, met with angry snarls and much tail swishing. Before long though, having a new feline friend proves to be great fun for Toffee too, but of course there is still the dog ...

A gentle tale about the uncertainty of change which will strike a chord with many young listeners and readers. It is enlivened by the different viewpoints and page layouts used in the watercolour and pencil illustrations. **JB**

Flop-Ear and Annie

★★★★

Guido Van Genechten, Cat's Whiskers,
32pp, 1 903012 17 1, £4.99 pbk

Flop-Ear (a rabbit who is just that little bit different with his one turned-down ear) wants to make friends with Annie. He tries various ploys: wearing his grandfather's spectacles, dressing up in various ways, carrying around lots of carrots, but nothing works until he finds that Annie likes him just the way he is. Painted in bold colours with heavy black outlines, the artwork is simple and suits the engaging nature of the two little rabbits in a warm-hearted story about friendship. **VC**

Bark, George

★★★★

Jules Feiffer, Collins, 32pp, 0 00 711055 3,
£4.99 pbk

George's mother is exasperated with him. The puppy will not bark, although he can 'Quack-quack', 'Oink', 'Moo', and 'Meow'. So off to the vet, who, with the aid of a long arm and ever-lengthening latex gloves, hauls out of George's tiny frame, an amazing number of ever larger animals. Anyone who knows Feiffer's work as a cartoonist can imagine the nonchalant skill with which he carries off this absurd drama, complete with increasingly despairing expressions from George's mum, and grim determination from the vet. Toddlers will enjoy matching animals to sounds, older children and their parents will relish the comic characterisation and the extra twist at the end. **CB**

Bringing Down the Moon

★★★

Jonathan Emmett, ill. Vanessa Cabban,
Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 7552 4, £10.99 hbk

Mole's expressive 'Hot-diggerty!' is a memorable opening to this endearing book where text and pictures are admirably matched. Hanging above Mole's head is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, the moon. Determinedly, he tries to bring it down, waking Rabbit, Squirrel and Hedgehog ('What the weevil are you up to?') They all tell him the task is quite impossible. Finally Mole discovers the moon lying in a puddle and in wonderment he touches and shatters it... There is a lot to talk about in this book with its gentle, appealing illustrations and great read-aloud text. It is just right for young children becoming more familiar with the world around them. **GB**

Old Bob's Brown Bear

★★★★

Niki Daly, Bloomsbury, 32pp,
0 7475 5011 5, £9.99 hbk

As he never had a teddy bear when he was a boy, Old Bob is given one by Gran for his birthday, making his granddaughter Emma rather jealous. She knows he cannot love it as she would be able to do and creates a fuss when she has to leave at the end of a visit. 'I want Teddy!' Emma wails. Old Bob begins to realise Emma is much better at loving a Teddy than he is and she is allowed to take Teddy back to her house for 'holidays'. Months and months later when Teddy has eventually been well worn by Emma's hugs and has become just another of her toys, Old Bob visits Emma and sees his fuzzy-wuzzy old teddy bear. 'I want Teddy!' says Old Bob. Emma is happy to give Teddy back.

A warm and touching story which highlights the

close relationship of grandfather and granddaughter and their shared feelings. The author's own warm, fluid watercolour illustrations add to the cosiness of the story. Whilst the ending may be a little sentimental for some tastes, this is an ideal book for shared bedtime reading. **AK**

Carlo Likes Reading

★★★★

Jessica Spanyol, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 7590 7, £10.99 hbk

Carlo the giraffe loves to read – everything, everywhere, and to anyone who will listen. This picture book is not so much a story, rather a series of annotated spreads – bedroom, kitchen, market, garage, park, library and so on – in which almost every conceivable object in each bright, jolly scene is labelled with a tie-on tag.

While I like the idea of using environmental print, this obsession with tags creates an artificiality: why not use realistic labels on items such as jam jars, milk cartons, food packets, etc. making the words an integral part of the whole? However, the plethora of tags does give touches of humour to the scenes: we have three tiny soap bubbles floating out of a bucket sporting large labels and a line of ants trailing tags past the sand pit.

A single sentence 'Carlo reads...' in large bold type introduces each double spread making this an inviting proposition for beginner readers as well as an attractive word book to share with the very young. **JB**

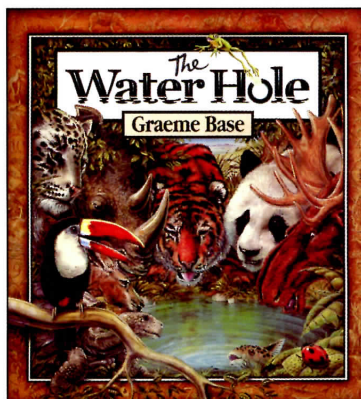
The Pear in the Pear Tree

★★★★

Pamela Allen, Puffin, 32pp, 0 14 056497 7, £4.99 pbk

Jane and John's comical attempts to pluck a juicy pear from the topmost branch of a tree are told in this picture book through rhyming couplets and Allen's characteristically spare yet wittily eloquent illustrations. John, wielding a ladder 'casts' Jane skyward whence she plunges into a pond and John has to rescue her. Still pearless the pair look on as a goose 'BOING-NGS' onto the very branch whereon rests the pear sending it PLONKING towards the

children. After pulling mightily they free the fruit thus CAT-A-PUL-TING the bird back to her pond. They then set about consuming their prize – bite for bite – of course! Great fun for listeners and readers from three to seven. **JB**



The Water Hole

★★★★

Graeme Base, Abrams, 32pp, 0 8109 4568 1, £12.95 hbk novelty

A bewilderingly rich visual conundrum from the creator of *The Eleventh Hour* and *Animalia*. Each double page spread depicts a sumptuous jungle landscape, focused on a concentrically cut out water-hole which dwindles as more and more animals come to drink from it. As the water level falls, the family of anthropomorphised frogs which features in each picture diminishes. For one frame the lushness shrivels, then a single raindrop enclosing the Earth bursts on the dry bed and the richness returns. There is clearly an ecological message underlying the spectacularly fecund imagery here, but it is as a visionary source of narrative hide and seek that most young readers will enjoy the book. Whole menageries are camouflaged into the surface details of the landscapes, while shifting geographical and human landmarks emerge from the gaps in the foliage. This is an intriguing source of wonder and speculation for readers of all ages. **GH**

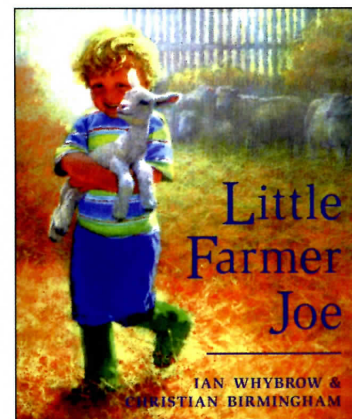
Crossing

★★★★★

Philip Booth, ill. Bagram Ibatouline, Candlewick Press, 40pp, 0 7636 1420 3, £10.99 hbk

This is a superbly illustrated large format picture book which celebrates in counting-rhyme verse the passage of an old American goods train through a level crossing. Booth's splendidly rhythmic poem, depicting all the different types of box car as the count progresses, was written in 1953. Ibatouline's almost hyper-realistic paintings touchingly recreate the characters, costume and cultural objects of that time. They reflect the simple, dramatic vividness of the text. You can almost hear the thunderous approach of the steam engine, the metallic chant as the great procession goes by, and the slow fade-out as it vanishes into the distance. The title of the book is printed on a gate barrier, and even the end papers, painted to resemble rusting metal, are fascinating. Very highly recommended (and not just for rail enthusiasts) as a counting book, a storybook, an historical source book and a great visual treat. **GH**

This large picture book communicates a complex message in simple terms with admirable clarity and conciseness. The colours and shapes are bright and simple, but detailed enough to convey the richness of the fiends' environment and the depth of their predicament, which they solve in a satisfying resolution. A highly recommended picture book, embodying a perennial theme that children might benefit from revisiting at different ages. **GH**

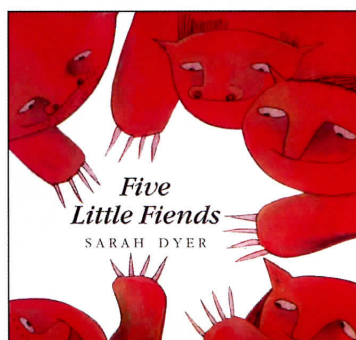


Little Farmer Joe

★★★★★

Ian Whybrow, ill. Christian Birmingham, Kingfisher, 32pp, 0 7534 0360 9, £10.99 hbk

Perhaps blue is the colour of fear. Certainly in the first half of this picture book, while Joe is experiencing farm animals for the first time and not liking them one little bit, blue is the predominant colour. He is actually being quite brave, because he copes with the owl's call and the large shaggy dog, the cows with horns and the geese who chase, but he is not happy. It is only in the darkness of night when he helps his uncle deliver a baby lamb and comforts the distressed ewe that he truly feels brave. After that, the lovely, soft-focus illustrations glow with happiness and the over-large animals, as seen through the eyes of a frightened child, gain perspective. Joe's body language and facial expressions throughout are wonderfully expressive. Outstanding in every way. **ES**



Five Little Fiends

★★★★

Sarah Dyer, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 0 7475 5229 0, £9.99 hbk

The eponymous fiends are really benign little creatures who live inside abstract statues on an empty plain. They appreciate the vast but simple wonders of their surroundings – sun, moon, land, sea and sky – but when each decides to take its favourite element to keep within its own home, they are all taught a lesson about the interdependence of everything in the universe.

