

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

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*the children's  
book magazine*



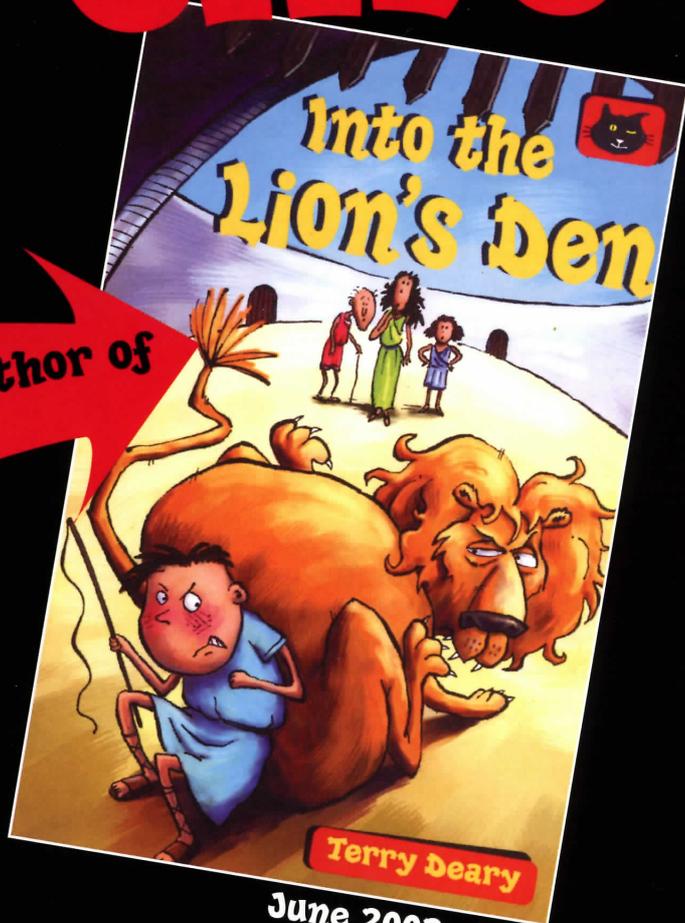


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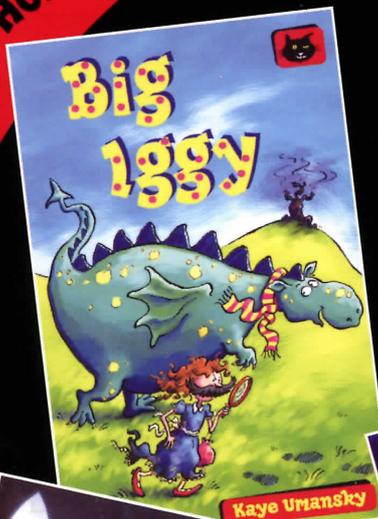
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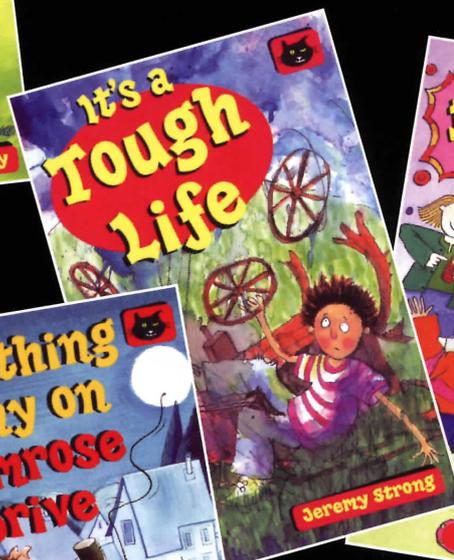
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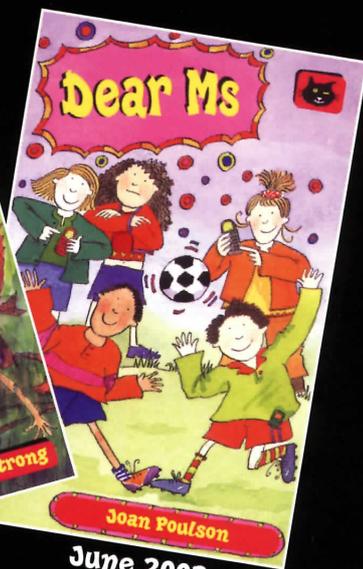
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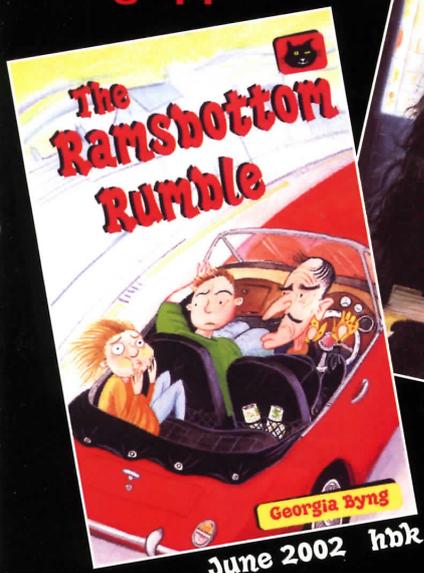


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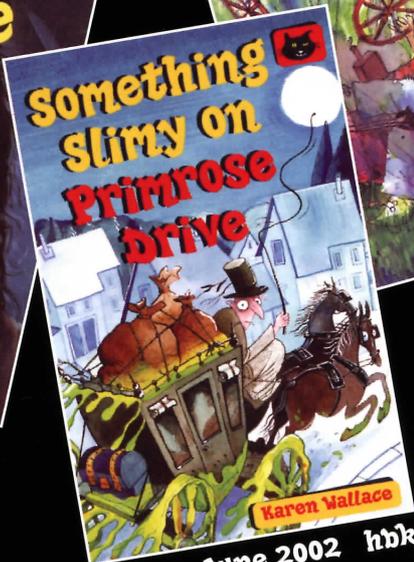


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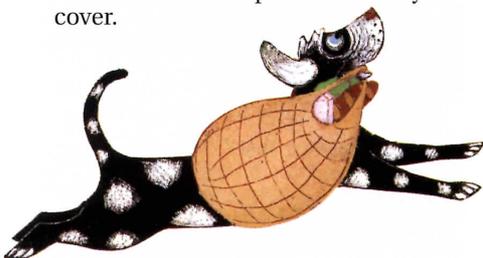
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## CoverStory

This issue's cover is from **Smog the Dog** by Adria Meserve, as discussed by Martin Salisbury on page 7. Thanks to Macmillan Children's Books for their help with this May cover.



# EDITORIAL

This issue of BfK carries two articles which continue our focus, following the events of September 11th, on the depiction of Arabs and of Islam in books for children. In our last issue Ann Lazim of the Centre for Language in Primary Education discussed picture books and fiction and the images they convey to young readers of the everyday lives of Arabs and of the conflict in the Middle East. She concluded that, while cultural stereotypes still abound, some books with positive images can be found, if not without difficulty.

In the same issue, writer Shereen Pandit discussed Deborah Ellis's **The Breadwinner**, the first children's novel to be set in Afghanistan and to reflect life under Taliban rule. She found that, given the sensitivity of the political moment and the need for a non-biased view of events, it is not as politically and historically balanced as it could have been. Apparently Pandit's assessment of **The Breadwinner** was the only one the book has received in the British press not to be wholly favourable. Was it, however, the only critical assessment to be written by a reviewer who is well informed not just about children and their books but also about the recent history of Afghanistan? Shereen Pandit also happens to have been brought up a Muslim. If so, this raises important questions for children's book reviewing about political and cultural perspectives in the discussion of such titles. It also

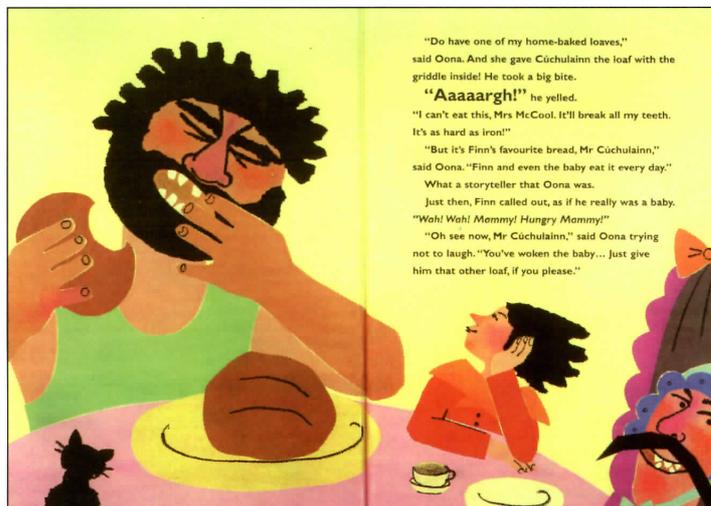


Rosemary Stones

raises questions about the place of experts in the reviewing of children's books, whether fiction or non-fiction, which encompass specialist subject areas.

This issue is also touched on in respect of non-fiction in the Briefing pages of this issue to do with OUP's acknowledgement of mistakes in its **The Young Oxford Encyclopedia of Science** following Felix Pirani's two-star review in BfK No.133.

BfK has now invited Shereen Pandit to discuss Latifa's **My Forbidden Face**, an autobiographical account by a young Afghani woman of her teenage years under Taliban rule, the first such account by a Muslim rather than by a Westerner. Meanwhile, the centuries old cultural and historical connections between East and West are underlined by Neil Philip in his history of **The Arabian Nights**. As violence continues to escalate in the Middle East, the acknowledgement of such shared connections has never been more important.



"Do have one of my home-baked loaves," said Oona. And she gave Cúchulainn the loaf with the griddle inside! He took a big bite.

"Aaaaargh!" he yelled.

"I can't eat this, Mrs McCool. It'll break all my teeth. It's as hard as iron!"

"But it's Finn's favourite bread, Mr Cúchulainn," said Oona. "Finn and even the baby eat it every day."

What a storyteller that Oona was.

Just then, Finn called out, as if he really was a baby.

"Wah! Wah! Mommy! Hungry Mommy!"

"Oh see now, Mr Cúchulainn," said Oona trying not to laugh. "You've woken the baby... Just give him that other loaf, if you please."

*Rosemary*

**Mrs McCool and the Giant Cúchulainn** by Jessica Souhami, published by Frances Lincoln, gets a five-star review on page 20.

## BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's book magazine

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# The Arabian Nights

In BfK No.133 (March '02) we looked at the depiction of Muslims and of Arabs in contemporary children's fiction and picture books. At a time when the differences between East and West can be too easily polarised, it is salutary to remind ourselves of the exchanges that have long taken place between our cultures, of which one of the best known is that masterpiece of world literature, **The Arabian Nights**. Andrew Lang said of it: 'All the East has contributed to its wonders and sent them to Europe in one parcel'\*. Neil Philip explores.

**W**hen Hans Christian Andersen was a boy, he used to visit the spinning-room of the local pauper asylum in Odense, where his grandmother was the gardener. He became something of a pet of the old ladies there, who were entertained by his childish prattle. In his autobiography, **The Fairy Tale of My Life**, Andersen recalls, 'They rewarded my eloquence by telling me tales in return; and thus a world as rich as that of the *Thousand and One Nights* was revealed to me.'

It may seem strange that Andersen, in order to emphasise his delight in Danish folk literature, should automatically compare his native folktales with those of Arabia, but the truth is that the stories of *The Arabian Nights* had become, over the previous century, a byword for the magic and wonder of storytelling.

## Entering Western culture

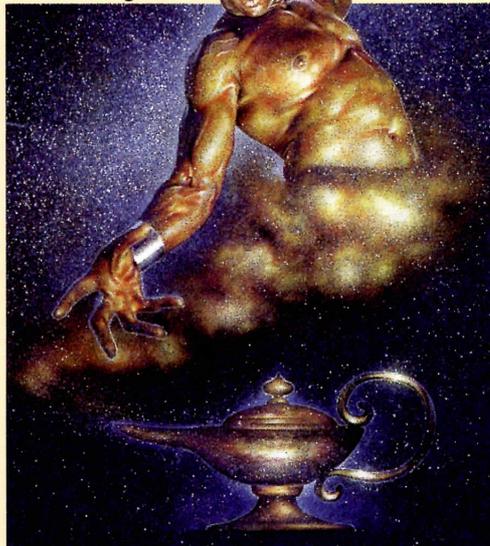
They entered western culture in a French translation by Antoine Galland, published between 1704 and 1715. Chapbook English versions of Galland's text began to appear almost immediately. Galland's tales captivated all Europe. Thrilling and exotic stories such as 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' appealed to the imaginations of young and old, while the framing device in which the beautiful Sheherazade (or Shahrazad, as her name is more properly spelled in modern versions) kept her husband captivated night after night by her storytelling, and thus saved her life, added a frisson of tension and even eroticism.

This last element in the *Nights* has proved the most controversial. Editions of the stories are divided not just between those aimed at adults and those aimed at children, but between those which seek to obscure the erotic undertow of the original, and those which seek to exaggerate it. So the standard Victorian translation by Edward Lane (1839-41) sought to omit all risky material, just as the first children's version by Richard Johnson (c. 1791) 'carefully expunged every thing that could give the least offence'. So concerned was Johnson's publisher Elizabeth Newbery to emphasize this point that the work was published under the title **The Oriental Moralist**, by 'the Revd Mr Cooper'.

## Discreet bookshelves

By contrast, Richard Burton's **Plain and Literal Translation of the**

From the cover of Geraldine McCaughrean's **One Thousand and One Nights**.



**Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night** (1885-8) revelled in salacious details – so much so that it was printed and distributed in exactly the same clandestine way as the pornography of the day. The title page claims it was printed in Benares, for the Kamashastra Society; it was actually printed in Stoke Newington, and the Kamashashtra Society was a polite fiction to avoid prosecution for obscenity by marketing the book by private subscription. But the venter of respectability (and Burton's very real scholarship) enabled the sixteen leather-bound volumes to take their place discreetly on the bookshelves of many a Victorian gentleman whose interest in Arabic folklore was, to say the least, somewhat tenuous.

A fin-de-siècle French edition by J C Mardrus, translated into English by E Powys Mathers and published in four volumes as **The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night** (1937), took Burton's frankness one stage further by simply inventing erotic details and episodes wherever the Arabic text seemed too tame.

One curious truth about this extremely curious masterpiece of world literature is that its chief fame derives from these various western versions. As Robert Irwin, author of **The Arabian Nights: A Companion** (Allen Lane, 1994), writes in the introduction to his marvellous **Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature** (Allen Lane, 1999), 'the best of Arabic literature, by which I mean what has been most highly regarded by the Arabs themselves, is decidedly short on adventure or sex.'

Even more extraordinary is the fact that many of the tales we most associate with the *Nights* are simply not present in any of the manuscript versions. The classic fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript that was the basis for Galland's translation does not contain 'Aladdin', 'Ali Baba', or 'Sinbad the Sailor'.

'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba' are two of the stories Galland collected from a Maronite Christian Arab called Hanna Diab. Galland saw no reason not to flesh out the thousand and one nights with newly-gathered folktales or, in the case

of 'Sinbad', stories from other manuscripts. And the truth is that a similar process had probably occurred at various points since *The Nights* started taking shape in Arabic around the eighth century AD. The first surviving manuscript fragment is from the early ninth century: it is a single page, in which Sheherazade's sister begs her to tell a story.

There is no way of knowing how closely this earliest version related to the fourteenth-century manuscript, and it in turn was evidently based on a lost Persian original. The *Nights* as we now know it intermingles Indian, Persian, Arabic, and even European sources in such a complex way as to mean there can be no definitive text. Hussain Haddawy's lively and authoritative **The Arabian Nights** (Everyman's Library, 1992) contains only 271 nights, the contents of the fourteenth-century manuscript as edited by Muhsin Mahdi; the same author's **The Arabian Nights II** (W W Norton, 1995) adds a further four tales, two of which, 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba', are translated from Galland.

Yet despite all this confusion and complication, *The Arabian Nights* is a whole book: one with a distinct flavour and atmosphere of its own, into which one plunges as avidly and utterly as a modern-day tourist into the noise and bustle of Djemaa El Fna in Marrakesh, to stand entranced if uncomprehending as a storyteller launches into his tale.



'The Rajah Who Dressed in Black' from *The Seven Wise Princesses*.

University Press, 1980, 0 226 20625 4, £13.50). These volumes show the enchanting story-world of *The Arabian Nights* still living in the mouths of Arabic storytellers. This is a feeling even more strongly present in Monia Hejaiej's intimate collection of tales from three women storytellers, *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis* (Quartet, 1996, 0 7043 0231 4, £11.00 pbk). In this book, the shade of Sheherazade seems no more than a breath away. In the words of Laura Rice from her foreword, 'Within each tale-telling, an intricate shuttling between the teller and the tale occurs.' These women are not telling their stories to save their lives, but they are certainly telling their lives in story, just as Sheherazade did.

The wisdom of these female storytellers, who start each story with the reminder that 'God is omnipresent', just as the *Arabian Nights* themselves constantly invoke 'Allah, the compassionate, the merciful', is reflected in another recent children's book, *The Seven Wise Princesses* by Wafa' Tarnowska (Barefoot Books, 2000, ill. Nilesh Mistry, 1 84148 021 5, £14.99 hbk).