REVIEWS 5–8 Infant/Junior

Creepy Castle

★★

Colin and Jacqui Hawkins, Mathew Price, 20pp, 1 84248 022 7, £8.99 hbk novelty

The very structure of movable books encourages their creators to surprise, and even shock, the reader – most famously in Jan Pienkowski's medal-winning *The Haunted House* (1979). The 'shock' usually provokes a smile rather than a scream – at most, a little gasp of pleasure prompted by the ingenuity of the artist/author/paper engineer. *Creepy Castle* is essentially a series of knock-knock jokes and two-liners, where the punch line is revealed as you open a door, peer into a coffin, lift a toilet seat or peep beneath the visor of a suit of armour. It is certainly charged with energy but

the paper engineering falls far short of Pienkowski's huge bat suddenly rearing up towards you out of the pages, for example. The jokes, which come almost too fast and frenetically, may provoke groans or mild amusement but the constant barrage of similar quips diminishes the impact. The pictures are busy, noisy and inventive enough to invite exploration and most children like lifting flaps. But where Pienkowski asks you to come back again and again to delight in the sheer invention of the improbable craftsmanship, this book will not lead to many return visits. **GF**

Rufferella

★★★★

Vanessa Gill-Brown, ill. Mandy Stanley, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 0 7475 5038 7, £4.99 pbk

Normally I am a great fan of traditional tale derivatives but I have to admit I found this one just too silly. Poor Ruff is the object of fairy-tale lover Diamante's attempts at emulating a fairy godmother and soon her long-suffering dog, clad in a frilly dress, sporting ribbons, jewels and make-up, is receiving lessons in etiquette. At her first 'ball' – a birthday party – her singing is a big hit and leads to a royal command performance where sausages prove her downfall ... once a dog, always a dog!

A longish read with plenty to 'paw' over and laugh at in the detailed scenes. I suspect that this is a book that will appeal much more to readers and listeners of six to eight than it does to me. **JB**

The Glass Heart: a tale of three princesses

★★★

Sally Gardner, Orion, 32pp, 1 85881 841 9, £8.99 hbk

An attractive picture book about three princesses whose hearts are made out of glass. After one of them dies of a broken heart, and another becomes an invalid when her heart cracks, the third is prevented from marrying anybody who does not know everything about glass. Only

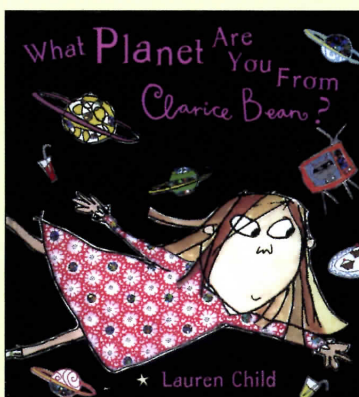
Editor's Choice

What Planet Are You From Clarice Bean?

★★★★★

Lauren Child, Orchard Books, 32pp, 1 84121 819 7, £10.99 hbk

Lauren Child does not put a foot wrong in this latest Clarice Bean picture book in which Clarice becomes an eco-warrior by helping to save a tree. A classroom project on the environment introduces us to Clarice's teacher and class mates – all sharply and wittily delineated by the delicious combination of Child's exuberantly wild and scribbly artwork characterisations and Clarice's comments ('This is my friend Betty Moody, without her glasses I am utterly a blur.' And so forth.). Clarice is musing on the ecology theme at home ('I am sure there is a big hole above our house because my sister Marcie uses too much hairspray and is causing pollution.') when her usually inert



teenage brother, Kurt, rushes in with the terrible news that a tree in their street is to be chopped down. Action is required and even Mrs Wilberton, Clarice's stern class teacher, has to approve. Reminiscent of Posy Simmonds' brilliant strip cartoon depiction of the *Guardian*-reading Weber family in the '80s, this latest addition to the Bean family saga is superb social commentary on generational difference de nos jours as well as a picture book that will delight Clarice fans of all ages. RS

the least likely candidate proves dedicated enough to go out into the world and to learn.

This is a romantic and pleasing little flight of fancy with a tale within a tale structure. The delicate and detailed pictures set the story within a Venetian fantasy land of gardens and gondolas. GH

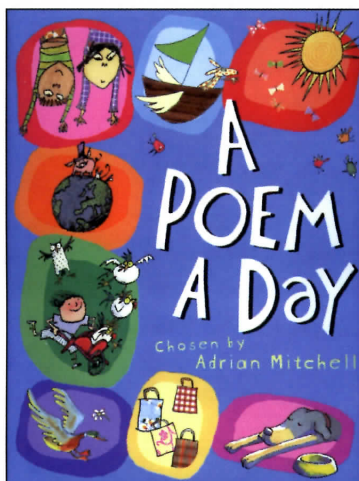
Snow Dog

★★★

Malorie Blackman, ill. Sami Sweeten, Corgi Pups, 64pp, 0 552 54703 4, £3.50 pbk

Girl wants dog more than anything else, but cannot have one. Sounds familiar? Blackman tells the story of how Nicky is able to have a most unusual dog with the help of Granddad, in such a way that even adults jaded by such stories in the past will enjoy the tale greatly.

Blackman's perceptions of the world of children and their emotions are as true to form as ever, and the illustrations by Sweeten help to make the story one that children will enjoy. RL



A Poem a Day

POETRY ★★★★★

Chosen by Adrian Mitchell, ill. Russell Ayto, Peter Bailey, Lauren Child and Guy Parker-Rees, Orchard, 304pp, 1 84121 741 7, £14.99 hbk

A real treat – a poem for every day of the year in bumper book format edited by one of our best poets and

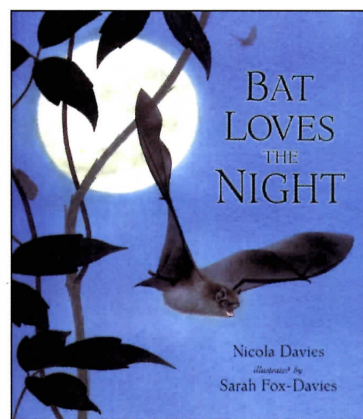
anthologists, Adrian Mitchell. This selection is a mixture of contemporary and traditional poets and lighthearted and thought provoking poems, the choice marked by Mitchell's anarchic and tender approach to life, his love of the ludicrous and his love of life. Belloc, Berry, Blake and Bloom; McGough, Patten, de la Mare and Dickinson are just a few of the poets in the anthology, plus plenty of Mitchell's own poems as well. The poems are accompanied by vibrant illustrations and there is the bonus of a ribbon place mark. Mitchell's introductory poem, 'The World Wants To Welcome You' sums it up: 'I'm your old rock cake, your old cream bun/ And I'm a-travelling round the sun./ I ain't got a clue where I am bound/ But I sing to myself as I trundle round.' HT

Bat Loves the Night

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Nicola Davies, ill. Sarah Fox-Davies, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 2887 9, £10.99 hbk

I would not want to change a single word or image in this beautifully produced picture book. It takes the young listener or reader of up to about age seven or eight years into the world of a pipistrelle bat, following its activities through one night. Like other Walker information stories it provides two kinds of text: narrative in large print and interesting and relevant information bites in smaller, lighter print. So, for instance, the poetic narrative tells how the bat 'shakes her thistledown fur' as she unfurls her wings to fly into the night from the roof hole. The information bites on the same pages tell us the pipistrelle is 'no bigger than your thumb' and has four extra-long fingers to support the skin of the wing – just the sort of detail to interest the very young. The text appeals to our senses – the bat flaps her wings 'with a sound like a tiny umbrella opening', captures 'moon-dust slippery' insects and has 'coat-hanger feet'. The difficult concept of echolocation is explained by using sight imagery to illuminate sound – 'she beams her voice around her like a torch, and the echoes come singing back'. Children will be fascinated to learn how the bat captures a moth by netting it with a wing tip and scooping it into her mouth. There is nothing cosy about this description – the bat bites hard and the moth's wings 'fall away, like the wrappers from a toffee'. Fox-Davies' illustrations perfectly reveal the creature's movements as she journeys through the night-time landscape.