This is the first retelling for children of a complex twelfth-century Sufi allegorical poem, 'Haft Paykar' by Nizami, in which seven princesses teach the Shah how to be a just ruler. It is a daring publication, for the original is scarcely known in the west, and the mystical system of colours and numbers that informs it is hard to grasp, even with Tarnowska's clear explanation. But in the end the risk is one well worth taking, for publisher and for reader, for beyond the strangeness of the material is the simple truth that a well-told story will always transcend its author's good intentions. Both Shah Bahram and ourselves may be being lectured by the seven wise princesses, but it doesn't feel like it: instead, we are travelling with him to such magical destinations as the City of the Stupefied, ready to be enthralled by a beautiful but unobtainable queen.'

No other work exudes such pure joy in storytelling as *The Arabian Nights*. Sheherazade saves her life by storytelling, as do many of the characters in her tales. Her stories are not just full of magic, they are a kind of magic. ■

### The power of story

It is in the end the transforming and redeeming power of story that *The Arabian Nights* celebrates. The stories themselves have an almost hypnotic quality, unfurling themselves as stories-inside-stories-inside-stories until they begin to feel as if they had no beginning and will have no ending. In Burton's edition, for instance, 'The Tale of King Omar Bin al-Nu'uman and His Sons Sharrkan and Zau al-Makan', covering nights 45-145, fills 371 pages.

This sense of never-ending profusion is best expressed in the title of a similar Sanskrit collection made by Somadeva in the twelfth century: *Kath Sarit S-gara*, 'The Ocean of the Streams of Story'. This is the ocean on which we are set adrift when we encounter *The Arabian Nights*, and whose tides are charted in Salman Rushdie's passionate defence of the primacy of storytelling, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Granta Books, 1990).

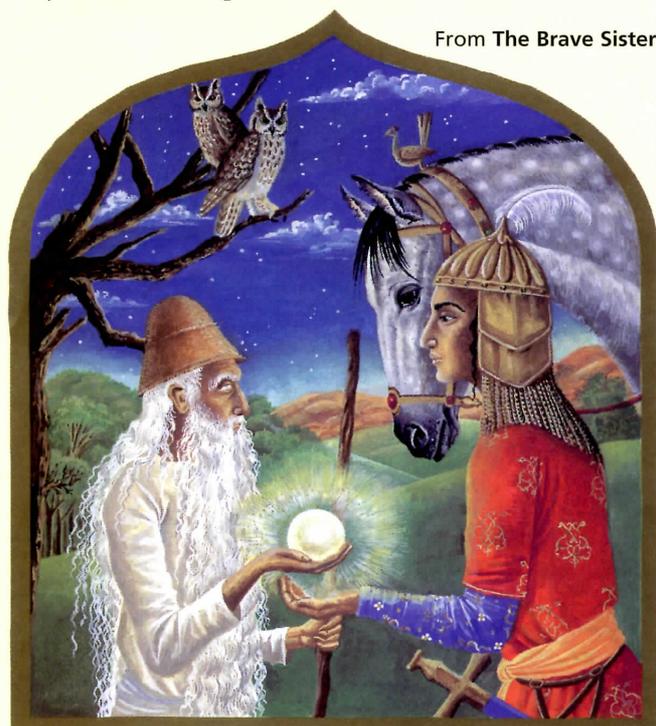
The best we can hope for from a children's version of such a protean work is that it gives us an authentic taste of the souk and the medina, that it makes us tremble with Sheherazade and wonder with King Shahryar, and that it leaves us just a little dizzy from the twists and turns of its storytelling.

### Contemporary retellings

The classic retellings on both sides of the Atlantic – Andrew Lang's *The Arabian Nights Entertainments\** (1898) and *The Arabian Nights: Their Best-Known Tales* by Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora A Smith (1909) – are both now showing their age. Luckily, several fine versions have appeared in recent years. Geraldine McCaughrean's *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (OUP, 1982, 0 19 275013 5, £4.99 pbk) is vigorous and sensuous; Brian Alderson's *The Arabian Nights* (Victor Gollancz, 1992, ill. Michael Foreman, o/p) is witty and spellbinding.

More recently, Fiona Waters has written a lively picture-book version of the story of one of the most unadorned folktales in the *Nights* as *The Brave Sister* (Bloomsbury, 1998, ill. Danuta Mayer, 0 7475 4129 9, £5.99 pbk). The story is a version of the international folktale 'The Dancing Water, the Singing Apple, and the Speaking Bird', which is well-known in Arabic folklore. Readers may like to compare it with orally-collected versions, such as 'The Nightingale that Shrieked' in Inea Bushnaq's *Arab Folktales* (Penguin, 1987, o/p) and 'The Promises of the Three Sisters' in Hasan M el-Shamy's *Folktales of Egypt* (Chicago

From *The Brave Sister*.



Neil Philip is a writer and folklorist. His retelling of *The Arabian Nights*, illustrated by Sheila Moxley, was published by Orchard Books in 1994. His most recent book is *The Great Mystery: Myths of Native America* (Clarion Books, NY, 2001).

# My Forbidden Face

Some of the most compelling accounts of the experience of war have been written by young people, as witness Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Now a young Afghani woman, Latifa, has published a memoir of her experiences as a teenager and twenty-year-old in that war-torn country, the first from the point of view of a Muslim woman. **Shereen Pandit** assesses her account.

*My Forbidden Face* is the story of a young Muslim woman who is on the threshold of adulthood when the Taliban comes to power in her native Afghanistan.

Latifa, born a year after the intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, has lived all her life in a country at war, a guerrilla war against the Communist government and its Soviet Allies, followed by a civil war amongst those who opposed that regime, followed by a war of the Taliban, victors of the civil war, against its own people. The book is published as the first American bombs begin to fall on Afghanistan, of which cognisance is taken in the Afterword. Her story isn't just, therefore, as the sub-title indicates, one of a young woman 'growing up under the Taliban' but one of a young woman who has grown up under a number of regimes, all of which, including those which preceded her birth, have made her people suffer to varying degrees.

Part memoir, part history, part a piecing together of the collective experiences of her family and friends, part a reflection upon what has happened in Afghanistan in her lifetime, particularly between the ages of 16 and 21, the story is a compelling one.

## A story of resistance

Opening her story with the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Latifa takes the reader in graphic detail through those first days, devoting nearly all of the first two chapters of the book to the beginning of the Taliban's five year reign of terror. She tells the story of the initial impact of the Taliban on her family, on women and on her beloved Kabul in a way which makes her fear for all of these almost palpable. Her story is also one of resistance, of how, after the first devastation of the literal and figurative blows rained by the Taliban upon them, people, especially women, rally to prevent what Latifa sees as the Taliban's determination to eradicate women from Afghanistan completely. Ordinary people like her refuse to lose hope, even when they realise that the world is watching and doing nothing about their pain.

Latifa's story is refreshing, because she writes as a Muslim woman, a member of a family which loves its Faith, its culture, its traditions, though it may have a few Western clothes, toys and ways. In coming forward to bear testimony against the Taliban's attacks on her country and its people, especially its women, she rejects not Islam, but the

Taliban's perversion of that Faith. Her struggle, her hope, is for a retention of her Faith and her culture, as well as her freedoms and that of all the men and women of her country.

## Historical and political context

Interesting, too, is that whilst the central thrust of the book is 'bearing witness' to the sufferings of ordinary Afghani people under the Taliban, the writer makes some attempt to place the Taliban regime in historical and political context, and thus to account for its rise and its short though devastating reign.

Latifa does not shirk from presenting her own and her family's political perspective on the events, not only under the Taliban, but before it. She raises political questions around the responsibility of the West for the rise of the Taliban and its perpetuation in power. Despite Western sponsorship of her trip to France and of her book, she doesn't fall into the

trap of designating everything non-Western as bad. Thus, for example, whilst she resents the Soviet Union's role in Afghanistan, she pays tribute to the Soviets for encouraging, supporting, even compelling, the education of the Afghan people, especially women.

At first reading, the book is a bit confusing stylistically, because of the way it moves back and forth between present tense, almost diary-style accounts of events as they unfold, to historical analysis, to pre-Taliban experiences, to her thoughts about what is happening and what has happened.

Often I had to sit with one finger in the chronology and one on the page I was reading to work out under which regime certain events took place. This happened, for example, with the story of her brothers, and the issue of conscription, their flight to the Soviet Union, the imprisonment of her older brother, the impact on her mother. This didn't detract from the power of the story for me, but it may well be problematic for young people reading the book.

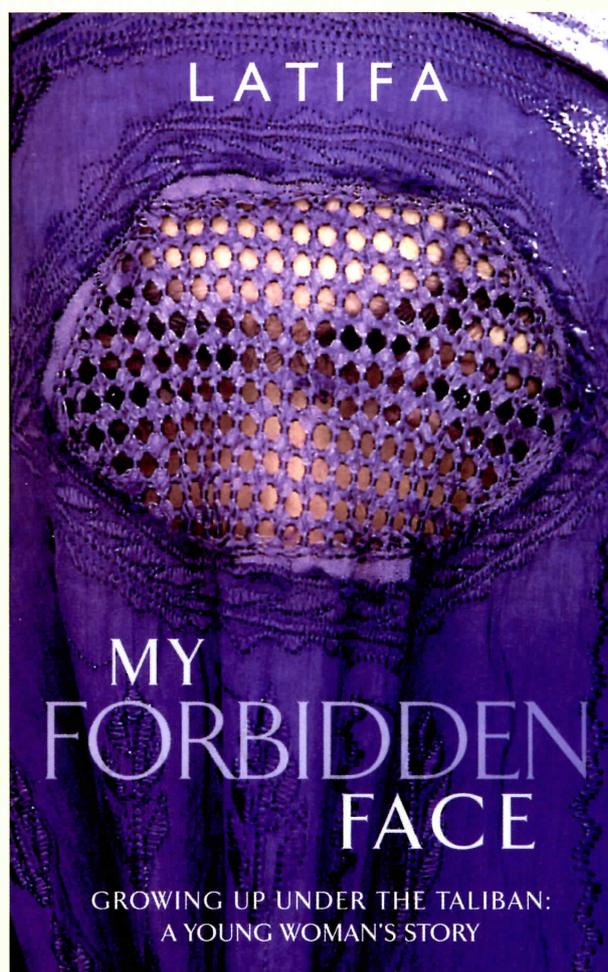
A more serious reservation that I have, is Latifa's insistence that Pakistan was the prime mover behind the Taliban, and the perhaps disproportionate amount of vitriol vented on Pakistan,

despite it being the only place where, for example, Afghani women could get medical treatment. Given the racism against Pakistanis in countries like Britain, the issue of Pakistan's involvement could, perhaps, have been handled with more care.

This, like all the issues raised in Latifa's book – war, oppression, Islam – makes Latifa's story one which must be read and discussed by and with young people. There is much to learn from it, not only about Afghanistan under the Taliban, but about the country's history, its people, its culture and above all, about Islam as seen through the eyes of those who adhere to the Faith and resent the way it is distorted. ■

*My Forbidden Face* by Latifa is published by Virago (1 86049 956 2, £9.99 pbk).

**Shereen Pandit** is a writer who has taught English and creative writing to refugees, mainly women, from many countries.

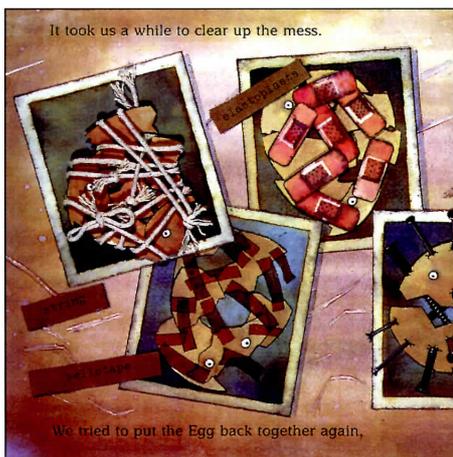


# NEW Picture Book Talents

Standards in the illustration of children's books have never been so high and in a demanding field, young illustrators compete to have publishers recognise their talents. How successful are they? Martin Salisbury assesses three first picture books from debut illustrators.

Three new debut picture books from Random House come from artists who have all studied at the University of Brighton's Illustration Department, at either Degree or MA level.

*Egg Drop* by Mini Grey is a surreal tale of the egg that wanted to fly. The egg's premature flirtation with aviation, and failure to demonstrate an understanding of aerodynamics (it didn't know anything about Bernoulli's Principle), lead to the inevitable conclusion. The artwork employs an interesting mix of old and new processes – hand rendered ink and wash alongside collaged and scanned textures, including



liberal use of distressed and cracked paint surfaces, brickwork, tablecloths, and even chewing gum. All of it is held together by a strong, unifying sense of design. I cannot say that I grasp the moral of this story but in visual terms this a fine debut by an artist who apparently acquired the name Mini as a result of being born in one in a Welsh car park.

Adria Meserve's *Smog the City Dog* describes the eponymous canine's decision to quit the urban chaos and head for a quiet canal towpath. 'I'm out of here!' he says. The subsequent journey is described in a meandering swirl of colour across the double-page spreads. The illustrations are lively and contemporary, but with stylistic references to the nineteen twenties pochoir techniques of another Anglo American, E McNight Kauffer. The typography is sympathetically integrated with the dynamics of the page and the happy ending gently reminds us of the benefits of co-operation and sharing over competition.

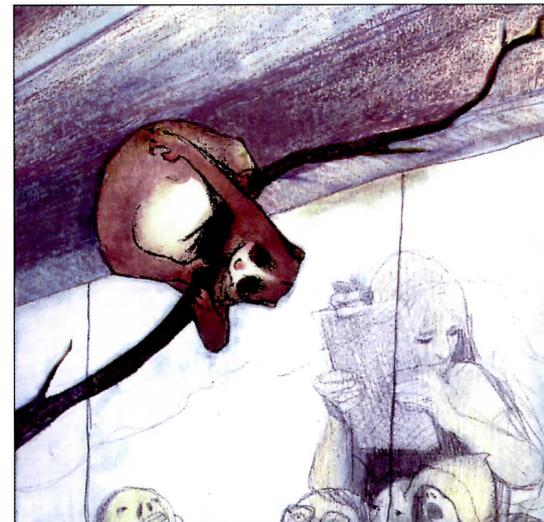
## The process of observation

By far the best of the bunch for me, though, is Alexis Deacon's wonderful *Slow Loris*. This book is a joy. It is particularly pleasing to see a book that grows from the process of observation, from a period of intensive drawing in the sketchbook. As an art student, Deacon spent many hours at the zoo drawing the animals, studying movement and clearly coming to know and be fascinated by these creatures. The freshness of line that comes from this first-hand intimacy brings the animals to life without resorting to Disneyesque anthropomorphism. Sometimes the drawings appear to have been 'knitted together' from the sketchbook, some clearly enlarged from smaller drawings and put through photocopying processes with the consequent break-up of the line. This sits surprisingly comfortably alongside the occasional bit of digital tweaking to show, for example, a sudden burst of movement. The unchanging expression on the face of the Loris as we are let in on the secret of its other (not so slow) life becomes increasingly hilarious (it eventually transpires that the Loris is not inherently slow, simply tired out from its extravagant nocturnal activities). The relationship of text to image, on both a visual and conceptual level, is faultless. The double page spread that follows the opening page gives us a six-frame time sequence that cleverly sets the pace with regard to the slowness of Loris's movement. We see him manage to move his arm an inch or two in the direction of his food while, in the



From *Smog the City Dog*.

meantime, various people come and go, in and out of frame across the pages. The accompanying text introduces us to our hero... 'Slow Loris wasn't his real name but that was what everyone called him. / A slow loris is just a type of animal. / Slow Loris was a slow loris. / He really was... / very... / slow.' The artist's excellent sense of visual pace is perhaps partly explained by his involvement with animation as an art student, always a good option for anyone interested in exploiting the medium of the picture book.



One of the many visual highlights here for me is the drawing of the Loris in his cage, viewed from inside, looking out to a group of bored school children with their harassed teacher. The lovely characterisation shows an all round artistic sensitivity that suggests more good things to come from Alexis Deacon.

This book, like *Loris*, is the coolest thing around. ■

*Egg Drop*, Mini Grey, Jonathan Cape, 0 224 06458 4, £10.99 (June 2002)  
*Smog the City Dog*, Adria Meserve, The Bodley Head, 0 370 32555 9, £9.99  
*Slow Loris*, Alexis Deacon, Hutchinson, 0 09 176799 7, £9.99

Martin Salisbury is the Course Co-ordinator, MA Children's Book Illustration, Department of Art and Design, APU, Cambridge.

# The Snicket Letters

When **BfK** sent **Geoff Fox** the first two titles in Lemony Snicket's best selling series 'A Series of Unfortunate Events', **The Bad Beginning** and **The Reptile Room**, for review he gave them only two stars while conceding that 'plenty of children will think it's off the planet.' Now **Geoff Fox** and Snicket enthusiast, **John McLay**, argue the merits or demerits of the series...

Dear John

I thought you should see the gist of the rather dyspeptic review I submitted to Rosemary which provoked her into suggesting this exchange of views. So – here are a few excerpts:

'I disliked the first book intensely. I disliked the second rather less – maybe I had been battered into acquiescence by the relentless and obvious humour, the repetitious and self-conscious style, the predictability of the characters and the transparencies of the plots.

Of course these qualities, which upset most adult readers, are precisely what many young readers enjoy, especially in a series. The word from the bookshop tills is that the books are racing off the shelves; even our local university bookshop is selling them at £1 off.

I quite enjoyed the metafictional games played by Daniel Handler, the man behind Lemony Snicket. LS himself purports to be an investigator whose pursuit of the truth about the three Baudelaire orphans is highly dangerous. He steps out of his narrative from time to time to regret that his story is so miserably miserable and the villain so villainous. There are also mildly literary jokes which seem to be there for the diversion of adult readers: a lawyer named Mr Poe in these tales of not too much mystery but some imagination has a son called Edgar and one joke depends on recognising the name Roger Ackroyd, for example.

The orphans (mother and father are briskly wiped out in a fire in the opening pages of Book 1) are constantly pursued for their money by the wicked Count Olaf, a distant cousin. The plots have the wild implausibility which many children relish; for example, the physically repugnant Count, leader of an acting troupe of grotesques, forces Violet Baudelaire to act with him in a play. The script requires them to marry – and Olaf then claims the marriage is valid, thus entitling him to the orphans' fortune. The fantasy not far from the surface of this episode is fairly typical ('Violet imagined sleeping beside Count Olaf and waking up each morning to look at this terrible man').

I'm very aware of the dangers of reading children's books with an adult's perspective; but, for me, this series takes children nowhere, several times over.'

Those were some of my reactions to the first two books, John. Now that I've read four of them, I'm mostly just *bored* by them. They are so formulaic. The plots are very similar: children, deposited by Poe in keeping of new inadequate/obsessive/unaware guardian, are menaced by disguised Count Olaf, and hop about between frying pans and fires (some entertaining predicaments here, I admit). Literally *hundreds* of times, Snicket peddles the same gags: Baby Sunny 'shrieks' a nonsense word which is then glossed ('which probably meant something along the lines of...'); again and again (and then again and again) he'll pause to explain a longish word with the formula 'a word which means here...' How many times can you stand the same joke? And the caricatures are so flat. Consider Count Olaf (he can't intend to use him in all 13 books, can he?). He's a comic-paper baddie. From Iago to Philip Pullman's Mrs Coulter, what makes the best villains interesting, and in the end disconcerting, is their ambiguity.

What am I missing?  
Geoff

Dear Geoff

You're probably not missing anything as such, but I do think you have succumbed to one of your own fears – and have consumed these books, inevitably, from a largely adult perspective. Your critique of 'A Series of Unfortunate Events' is not really very helpful to either the children who might read them, nor to adults for whom they were not written anyway – despite the odd mature aside contained within.

Ten-year-olds love these books. Fact. They're funny. They're actually being read, and growing numbers of readers are going back for more. How many other books are bought and remain unread collecting dust on book shelves? More than we would probably think. These readers positively revel in all of the points you cite as negatives. Relentless and obvious humour, as you yourself admit, is glorious for the majority of young minds. Outlandish plots, the repetitious writing style and distinctly drawn characters are all winning ingredients. Series fiction relies wholly on a combination of these accessible and entertaining hooks to succeed. They deliver a knock-out punch with book 1, then serve up more of the same, with some degrees of variation, for as long as the concept remains commercial and popular. Lemony Snicket has struck gold in this sense, and I for one applaud him for it.

I can't help thinking that your whole approach to Lemony is a bit too deep. They're not Shakespeare, nor Pullman. I must admit I've not really analysed these books to any great extent. I sincerely hope nobody ever does, because I bet the author would laugh his head off if anybody ever did. When I read them, like many others of a more tender age, I suspect, I did so at a fair rate of knots and didn't try to deconstruct them for hidden messages or allegory. I very much doubt there are any.

Ten-year-old readers don't do this either. They know that they are ridiculous, enjoyable fantasies to be taken with the huge pinch of salt that the author intended. The storylines are a bit more grim than usual, but, hey, that's the point.

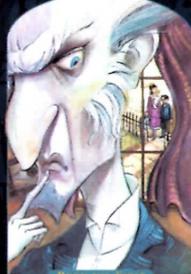
The publishers, Egmont in the UK and HarperCollins in the US, have used some extremely clever and witty marketing tools to bring the exploits of the Baudelaire orphans to a hungry readership. Declaring that book browsers should 'not read these books' immediately makes them want to find out more. Warnings that they're slightly scurrilous are a huge come on. Getting people to protest in bookshops that they are giving the fictitious Happiness League a bad name is inspired. It's so obvious! And so clever. All successful marketing is, I suppose. Kids are picking them up and reading them and collecting them and talking about them and enjoying them as a result. Great news for all! No complaints here.

There's nothing wrong with Lemony Snicket. These books are funny but predictable. So what?

John

A Series of  
Unfortunate Events

by Lemony Snicket



The Bad Beginning

A Series of  
Unfortunate Events

by Lemony Snicket



The Reptile Room

A Series of  
Unfortunate Events

by Lemony Snicket



The Wide Window

A Series of  
Unfortunate Events

by Lemony Snicket



The Miserable Mill

A Series of  
Unfortunate Events

by Lemony Snicket



The Austere Academy

Dear John

Thanks for your reply. I think there's a difference between being serious about books for children and being stuffy about them. So when you say you think I'm being 'a bit too deep' and that you've 'not really analysed these books to any great extent', I part company from you. There's surely nothing wrong with depth, and nothing wrong with analysis, whether you are talking about Noddy or **Northern Lights**. In fact, close readings and speculations about reader responses are essential to those concerned with helping children to grow as readers (and teachers, librarians and parents want to do precisely that). And that's because, if I can say this without you accusing me of pomposity, children deserve the best.

But let me be clear – I do realise that, like the rest of us, they need what Peter Dickinson called thirty years ago 'literary roughage'. My point is that there's roughage and roughage!

You're right that anyone who works day in day out with children and books is in trouble if they forget the headlong excitement of children's reading, the laughter, the hairs-on-the-back-of-the-neck stuff. I hope that whether as teacher, storyteller or writer, I've never forgotten that and indeed have spent much of my time listening to children talking about books. My reservations about the Snicket books arise mostly from a sense that other series offer so much more. And that here there is some slick, if manipulative, marketing at work, promoting some formulaic writing and clever packaging – and doing so very effectively. It's no argument to point to the huge sales figures as any indicator of worth, is it? I mean, on that basis, **Pop Idol** would emerge as high quality television, wouldn't it?

I'm genuinely glad LS's fans are reading, of course – but there's an ancient fallacy around in the notion that *all* pulp reading necessarily leads on to more discriminating reading. I think it often leads on to more pulp reading. And I think it's patronising, dishonest and uncaring for us to deny the hope that we want children to develop into discriminating readers.

A last point about series books. Consider the Just William and Harry Potter series. I'd suggest that they are characterised by inventive and surprising plots, sustained and varying wit, and above all, rich and playful language. They don't condescend to children. These qualities are not around in LS's books. In the end, I'm simply arguing that there's so much better reading around for children to enjoy.

Geoff

Dear Geoff

I'm definitely not accusing you of pomposity, have no fear. I respect your opinions too much to do so. Indeed I agree wholeheartedly with a number of points you make. It is highly desirable that children develop into discriminating readers and there is definitely nothing wrong with analysis. But I can't help thinking that the Lemony Snicket books are getting short shrift here, and that we should be celebrating what they are, and not trying to compare them to other series. Nobody has ever suggested they be required National Curriculum reading.

Of course they will fall down when Harry Potter is brought into the equation. Those books are a very different type of 'series'. It's like comparing **Eastenders** to **Inspector Morse**. LS is intended for regular consumption, in shorter bursts, and as such these books deliver a very different type of 'hit' for young readers.

I do disagree with you, however, when you call them 'pulp reading' and 'condescending'. They are simply a different type of reading that offer a different type of reading experience from Harry Potter and Just William. Children are enjoying these books in droves, and I think this is a marvellous thing. They're certainly not 'bad' books, as I believe you are subtly trying to imply. Lemony Snicket is a positive phenomenon regardless of the publisher's slick marketing. Personally, I can't wait to read the next one...

John

**Geoff Fox** is Honorary Research fellow at Exeter University School of Education and Editor of **Children's Literature in Education**.

**John McLay** is a children's fiction scout and reviewer.

There are now five titles available in Lemony Snicket's 'A Series of Unfortunate Events': **The Bad Beginning** (0 7497 4611 4), **The Reptile Room** (0 7497 4612 2), **The Wide Window** (0 7497 4701 3), **The Miser-able Mill** (0 7497 4702 1) and **The Austere Academy** (0 7497 4703 X). They are published by Egmont Children's Books at £5.99 each.

## Hal's Reading Diary

Books seem to be a social activity for 14-month-old **Hal Mills**. His father, **Roger Mills**, explains.

There's been a new development in our household over the last couple of months. Several times a week Hal will go to the shelf where his books are kept, pull one out, and then come over to his mother waving it in the air. Though he can't talk, he makes it very plain that what he wants is a little reading session sitting on my wife's lap. Watching them sitting together, the small boy cradled by his mother, both of them absorbed in the book, I realise that the pleasure that Hal gets from this is not just about what he is seeing in the book. It is also to do with a feeling that looking at a book with mother is an experience of complete security.

Security, when you are 14 months old, is a matter of some urgency. Psychoanalytical writers point to critical shifts that are taking place around the end of the first year. At the beginning of life, the baby does not recognise himself as distinct from mother. Mother is an extension of self. By a year though, things are starting to change. The development of the child's cognitive capacities, and the enormous psychological impact of learning to walk (so that, by his own volition, the toddler can now walk away from mother) both enforce the unavoidable realisation that infant and mother are separate people. Realising he is separate from mother also means realising he is weak and dependent. What psychoanalyst John Bowlby labelled 'separation anxiety' sets in.

We've been seeing this very clearly in Hal. Though he seems to be more confident than some of his 'friends' from the NCT group, he is

definitely more clingy than he used to be. These days Hal will trot off to explore something at the other end of the room, and then rush back and hurl himself at your legs, as if to reassure himself of how solid and real and there you actually are. Analyst Margaret Mahler calls this, in an apt phrase, 'emotional refuelling', and Hal's recently emerged interest in reading with mother looks very much like another expression of his new and pressing need for top-ups of love and security.



Looking at it like this has made me realise something that is very easy to forget. Reading for adults is almost always a solitary, even isolating thing to do. As soon as you are old enough to read to yourself you usually stop reading with anyone else, outside of artificial experiences like reading out loud in class or reading to someone who, for whatever reason, can't read for themselves. But when you are Hal's age, and can't read, reading is an eminently social activity. The experience of a book is also an experience of being closely connected to the person who looks after you, and feeling safe because of it.

Adults get all sorts of pleasure from reading, but our earliest experiences of books are rarely mentioned. But it seems a fair bet that, at some level, one of the things that makes being wrapped up in a good book such a wonderful experience, is that you get in touch with traces of the security of reading with mother that you felt as a child. Reading enriches us in countless ways. But we forget that it also makes us feel safe.

*Roger Mills is a Psychodynamic Counsellor.*

# Children's Author and Illustrator Sites on the Web

While groping and bumping around the Web looking at author sites for this article, consideration of their nature has arisen. What do they do well and what do they do badly? Websites offer a variety of opportunities to authors and illustrators. These may be largely commercial, advertising themselves and their works. They may be more altruistic, giving simple access to children looking for information or suggesting ways that teachers can make use of an author's books. Either way, more and more authors and illustrators are creating their own websites or having them created for them. **Clive Barnes** assesses their contribution.

I can't hope to cover all author and illustrator sites in this small space or to be sure that I haven't missed out a good one, so I have restricted myself to examples that illustrate some of their features.

While every author and illustrator who has a website is probably aware of its advantages in some way, some are more adept at using the technology or recognising who their audience might be. The idea of audience is probably the most crucial, for what I feel distinguishes a website from a book is its ability to communicate more directly, and to invite participation of one kind or another from its audience. So sites which are put together with only the vaguest idea of who they want to talk to, or as merely another way of displaying material already available in print, are likely to be a disappointment.

## CLASSIC AUTHORS

On the other hand, the potential of the web for bringing together a multitude of approaches and audiences around children's authors and illustrators is most apparent with those classic authors whose only hope now for direct communication with us is via a Ouija board. There is a network site for Lewis Carroll ([www.lewiscarroll.org](http://www.lewiscarroll.org)) that has hundreds of links to everything you may want to know about Carroll, whether it's mathematics, on-line texts, the illustrations (Tenniel or Disney), academic conferences or Carroll appreciation societies. There are similar sites for other classic authors, usually maintained by enthusiasts, and whether an author or illustrator is honoured in this way depends on their enduring fan base.

To find a particular author, you can begin with an individual search on the web. To appreciate the range of sites it's best to approach through a list of links from a general children's books site. Two of the sites I reviewed in BfK last September, ACHUKA ([www.achuka.co.uk](http://www.achuka.co.uk)) and Children's Books UK ([\[books.co.uk\]\(http://books.co.uk\)\), have lists of modern authors and illustrators. These are mainly British. To get a wider cross section of English language sites, try the University of Calgary's Children's Literature Web Guide \(\[www.acs.ucalgary/~dkbrown/index.html\]\(http://www.acs.ucalgary/~dkbrown/index.html\)\). This has the longest list I have found, includes classic and modern authors, and marks those sites it finds especially exciting. The only problem is that it's not been updated for some time, so some of the links are dead ends.](http://www.ukchildrens</a></p>
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## MODERN AUTHORS AND ILLUSTRATORS

There are, of course, modern authors and illustrators, including some of the most popular or revered in the UK, who haven't entered this world at all, or who are content to leave websites to their publishers or other commercial sponsors. Neither Shirley Hughes nor Anthony Browne has their own site. Jacqueline Wilson has a page on the Transworld site ([www.booksattransworld.co.uk](http://www.booksattransworld.co.uk)) which leads to a further free fan club page. J K Rowling relies on Harry Potter fan sites and the Warner Brothers film site ([www.harrypotter.warnerbros.com](http://www.harrypotter.warnerbros.com)). This last site has nothing about the author herself, but has exciting graphics and appears to be good value for games and activities. There are a number of other sites on authors set up by fans, usually adults. Some of these work closely with the authors, like Brian Jacques' Redwall site ([www.redwall.org/dave/jacques/html](http://www.redwall.org/dave/jacques/html)), which was begun by a teenage fan. Others, like the site set up by Alan Garner's adult admirers ([www.ozemail.com.au/~zenophon/](http://www.ozemail.com.au/~zenophon/)), revere their hero from afar.

On any author site, you might expect to find a biography, responses to frequently asked questions (FAQ), and details and reviews of the books, sometimes with a facility to buy them on-line. Anne Fine, the Children's Laureate, has a site that does this bare minimum ([www.annefine.co.uk](http://www.annefine.co.uk)). The pages on her childhood and where she gets her ideas from are culled from talks she has given in the past, and the language on the site is inclined to publisher blurb speak. Still, it's nice to see the site recommending a visit to the library to find the books, as well as the bookshop or Amazon.

It may be that well established authors and illustrators don't see the need to go to the trouble of creating and maintaining a site. Many of those who do see the need are seeking not only to promote the books but also to advertise their availability for school visits and other bookings. For performance poets, who depend on this income or who see it as a major part of their work, the website can function as a high class business card. A relative newcomer like Andy Fusek Peters ([www.tallpoet.com](http://www.tallpoet.com)) has a fine example of a polished site, sparkling with recommendations for his work, devoted to selling the multiple roles that flash across the home page: didgeridu player, television presenter and writer, anthologist, writer in education, and author. However, it's a relatively impersonal site that would not satisfy



Clive Barnes

a child looking for project information or contact with a favourite author.

Happily, there are many author sites which are devoted to fulfilling this need. The quality and presentation of little known facts can be endearingly, or irritatingly, idiosyncratic. It's reassuring that accomplished authors, like the rest of us, asked to talk about themselves, sometimes don't quite know what to say. Interviews with authors may occasionally dip into the facetious or the precious. Lynne Reid Banks, for instance, conducts a rather arch interview with herself ([www.lynnereidbanks.com](http://www.lynnereidbanks.com)). In general, there's a balance of entertainment and information on these sites, and a desire to communicate with children.

Occasionally, more pointed intentions surface. Lurking behind the innocuous title, 'A Day Visiting Schools' on the Diana Wynne Jones site ([www.leemac.freemove.co.uk](http://www.leemac.freemove.co.uk)) there is a description of all the indignities and slights suffered by her at the hands of discourteous staff in schools: salutary reading for us and cathartic writing for her. More useful for prospective hosts are writers like Tim Bowler ([www.timbowler.co.uk](http://www.timbowler.co.uk)), Julia Jarman ([julia.jarman.mcmail.com](http://julia.jarman.mcmail.com)), and Beverley Naidoo ([www.beverleynaidoo.com](http://www.beverleynaidoo.com)) who are clear about what they can offer to schools and what they require by way of preparation for their sessions to be effective. Julia Jarman goes further and provides hints on how her work can be integrated into the English National Curriculum, and some authors and illustrators are happy to give this kind of guidance. However, to see the extent to which 'lesson plans' can be drawn from children's fiction, you need to visit an American site. It's amazing what you can do with the Wizard of Oz ([www.eskimo.com/~tiktok](http://www.eskimo.com/~tiktok)), for instance.