The picture of the return of the adult bat at dawn to the roof space where the batlings 'like velvet scraps' are clustered has great imaginative appeal. MM

One Tiny Turtle

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Nicola Davies, ill. Jane Chapman, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 6258 9, £10.99 hbk

How do you best convince young children, up to about age seven years, that sea turtles need our care and concern if they are to survive? Davies helps them empathise by telling the life story of one little Loggerhead turtle. The story begins when the baby Turtle is 'not much bigger than a bottle-top' and lives in the sea turtle nursery in a tangle of seaweed and driftwood just below the surface of the ocean. Then, at the age of a few years, Turtle leaves the nursery and, now 'bigger than a dinner plate', swims into the open sea. The food she eats – small sea creatures like crabs and shrimps – and the environments she moves through from 'cool seaweed jungles' to 'turquoise lagoons' are powerfully described in words and pictures. By the end of the story Turtle has become 'big as a barrow' and has to struggle onto the land. She lays her eggs which are 'like a hundred squidgy ping-pong balls' in a sandy hole and the cycle begins again. For me, one great strength of this book is that while quality information is given, the limitations of our knowledge are often hinted at. No-one sees Turtle leave the nursery and she disappears for years – 'only good luck will catch you a glimpse of her' – to return instinctively to the beach where she was born to lay her eggs. MM

REVIEWS 8–10 Junior/Middle

The Driftway

AUDIO BOOK ★★

Penelope Lively, read by Hannah Gordon, BBC Cover to Cover, 5 hrs 15 mins, unabridged, 1 85549 342 X, £13.99 tape

Hannah Gordon's measured reading of this thoughtful but ponderous story does little to bring it to life. Written when both authors and readers enjoyed a slower pace of storytelling, *The Driftway* is fine to read as the pace can be varied and the close observation which gives everything an almost equal weight

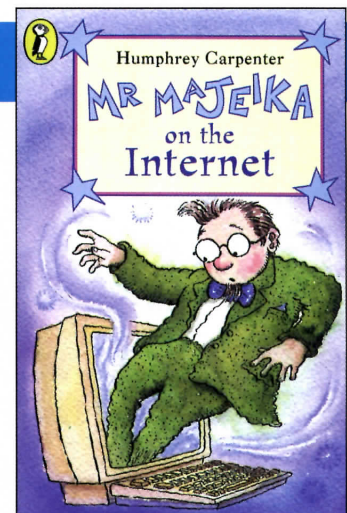
can be skipped. Read aloud, Hannah Gordon can do little to hurry the pace and the very slow start, when Paul and Sandra are questioned in the shop and begin their running away, makes a far too lengthy introduction to the more interesting stories from the past which can help Paul lay down his rage and grief. Lively leaves nothing to chance in her carefully written story; listening to this reading one wishes that, just occasionally, she would do so. JE

Mr Majeika on the Internet

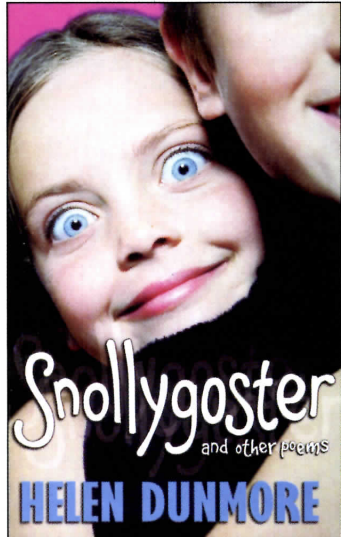
★★★★★

Humphrey Carpenter, ill. Frank Rodgers, Young Puffin, 96pp, 0 14 131010 3, £3.99 pbk

A new Mr Majeika book promises to be good fun, and this latest book is no exception to the rule. Here Mr Majeika and Class Three manage to go inside a computer and travel along the web. Packed with the usual humorous detail, Carpenter's observations about certain aspects of modern life also add to the story. The references to *Gulliver's Travels* are



interesting, and could have children rushing off to read the book in question. Well worth buying. **RL**



Snollygoster and Other Poems

POETRY ★★★★★

Helen Dunmore, ill. Rosamund Fowler, Scholastic, 96pp, 0 439 99636 8, £4.99 pbk

At last, a new children's collection from Helen Dunmore, including some wonderful poems from her first collection *Secrets* (now out of print). We step into the dreams of Pearlite Mountblossom who 'lost her mother/ she lives in a tent with her dad and her brother,/ the wind blew out and the sea blew in/ and Pearlite early learned to swim.' We meet Fudge the hamster in a poem packed with kennings, revealing the 'sawdust sleeper,' 'night nibbler's' secret night life. There are poems about best friends, darkness, lorries, waiting for Mum – all beautifully crafted, the language and images (as is always the case in Dunmore's poetry) echoing in the mind long after the book is closed. **HT**

Funny Frank

★★★★★

Dick King-Smith, ill. John Eastwood, Doubleday, 112pp, 0 385 60245 6, £10.99 hbk

Frank is one of eight chickens born to Gertie, but unlike his siblings he has a strong yearning to swim just like a duck. How he manages to do so with the aid of the farming family, makes for an amusing tale that will be enjoyed by old as well as new fans of King-Smith. Details about farming life are dotted about the book, which coupled with the illustrations by Eastwood make for a good read. If there is a moral to the story, it is that it is worthwhile letting a child go its own way, even if that is a bit unusual at times. Well recommended. **RL**

The Nation's Favourite Children's Poems

POETRY ★

Edited and compiled by Alex Warwick, ill. Josephine Sumner, BBC, 192pp, 0 563 53774 4, £9.99 hbk

Anyone who reads poems need only read the contents list of BBC's *The Nation's Favourite Children's Poems*.

It's that fresh. With reading time saved, the reader can speculate – the book doesn't say – which nation is being referred to. The Welsh? the Scottish? the English? the British? No, *The nation* – there's one, for heaven's sake. The reader might ask – it doesn't say – how the poems were chosen. They might wonder – it doesn't say – what hand if any children if any had in deciding which were their favourites. What the contents list itself reveals, though, is that the selection banally reproduces the over-established tastes of those – amongst them many teachers, sadly – who don't read much poetry. Three establishment Caribbean poems, nothing in any English dialect except standard ('the' standard); nothing in translation from India, Pakistan, China or anywhere. The collection's psychic centre seems, in fact, to be somewhere near Slough. A book so formulaically pointless that it might well become one of the Nation's Favourite Nation's Favourite Books, excerpts from which could be suitably screened between the Nation's Favourite Antiques Roadshow and the Nation's Favourite Hymns of Praise. Highly recommended for the Nation's Favourite Literacy Hour. **RH**

Out of the Ashes

★★★

Michael Morpurgo, ill. Michael Foreman, Macmillan, 128pp, 0 330 39732 X, £7.99 pbk

It was interesting to read this book after the two Steinbeck re-releases (see page 25). Morpurgo also deals with harsh realities of bucolic life in his depiction of how the recent foot and mouth epidemic affects a fictional farming family. Presented as the diary of Becky Morley, a horse-and-dad-bedazzled farmer's daughter, it begins with a cheerful evocation of a hearty New Year celebration in a traditional English village, with Farmer Morley leading the bell-ringing, boozing and song. In late February, when Becky is rearing a pet lamb, the impending catastrophe is broached. The epidemic reaches the farm in March, when Becky is already sickened by the slaughter on neighbouring farms. By April, the Morleys' life work is in ruins.

The book ends, as its title suggests, on an optimistic note. It is a short novel, powerfully told, but I couldn't help thinking that it simplifies some of the issues arising from the crisis. The farming community are depicted as hapless victims of fate, and there is no mention of agribusiness, subsidies and market forces to balance the relentless cries of 'what have we done to deserve this?'. Not that you would expect them in a farmer's daughter's diary of course. The pre-plague farming life is presented as an idyll of bloodless husbandry, with no hint that the majority of the animals that are slaughtered when the epidemic reaches them were destined anyway to end their lives 'screaming at the block' as Orwell put it in *Animal Farm*. If you intend to introduce this book to your class, you might consider using *Animal Farm* or *The Red Pony* alongside as counterweights to what seems to me to be a somewhat romanticised vision of farming. **GH**

A Christmas Carol

AUDIO BOOK ★★★★★

Charles Dickens, read by Miriam Margolyes, BBC Cover to Cover, 3 hrs 15 mins, unabridged, 1 85549 630 5, £15.99 CD

Miriam Margolyes throws herself into this reading of *A Christmas Carol*, enriching it with both enthusiasm and humour. The Cratchits' eager enjoyment of their Christmas is contagious and Margolyes even manages to read the scene where one goose is ample among so many without a hint of arch cynicism. She contrasts Scrooge's visions of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and worst still, Christmas Yet to Come, making each vivid and different from the one before. Skip the book. As teachers well know, Dickens is best read aloud and Miriam Margolyes does it beautifully. **JE**

100 Best Poems for Children

POETRY ★★★★★

Edited by Roger McGough, ill. Sheila Moxley, Viking, 144pp, 0 670 89490 7, £12.99 hbk