## MULTI-MEDIA POSSIBILITIES

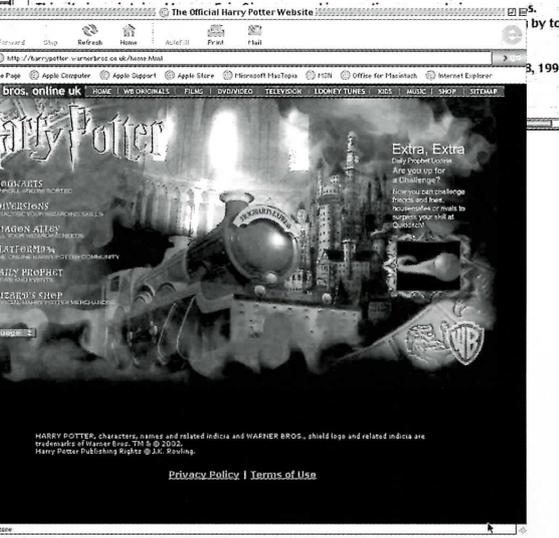
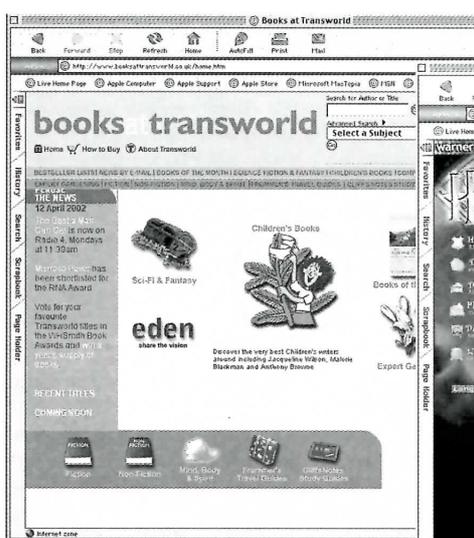
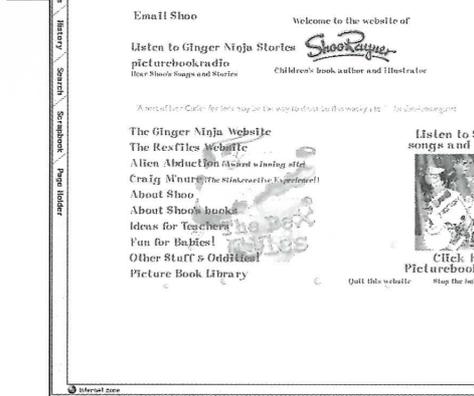
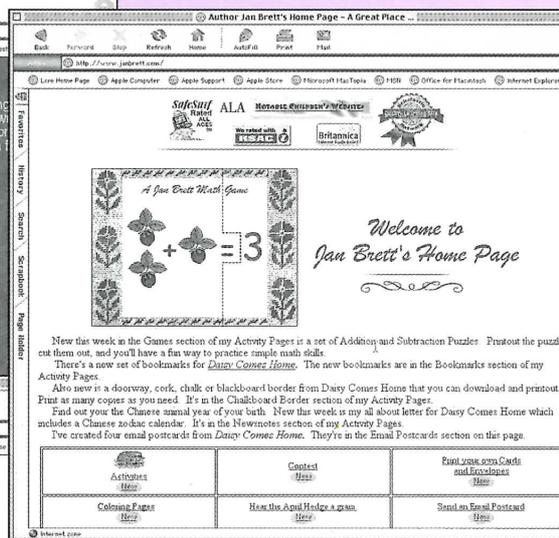
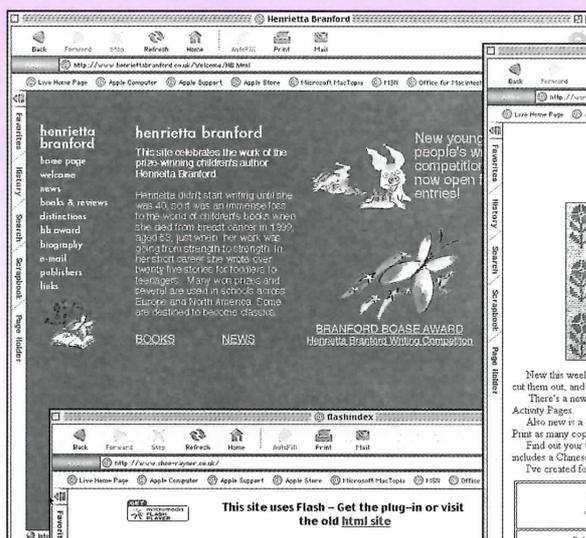
Some of these sites take advantage of the multi-media possibilities of the web. The least you would expect is the author's smiling face and book covers in full colour. Gillian Cross's home page ([www.gilliancross.co.uk](http://www.gilliancross.co.uk)) has a swivelling eye to remind you of **The Demon Headmaster**. You can listen to Benjamin Zephaniah ([www.oneworld.org/zephaniah/](http://www.oneworld.org/zephaniah/)) reading his poems, or you can take up Neil Arksey's invitation to shake the author by

clicking on a button. His photo obligingly vibrates, gently or violently, according to your preference ([www.neilarksey.co.uk](http://www.neilarksey.co.uk)). But, as you might expect, it's the illustrator sites that make the most use of web technology.

Most illustrator sites are worth looking at, and I'll merely highlight a few. Catherine and Laurence Anholt ([www.anholt.co.uk](http://www.anholt.co.uk)) use one of their latest titles, **Chimp and Zee**, to produce simple interactive games that build on the characters in the story. Jan Pieńkowski's Fun and Games section includes the whole of **Christmas**, one of his out-of-print titles, and colouring sheets and join-the-dots that can be downloaded ([www.janpienkowski.com](http://www.janpienkowski.com)). To see how far this kind of generosity can go, it's worth visiting the American illustrator, Jan Brett, who has '1,895 pages of artwork to share with you!' This is suitable for all occasions: certificates of reading achievement, greetings cards, bookplates and bookmarks and much more, all in colour and all ready to print ([www.janbrett.com](http://www.janbrett.com)). In the UK, Shoo Rayner is a web enthusiast who has been building his site ([www.shoo-rayner.co.uk](http://www.shoo-rayner.co.uk)) over the last few years. He has sites within sites, one of which, Alien Abduction, he developed as part of a project with three Northamptonshire schools. There's also Craig M'nure, a 'stinkeractive' website, which introduces you to the flora and fauna of a special Scottish island, where you can listen to the cry of Belcher's Penguin and witness the Lesser Squawk fall from its perch.

The illustrator site I have enjoyed most is more modest in its use of web wizardry. Colin Thompson's site ([www.colinthompson.com](http://www.colinthompson.com)) is put together so that it's easy to find your way around and has the look of his picture books. The home page is an ingenious collage of photos and objects that acts as a contents list for the site. He gives the story behind the creation of each of his books and a glimpse into his varied past. He has sections on 'Working methods' and 'Drawing on the Computer', and, true to the detail in his illustrations, provides large sample colour pictures which you can zoom into, to discover more and more. He incidentally demonstrates one way in which the web can bypass more parochial publishing sensibilities. Under a heading, 'Dangerous Poems', he includes the full text of poems which appeared in the Australian edition of **Fish are So Stupid**, but were removed from the British publication in case they caused offence.

Thompson is a British born writer now living and working in Australia, and his site demonstrates the relaxed ease with which some Australian writers are able to address their child readers and to invite participation on the sites. Morris Gleitzman and Paul Jennings have successfully transferred a blend of mateyness, humour and concern for a child's point of view from the printed page to the web page. On Paul Jennings' site, the headings – news and stuff, books, about Paul, free stuff, your pages – set the tone of openness and warmth ([www.pauljennings.com.au](http://www.pauljennings.com.au)). The biographical section is written by Paul himself. It includes photos of the new home he is building on the cliffs and his sighting of a whale in the bay. Morris Gleitzman invites his readers to examine two of his school reports, and has a page where he responds briefly to selected e-



mails from his fans ([www.morrisgleitzman.com](http://www.morrisgleitzman.com)).

**AWARENESS OF THE AUDIENCE**

This brings me back to the points that I made at the beginning of the article: the need for an awareness of the audience and clarity of directness and approach. Many British sites aim to be child friendly, and some have a Guest Book where readers can leave comments to be displayed, but, of the British writers I visited, only Melvin Burgess, whose site ([web.onetel.net/~melvinburgess](http://web.onetel.net/~melvinburgess)) has a scruffy honesty and assumes everybody can read very small print, seems to address his readers as comfortably as Jennings and Gleitzman. Lastly, a rather more poignant aspect of the web, and a site which acts as a living memorial to a writer whose career was all too short. Paul Carter, the husband of

Henrietta Branford, has created a site which celebrates her work and the work of the Branford-Boase Award ([www.henriettabranford.co.uk](http://www.henriettabranford.co.uk)). It is well designed and features a biography which is a model of its kind. It is a site which is courteous and thoughtful and whose frankness towards its readers is captured in an invitation to e-mail that might be a lesson to those sites that claim more but deliver less: 'This site is very much a part-time project for me so I cannot guarantee to reply quickly to your messages. I will do my best.' This is a site that lives up to both the talent and spirit of the author it celebrates, and it's hard to do better than that. ■

Clive Barnes is Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City. His assessment of websites that review children's books appeared in BfK No. 130.

# Authorgraph No.134

Eva Ibbotson interviewed by Elizabeth Hammill

'Ghosts have had a very bad press' declares Eva Ibbotson emphatically with a mischievous glint in her eye. Elsewhere perhaps, but not in the Ibbotson household. For Eva, whose children's books from **The Great Ghost Rescue** to **Monster Mission** are populated with displaced ghosts, worried witches, 'peculiar people, people who are different', ghosts and their otherworldly kin have been fertile subject matter for a writer intent on exploring our world through topsy-turvy eyes and entertaining readers in the process.

A visit with Eva in her terrace house in a Victorian suburb of Newcastle upon Tyne where she and her ecologist husband brought up their four children, raises other ghosts – ghosts from a past which provides the creative, sometimes dark, underpinnings of her children's books and her adult historical romances.

Born in Vienna in 1925, Eva grew up in a 'Bohemian, left wing family ... at the centre of the Viennese intelligensia'. Her father was a scientist and her mother a successful novelist and playwright who worked with Brecht, Eisenstein and Pabst. Their marriage was not a success. Eva was shunted between homes with aunts and grandmothers – some of whom were 'exceedingly odd' – and sent to boarding school – a *kinderheim* – at six. Two years later in 1933, the Nazi threat drove the family to England – her father to Edinburgh, her mother, remarried to a Russian, to Hampstead and Eva to Dartington Hall, the newly founded progressive school which became her 'home' for the next eight years – a place filled with a heady mixture of 'idealism, idiocy, wealth and amazingly good teaching'.

Eva describes her childhood as a 'privileged' one, filled with wit, humour, eccentric people and stories. Her mother had 'this absolute ability to turn anything into a story'. Her tales were not the 'Once upon a time' variety but took the truth and 'embroidered' it. 'My grandfather would have a carp delivered at Christmas – a live carp – and he'd keep it in the bath, but when Christmas came, nobody could kill

it. That sort of thing...' Her grandfather, his carp and other 'odd' relations later made embroidered appearances in Eva's early short stories for **Good Housekeeping** and then in her novels and children's books. Her mother's Viennese stories gave her an 'almost imaginary country, a country of the heart' to draw on – one to which she has returned regularly in her historical romances and, for the first time, in her next book for children.

But her childhood was also filled with a deep insecurity. Her children's books, despite their surface humour, are about children whose 'parents aren't there' and characters who are 'displaced and looking for a home as I was'. She vividly remembers 'this very strong physical feeling of being lost' as a child, of 'rushing out into the street' from her *kinderheim*, 'thinking that I'd seen my mother pass and it was somebody else'. That longing – a 'kind of anguish really' – has never left her. 'You're always trying to be loved and to love other people and to be reassured. That's probably why I always try to write books with happy endings for children and adults. I can't imagine what you'd have to pay me to write an unhappy ending. I just want to reassure people and reassure myself. I want my characters to find love and safety.'

Eva herself found these when she met Alan Ibbotson at Cambridge where she was doing research after taking a degree in Physiology at London University and he was working as an ecologist. Marriage 'set me free for the first time in my life. I felt secure, emotionally secure' and she turned from physiology which 'distressed me' to writing.

Perhaps that is why Eva sees her stories as fairytales. Like Bruno Bettelheim, she believes that fairytales are 'the best thing' for children. While 'you can't deviate too far from a fairytale structure – otherwise you're in freefall, in anarchy and children get worried and upset', she does enjoy upending traditional expectations and making mayhem with magic, but not from a desire to 'mock'. Accustomed to wit and parents who 'could see humour in everything', Eva, early on, absorbed the idea that if you tell a tale or 'write a book with no humour in it, you've let people down'.

While Cinderella variants abound in **Which Witch?** and **Journey to the River Sea**, for instance, she has also used

witches and ghosts as a 'way of writing about people like us but over the top, over the edge'. 'After all,' she muses, 'why shouldn't witches and ghosts be as desperate and worried about things as any of us? Thinking like this, taking a new angle makes you much freer. You've got to see through other people's eyes...' Hence, the alternative delights of Hag's perfumes – 'crushed pig's bladder with unbrushed teeth' – in **The Great Ghost Rescue** or the Wizard Arriman the Awful's spell-casting competition to find himself the blackest witch of all for a wife in **Which Witch?** Outrageous human behaviour – greed, snobbery, pompousness, the misuse of power – are fair game. Politicians, in particular, are unrepentantly in Eva's firing line: Margaret Thatcher makes a cameo appearance in **The Secret of Platform 13** as a harpy with a handbag and the balloons in **Not Just a Witch** are inflated by politicians' hot air.

She passionately champions 'the poor and the underdog' – in particular, orphaned, mistreated or unappreciated children who long, as she did, to find an adult who will recognize their worth and uniqueness. Like Roald Dahl, she is on the side of the child but with an important difference. 'He wants the put-upon children to fight the adults, to show you're just as strong, you'll whirl the headmistress round ... I'm not quite doing that. I'm hoping that the headmistress will fall over a cliff or see the error of her ways. I want children or ghosts to be rescuers either of themselves or of others.' Alone, relying on their resources, her children do just that, aided from unexpected quarters. Her 'fairy godmothers', like Eva herself, believe in children. Aunt Etta, a kidnapper with an unusual rescue operation to mount in **Monster Mission**, reflects: 'You'd be surprised. There are children all over the world whose parents don't know how lucky they are.' Miss Minton, the indomitable governess in **Journey to the River Sea**, muses: 'I may be mad but I think children should lead big lives.'

Eva inherited her husband's 'strong line on having to live in harmony with animals, witches, ghosts, worms, everything – whatever their essence'. Alan introduced her to the natural world on country walks when they were courting: 'He used to turn up stones and there would be a whole world – spiders' eggs, little worms, beetles and bits of fungus



and he knew them all just like I knew my friends.' Later, 'when they started spraying DDT and messing up the sea, I was indignant perhaps earlier than some people.' This ecological indignation finds voice in *The Great Ghost Rescue* when a national ghost refuge must be found for spirits whose haunts have been reclaimed and gentrified and in *Monster Mission* when an unusual rescue operation is mounted to save mermaids and other creatures in distress.

In *Journey to the River Sea*, Eva's underlying subject is man's relation to the natural world – a relationship that has often defined characters in earlier books. After her husband's death, she found that she wanted to write, not another witch tale, but 'an old fashioned story of the kind I had by my bed – *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Secret Garden* – a lovely homespun book rooted in a sound moral framework with humour and adventure.' For years she had been intrigued by tales

of Manaus, a city carved out of the jungle a thousand miles up the Amazon, built by the rubber barons in the nineteenth century where there was a 'fantastic opera house with grass growing through cracks in the stone and howler monkeys screeching on the roof'. Forgoing fantasy for historical adventure, she found herself in new literary country where her historical romances, her love of Frances Hodgson Burnett and her personal ghosts all met. The fate of each exotic cast member is determined by their response to the jungle: 'For whether a place is a heaven or a hell rests in yourself and those who go with courage and an open mind may find themselves in Paradise.' Through Maia, the orphaned heroine who sails to Manaus to find a Paradise, Eva grew herself 'for I allowed my heroine not to be safe. So maybe I'm at last laying my ghosts.'

The success of *Journey to the River Sea*

surprises her. She never expected to win the Smarties Gold Medal or to be 'sitting at the Whitbread dinner'. The J K Rowling phenomenon has propelled her books onto the best seller list in America and she finds herself 'in extreme old age back in the swim again'.

Sitting in the first floor drawing room where Eva has written for the last forty years at her mother's desk, we discuss the business of writing. 'I start with an atmosphere and a place ... sometimes a writer whose work is seminal like Margaret Mead who can give you the smell, the taste of a place. I know the shape of the book although it often alters. I knew about Maia but not about Clovis. Beginnings always make me so distressed because I know so little. It's as though the book is lying at the bottom of the sea waiting for me to dredge it up.' Then, it's 'trial and error, trial and error' – on through eight or nine versions, paragraph by paragraph. Each time 'I'm seeing more' until it's 'absolutely right'. The words are vital. She still remembers in her teens being 'dazzled and awed by the sheer beauty of the English language' and, like the poet Edward Thomas, she writes with 'a feeling of being chosen by the words rather than you choosing the words'. She still starts with a pen and pencil and 'this business of it going down my arm from my brain'. She used to transfer to an old Olivetti but now uses a computer. She has never written a book in less than a year. 'I'm very fussy, very painstaking. If there was an epitaph on my tombstone, it would say: She took trouble. Not: She was a great writer but: She took trouble.'

Looking around Eva's 'writing room', there are signs that she has taken trouble with her life too. Her husband's desk sits with hers in front of the double windows. Here he would join her and they would read finished chapters together. On the walls are Viennese prints and paintings by Eva's mother, husband and sons. On the mantle are cards from friends and family and a wonderful 'writer's block' made for her by one of her seven grandchildren. Eva may finally be 'laying her ghosts' but here, nonetheless, they feel very much alive in the home they have made for her and she for them. ■

Elizabeth Hammill is Artistic Executive of the Centre for the Children's Book.

Photograph courtesy of Macmillan Children's Books.

### The Books

(published by Macmillan Children's Books, £9.99 hbk and £4.99 pbk)

*Dial a Ghost*, 0 330 39826 1 pbk

*The Great Ghost Rescue*, 0 330 39828 8 pbk

*The Haunting of Hiram*, 0 330 39842 3 pbk

*Journey to the River Sea*, 0 333 94740 1 hbk, 0 330 39715 X pbk

*Monster Mission*, 0 330 37262 9 pbk

*Not Just a Witch*, 0 330 39799 0 pbk

*The Secret of Platform 13*, 0 330 39801 6 pbk

*Which Witch?*, 0 330 39800 8 pbk

## NEWS

**£500,000 boosts Bookstart****Bookstart**

Est. 1992 by BOOKTRUST

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has announced new funding of £500,000 to significantly boost the future development of Bookstart, a national programme begun in 1992 which gives free books plus reading advice and support to parents and carers of 7-9 month old babies. Bookstart Plus schemes in some areas have extended this to babies of 18 months and 2-3 years.

**The Foyle Foundation announces a three-year sponsorship of the Poetry Society's Young Poets of the Year Award**

The Foyle Foundation, established under the terms of the will of the late Christina Foyle, is to sponsor The Poetry Society's Young Poets of the Year Award for young writers between the ages of 11 and 18.

As part of their prize, 15 overall winners will spend a week tutored by this year's judges, Matthew Sweeney and one other poet (still to be confirmed), at the Arvon Foundation's centre at Lumb Bank. For young writers this is a wonderful opportunity to develop their writing under the guidance of professional writers and gain an insight into all aspects of poetry. The winners also get to see their poems in print in a specially published anthology.

For further information about the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award telephone 020 7420 9894 or visit [www.poetrysociety.org.uk](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk)

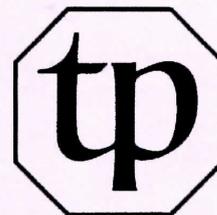
**Library Science Clubs**

The Library Association's Frontiers Science in Libraries campaign is encouraging library-based out of hours study support groups to become Frontiers Science Clubs. Since the launch of the clubs project in January, 50 groups have signed up with many more expected throughout the spring.

Study support groups and homework clubs, whether in public or in school libraries, have an important role to play in encouraging young people in their studies. The Frontiers Science Clubs project provides resource packs for club leaders and a website ([www.frontiersclub.org.uk](http://www.frontiersclub.org.uk)) has been specially developed for Frontiers Science Club members to take part in on-line activities. Further information from **Philippa Perry**, tel: 020 7247 9695; fax: 020 7247 6069; email: [pnlp@dircon.co.uk](mailto:pnlp@dircon.co.uk)

**The Young Oxford Encyclopedia of Science to be corrected**

Following a review in BfK No.133 by Professor Felix Pirani, Emeritus Professor of Rational Mechanics at the University of London, which pinpointed 'many mistakes and erroneous simplifications', OUP have acknowledged the need for corrections and revisions in their **The Young Oxford Encyclopedia of Science** which, they say, will be implemented on reprint. The BfK reviewer followed up his review by sending an extensive list of the mistakes and misleading statements

**Useful Organisations No.20: The Thimble Press**

**Lockwood, Station Road, Woodchester, Stroud, Glos. GL5 5EQ**  
Tel: 01453 755566  
Fax: 01453 878599  
Email: [thimblepress@onetel.net.uk](mailto:thimblepress@onetel.net.uk)

The Thimble Press concentrates on experience-based writing by exceptional readers. It has been publishing articles (in the journal *Signal*, three per year), booklets and books about children's books since 1970. The *Signal* Bookguide by Jill Bennett, **Learning to Read with Picture Books** (1979), is still in print, as is **Picture Books 9-13** by Elaine Moss, who first formulated the idea

in *Signal* in 1978. In **Not a Perfect Offering** Liz Waterland, author of *Read with Me*, tells a story of what starting school feels like to a four-year-old. Margaret Meek's **How Texts Teach What Readers Learn** is the classic text about the interrelation of literacy and literature; Jane Doonan's **Looking at Pictures in Picture Books** developed from her *Signal* articles on the 'active contemplation' of work by contemporary artists. Other influential books from the Thimble Press include **Tell Me: Children, Reading & Talk** by Aidan Chambers and **Signs of Childhood in Children's Books** by Peter Hollindale.

contained in this volume to the publisher. OUP are to be congratulated for their ready acknowledgement of the need for corrections and for the seriousness with which they have taken the comments made by Professor Pirani and his colleague, Dr Margi Johnson. This incident underlines the importance of the reviewing of children's non-fiction by subject specialists whenever possible.

**Children's Books into Movies**

Philip Pullman's trilogy, 'His Dark Materials', is to be filmed following a deal between New Line, producer of 'The Lord of the Rings' trilogy and Scholastic Entertainment US. Meanwhile, BBC Online reports that the Harry Potter movie has become the second most successful film to date after *Titanic*.

## PEOPLE

**Mary Tapissier**, Managing Director of Hodder Children's Books, has been appointed Chair of the division.

**Judith Elliott**, currently Managing Director and publisher of Orion Children's Books of which she is also co-founder, is to take up a new role as Chair of the division. She will work part time at the end of the year although she will continue to be actively involved with her authors.

**Richard Scrivener** has been appointed Publisher of Scholastic Children's Books.

**Lisa Edwards**, Senior Commissioning Editor at Scholastic, has been appointed Editorial Director Non-Fiction.

**Helen Dunning**, formerly Publicity Manager at Puffin Books, is now working as a freelance children's publicist and can be contacted at [helen@hdunning.freemove.co.uk](mailto:helen@hdunning.freemove.co.uk) or 01743 341252.





# 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

**Brian Alderson** is children's book consultant for *The Times*.  
**Khalida Alvi** was formerly a primary and advisory teacher in Ealing.  
**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.  
**Colin Chapman** is a Youth Service Manager with the London Borough of Redbridge.  
**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 book 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.  
**Peter Hollindale**, formerly at the University of York, is now a freelance writer and teacher.  
**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.  
**Errol Lloyd** is an artist and writer.  
**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.  
**Andrea Reece** worked for children's publishers for 16 years and is now a freelance marketing consultant.  
**Elizabeth Schlenker** 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.

## TITLES REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE

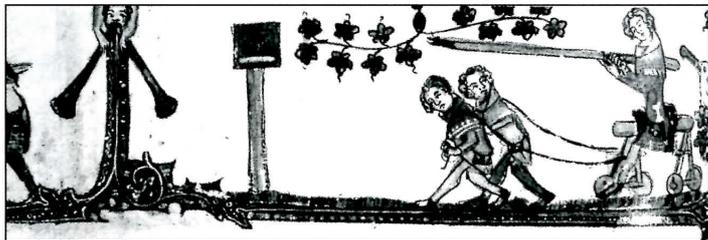
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# Books About Children's Books

## Medieval Children

★★★★

Nicholas Orme, Yale University Press, 400pp, 0 300 08541 9, £25.00 hbk



A fourteenth-century knight, with couched lance, is charging at a quintain. But stay – what is this? He rides a wooden horse with wooden wheels and is being pulled along by a couple of chums. You might have seen something similar only a year or two ago before computer-games and 'paediatricians' stopped kids playing in the street.

That little scene, pictured in a medieval manuscript, encapsulates much of what Orme has to tell us in this thought-provoking and beautifully illustrated study. As an historian he has undertaken much research into education and society in the middle ages and he sets out here to confront what has become Received Wisdom: that, in those far-off times, there was no concept of 'childhood' such as we have today, and that children were regarded as not much more than 'inadequate adults'.

Dr Orme's method of procedure in demolishing this view is of the simplest. In nine chapters covering aspects of life over five hundred years

or so ('Arriving' ... 'Family Life' ... 'Danger and Death' ... etc.) he presents an array of evidence, drawn from a tremendous spread of sources, to show how the province Childhood was not only acknowledged but could also be respected by our ancestors.

Obviously the length and the depredations of elapsed time result in the evidence arriving promiscuously from different periods and places; obviously too Dr Orme has to apologize for his sources' frequent silence on subjects like females and the labouring classes, but all that does not interfere with his large and wholly convincing argument.

Although the book is barbarically designed (the diligent reader is forever flipping backwards and forwards to get at the references, their attendant bibliography, and the sources of illustrations) the text has the momentum of a cumulative anthology, and readers of BfK should take especial pleasure in the chapters on 'Words, Rhymes and Songs', 'Play', 'Learning to Read', and 'Reading for Pleasure'. Anent which hearken to the following example from a French grammar of 1530: 'He hath been at school this half year, and yet he cannot spell his Paternoster.' *Plus ça change.* BA

## The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense

★★★★★

Edward Lear, compiled and edited by Vivien Noakes, Penguin Classics, 568pp, 0 7139 9591 2, £20.00 hbk

In 1947 Messrs Faber published Holbrook Jackson's edition of *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear* – cloth binding blocked with a wild design by Barnett Freedman. However, it admitted to being only a reprint of texts published up to 1895 and thus by no means 'complete', and Faber's recent paperback reprint is even less so. (They'd better watch out for the Trade Descriptions Police.)

The completeness of Noakes's giant volume is a different matter altogether. She is the world's leading authority on Lear, having published a biography and a *Selected Letters*, and having organised the superb eggzibission at the Royal Academy in 1985. Now, in this gromfibberous cornucopia, she sets out a chronological sequence of everything (apart from some repetitious alphabets) that can pass as, or that is adjunct to, Learical lyricism.

She begins with the extraordinarily precocious 'Eclogue' that the thirteen-year-old Lear wrote when he and his family had to leave their Highgate home for London:

*The rural scene to change for houses, brown,*

*And barter health for the thick smoke of town.*

and she carries us through all the 'official' published nonsenses, with eggstrax from letters and diaries and

from whatever random sources she has found interspersed among the familiar texts. Recognising too the importance of Lear's drawings as an essential element in his tragi-comic world she has given us excellently reproduced examples of everything needful, including – hurrah! – eighteen of his Absurd Birds in colour. (These instantly reveal the tradition that connects Lear to Quentin Blake.)

The colour plates also include one or two examples of Lear's hand-coloured lithographs and paintings which relate back to Vivien Noakes's biographical introduction and the extensive and very helpful chronological table that accompanies it. These are balanced at the end of the book by indexes, by 84 pages of notes, and by some examples of the poet's nonsense similes. Such editorial exposition is not mere scene-setting or bibliographical substantiation. It serves primarily to highlight the uniqueness of Lear's genius – the creative contradictions of his 'hurried, boshy life': the ludicrous transformed with elegant craft into threnody, the apparently slapdash caricatures subsisting alongside works of painterly skill, the conviviality masking a life of heroic loneliness. He would have been deeply moved (and probably embarrassed) at this triumphant celebration of what he once dismissively called his 'volumes of stuff'. *O, quacks vobiscum – what a lark!* BA

Brian Alderson's anthology of Lear for Puffin Books, *A Book of Bosh*, is, alas, out of print.

## 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 10 PRE-SCHOOL NURSERY/INFANT

#### The Scarecrow's Hat

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Ken Brown, Andersen, 32pp, 1 84270 101 0, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 125, November 2000:

'Chicken wants scarecrow's hat for a nest, so she sets out on a long trail of swap and barter. Travelling through Brown's beautifully cast country scenes, chicken trades ribbons, glasses, feathers and blankets. All the animals get the object they want and the closing lines cleverly set up young readers to continue the tale in their own words and pictures. Recommended for shared reading in class groups.'

#### Splash!

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Philippe Corentin, trans. Sarah Pakenham, Andersen, 40pp, 0 86264 589 1, £3.99

Reviewed BfK 127, March 2001:

'A hungry wolf, having fallen down a well in pursuit of the cheesy lunar

reflection, dupes pig into making the same mistake to effect his escape. Pig in turn tricks a rabbit family to extricate himself and then along comes wolf again... The book's elongated pages are read vertically and become the shaft of the well up and down which the rope, bucket and gullible animals yoyo in this hilarious tale of foolishness and trickery.'

#### Don't Step on the Crack!

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Colin McNaughton, Collins, 32pp, 0 00 664771 5, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 128, May 2001:

'Following the old adage about not stepping on a crack in the pavement, this cautionary tale illustrates some untoward events which might ensue if you do step on a particular crack in a particular pavement in a particular town. Perhaps the worst of these might be your dad turning into a hippy, your mum going for a younger look, forgetting to put on trousers before going to school, or turning into a pig...'

#### I am NOT sleepy and I WILL NOT go to bed

PICTURE BOOK ★★★★★

Lauren Child, Orchard, 32pp, 1 84121 078 1, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 130, September 2001:

'Before Lola can be cajoled into bed, Charlie has to negotiate with thirsty tigers, a hungry lion, whales in the bath and pyjama-pinching dancing dogs. This is a satisfying little story in large picture book format that should appeal to both sleep-defying toddlers and their baby-sitting siblings.'

### 10-12 MIDDLE/SECONDARY

#### The Ghost Behind the Wall

FICTION ★★★★★

Melvin Burgess, Puffin, 144pp, 0 14 131027 8, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 126, January 2001:

'David is "a bit of a brute" so it is unsurprising that, having found he can get into old Mr Alveston's flat through the ventilation shaft, he starts to plays some cruel tricks.

Which is fun until he finds that he is working with a ghost-child who goes further than David. But when the old man's flat is trashed David is suddenly led towards its surprising identity in an humane and poignant climax.'

#### The Lady and the Squire

FICTION ★★★★★

Terry Jones, ill, Michael Foreman, Puffin, 336pp, 0 14 130737 4, £5.99

Reviewed BfK 126, January 2001:

'Herein Tom and Ann from *The Knight and the Squire* continue their hectic career in France in the wake of Edward III's invasion. Off they go again in a whirlwind of capture, escape, pursuit and flight; in and out of dungeons and bedchambers; diving off castle walls, falling down wells; now in disguise, now out of it; and in imminent danger of a variety of cruel deaths at every turn. Jones and Foreman cleverly insinuate the idea that there is a real medieval realm, brutal and fascinating, to be discovered beyond the novel's pages.'

**Artemis Fowl**

FICTION ★★★★★

Eoin Colfer, Puffin, 288pp,  
0 14 131212 2, £4.99

Reviewed BfK 130, September 2001:

"Leprechaun" is a corruption by the Mud People (human beings) of LEPrecon, an elite arm of the Lower Elements Police, the force responsible for internal and external security in the fairy world. The joke sums up neatly the special nature of this comic fantasy, which combines the ancient characters of myth and legend with a hi-tech James Bond clash between good and evil in the upper and nether worlds. The novel's success comes from cleverly mixing genres, and it provides a very entertaining read for Artemis's age-group, whether criminals or not.

**Mirrors**

ANTHOLOGY ★★★★★

Edited by Wendy Cooling, ill.  
Sarah Young and Tim Stevens,  
Collins, 240pp, 00 710589 4,  
£5.99

Reviewed BfK 133, March 2002:

"Mirrors and reflections have played their part in stories from the ancient tales ... to today" and this collection of short stories kicks off, appropriately, with Elizabeth Laird's retelling of the Narcissus and Echo myth, "The Fateful Mirror" and ends with Berlie Doherty's "The Girl of Silver Lake" about a girl who, like Narcissus, doesn't want to grow up. In between these fantasies of self sufficiency are many different takes on mirroring. There is an appealing freshness to the way these stories play with a powerful theme.

**Freedom of Speech**

Philip Steele, 0 7496 3824 9

**Workers' Rights**

Katherine Prior, 0 7496 4509 1

**Freedom of Belief**

Mike Hirst, 0 7496 3826 5

**Rights in the Home**Emma Haughton and Penny  
Clarke, 0 7496 3827 3

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Franklin Watts 'What do we  
mean by human rights?', 48pp,  
£5.99 each

Reviewed BfK 106, September 1997:

'Each title provides clear explanations of key concepts and historical information related to the type of oppression with which it

deals. The core of the series however, is a set of case studies which focus on the struggles of named individuals or groups. The level of iniquity revealed by these stories is appalling, and the anger that they provoke is made the more intense by the fact that the vast majority of them are very recent. The role of the prosperous world in perpetuating the poverty of those who produce its luxuries is clearly implied. An excellent, thought provoking set of books.' (Two further titles in the series, **Freedom of Movement**, 0 7496 4510 5, and **Equal Rights**, 0 7496 3825 7, are also now available in paperback.)

**REVIEWS Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant****Can We Play?**

★★★★★

Mara van der Meer, paper  
engineering by Ron van der  
Meer, Harry N Abrams Inc.,  
20pp, 0 8109 0379 2, £10.95  
hbk novelty

A new title with paper engineering by one of the masters, Ron van der Meer, is an event for all devotees of movable books; and, more to the point, for any small child fortunate to lay hands on a copy. Especially when van der Meer's work is admirably interwoven with witty text and illustrations by Mara van der Meer. The back cover warns that this book is not suitable for children under the age of three. But do buy it for a third birthday present.

At a basic level, it is a learn-the-days-of-the-week manual – but it is much more than that. The heroine is desperate to find someone to play with. But on Monday, Mommy (it's published in New York) is off to work, on Tuesday Daddy's heading for the store – and so on. Each of these grown-ups promises great things for Sunday, however, and by lifting a flap or turning the page to find a pop-up surprise, we enjoy glimpses of these promises in action. Daddy, for example, dons his tutu to practice (sic – but perhaps Literacy Hour specialists could seize the chance to talk about US/UK spellings...) ballet with his daughter.