The cover of *100 Best Poems for Children* celebrates the welcome idea that they are 'chosen by children', and McGough's introduction explains how. 'It was the teachers and children of 135 schools' – junior, secondary, prep, public? – 'up and down the country who did the reading and choosing,' nominating poems in three categories: contemporary, 25 to 100 years old, and 100 plus. Despite that promising start, the result is not by any means the kind of fascinating and challenging anthology that McGough does when he is left to it. Rather, it is a sumptuously illustrated book of poems that children have evidently liked, chosen from amongst those that teachers have chosen to share with them. That is, 'chosen by children' is close to meaning a selection by children of a selection made by teachers. Would it be teachers – some – or children who get the most buzz out of 'In Flanders Fields' and 'Dover Beach'? I wonder too who voted for Jo Shapcott's patronising 'Penguin Complaints'. Or Craig Raine's laborious 'Martian sends a postcard home'. There are a few nice surprises, but overall the dependence of the selection on teachers' affection for anthologies of poems written mainly in England and the most anthologised poems from them does rather show through. **RH**

More Stories to Make You Think

★★★★★

Heather Butler, ill. Simon Smith, The Bible Reading Fellowship, 128pp, 1 84101 141 X, £4.99 pbk

Bible readings and prayers are included in this avowedly Christian production. However, the stories, based on real incidents and including such subjects as families facing redundancy, abuse, death, disability, anger, and serious illness, are of a generally ethical nature and not specifically Christian. Some less serious subjects are also addressed, such as personal hygiene, boredom, having a famous parent, and the

consequences of lying, and there is also a chapter on the contrast between life in Britain and a Third World street child in Guatemala. The stories are for the most part well thought out and imaginative. There are points for discussion throughout, with answers that real children have given – sometimes very odd ones as often happens in discussing issues with children. There are also things to think about with each story and activities to go with the thinking time. The book will be useful in PSHE or Citizenship lessons, whether within a Christian context or not; but the black and white comic-style illustrations are not very helpful, particularly as the book is likely to be used by adults working with children, rather than by the children themselves. **ES**

The Puffin Book of Stories for Ten-Year-Olds

★★★★★

Edited by Wendy Cooling, ill. Steve Cox, Puffin, 176pp, 0 14 130660 2, £3.99 pbk

This follows earlier collections for children from five up to nine. There is a variety of tales to suit a range of interests – science fiction, humour, tradition and fantasy. There are two football tales, Trevor Millum's 'Gruesome Gran and the Broken Promise' and Alan MacDonald's 'Baggy Shorts'. Computer fanatics may be attracted by 'Brian and the Brain' by Sara Volger and Jane Burchett, in which a boy swaps brains with his computer, or 'The Computer Ghost' by Terrance Dicks. There is adventure for Callum in Theresa Breslin's 'Maelstrom' whilst readers of traditional tales are catered for in a sophisticated reworking by Adèle Geras of 'Beauty and the Beast'. The old favourite by Jan Mark, 'Nothing to Be Afraid Of' is there too, but my favourite is the devastatingly simple and very short Nepalese tale about how the older generation need to be looked after in 'The Doko' by Shyam Das Baishnab. Useful for the classroom as an emergency read but the title may put off potential 11-year-olds for whom some of the stories are eminently suitable. **AK**

The House of Arden

★★★★★

E Nesbit, Red Fox Classics, 320pp, 0 09 940959 3, £4.99 pbk

The Little Duke

★★★★★

Charlotte M Yonge, Jane Nissen Books, 200pp, 1 903252 11 3, £6.99 pbk

The House of Arden was first published 93 years ago but its narrative voice and dialogue still come across with freshness and modernity. (Perhaps there was something special in the literary air of 1908: it also saw the launch of *The Wind in the Willows*, *Anne of Green Gables* and the weekly boys' paper, *The Magnet*.)

The House of Arden is another of Nesbit's stories of children who are catapulted backwards and forwards in time. The real time of the story is 1907. Brother and sister, Edred and Elfrida, live with an aunt who has to take in lodgers to eke out the meagre family income. Their mother died years earlier and their father has

never returned from a South American exploration and is also presumed dead. When a distant male relative also shuffles off this mortal coil Edred inherits the house and castle of Arden, and the children soon embark on a search for Arden's legendary lost treasure.

Their ingenuity brings them into contact with a waspish magical mole – the Mouldiwarp – who sends them off on their time-travels. They do not find the treasure, but something much better – their father, whom they rescue from the brigands who have captured him.

The plot is a well-used one, but Nesbit's lively approach carries the reader persuasively through the children's improbable adventures. Mysteries are unravelled as they press their intelligence and investigative skills into action. The book's main delight, however, is the way in which the author questions the logistics of the time-shifts which she so exuberantly employs. The children ask exactly the questions which many readers must put to themselves: for example, does the time-travellers' behaviour have any direct influence on historical happenings? As Elfrida reflects rather bitterly when she is precipitated into the England of King James I and ordered by her nurse to sew her sampler, 'Whatever is the good of working at a sampler that you haven't time to finish, and that would be worn out, anyhow, years and years before you were born?'

The House of Arden is a rewarding read, and so too is another reprinted classic, Charlotte M Yonge's **The Little Duke**. This originally appeared as long ago as 1852 but, after a slightly self-consciously 'historical' beginning, it settles down into an exciting narrative.

The setting is tenth-century France: the eponymous hero is Richard, the eight-year-old orphaned Duke of Normandy who is under constant threat from his enemies. The author vividly recreates political and military power struggles between the Normans and the Franks, and the effects of these on the small, vulnerable child. Yonge does not pull her punches. There is gore and mayhem in and around dark and murky castles and palaces, all of which is atmospherically conveyed.

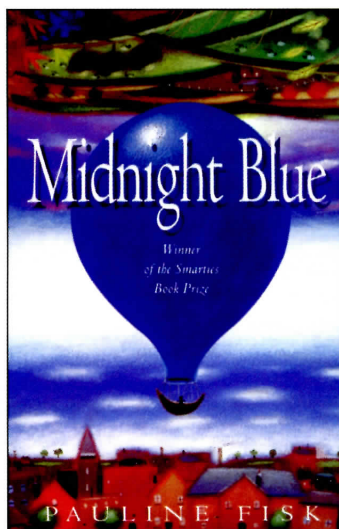
The action is occasionally inhibited by philosophising which hampers home the importance of Christian values, particularly forgiveness of one's enemies. Nothing wrong in this, of course, but the Victorian nature of Yonge's expressions of love and honour and chivalry sits strangely in the story's bloody and thunderous medieval action. MC

Midnight Blue

★★★★

Pauline Fisk, Lion, 224pp,
0 7459 4739 5, £ 4.99 pbk

This is a welcome re-issue of Fisk's debut novel of about ten years ago. Much praised then, and winner of the Smarties Grand Prix in 1990, it is a richly coloured fantasy, whose story grows from the hopes and fears of Bonnie, its central character. She is trying to make a new life with Maybelle, a mother she scarcely knows, and to escape the grip of her embittered grandmother. Whether in the graffiti stained block of flats where the story begins or in the bucolic never land to which Bonnie



escapes, she faces the same choices. Fisk makes intriguing use of themes drawn from earlier children's literature. Children who meet them here for the first time will find plenty to intrigue and puzzle them. However, it is the endearingly fallible Bonnie and the irredeemably appalling Grandbag that will hold their attention. The warmth and reassurance that Fisk conveys throughout, even when dealing with the most difficult emotional situations, makes the tale suitable for children as young as eight. CB

The Children Who Lived in a Barn

★★

Eleanor Graham, ill. Mary Gernat, Persephone Books, 240pp, 1 903155 19 3, £10.00 pbk

Remember the days when a children's book could have a chapter entitled 'A Telegram and a Journey by Air' and twins nicknamed 'Jumbo' and 'Sambo'? These – and more in similar vein – are to be found in this attractive (if expensive) reissue of a novel first published in 1938. Its primary appeal today is likely to be to nostalgic adults rather than to younger readers, many of whom will see its central characters, the five Dunnet children, as beings from a strange world where gender roles are rigorously defined. Left to fend totally for themselves when their parents are abroad, they respond with remarkable perseverance, notably in their determination to outface the conformist tendencies of some of their adult fellow villagers. While there is much to enjoy, even in its datedness, in this depiction of youthful assertiveness, its sheer implausibility too often diminishes the possibility of unquestioning surrender to the narrative. RD

The Witch Trade

★★

Michael Molloy, ill. David Wyatt, The Chicken House, 288pp, 1 903434 31 9, £11.99 hbk

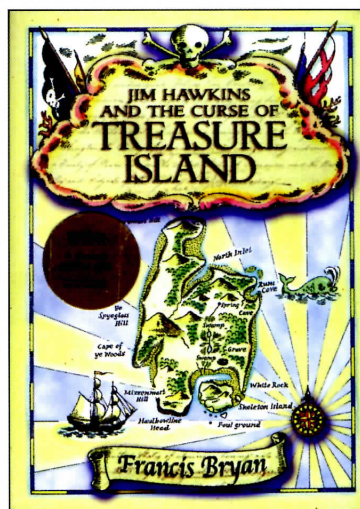
The town of Speller has lost many of its inhabitants. All of its children were spirited away by the evil Night Witches, apart from Abby Clover, and following this, Abby's explorer parents sailed away and never returned. All this vanishing hinges around the search for Ice Dust, the supply of which was controlled by Sea Witches until the marauding Night Witches prevented the supply

of the magic dust from reaching the Light Witches. Abby and her mysterious friend Spike are drawn into a series of adventures with the discovery of a new supply of dust at a land beneath Antarctica. An albatross called Benbow, Captain Adam Starlight (alias the Ancient Mariner) and Sir Chadwick Street, master of the Light Witches, accompany the children on a voyage to prevent the Night Witches from getting hold of Ice Dust and establishing a New World Order. **The Witch Trade** is one of those fantasy novels in which it seems an awful lot can happen, and it does, leaving the reader feeling rather breathless. It also leaves something of a feeling of déjà vu. VC

Jim Hawkins and the Curse of Treasure Island

★★★★

Francis Bryan, ill. Peter Bailey, Orion, 352pp, 1 84255 076 4, £12.99 hbk



It is ten years after the conclusion of events in Stevenson's **Treasure Island** and Jim Hawkins – 'grown to man's estate' – is successfully running the Admiral Benbow inn. When, however, a beautiful stranger and her young son appear, requesting to speak to him, he is drawn back to the treasure-hunting adventures of his past and to a reunion with some of his former allies and opponents. His return to the 'diseased' island and its 'bizarre kingdom of evil' allows Bryan to create a succession of violently bloody encounters, many of them the outcome of treachery and double-dealing. More interestingly, perhaps, Bryan manages also to retain some of Stevenson's psychological subtleties, especially in the relationship between Jim and Long John Silver. Add a considerable love interest (not present in the original!) and we have an enjoyable and satisfying contribution to the 'sequel' genre. RD

Ocean World

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

David Orme and Helen Bird, BBC 'The Blue Planet', 64pp, 0 563 53315 3, £7.99 hbk

Being one of those who found the BBC's recent 'Blue Planet' entirely absorbing, I find it easy to welcome this souvenir by-product of the series. And it maintains those virtues of its parent that I found to be cardinal – clarity of explanation and brilliantly illustrative image-making. To the reader with previous viewing

experience this is a brilliant reinforcement of the Attenborough achievement; to those less lucky it is a self-sufficient introduction to the natural history of the oceans.

Coastal, open ocean, coral, arctic, fish, flesh and fowl are all introduced in an end-to-end read that is a model for language and layout and in which words and pictures mesh magnificently. Easily accessible to eight-ups, this is also a grand book for sharing with younger ones and there can be few persons of any age whom it will not engage and improve. TP

The True Mystery of the Mary Celeste

Rachel Wright, 64pp, 0 439 99256 7

Titanic

Alan MacDonald, 64pp, 0 439 99255 9

Gold Rush

Valerie Wilding, 80pp, 0 439 99951 0

Moon Landing

Nick Arnold, 64pp, 0 439 99952 9

NON-FICTION

★★★

Ill. Pete Smith, Scholastic 'Speedy Reads', £2.99 each pbk

Four jolly little paperbacks in a new series from Scholastic, these zippy titles give essential information in a bite-size offering. 'No more than you need to know!' runs the strapline – a negative sales pitch for some perhaps, but for homework panics or for readers lacking in confidence these handy little books will undoubtedly succeed. Popular topics have been chosen to appeal to the 8–10 age group, but older readers will also find plenty of useful information. Chatty and fast-moving, they are full of quirky facts as well as including all the important bits of the story. **The True Mystery of the Mary Celeste** sails along at a cracking pace, setting out possible theories for the ship's abandonment, while debunking the most far-fetched tales. **Titanic** is less successful, strangely lacking in drama, although there is a good selection of quotes from first-hand accounts. **Gold Rush** tells an exciting tale of the first prospectors in California and the journeys across the continent made by wagon train. **Moon Landing** author Nick Arnold is very much at home in this field, and he packs in a wealth of detail on the space race and astronauts as well as the exploration of the Moon itself. There are nice little touches in each of the books, such as a flickbook action replay drawn in the top righthand corner, and useful website addresses. A pity about the lack of index. SU

Why Beethoven Threw the Stew

NON-FICTION

★★★

Steven Isserlis, ill. Adam Stower, Faber, 144pp, 0 571 20616 6, £4.99 pbk

Good books on music for children are rare indeed, so the prospect of an introduction to the lives of six great composers by the remarkable cellist Steven Isserlis is a welcome one. Isserlis was born into a musical household, but it was his cello teacher Jane Cowan who really

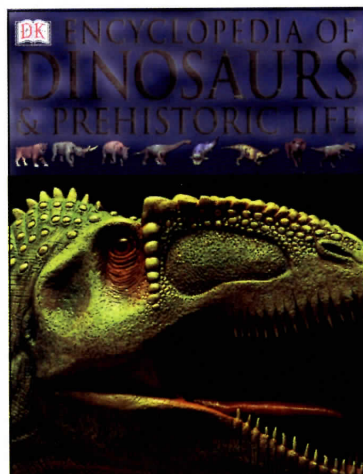
brought the composers to life for him, quoting from their letters, telling stories about them and explaining their musical jokes so that they became like familiar friends. Isserlis devotes a chapter to each of six composers – Bach, Mozart, Beethoven (inspiring the title by hurling a plate of veal in gravy at a rude waiter), Schumann, Brahms and Stravinsky – and includes description of their music as well as suggesting works that children may particularly enjoy. His musical portraits are written in a chatty and informal style that is probably most amusing and persuasive in person, but somewhat grating on the page. For so intelligent and articulate a performer, Isserlis seems strangely ill at ease with his young audience, trying perhaps a little too hard to please. However his passion for his subject is compelling and will inspire any musical child to explore the music and find out more. **SU**

Encyclopedia of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

David Lambert, Darren Naish and Elizabeth Wyse, Dorling Kindersley, 376pp, 0 7513 0955 9, £19.99 hbk

Did you know that Marie Stopes was an expert palaeobotanist? Do you know what a cladogram is and how helpful it can be? Over what did Reg Sprigg stumble in 1946? What is special about the Messel deposits? Here is a book that tells you all this and lots more – as it should, having styled itself an 'Encyclopaedia'. I am old fashioned enough to still spell Encyclopaedia with two A's and expect its content to begin at A and go on to Z, meaning that you have to know what you're looking for before you start to look. Apart from Atlascopcosaurus (not featured in



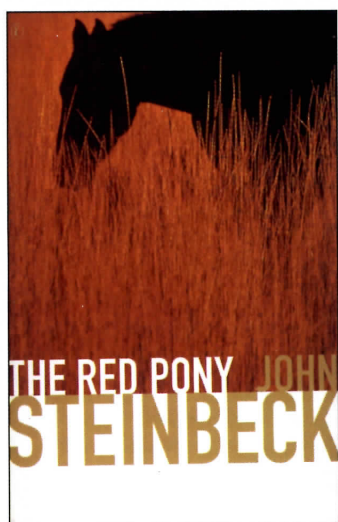
this volume) and Euparkeria (the world's first traffic warden, allegedly) I've never been much taken by dinosaurs, preferring to interest

myself in other forms of prehistoric life. I'm happy to report that these latter are nobly represented in this commodious information source, which seems to consist of a coming together of nearly all of the celebrated DK presentation skills with a truly authoritative text. A splendid 'how to use this book' spread allows the reader to get the best out of the content to which a comprehensive index and glossary provide specific access and illumination.

The 'Reference Section' which forms the last 100 pages is a brilliant book in itself, dealing especially well with palaeological techniques and museum-style restoration as well as a guide to familiar fossils.

Yes, this is an excellent palaeo-compendium, probably at its best in the midst of an interested family but well worth a place in a reference library. **TP**

REVIEWS 10–12 Middle/Secondary



The Pearl

0 14 131255 6

The Red Pony

0 14 131256 4

★★★★★

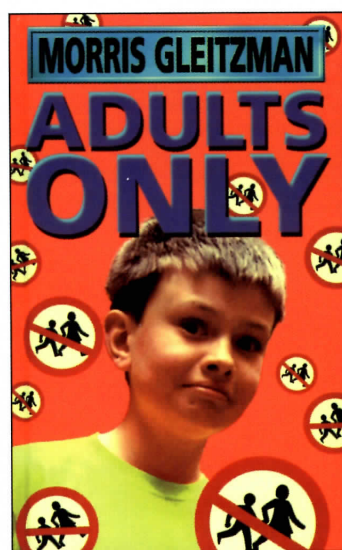
John Steinbeck, Puffin, 128pp, £4.99 each pbk

Puffin have reissued two classic Steinbeck novels, both of them dealing with the brutally harsh vicissitudes of working lives lived close to the elements. In *The Pearl*, an impoverished pearl diver discovers a fabulous treasure which he hopes will transform life for himself and his family. It does so, by generating monstrous forces of greed, betrayal and violence against which Kino, Juana and the baby Coyotito are helpless. The tranquil clarity of Steinbeck's writing expresses an almost mystical sensitivity to the beauty against which the tragedy implacably develops.