Come Sunday, when her relatives gather outside her bedroom door just bursting to play, this heroine isn't sure she's up for it. Not just yet, anyway. She's still in bed, finishing reading her miniature copy of *Can We*

*Play?* Presumably that's the Choke Factor, since this tiny book comes right out of its recess within the page so that you can read it too. This is the best kind of movable book. Constantly surprising, with moving parts integral to the narrative (not merely diverting decorations) and pages that demand to be revisited again and again to see what you missed last time. Full of teases, twists and chuckles. GF

**In the Dark, Dark Wood**

★★★★

Jessica Souhami, Frances  
Lincoln, 16pp, 0 7112 1540 5,  
£10.99 hbk novelty

On the back cover of this picture book we are told that it is 'Suitable for Nursery and Early Years Education/Scottish Guidelines English Language, Level A'. Well, small fingers could certainly lift the flaps to discover very unthreatening little creatures going 'Hoo-hoo-hoo!' or 'Haa-haa-haa!' and readers would probably oblige with a small shriek when, like the bat in Pieńkowski's *Haunted House*, a ghost leaps up and out of the final opening to shout 'Boo!' It is also a very easy text to join in with for there is much repetition in this developing 'spooky story' of dark, dark woods, dark, dark houses, dark, dark rooms and so on. In a nursery class or when fulfilling the Scottish Guidelines, however, using the physical book would be at most a one adult/two-or-three children experience if the youngsters themselves are going to open the flaps. Pausing to do so breaks up the rhythm of the language, so that my question really is about whether the pictures and the flap lifting actually *add* anything to this well-known tale which, I think, used to be popular as a told story among groups such as cubs and brownies. If you simply tell the tale, letting the mind's eyes of the listeners conjure up the various spooks and allowing the insistent beat of the language take over the very bodies of the listening group (the Hoo-hoo-hoos and the Haa-haa-haas demand to be chanted), you build up together to the climactic 'Boo!' and a delicious, noisy and comfortable shudder. And corporate shivering is sadly neglected

in the National Curriculum, and possibly even in the Scottish Guidelines. GF

**Claydon was a Clingy Child**

★★★

Cressida Cowell, Hodder,  
32pp, 0 340 75723 X, £9.99 hbk

Claydon clings to his mother – to her leg to be precise, for it is there that he feels safest. But Claydon's mum is an action woman. Throughout skate boarding, rugby, skydiving, bicycling, Claydon clings desperately to her left limb, while his teddy bear sounds a note of reason, pleading with Claydon to relinquish this position.

Cowell's cheerful, loosely structured pen and watercolour drawings suit the active life led by Claydon's mother, and the relatively minimal text takes flight on occasion too, to coil itself around the matching illustrations. On the final double spread Claydon is shown to have his mother's genes, as, parted from her leg, he rides his tricycle down a slide, with an anguished looking teddy in his backpack. Young children may enjoy Claydon's extreme positions attached to his mother's leg, and the book may also provide opportunities for children and adults to discuss questions of independence. VC

**Lovely Old Roly**

★★★★

Michael Rosen, ill. Priscilla  
Lamont, Frances Lincoln, 32pp,  
0 7112 1488 3, £10.99 hbk

It is early spring when the children's dear old cat Roly dies. 'His legs are tired' and 'his whiskers are sad', and when they bury him in the garden, mum and dad are comforting: 'He'll always be in and around you somewhere.' Time must pass, routines must go on until one day a new puss appears at the door. Sausage gradually takes over their lives, and they are happy. But while Sausage is with them most of the time, the children understand that Roly is with them always. Rosen's tender words offer a child-like view of life and death, and Lamont's gentle watercolour pictures, depicting the passing of the seasons of the year as



well as the seasons of grief, are truly perceptive. ES

**What's in the Pan, Man?**

★★★

Pauline Stewart, ill. Alex  
Ayliffe, The Bodley Head,  
32pp, 0 370 32583 4, £9.99 hbk

On a Caribbean beach, Dan cooks up a mean fish stew (in a large pot on an open fire) consisting of several types of tropical fish, onion, garlic, scallion, tomatoes, thyme, pepper and other ingredients. Though on reflection these are not the sort of foodstuff that have any particular appeal to infants, the story is in essence a celebration of an aspect of Caribbean culture, and the real point is that the resultant stew is so mouth-wateringly aromatic that locals and tourists alike come snaking their way up the beach, conga style, to feast. Everybody is

delighted with the meal, but none more so than the cook. 'Dan grinned wide, man, his teeth as bright as the frothing tide.'

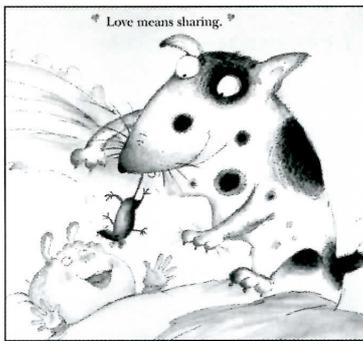
If this picture book had been published a couple of decades ago, it would probably have been considered perilously close to prevailing stereotypes of smiling, happy-go-lucky islanders, without a care in the world. However with the passage of time these stereotypes may now seem relatively innocuous, having been superseded perhaps by more modern, disquieting ones. In any event when the author is black, the issues involved become somewhat blurred. Ayliffe's stylised illustration – colourful, fresh, joyful – delivers the full import of the text. **EL**

## Truelove

★★★★

Babette Cole, Red Fox, 40pp, 0 09 943305 2, £5.99 pbk

This tale is skilfully told from the point of view of the dog, Truelove. When a new baby is born he no longer feels wanted. What is the meaning of true love, he wonders? Is it sharing everything? Does it cure all hurt? Each effort to show the intensity of his love ends in disaster. As he yowls 'I Loo...ve yooou ...' human patience is exhausted, and Truelove is thrown out. Young readers and all pooch-lovers empathise deeply on the textfree page when Truelove heads for the city, possessions knotted in a red-spotted hanky. Living on the streets proves tough, especially when he mixes with the wrong set. Cole packs the pages



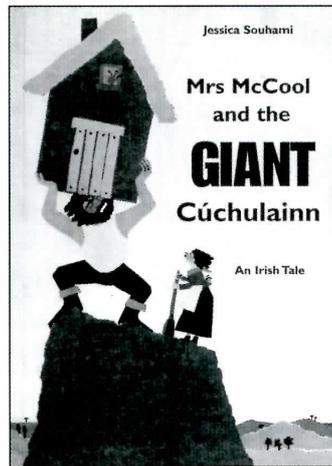
with visual jokes, and as he is eventually restored to his family, Truelove tells readers he knows what love really means. He is entrusted with nappy-changing duties... but not without a discreet clothes peg! **GB**

## Mrs McCool and the Giant Cúchulainn: An Irish Tale

★★★★★

Jessica Souhami, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 0 7112 1822 6, £10.99 hbk

Souhami, an accomplished storyteller, recounts what happened when Cúchulainn went in search of Finn McCool, and not with the intention of doing Finn any good. But Finn has the advantage of a quick-witted wife, who, quick as a flash, dresses her husband as a baby and pops him in a pram to hide before Cúchulainn arrives. Awed by the



strength of the 'baby' giant, Cúchulainn beats a retreat before the daddy, Finn, can get home, proving as Mrs McCool remarks, 'Big is big. But brains are better.'

Souhami hits just the right tone with her dialogue and with the colour scheme for her collages, conveying a feel for the landscape supposedly inhabited by the two mighty giants. It is, in fact, a legend about two legends, as neither Finn nor Cúchulainn could have actually met, but if they had it couldn't have been a funnier encounter. This retelling is full of verve, and just demands to be read aloud, and the size and clarity of the illustrations make them easy to see in a group reading. This is a delightful, witty and highly attractive publication. **VC**

## The Girl who Lost her Smile

★★★★

Karim Alrawi, ill. Stefan Czernecki, Tradewind Books, 32pp, 1 896580 15 7, £4.95 pbk

This short and colourful little picture book is a retelling of a story written by Jallal al-din Rumi, the Turkish founder of the Whirling Dervishes. Jehan is a young girl who lives in Baghdad, and is the owner of a smile that illuminates the sun and the night sky. One morning, she wakes up to discover that her smile has vanished. As the world falls into darkness and mourning, various artists and entertainers arrive from around the world to try to restore Jehan's smile, but all of them fail until a young man carrying only 'a simple sandalwood scraper' effects an illuminating revelation.

The pictures that accompany the concise text are as bright and simple as the story, almost caricatural in their depiction of the visitors and their art-forms. Readers will find interesting parallels here with the Persephone myth and other examples of Paradise lost and regained. Teachers interested in promoting philosophical discussion will find this short but elliptical and evocative tale a useful stimulus for children of all ages. **GH**

# REVIEWS 5-8 Infant/Junior

## Joseph

★★★★

Anna Fienberg, ill. Kim Gamble, Allen and Unwin, 32pp, 1 86448 173 0, £10.99 hbk

Joseph is a picture book retelling of the Old Testament story of Joseph, son of Jacob. It is a family drama, surging with intense emotions and replete with adventure, exotic locations and violent action, and some sex too. If such a story were offered in a modern setting it is unlikely that it would be considered a fit subject for younger readers. Indeed, tamer stories for older readers have been called into question. However, tradition and temporal distance seem to temper the reaction of moral guardians to tales such as this, allowing Fienberg and Gamble to offer their fine interpretation of the story of a young man who was hated by his jealous brothers.

The racier aspects of the story are toned down: all Potiphar's wife demands is a kiss. But when Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt and his blood stained coat returned to Jacob, Fienberg's text captures the agony of the old man: 'He was like a river flooding its banks, fed by a river of sorrow.' Gamble's Jacob, alone clutching the bloodied garment, leaves no doubt about the love and the grief of the bereaved father for his lost son. Each page carries at least one illustration, executed in warm earthy tones, sometimes set against deep, subdued blues and greens,

which convey the feeling of heat and dryness, and also of places and times when the interpretation of dreams was taken seriously by the highest in the land. This is an outstanding example of how to breathe new life into an old story. **VC**

## Winnie the Pooh

AUDIO BOOK ★★★★★

A A Milne, read by Bernard Cribbins, BBC Cover to Cover, 3 hrs, unabridged, 1 85549 825 1, £14.99 CD

Bernard Cribbins reads Milne's classic stories of Pooh Bear lightly, capturing the genuine humour and glossing over the arch conversations with Christopher Robin at the beginning. In so doing, he rightly reads the stories for their child appeal rather than with one eye on the adults who might also be listening. He's good on the voices, too, giving each of the animals a clear identity: the kindly Kanga and anxious Roo, eager Piglet and depressive Eeyore. All are brought together through Pooh's engaging adventures with unpredictable honey bees, potentially terrifying heffalumps and bold exploration of the North Pole. **JE**

## The Kingfisher Book of Toy Stories

★★★★

Compiled by Laura Cecil, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, Kingfisher, 80pp, 0 7534 0596 2,

£8.99 pbk

Cecil's choice of ten stories about toys that come alive is presented in an invitingly large format with glowing illustrations. It's a collection of well-tryed tales, including retellings of 'The Nutcracker' and 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier'. All are suitable for reading aloud to young children, who will be enchanted by the illustrations. These have almost as much space as the text, ranging from full-page plates and half-page double spreads to borders and cameos. As ever, they are vibrant and full of character. Chichester Clark is as much at home in the sunlit garden, in which the little wooden dolls, Purl and Plain, go adventuring, as in the moonlit nurseries that are the more usual venues for toy shenanigans. She has the knack of conveying movement in the 'living' toys that is somewhere between mechanical and organic, and her gentleness and humour soften the more disturbing elements in storytellers like Andersen and Hoffman, without losing any of the excitement. **CB**

## A Present for Salima: a story about Id-ul-Fitr

★★★★

Kerena Marchant, ill. Tim Clarey, Hodder Wayland, 48pp, 0 7502 3654 X, £8.99 hbk

One in a series of religious celebration stories, this story details the religious awakening of a 10-year-old Muslim boy in Morocco who is keenly aware of the events occurring

around him. He discovers the meaning and significance of Id-ul-Fitr within his family and community. Children reading this book will easily be able to identify with and share his feelings.

The story is divided into eight short chapters written in simple and readable language. The first chapter gives a brief but clear introduction and sets the scene for the story to follow in a natural and smooth manner suitable for the intended age-group. This is an appealing book with pleasant illustrations in black and white and colour. It also includes a useful glossary and is a valuable book to have in the classroom. **KA**

## The Were-Pig

★★★★

Paul Stewart, ill. Tony Ross, Corgi Pups, 64pp, 0 552 54713 1, £3.50 pbk

Albert takes a Mars Bar from a girl's lunch-box at school. His grandmother, Nan Tucker, is worried and tells Albert that the next time the sun comes out, his greediness will result in his turning into a Were-Pig (half human, half pig).

Albert becomes preoccupied with the consequences of his actions and has a sleepless night worrying about growing a curly tail and developing trotters and a snout. This is an excellent moral tale, to be enjoyed on a number of levels. Ross's lively illustrations capture the spirit of the story. **AK**

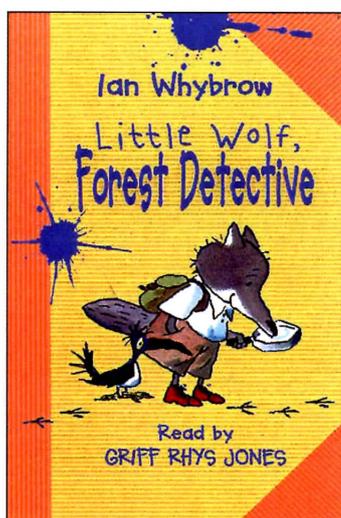
## Peter and the Waterwolf

★★★★

Pippa Goodhart, ill. Ian Beck, Corgi Pups, 64pp, 0 552 54714 X, £3.50 pbk

Aimed at 'new readers', this is a retelling of the story of the little Dutch boy who put his finger in the dyke to prevent his village from being swept away by the rising tide during a storm. Standing on the dyke as a storm brews, Peter's father tells his son that old folk from the village think of the sea as an angry waterwolf wanting to reclaim the land back. The image of such a wolf in each stormy half-page scene is conveyed by Beck in his inimitable style.

This would make an excellent picture book, with full-page colour illustrations depicting the dramatic events so richly described in Goodhart's text. Peter's tension is vividly expressed: 'He imagined the Waterwolf, foaming and gathering, waiting to come rumbling, tumbling through the dyke to swallow him, and wallow him in waves.' Excellent. AK



## Little Wolf, Forest Detective

AUDIO BOOK ★★★★★

Ian Whybrow, read by Griff Rhys Jones, Collins, 1 hr 30 mins, unabridged, 0 00 713024 4, £5.99 tape

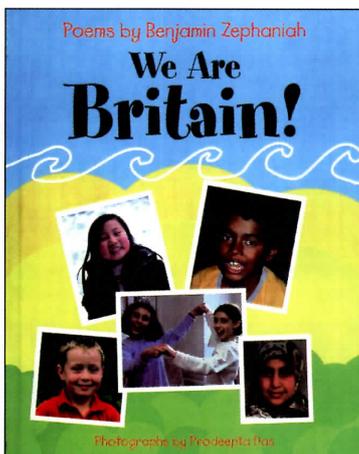
Backed by dramatic music and excellent sound effects, Griff Rhys Jones's reading of Little Wolf's letters home telling of the latest adventures of his friends Yeller, Normus Bear and Stubbs Crow is first-class entertainment. That such an apparently visual book, which seems to depend on the jokes of letters full of mis-spelt words and splodged all over with ink blotches, works so well when read aloud is a tribute to Ian Whybrow's good writing which makes the word play as sure aurally as visually. Solving the mysteries in Frettnin Forest provides great material for these likeable, if somewhat hopeless, characters. JE

## We are Britain!

POETRY ★★★★★

Benjamin Zephaniah, photographs by Prodepta Das, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 0 7112 1764 5, £10.99 hbk

This colourful and appealing match of photographs and poems in picture



book format has portraits of 13 children of varying backgrounds from across the UK. It celebrates not only a kaleidoscope of cultures but also the common joys of childhood. There is an apparent artlessness and a real lack of pretension in both photographs and poems that creates the impression that readers, say between seven and eleven, would immediately recognise and identify with the children they meet here.

Das's photographs have a family album quality that captures, at turns, both the children's self-conscious directness to the camera and their total indifference to it when presented with something else going on more absorbing or exciting. The photographs respect both the children's individuality and the importance to them of the bonds of family and friendship.

Zephaniah's poems are like the poems that the children themselves might write. They are direct. They have a carefree use of cliché phrases and the sort of imprecise adverbs and adjectives (very, really, pretty, lovely) that English teachers used to put a red line through. They borrow shamelessly from pop songs: 'We must stick together / No matter what the weather' and - shades of James Brown - 'He flies through the scene / Like a flying machine.' They are put together with a cheeky sense of fun, a love of even the most incongruous rhyme (what about power and cauliflower?), and a scrupulous regard for form and theme that holds everything in place. They are funny, affecting and joyful revelations of the liberating possibilities of growing up, as Zephaniah says, in a 'multicultural, multicoloured land where every child is equal and all children have a poem to call their own'. CB

## Clottus and the Ghostly Gladiator

0 7136 5954 8

## Bacillus and the Beastly Bath

0 7136 5955 6

## Twitta and the Ferocious Fever

0 7136 5956 4

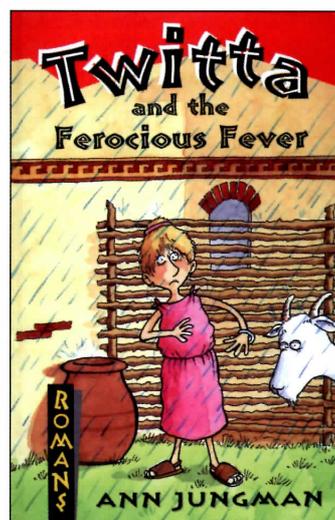
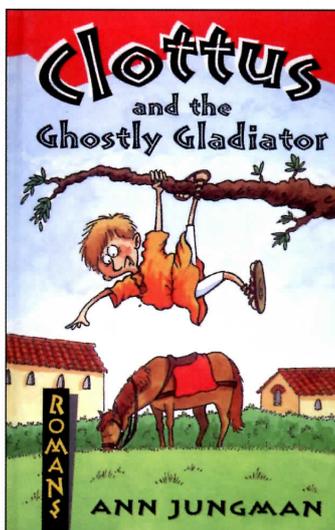
## Tertius and the Horrible Hunt

0 7136 5957 2

★★★★

Ann Jungman, ill. Mike Phillips, A & C Black 'Romans', 64pp, £8.99 each hbk

These four titles form a mini series



entitled 'Romans', and tell stories of what it was like for a family of Romans to live in Britain. Although the stories themselves are fictional, they give interesting and therefore easily remembered details of what the Ancient Romans did in their everyday lives. The texts are easy to read, and the humour of the illustrations lends well to the stories.

In *Clottus and the Ghostly Gladiator*, we discover how slaves worked for the Romans, and also a gladiator match. *Bacillus and the Beastly Bath* explains to us what it was like to go to the Baths with all the accompanying rituals. In *Twitta and the Ferocious Fever*, Twitta goes shopping with *Perpendiculara* in the market, but catches cold afterwards - how will she be cured of the fever that she catches? *Tertius and the Horrible Hunt* tells us how Romans had their houses decorated, and what they did to entertain their guests both young and old.

The humour with which Jungman accompanies much of her storytelling is certainly present in this series, and will mean that children should enjoy reading or listening to the books. An added bonus is that each story features the children displaying such qualities as loyalty, mercy and consideration as part of their everyday lives and behaviour - in addition, of course, to the pranks and misbehaviour that are natural to children anywhere. The size of the books is also just right for children. RL

## Id-ul-Fitr

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Mike Hurst, Hodder Wayland 'Celebrate!', 32pp, 0 7502 4046 6, £4.99 pbk

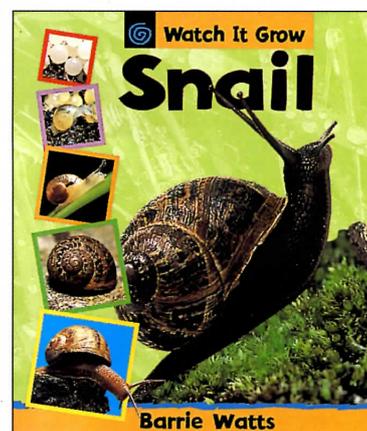
This book is based on the 'Festivals' series title on *Id-ul-Fitr* published previously by Wayland in 1996. As such it offers little in the way of new information except that it provides such information in a more concise manner. Of note there is a factual mistake in the chapter dealing with the Muslim Festival Calendar (page 29) where it is incorrectly stated that *Id-ul-Adha* occurs at the end of Ramadan. *Id-ul-Fitr* occurs at the end of Ramadan and *Id-ul-Adha* occurs independently of Ramadan approximately two months ten days later. KA

## Muslim Imam

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Akbar Dad Khan, photographs by Chris Fairclough, Franklin Watts, 32pp, 0 7496 4065 0, £10.99 hbk

This is a well presented book with high quality photographs, bold text and a helpful glossary. The book details the life of an Imam who is an individual who plays a key role within a Mosque. This role is explained by detailing the day-to-day activities of the Imam. As he goes about his job the meaning of the religion, its rituals and the involvement of the wider Muslim community in British society is explained. This not only makes Islam more accessible to younger readers but also helps dispel some of the myths associated with its practice and helps promote a positive identity for young British Muslim children within the school environment. KA



## Snail

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

0 7496 4431 1

## Duck

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

0 7496 4430 3

Barrie Watts, Franklin Watts 'Watch It Grow', 32pp, £10.99 each hbk

These excellent early information books have a 'life cycle' organisation which gives pace and coherence to the accounts. Children are not offered scraps of interesting but miscellaneous information but rather a detailed explanation of the life events of a particular creature and how it feeds, grows and reproduces. Teachers will welcome the potential for flexible use built into

each book's design: four-year-olds will be able to look at the sequence of pictures and talk about them; by about six years children will manage the sentences in large type and link these to the illustrations; by seven most will read the text and illustrations to the end of the account. Watts provides a strong narrative which works well with his superb photographs. On those occasions when a drawing shows something best there are clear,

labelled diagrams by David Burroughs.

In *Snail* we have an illuminating cross section showing the structure and function of the snail's special tongue or 'radula' which it uses 'like a grater to scrape food into its mouth'. The photographs in *Snail* are particularly arresting – the snail's eggs look wonderfully luminous against dark, rich soil and the intricately patterned whorls on the shells of the adult creatures are bold

and clear. The photographs are enlarged and perhaps we could have been given some pictures to indicate size and scale – I find children often ask about this. We have some help in the written text – each snail egg is 'the size of a match head'. The scale issue is tackled early on in *Duck* as the first picture of the egg is described as 'life size'. We know from their questions that children seek detailed information so they will be interested to learn that the duck's bill is made of a very tough material similar to that of

human nails. Picture and text describe the tiny, tough teeth inside the creature's bill which are ideal for ripping weeds and tearing long grass. Technical vocabulary is introduced in context – 'keratin' and 'incubates' in *Duck* and 'calcium' and 'radula' in *Snail*. The books could be used to good effect alongside first-hand experience – observing ducklings during a nature walk or studying snails kept in a classroom vivarium.

MM

## REVIEWS 8–10 Junior/Middle

### The Lucky Sovereign

★★★

Stewart Lees, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 0 7112 1856 0, £10.99 hbk

The publishers draw the attention of the potential purchaser to the suitability of this book for National Curriculum English – Reading, Key Stages 1 and 2. Scottish Guidelines English language – Reading, Levels B/C; Environmental Studies, People in Society'. There is a slightly uneasy sense about this text that they gave precisely this brief to the author-illustrator. The narrative does not quite 'work', though a story of a father and son (no mention of mother or siblings) setting sail for Jamestown and the New World *should* be exciting enough. The shipboard skulduggery isn't wholly plausible. Sam's father is robbed of all his savings and accused of being a penniless immigrant (and so liable to slavery) by a seaman already proven to be a thief. Some bright sparks in those KS1 and KS2 classes would ask, 'But why would they believe a thief rather than Sam's father?', and they'd be right to do so. And why use names such as Squire Trelawney and Flint with their echoes of Stevenson – and the ship is called the *Treasurer* and there's an episode reminiscent of Jim Hawkins' eavesdropping in the apple barrel? The arrival at Jamestown allows the introduction in the closing pages of a historical character, John Rolfe and his 'beautiful wife, the princess Pocahontas' (who are duly followed up in a concluding historical note). Physically, this is a handsome book and the artwork provides much to interest the historically or nautically minded reader, not least because of the intriguing perspectives from which we view the action. It's just that sense that the book may be serving too many masters. GF

### The Bus Ride

★★★

William Miller, ill. John Ward, Lee & Low Books, New York, 32pp, 1 58430 026 4, £4.99 pbk

This book has an introduction by Rosa Parks, whose arrest for breaking prevailing Alabama state law by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, sparked off widespread civil rights protests throughout America. Part of the protest was the boycotting of the Alabama bus company by black people which eventually led to the capitulation of the bus company and to changes in segregation laws. This picture book is based on a watered down version of this story, with an eight- or nine-year-old girl substituted for Rosa Parks. Though this ploy may more directly engage young

readers, the disadvantage is that it obliquely suggests a diminished degree of courage required to confront the system i.e. if a child was capable of it, then Rosa Parks' action may not have been so extraordinary after all. However the book does get across the central message that however young one may be, one should always stand up for what is right. EL

### Don't Get Your Knickers in a Twist!

Chosen by Paul Cookson, ill. Jane Eccles, 0 330 39769 9

### Ye New Spell Book

Chosen by Brian Moses, ill. Alan Rowe, 0 330 39708 7

### Toothpaste Trouble

Chosen by Nick Toczek, ill. Gerald Hawksley, 0 330 39753 2

POETRY ★★★

Macmillan, 96pp, £3.99 each pbk

These three collections aimed at Junior school children are cheerful and entertaining. Cookson's anthology is packed full of wordplay, clichés and idioms summed up by Nick Toczek's poem 'Them'. "If you ask me," she said, / "They're two sandwiches short of a picnic / Cos their heads aren't screwed on right / So they act like the goat, / Monkey around, / Get up to no good / And, when all's said and done, / Behave like a set of complete idioms."

*Ye New Spell Book* is a collection of magical verse with a spell for almost everything. There are spells to turn hamsters into dinosaurs and to banish pimples. There are curses for enemies and charms for lovers. *Toothpaste Trouble* is a lively collection of poems taking the reader from breakfast to bedtime. All three anthologies are in the 'light-hearted fun read' genre of anthologies and would be a good appetiser for children wanting to write their own poems and experiment with wordplay. HT

### I Did Not Eat the Goldfish

POETRY ★★★

Roger Stevens, ill. Jane Eccles, Macmillan, 96pp, 0 330 39718 4, £4.99 pbk

Although Stevens' poems have appeared in many Macmillan anthologies, this is his first collection. He covers a wide range of subjects and issues from football and new teachers to the loss of a father, friendship and the world of dogs and

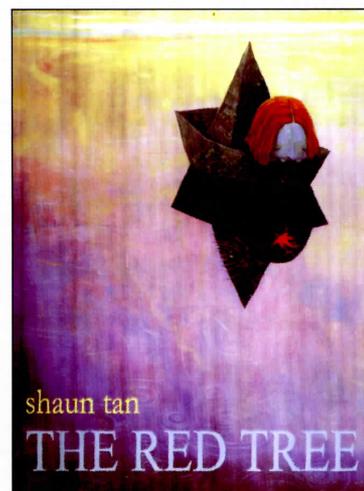
## Editor's Choice

### The Red Tree

★★★★★

Shaun Tan, Lothian, 40pp, 0 7344 0172 8, £8.99 hbk (distributed in the UK by Ragged Bears)

Depression is not an obvious choice of subject for a picture book but Tan's handsome, large format volume conveys this state of mind admirably via its brief text and hauntingly surreal illustrations. 'Sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to' the opening page tells us beneath an illustration of a girl sitting up in bed as blackened leaves fall from her ceiling and threaten to engulf her. A framed picture of a red leaf on the wall echoes the red of her hair and perhaps represents the part of her that can still sometimes see the world as a creative, warm and glowing place. She reaches that place at the end of the book when the red tree bursts into life but the journey to get through the day is harrowing. 'Sometimes you wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait but nothing ever happens' we are told as the girl diminishes in size in a sequence of illustrations as the perspective is pulled further and further back from her until she is



invisible. The text gets smaller too and the reader winces with the pain of this invisibility that is bleakly conveyed. Fragmentation and lack of connection are seen in scatterings of letters and scraps of dictionary definitions amongst brooding landscapes. This book does not use the word depression but leaves the way open for young readers to respond to its theme with their own experiences and feelings. Many, I am sure, will find it a relief to know that there is a book that understands just how awful things can be. For all ages from about nine. RS

cats. A light-hearted read with some sensitive observations. HT

### The Bad Beginning (A Series of Unfortunate Events 1)

AUDIO BOOK ★★★

Lemony Snicket, read by Tim Curry, Collins, 3 hrs, unabridged, 0 00 713373 1, £8.99 tape

There's no doubt that the Lemony Snicket joke is a brilliant one – and that children love it. The idea of 'A series of unfortunate events' is irresistible since, as everyone knows, bad news is always more interesting than good. So, the horrors that befall the young Baudelaire children who are first abruptly orphaned and then, as a consequence, sent to live with an outrageously disagreeable uncle are fascinatingly gruesome; as is Lemony Snicket's original and lugubrious style with its strange and amusing asides to the reader, explaining both perfectly obvious and possibly obscure words or phrases in an equally conspiratorial manner.

Perhaps inevitably such a collusive style between writer and reader cannot be completely caught. Certainly, in Tim Curry's reading the lugubrious verges on the tiresome and the overall pace is too slow to hold attention absolutely. The jokes remain however and if gruesome grabs there is a lifetime of Lemony Snicket stories to come. JE

### The Last Wolf

★★★★★

Michael Morpurgo, ill. Michael Foreman, Doubleday, 96pp, 0 385 60222 7, £10.99 hbk

Recovering from an illness, Michael McLeod is persuaded by Miya, his granddaughter, to develop an interest in computers. In turn, this leads to an interest in genealogy, and he soon finds himself, via an email from a distant cousin in Massachusetts, reading the autobiographical memoir of an eighteenth-century ancestor, one Robbie McLeod, who as a young man had been a follower of Bonnie Prince Charlie. After the battle of Culloden and a period on the run in Scotland, he eventually

MICHAEL MORPURGO

Illustrated by Michael Foreman

## The Last Wolf



makes his way to New England, the hardships of his journey being considerably alleviated by the companionship of another Charlie, 'a prince among wolves'. The human and animal aspects of the story are skilfully balanced by Morpurgo (and attractively portrayed in Foreman's black and white illustrations) in a style which, while essentially plain and unassuming, has considerable emotional impact. RD

## The Eighteenth Emergency

AUDIO BOOK ★★★★★

Betsy Byars, read by James Aubrey, BBC Cover to Cover, 2 hrs 20 mins, unabridged, 1 85549 130 3, £8.99 tape

The best bullying story ever, Betsy Byars's *The Eighteenth Emergency* manages to be very funny indeed without for a moment underestimating its horrors or significance of the victim's feelings as he struggles for survival. And James Aubrey reflects both those qualities admirably in his reading. Benjie and his friend Ezzie know how to cope with seventeen emergencies – all learnt from the Tarzan films. They know how to duck under and out from charging bulls, how to get out of quicksand and how to escape seizure by a gorilla. But will any of these help when Benjie makes the fatal mistake of calling Marv Hammerman, the biggest and most brutish boy in their class, a Neanderthal? The only solution is for Benjie and Ezzie to think up their own solution to this unpredictable eighteenth emergency. The major drama is set against finely observed details of home and school life, all convincingly related in Benjie and Ezzie's dialogue. JE

## The Road to the River

★★★★

Helen Armstrong, ill. Steve Dell, Orion, 128pp, 1 84255 031 4, £9.99 hbk

This is the sequel to Armstrong's much praised debut novel, *The Road to Somewhere* and it brings back the main characters – Cow, Woolly Woolly Baa Lamb and of course Ratty. You are plunged into the adventure in the first pages: Bad Things have terrified the hens on the farm where the animals live and are out to get all pets. Then comes a message from the animals' old friend Minka: she is a prisoner of the Bad Things and desperately needs help. Ratty's first-person narrative with its short, staccato sentences creates an irresistible pace as well as a real sense of his character. The story is told in the present tense throughout and this too gives it an immediacy and distinctiveness.

The pace is maintained right to the final chapter when it is happy endings all round – even for the villain. These haven't come easily though; there is no sentimentality in the book, just respect for the animal characters and for their wild nature. An author to watch. AR

## Time Stops for No Mouse

★★★

Michael Hoeye, Puffin, 272pp, 0 670 91306 5, £9.99 hbk

This first novel by a new American writer appears to have begun life as a modest local enterprise in Oregon, only to catch the eye of commercial publishers eager for the next best seller, complete with sequels and spin-offs. The speculators are likely to be disappointed. This is an engaging animal adventure story, with the disadvantage that the characters are so heavily humanised that for long stretches only the occasional mention of fur or paws reminds us of their nature. The hero is Hermux Tantamoq, a mouse who lives quietly as a watchmaker until Linka Perflinger, an attractive mouse aviator and adventurer, brings in her watch for repair. Hermux is captivated, and when Linka fails to collect her watch he finds a new role as chivalrous investigator and rescuer. Drawn into a world of mad scientists and ruthless business rodents, Hermux acquires himself well. The book is very good on incidental humour, some of it (such as satire on interior design and health farms) most likely to appeal to adults, while Hermux himself is an amusing hero whose tribulations make for a pleasant if unremarkable read. But

the publicity makes much of the cautious servicemark 'Not Too Scary', and most children's verdict may well be 'Not Scary Enough'. PH

## The Wind Singer

AUDIO BOOK ★★★★★

William Nicholson, read by the author, Collins, 3 hrs, abridged, 0 00 712732 4, £8.99 tape

If you like your stories delivered at a lively pace and with a range of excessive voices for different characters, this is not for you. William Nicholson reads this heavily abridged version unhurriedly and with little variation, defining his own story as calm and measured rather than as a thrilling adventure. Although this can lapse into the soporific, overall it feels entirely appropriate as it allows his dig at an increasingly 'examined' society – the underlying premise of *The Wind Singer* – to come to the fore, so highlighting that aspect which is of far more interest than the driving fantasy of discovering the secret of the Wind Singer. JE

## The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of World Geography

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Gillian Doherty, Anna Claybourne and Susanna Davidson, Usborne, 400pp, 0 7460 4206 X, £30 hbk

At a time when many non-fiction publishers are struggling to maintain sales of reference books in the face of competition from the internet, it is heartening to see one publisher meeting the challenge head on. Anyone who has tried to look something up quickly on the web knows that it can be frustratingly time-consuming, the sheer quantity of sites quite overwhelming and the quality of information often questionable. Hopefully books such as Usborne's new encyclopedia of geography will help to redress the balance by directing children to useful and reliable websites that can be explored alongside the written page. A first-rate reference book in its own right, the publisher is keen to stress that the book can be used without access to a computer. Its value is very definitely enhanced however when you log on to the 'quicklink site' that provides access to recommended websites. The best of these include video clips of volcanoes exploding or hurricanes in action, and there are particularly useful animated diagrams that demonstrate how the Earth orbits the Sun or the changing of the seasons. Others offer the opportunity to put questions to a marine scientist

or to visit a virtual underground cave system. Usborne promises that the link site will be regularly maintained and updated. An additional benefit is that many of the images in the book can be downloaded and printed out for homework projects.