The Red Pony presents four episodes from the painful coming of age of Jody Tiflin, the son of frugal Californian ranchers in the 1930s. Jody trains and nurtures a longed for pony only to see it sicken and die. He talks to a mysterious old *paisano* who emerges from the Salinas valley and disappears into the mountains after

Jody's father refuses to allow him to remain on the ranch, his birthplace. He helps look after a mare which is carrying the colt he has been promised, and sees her butchered when the birthing goes wrong. He listens to his grandfather's oft repeated stories, and realises the sense of loss in which the stories are grounded. The underlying theme, again expressed simply and poignantly, is the sorrow of childhood's end, the longing and regret arising from the discovery of human fallibility and transience.

These books are masterpieces of storytelling, rich in incidental detail of time and person and place. The themes are powerful and troubling, and there are episodes of violence in both books, but these aspects of the stories are mediated by honest and sympathetic writing. Essential books for any classroom from late KS2 onward. **GH**



Adults Only

★★★★★

Morris Gleitzman, Viking, 192pp, 0 670 91259 X, £ 10.99 hbk

Until its happy but more serious close, *Adults Only* is a very funny book. Considering its content, this is

quite a feat. Gleitzman's novel is part family comedy and part ghost story. The comedy centres on Jake, aged 12, the only child on an Australian island which his parents have set up as an 'Adults Only' holiday resort, guaranteed child-free. Jake has had to spend his childhood in the shadows of concealment, since his visible presence would ruin business. Not surprisingly, he is lonely and young for his age, lavishing love and fantasy play on his ancient teddy bear, Crusher. Not surprisingly either, he comes to feel unwanted. Few laughs here, you might think, but actually there are lots, arising from Jake's ingenious but accident-prone efforts to allay his solitude. Jake is truly loved despite his fears, and the cruelty he undergoes turns out to be unavoidable: his feckless parents are caught in a financial trap. The cruelty undergone by the ghost children he meets is of a different order. It derives from Australia's shameful record of institutional child abuse, some of it all too recent. The holiday island was formerly a children's home, and a place of suffering. As past and present interact, both Jake and the dead find new happiness. So this is a serious story with a rip-roaring surface of farcical misadventures, a curious blend that shouldn't work but does, triumphantly. It will appeal to many readers between 10 and 12. **PH**

Holly Starcross

★★

Berlie Doherty, Hamish Hamilton, 192pp, 0 241 13616 4, £10.99 hbk

When Holly Starcross was six, her sophisticated mother camped overnight from a Derbyshire farm and her seven-year unsuccessful marriage to Holly's father, a countryman working with horses. She took with her the protesting Holly, and for the next eight years has blocked any contact between father and daughter. All this time, we are told, Phil Starcross has not known where his daughter is. Since Holly's mother has meanwhile become a nationally famous television presenter, not even her father's lack of a television set can quite account for his snail-paced detective work, and this is only one of the novel's

many implausibilities. The story opens as he at last traces Holly, and takes her away in his battered car for a few illicit and belated getting-to-know-you days. When Holly's mother finally catches up with them at her father's cottage, Holly must choose. The familiar distress of broken marriages is sharpened here by a version of Solomon's judgement: Holly's father goes away to spare her the pain of choosing, and in doing so wins her with his more unselfish love. The story, though readably told, is a mass of clichés from start to finish. Its real subject is not the competing claims of parents but of lifestyles: the brittle, glittery, urban media world versus rural Derbyshire and horses. Holly opts for Derbyshire, and so, quite clearly, does the author. **PH**

Dr Franklin's Island

★★

Ann Halam, Dolphin, 224pp, 1 85881 396 4, £4.99 pbk

'Nothing like it has ever been written before' claims the cover of Halam's sci-fi horror story. This is an unwise boast. The first part of the book echoes *Lord of the Flies*. Three children, sole survivors of an air crash, are marooned on a seemingly uninhabited tropical island, and two civilized teenage girls are set against one malicious and untrustworthy teenage boy, while their idyllic lagoon throws up horrors. Then the story mutates into an update of HG Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau*. All three teenagers are captured by a mad scientist, of whose secret hi-tech complex in the island's volcanic interior they have been wholly unaware. Dr Franklin's project is not, as in Wells, to humanize animals, but to 'animalize' humans, and Miranda, Semirah and Arnie become his guinea pigs, or rather, respectively, his bird, fish and snake.

The novel begins and ends very well. Relationships and tensions are skilfully handled in the beach episode, as the children struggle to survive. Even better is the last section, once the 'transgenic' experiment has turned the trio into their animal forms while retaining their human intelligence. Semirah, the narrator, finds unexpected

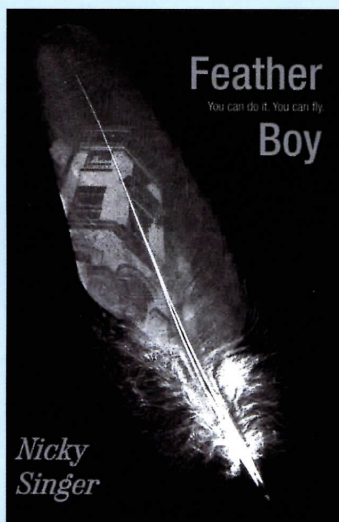
NEW Talent

Feather Boy

★★★★★

Nicky Singer, Collins, 288pp,
0 00 712026 5, £4.99 pbk

Bullied on the way to school and then tormented at school, 12-year-old Robert does not want to burden his hardworking single parent mum with his troubles. A school project working with people in an old people's home initially seems destined to make Robert's life even more difficult when his designated 'Elder' turns out to be the frail and difficult Edith Sorrel. But somehow the theme of the project – the Firebird story, in which a mute prince is enabled to speak – informs Robert's relationship with Edith and impels him to discover the tragic story of her muted past. Teetering on the brink of magic realism, this first children's novel from Singer, an adult novelist, takes on powerful themes of love and loss in relation to growth and development with a poetic intensity. For Edith, release from



'madness' following the death of her son has come tragically late. Her interventions and confident belief in Robert, however, release inner strengths in him which will now free him to shape his own story. RS

physical delight in her fish-form, and there is real originality in the book's vision here. The problem is a trough in the middle of the book, just where its peak of tension ought to be, in the phase between capture and transmutation. This is a time of fear and horror, and Semirah tells us that it is, referring frequently to 'torture'. But we are only allowed a glimpse of this reported physical suffering, while the main impression is a totally unconvincing equanimity, scientific interest, and 'Let's think positive' acceptance on the part of the girls. Their reactions to their ordeal are exemplary but, sadly, wholly unbelievable, and this gives a hollow middle to a book with an exciting opening and climax. PH



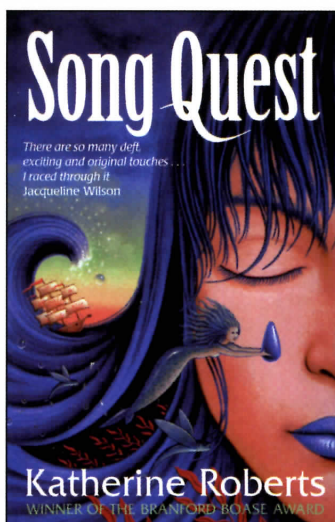
Gathering Blue

★★★★★

Lois Lowry, Bloomsbury, 224pp,
0 7475 5592 3, £5.99 pbk

Kira lives in a bleak world of the future: Earth, with civilisation as we know it, utterly destroyed. Aggression rules and those with handicaps or deformities – like Kira's twisted leg – are left to die in the living grave called The Field. Exposed by her mother's death Kira must go to The Council of Guardians to beg for her life and her

place in the village. Her artistic talents are recognised and she is kept in isolation from the rest of the village in order to repair and complete the Singer's robe, which charts the history of civilisation. Kira discovers the shocking truth – that all artists have had their families destroyed and their natural creativity suppressed in order to shape the future of the community at The Guardians' behest. Despite being given a route to freedom by her missing father – who survived an attempt on his life but whom Kira believed had died in her infancy – she chooses to stay in order to embroider a very different future on the robe from the one which the Guardians wished to dictate. This is a story full of warnings – but also bright with hope. It celebrates the power and strength of the individual and reminds us that even one determined person can effect far-reaching changes. VR



Song Quest

240pp, 1 903434 32 7, £5.99 pbk

Crystal Mask

256pp, 1 903434 19 X, £11.99 hbk

★★★★★

Katherine Roberts, The
Chicken House

These are the first parts of a rich new

fantasy sequence which reworks the battles of light and dark and good and evil in ways that are reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin. The Isle of Echoes schools its young to be the singers who will use their gifts to preserve harmony. Both books start here, some twenty years apart, with the discords of the young scholars, before venturing out across the wild seas to the mainland and the awful challenges there. **Song Quest** is the wonderfully exciting and award-winning start to the sequence. The novice Rialle is part of the group which sets out to find the cause of disturbances, chasing also the runaway novice Kherron who has jealously made Rialle's life miserable. Alternately we follow the two characters until their stories come together in a battle for survival that is exciting, engrossing and moving storytelling. **Crystal Mask** follows a similar sequence but opts to push Rialle, whom we have come to admire, into the background and introduce the never quite likeable Renn as a reluctantly gifted novice. When Shaiala is brought, struggling and terrified, to the Isle, desperate to understand what has happened to her friends the centaurs, Renn is the only one who can understand her. Their battles continue into the journey to the mainland where they too have to confront the evil Frazhin in scenes that are again powerfully vivid. AJ

Sabrina Fludde

★★★★★

Pauline Fisk, Bloomsbury,
256pp, 0 7475 5523 0, £10.99 hbk

From page one where a young female child is drifting, corouselike, down a wide river, into an ancient town, a latent darkness pervades this novel. Her seeming lack of a past and then her unfolding destiny according to long-ago legend makes for an unsettling and absorbing read.

Shrewsbury is in fact the town, and its recent millennium floods come at the climax, where good and evil have their final showdown, leaving the way tantalisingly open for a sequel. All credit to Ms Fisk for pushing at the boundaries of mystery/fantasy storytelling. This is a complex and literate book, which of course is to imply that it will take off most easily with an experienced reader. DB

Shakespeare Stories: A Midsummer Night's Dream

AUDIO BOOK

★★★★★

Leon Garfield, read by Clare
Higgins, Cavalcade, 45 mins,
0 7540 7057 3, £3.99 tape

In book form, handsomely matched by Michael Foreman's illustrations, Leon Garfield's simplified retelling of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a few of Shakespeare's choicest phrases thrown in, offered an attractive alternative way into the play. Without the visual dimension this audio version is far less inspiring. In fact, it is almost confusing: opening with an explanation of the complexity of the four Athenian lovers delays the ethereal magic promised by the opening music. Claire Higgins' reading is as of a story rather than a play, so much of the excitement of a drama is missing. Forget a love of Shakespeare. Use this tape with its additional sound but uninspiring introduction to Shakespeare read by

Simon Russell Beale, as an introduction to *Key Stage 2: The Tudors/Shakespeare*. JE

The Usborne Book of Peoples of the World

NON-FICTION

★★★★★

Gillian Doherty and Anna
Claybourne, Usborne, 96pp,
0 7460 4182 9, £9.99 hbk

The title page of this 'internet-linked' volume makes a brave attempt to list the peoples of the world; however, having filled the available space with editors, designers, additional contributors and consultants, there is no room for the rest of us on it. What follows, though, is a good look at our planet, place by place, and some of the people who live there. So having defined 'ethnic groups' early on it gives a practical demonstration of how some groups are regionally confined, others globally dispersed. At least, that seems to be the theory. In fact this book seems to be more about the places than the people who live there – the two-page spread on Eastern Europe for instance, mentions only the various peoples of former Yugoslavia – and then only to list some of their original groups – telling us much more about Chernobyl, Communism, spa towns and architecture in Prague. The Middle East spread is slightly better in that we learn about the presence of Arabs, Persians, Turks, Jews and Bedouins. We also learn how to pour coffee Middle Eastern style and what Kuwaiti water towers look like.

So, all in all, as a book on its own (of which it tells us it is a superb self-contained example) this is a very slight volume. But, larded as it is with websites, it may to the suitably equipped and inclined, be vastly more. As Thomas Waller remarked, 'One never knows, do one?' I certainly don't. TP

The 14th Dalai Lama

NON-FICTION

★★★★★

Whitney Stewart, Lerner 'First
Avenue Editions', 128pp,
0 8225 9691 1, £11.99 pbk

The life of Lhamo Thondup from his birth in a Tibetan cowshed 65 years ago to his current status as a Nobel Prize winning icon of peaceful resistance to oppression is one of the most significant stories of our time, and here it is told calmly but vividly. An understanding of Tibet's recent history necessitates an explanation of some of the tenets of Lamaistic Buddhism, with its faith in a reincarnated spiritual leader who embodies the earthly form of the deity of infinite compassion. This is done lucidly and non-judgementally. The Dalai Lama's fortitude and forgiveness in the face of the Chinese annexation of Tibet are given due emphasis throughout, but a significant strength of Stewart's account is that it does not pretend that all was well before the invasion. That Tibet under the Lamas was a theocratic, feudal and utterly undemocratic society, and that the Dalai Lama's earliest struggles were against oppression within his own borders, are facts which are seldom heard.

Historic and contemporary photographs and clear layout add to the appeal of this clearly written and informative book. GH

REVIEWS 12+ Secondary

Stargirl

★★★★

Jerry Spinelli, Orchard, 192pp,
1 84121 030 7, £9.99 hbk



This American teenage novel is a hymn to nonconformity. Stargirl, aged 15, has been homeschooled, and makes a belated entry to the local High School in a small Arizona town. In a conformist environment, where everyone dresses, eats, behaves and thinks like everyone else with gender as the only differential, her eccentric, demonstrative, bizarre behaviour creates convulsions in the school community. After the first shock has passed, she becomes hugely popular, only for new and less acceptable oddities to turn love to hate, and cause her to be ostracised by almost the whole school. The chief exception is Leo Borlock, who tells her story. Leo and Stargirl fall in love. The bemusement, pain and elation of first love are impressively caught in the novel, but its real originality lies in the character of Stargirl. She is almost a different kind of being, a different species, with an impartial generosity of spirit that small town America cannot take.

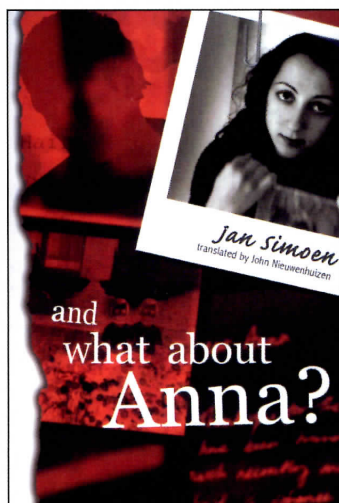
Some readers may sympathise with small town America, and with Stargirl's peers. Not everyone would warm to a cheerleader who sometimes cheers for the opposition, or enjoy a birthday serenade in the school dining-hall from Stargirl with her ukulele. Others, however, will not dismiss the book as embarrassing and mawkish but read it as Spinelli clearly intends, as an allegory of finer human possibilities if evolution had taken a different course. Either way, it is a thought-provoking, challenging book. PH

And what about Anna?

★★★★★

Jan Simoen, trans. John Nieuwenhuizen, Allen & Unwin, 254pp, 1 86508 456 5, £5.50 pbk

Both Anna's brothers are dead – Jonas of Aids, and Michael and his wife in a land-mine explosion in Bosnia. On the day of her last school examination she receives a letter from her long lost friend, Hugo, which challenges all her assumptions



about life and death. She travels to Ostend to meet him, unaware that she is at the centre of a complex and secretive plot which will reveal that Michael and his wife are alive but only now able to come out of hiding where they have been shielding themselves and their child from the attentions of Arkan, the Serb war criminal and his accomplice Goran, Michael's estranged father.

The storyline is labyrinthine – a simultaneous voyage of discovery for Anna and the reader. Told in the first person, it provides an addictive exploration of Anna's thoughts and feelings as she strives to come to terms with a series of wholly unexpected revelations.

This novel won the Flemish Youth Award 2001 and loses nothing in translation. Its consideration of life and death, loss and renewal is universal. Photography is Anna's passion and the narrative landscape is often conveyed through a skilful opposition of stark photographic imagery and poetic richness.

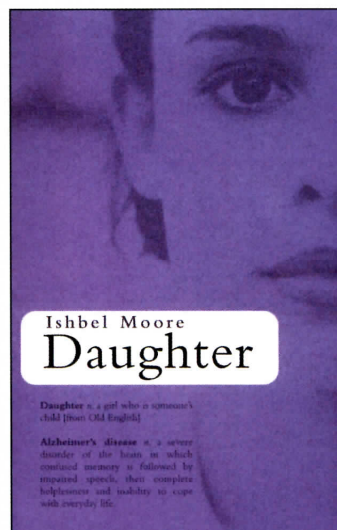
And what about Anna? carefully and successfully examines the influences of world politics on individual lives with a sobering reminder of the damage so many endure. Its overriding message, however, is one of hope and renewal – Anna's parents are re-united through the discovery of their baby grandson, Michael returns to the family after a long disappearance, and Anna is able to cast aside her unhappiness and focus positively on her own future. This is a book for able, older readers and adults: insightful and beautifully written in a distinctive and memorable style. VR

Daughter

★★★★

Ishbel Moore, Oxford University Press, 160pp,
0 19 271874 6, £6.99 pbk

When Sylvie returns home from school to find her mother perched on the balcony rail of their apartment, she realises that something is seriously wrong. This is one more incident to add to the catalogue of increasingly bizarre behaviour that she has noticed in recent months. The doctor diagnoses a rapidly advancing form of Alzheimer's and Sylvie reluctantly has to accept that she cannot cope on her own.



Daughter is a poignant novel which guides the reader through the range of emotions experienced by Sylvie and her mother; there are moments of tenderness and frustration, grief and resignation. Beautifully written, the issues raised could stimulate discussion to support the citizenship or PSHE curriculum. NG

Tibet: Disputed Land

Peter Kizilos, 80pp,
0 8225 3563 7

Haiti: Land of Inequality

Mary C Turck, 104pp,
0 8225 3554 8

Kurdistan: Region under Siege

Kari J Bodnarchuk, 104pp,
0 8225 3556 4

Sudan: North against South

Lawrence J Zwier, 80pp,
0 8225 3559 9

Rwanda: Country Torn Apart

Kari Bodnarchuk, 96pp,
0 8225 3557 2

NON-FICTION ★★

Lerner 'World in Conflict',
£12.99 each hbk

These books form part of a series on political flashpoints around the world (other titles deal with East Timor, Northern Ireland, Quebec, Sri Lanka and South Africa). Each book provides an historical background to the location, an account of recent troubles, and a section on the prospects for the future. In their presentation of archival material, contemporary photographs, eyewitness accounts and references for further reading, they cover much of the same ground as the excellent 'New Perspectives' series from Wayland, but the format is denser. Information is arranged across three columns and the pages have a more crowded feel.

The books originate in America so they obviously view the issues from that perspective. Efforts are made to be even-handed in attributing responsibility for the deeply depressing states of affairs described

here. The authors are unafraid to represent the countries in question not just as victims but as agents of their own history. For example, the much lauded Toussaint-Louverture is depicted not just as the usual hero of the Haitian struggle for independence, but as a fallible dictator who re-established virtual slavery under the fermage system.

On the other hand, the role of prosperous nations in initiating and perpetuating much of the misery is given due prominence. Bodnarchuk, for example, in the book on Rwanda, provides a useful counterpoise to simplistic arguments about tribalism by pointing out that relationships between groups in colonial African were often corrupted by the colonisers' commitment to the pseudo science of eugenics.

There are, of course, some questionable emphases and omissions. In the foreword that appears in all of the volumes, Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, while making a sound point about the role of the media in glamorising conflict, states that 'For every Palestinian who has killed an Israeli, there are hundreds of Kashmiris, Tamils and Bosnians eager to shoot at their enemies.' Given the relative numbers of Palestinian and Israeli dead in the intifada, and the conduct of the Israeli army towards Palestinian civilians, the implicit positioning of culprit and victim in this statement is objectionable.

Turning to omissions, I found that the Rwanda book lets the west off too lightly. Second only to the massacres themselves in obscurity was the response of Western governments, and in particular of Clinton and Albright, who not only refused to intervene, but also actively sabotaged international efforts to stop the genocide (see reports on www.alter.net.org). The only hint we have of this is a note on page 69 to the effect that Clinton later apologised.

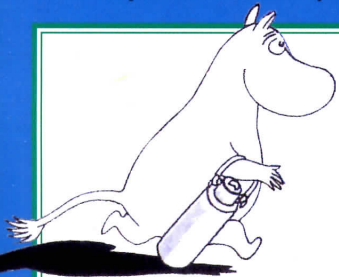
A more general issue is whether or not it is advisable to depict whole countries and cultures in terms of their biggest, and usually externally inflicted, problems. The taglines following each country's names represent this issue clearly: they imply that the problem is the most important thing about the country (though each of the tags could apply to America itself at the moment). With this reservation in mind, these books do provide useful sources of information about some of the conflicts currently dividing the world. GH

PICTURE BOOKS REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE RELEVANT TO OLDER READERS:

The Water Hole (see p21)

Crossing (see p21)

Five Little Fiends (see p21)



CLASSICS IN SHORT No. 31

Brian Alderson

Exhumations from the histories of Moominland



The saga of the Moomins

has no beginning and no end. Like remnants of some skaldic history, bits of the story jut up out of the silent tundra to be gathered and chronicled by their discoverer.

Tove Jansson

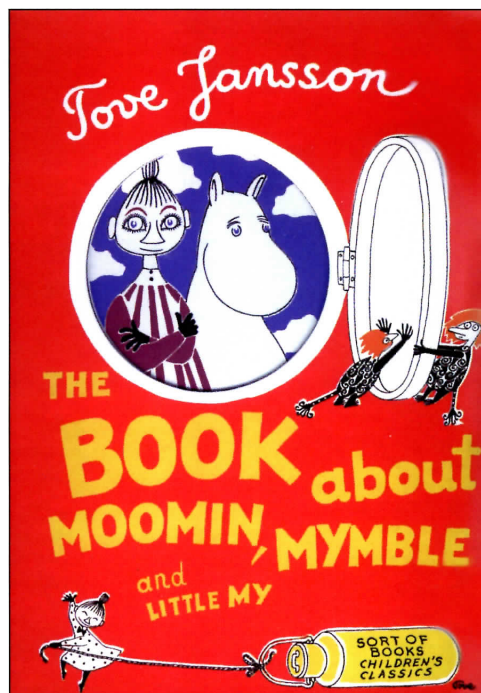
who died last year, was well qualified for the task. She was born in Finland in 1914, the gifted daughter of a sculptor and a variously-talented mother (who seems, uncannily, to resemble Moominmamma, the pivotal figure in the saga). The family's first language was Swedish and the conjunction of the two Norden cultures, along with a passion for the sea and for life on remote islands, was to be fundamental to Tove's work.

Art too was significant.

She studied painting in Stockholm and in mainland Europe, and as well as fine art she found great satisfaction in writing and illustration and indeed, while still at school, she had produced an illustrated story of her own which was published in 1933. Her technical command of drawing in both pen and ink and watercolour was complete, as was her interpretative vision (she did some remarkable illustrative suites for Swedish editions of *Alice*, of *The Hunting of the Snark* [almost a Moomin story itself], and of *The Hobbit*) and any assessment of her texts must stress the perfection of their graphic accompaniment. It unites and gives coherence to what sometimes seems a fragmentary masterpiece.

Finn Family Moomintroll

gave English readers their first sight of the saga in 1950, although it had been preceded in Sweden by *Comet in Moominland* which was translated a year later. Together, these establish the character of the Moomin family: Pappa, Mamma, and Moomintroll, and begin the introduction of the many eccentric creatures who pop in and out of these bits of the saga that Tove has preserved for us. Near-permanent figures are Snuffkin, the wandering harmonicist, and the Hemulen, philatelist and failed natural philosopher, and they are joined by Moomintroll's chum, Sniff, and by the Muskrat, who, later on, drop out of sight. A prodigality of walk-on characters materialize all through, and in later books Mymble and her sister, the tough Little My, come to prominence with the boy Toft and the hysteric Fillyjonk. Strangely ominous, at the edge of events, are the tribe of Hattifatteners who can neither hear nor speak 'with no object in life but the distant goal of their journey's end', and the lowering Groke, beneath whose feet the ground itself will freeze.



And the Arbitrary is in charge.

Such a register of characters may give a hint of the saga's independence from all literary ancestors (unless, like the Moomins' Ancestor they have been immolated in the stove). Any attempt to sum up the point of it all is defeated however by the arbitrary and sometimes barely connected succession of narrative events. ("Does anything matter anywhere?" asks Little My at one point. "No," her sister replied happily. "Don't ask such silly questions.") What may be helpful though is to note that the weight of the saga is present in the seven books that



run from *Comet to Moominvalley in November* (1971), but that some incidental goings-on are recorded in three picture books with texts in verse. A kind of coda, *The Dangerous Journey* came out in England in 1978, and this was preceded by the ballad, *Who Will Comfort Toffle?* (1960) and an early novelty-book, featuring pages with holes in them, *Moomin, Mymble and Little My* (1952). This has just been republished, by a company with the Moominish name of Sort of Books, in a new translation by Sophie Hannah who has done her best with the not-very-inspiring Swedish original. The best bit, apart from the cut-up pictures, is the playful script in which the text is written out.

So does anything matter?

Yes, Mymble's sister, happily it does. Do not be put off by the unusual narrative structure of the seven books of the canon. Ignore the *reductios* of the Blytonians that page-turning is the highest good. Tove Jansson's rags, tags, and bobtails march to a different drum, wakening minds and imaginations like no other. These exhumations from Moominland are best read successively and complete, from *Comet* onwards, because – for all their inconsequence – they take the reader into an exploration of the wellsprings of personality. Their persuasiveness does not lie in cranking up factitious conflicts. Instead we get an existentialist comedy (whose genius storytelling is remarkably well translated by, in sum, three different translators) with the participants wobbling across the paths of their fellows in quest of what may prove only a precarious self-fulfilment. You keep reading because these oddballs turn into friends. You want to glimpse how they might be faring. And in the great culminating episodes of *Moominpappa at Sea* and *Moominvalley in November* you realise that they may be living your dilemmas too and that a consolation is not impossible – even for Fillyjonks. ■

The illustrations are taken from *The Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My*, English translation by Sophie Hannah, Sort of Books, 0 9535227 4 1, £8.99 hbk.

Finn Family Moomintroll (0 14 030150 X), *Comet in Moominland* (0 14 030286 7), *Moominland Midwinter* (0 14 030502 5), and *Tales from Moominvalley* (0 14 030609 9) are available from Puffin Books at £4.99 each pbk.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for *The Times*.