The book itself provides good coverage of the physical geography of the Earth, the formation of rocks and minerals, rivers, lakes and mountains. There is generous use of photographs throughout, from satellite images of the Earth to dramatic shots of landscape features as well as marvellous close-ups of people and faces like the beautiful Masai girl or a group of young Buddhist monks. Coverage of the human geography of each continent inevitably skates over the surface, and Western Europe receives a mere two pages and a rather limited choice of websites, although there are useful sections on the EU, as well as general features on farming, industry and population. A 60-page world atlas and gazetteer completes the volume, together with a factfile of useful statistics. One hopes that Usborne might use the website to include any updates here too. Altogether an approachable and attractive reference book with a wealth of useful websites that can be recommended for home or school use. SU

## Josef Herman in Wales

NON-FICTION ★★

Carolyn Davies, Pont Library, 32pp, 1 85902 999 X, £7.95 pbk

Herman was a Polish exile born in Warsaw in 1911, who arrived in Britain via Belgium and France in 1940. He was awarded the OBE and was a Royal Academician. His artwork is reminiscent of Georges Rouault and the German Expressionist artists and some are particularly naive. The book's concentration on just one period of his life, spent in Wales from 1944 to 1955, leaves the reader frustrated. Some of the drawings and paintings reproduced may be from an earlier period but as many of the paintings are not dated we are left ignorant. We are not told why he left Wales. He became a member of the Royal Academy in 1990, so it would be useful to see some examples of his later work.

The text is suitably simple for young readers but basic omissions, for instance, explaining which war is being referred to, are significant. There is an error at the back of the book with regard to the actual dimensions of a painting.

More questions raised than answered here. AK

## REVIEWS 10–12 Middle/Secondary

## Henry V

Ill. Patricia Ludlow, 1 84234 050 6

## The Taming of the Shrew

Ill. Gwen Green, 1 84234 051 4

★★

Jennifer Mulherin, Cherrytree Books 'Shakespeare for Everyone', 32pp, £4.99 each pbk

Everything about these narrative retellings of the stories of the plays is worthy. In the nicely produced, 30-page formula, there are quotations, accounts of characters and background interspersed with lots of lovely colour pictures, including paintings. Good fillers to use in work about Shakespeare and the plays. I'm not sure what the series title refers to but it's a strangely disconnected, adult view of how to lead children to the plays, more usefully filling the

library shelves and the topic box. The text is filled with appropriate adult comment and information reduced to often wooden sentences whose purpose is more to pay homage to 'our greatest dramatist and poet' than to excite curiosity. A lot of fancy frontage but only a few, narrow doors into the world of the plays. AJ

## The Story of the Search for the Story

★★

Bjørn Sortland, ill. Lars Elling, Carolrhoda, 40pp, 1 57505 375 6, £12.99 hbk

I admire the intentions of this book. I didn't enjoy it. It introduces its readers to several great figures in world literature and tries to make a point about censorship and freedom

of speech at the same time. The Norwegian author and illustrator have already done the same sort of thing for world art in *Anna's Art Adventure*. However, there isn't much of a story, and I'm not sure whom it's for. I wonder whether a younger child, who isn't likely to be sampling Joyce, Proust or Rushdie just yet, is likely to be interested in meeting them in this way. An older child, who might be, would find this picture book introduction embarrassing for all concerned. It is always awkward to judge a text that has been translated, but this does seem ponderous and humourless. The illustrations, which are almost uniformly dark, do not convey much about the authors or their work and contribute very little to the telling of the story. CB

### Long Walk to Lavender Street: A Story from South Africa

Brenda Hollyer, 0 7502 3636 1, £9.99 hbk

### False Papers: A Story from World War One

Stewart Ross, 0 7502 3872 0, £9.99 hbk

### Broken Lives: A Victorian Mine Disaster

Neil Tonge, 0 7502 3631 0, £4.99 pbk

### The Enemy: A Story from World War II

James Riordan, 0 7502 3439 3, £4.99 pbk

★★★

Hodder Wayland 'Survivors', 96pp

This isn't the first time a publisher has produced a series of novels with a view to the information or insight they might provide in support of historical or social studies. I imagine there is always an editorial decision to be made on the balance between storytelling and character development and the clear and accurate portrayal of real events, settings or attitudes. Compared to the comic historical escapades sometimes published for younger children, these four examples of Wayland's new 'Survivors' series seek to be both serious and literary. Yet they show a move away from the exercise of the literary imagination compared to something like A & C Black's 'Flashback' series of a few years ago.

Produced by a publisher whose catalogue is predominantly information books, and intended for Key Stage 3 students in the English National Curriculum, there is a uniformity of approach in the titles not only in length and presentation but even of language and style. Apart from its main story, each book has an introduction, map, historical notes, a list of follow-up reading and a glossary. The covers show a photograph of a child model in appropriate period dress against a background collage of slightly out-of-focus contemporary photographs. Here the mixture of fiction and documentary and the appeal to the child reader are all evident.

The authors appear to be working within a remit to keep the stories straightforward and accessible to the

widest range of reading ability. This is good for narrative clarity but perhaps makes it more difficult to offer particular insight or generate excitement in the texts. As the series title suggests, all of the novels deal with young people faced with harrowing experiences. The four books treat the two world wars, the conditions of Victorian coal mining and the destruction of families through apartheid. Yet there is rarely a feeling of the books getting to grips with the trauma implied in their subject matter. And, to be fair, the writers would be hard pushed to achieve that in the 80-odd pages they have here.

With the exception of, perhaps, *False Papers*, which deals with trench warfare, the novels describe situations in which children would have played a full part. However, it is an open question whether a story truthfully told through a child's eyes is likely to give any more than a partial and uninformed view beyond the circumstantial detail. This makes it difficult for the writers to be true both to the intention to give an accurate historical record and to respect the child's viewpoint. *The Enemy* and *Long Walk to Lavender Street* work best because they are told by an adult looking back, and so, within the story itself, have the benefit of a wider perspective.

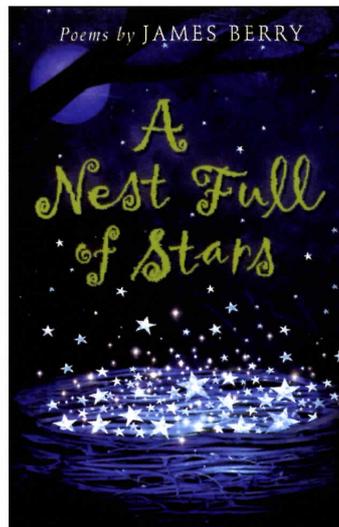
Presumably, the novels address a classroom need for children to empathise with people in the past or who are caught up in present-day conflicts. But I wonder what the advantage is, for example, of using *False Papers* over other sources about the First World War, some of them contemporary, like the war poets, or others, like Michael Foreman's *War Game*, which convey the horror visually yet within a child's understanding. The further reading lists seem to suggest that these novels may be used as an introduction to conventional information books or to more demanding fiction. *The Enemy* refers to another of James Riordan's novels, *The Prisoner*. *Long Walk to Lavender Street* recommends Beverley Naidoo's novels. However, in terms of the reading experience they provide in themselves, I feel that only *The Enemy* and *Long Walk to Lavender Street* have the shape and conviction of real novels, and it was only Hollyer's that moved me. CB

### A Nest Full of Stars

POETRY ★★★★★

James Berry, ill. Rachel Merriman, Macmillan, 96pp, 0 333 96051 3, £9.99 hbk

Berry has the gift of being able to write about childhood as if he were still there. In this new collection he is on top form writing about families, arguments, school, insects and animals and celebrating difference and experience. In his introduction he tells us, 'I developed a strong yearning to write poems based on forms and influences drawn from everyday Caribbean language and culture.' This is one of Berry's greatest strengths, to let his culture and experience inform and enrich language and ideas. Whether writing in Caribbean Creole or 'standard English' his poems are tender, true and magical. The poem 'Big Page Writer' is only one example of these qualities: 'Just carrying on writing / like a hard-working explorer / I suddenly have a full half page / making me a real big page writer. /



Voices of alphabet-shapes, welcome / like eyeballs, birds' footprints, twigs, pebbles / ... my big half page holds a mighty magic mood.' HT

### From Above with Love

★★

Andrew Matthews, Red Fox, 160pp, 0 09 943427 X, £4.99 pbk

There are references to film throughout this book and the central conceit – human being is helped by her very own guardian angel – is often explored in movies. Here however, you're never really sure of the guardian angel's purpose – either as plot device or spiritual mentor.

The central character seems so worldly wise and mature that it's hard to believe she is only 16. Does Lauren really need Pontifex, her guardian angel, when she manages to sort out a quite sensible philosophy for life and love on her own and by page 23? Does his presence and need for her help – an innocent abroad he gets himself into some tricky and fairly amusing situations – teach her anything about herself or life? It doesn't really seem to. Still, teenage girls will love the idea of your very own guardian angel to help you through a break-up with your boyfriend. AR

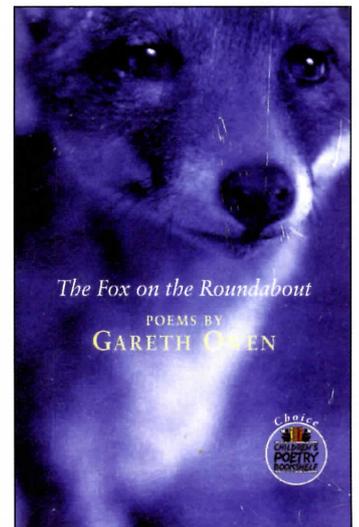
### The Fox on the Roundabout

POETRY ★★★★★

Gareth Owen, Macmillan, 112pp, 0 330 48468 0, £4.99 pbk

This is a gem – a new edition of Owen's classic collection plus six new poems. It has been made the Poetry Book Society's Children's Poetry Bookshelf Choice and deservedly so. Owen has the gift of being able to step back into childhood without sentimentalising and forgetting what it was really like. There are poems about identity, betrayal, love and loss. He considers age and memory from new perspectives informed by childhood experience. The language he uses is rich, the lines are haunting and funny in equal measures making the poems multi-layered, to be read again and again. His poem 'Gold' is one of the best answers to that perennial question children ask poets: 'Where do you get your ideas from?'

'Knock the dirt off your spade, / Set out for the hills / And get to digging. / ...Most days of course / All you come



up with / Is a pile of broken stones. / But better stones, I say, / Than buckets full of air. / At least you can build yourself a cairn / To prove you once passed by.' HT

### Run Zan Run

★★★

Catherine MacPhail, Bloomsbury, 192pp, 0 7475 5504 4, £4.99 pbk

This first novel by MacPhail, now published in paperback, deals with a social issue, bullying in this instance, embedded in a thriller. Katie is the only child of loving, comfortably off, parents, but this perfect life is marred by bullies. Attacked on her way home from school, Katie's tormentors are seen off by a nameless girl Katie comes to call 'Zan' after the box in which her rescuer lives. Zan, on the run from circumstances which are revealed at the end of the book, hides out in derelict buildings and waste ground. She knows how to take care of herself, and empowers Katie to do likewise.

MacPhail's bullies are unattractive characters and *Run Zan Run* is very much onside with the bullied. When Katie's teachers discuss bullying in terms of problems which might have led the bullies to behave as they do, Katie is emphatic that this is an attitude behind which bullies may hide and carry on their terrorising of those weaker or more defenceless than themselves. She also raises the question of bullying behaviour, which when stamped out in school, is merely relocated to other sites such as Katie's route home from school.

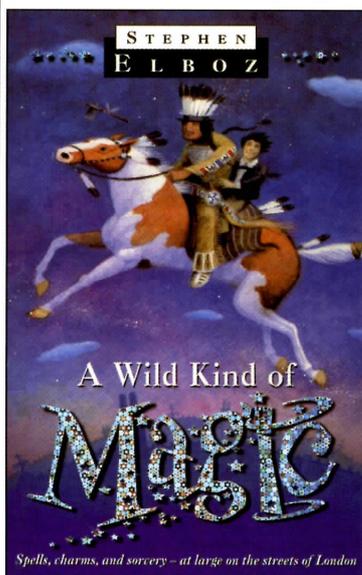
Important issues are raised in *Run Zan Run* and its thriller framework makes it a book which will be read for its action centred plot rather than any social messages contained within it. This is laudable, but all the more pity then that a rather overly melodramatic conclusion may strain a reader's suspension of disbelief. Originally published in 1994 MacPhail has since then written books which, to a greater extent, foreground her ability to develop character and portray domestic situations. VC

### A Wild Kind of Magic

★★★★★

Stephen Elboz, Oxford, 224pp, 0 19 271892 4, £6.99 pbk

It seems appropriate that a novel entitled *A Wild Kind of Magic* should



be a 'wild kind' of book: such is certainly the case here. With a pace that rarely flags (and which indeed occasionally threatens to be exhausting) this piece of madcap entertainment pits the forces of young magician Kit Stixby and his best friend Henry, Queen Victoria's grandson, against the assorted powers of kidnappers, vampire gangs and other larger than life villains straight from the best (or worst) of Victorian melodrama. The murky criminal underworld of the period - complete with the presence, or non-presence, of Jack the Ripper - is here in all its decadent glory, given an extra frisson by the supernatural dimension of the story. Great fun: and watch out in particular for Chapter Ten, set in a sleazy music hall, with the proceedings presided over by its owner, the wonderfully named Belle Canto. RD

### Carrie's War

AUDIO BOOK ★★★★★

Nina Bawden, read by Zelah Clarke, BBC Cover to Cover, 4 hrs 20 mins, unabridged, 1 85549 141 9, £10.99 tape

The re-release of this version of Nina Bawden's perennially absorbing story gives a new generation of listeners a treat. Superficially the story of Carrie's experiences as an evacuee during the Second World War, it is told by Carrie when she returns to the South Wales valley 30 years later and begins to make greater sense of the things that happened at the time. Bawden's cast of original characters and especially of the strange Mister Johnny, as seen by Carrie and her brother Nick, are superbly drawn and her insight into the tensions of family relationships and their misinterpretation is original. *Carrie's War* is a classic and Zelah Clarke's carefully controlled reading of it captures perfectly both the needle sharp observations and

the imprecise dreamy nature of aspects of the story. JE

### Journey as the Wire Bend; Up River Where the Story End

★★★★★

Lisa Levi, ill. Myvanwy Evans, Bogle L'Ouverture Publications, 224pp, 0 904521 34 6, £11.95 pbk

Set on a Caribbean island reminiscent of Trinidad, *Journey as the Wire Bend; Up River Where the Story End* is a modern tale which takes the reader on a pilgrimage into the heart of Caribbean mythology. Following an attempted coup, Annabelle for her safety is sent from the city to join her two cousins and their parents in a remote mountain region. Following the coup there is no television and the children, resorting to more traditional ways of occupying themselves, set off on a hike into the forest. Annabelle with her game-box and other electronic gadgetry, is a metaphor for the modern world they leave behind as they delve further and further up river, encountering as they do mythical creatures from Caribbean folklore: Mama D'Glo (River Mother), Anansi (the spiderman) and the Dwens (the lost souls of the forest), and a host of other bush characters.

Written with exuberance and confidence, Levi's language moves effortlessly between the standard English of the narration and the 'nation language' of the dialogue, to enchant the young reader. The pages are interspersed with some eight of Evans' evocative line drawings. EL

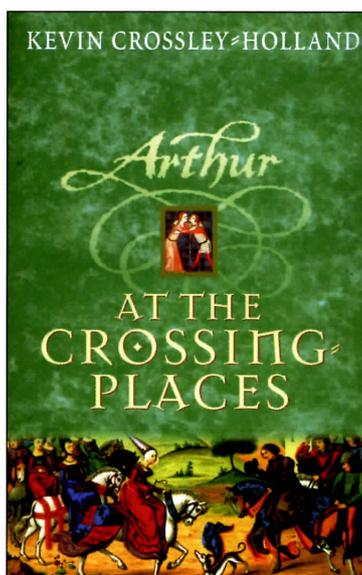
### At the Crossing-Places

★★★★★

Kevin Crossley-Holland, Orion, 384pp, 1 85881 398 0, £10.99 hbk

Reworkings of the old tales of the Matter of Britain present authors with a difficult challenge - how to weave disjointed, uneven and inconsistent fragments into a sustaining whole? Crossley-Holland triumphantly devises a structure in his 'Arthur' trilogy which transcends that problem of fragmentation.

In Part One (*The Seeing Stone*) and now in Part Two (*At the Crossing-Places*) his main narrative does not concern the legendary king but an Arthur growing up at the end of the twelfth century in rural Shropshire. This Arthur is indeed 'at the crossing-places'. He has become squire to a knight determined to go on a Crusade, he is increasingly anxious to discover the identity of his mother from whom he was separated at birth, and he is rapidly becoming aware of girls - betrothal, after all, might not be far away. Much like many of his readers, he is testing the



limits of his sense of self.

King Arthur, along with the round table, the knights, the ladies, Merlin and the rest are glimpsed by the medieval Arthur in his mysterious 'seeing stone'. Here in short chapters we might find a retelling of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the tale of Sir Pellinore and the Yelting Beast, or the beginnings of the tragedy of Guinevere and Lancelot. Within the strong and continuing medieval narrative, these interspersed tales work well. For they are not arbitrarily introduced; they might echo or foreshadow young Arthur's experiences, helping him make sense of his life through story. Crossley-Holland's reader will have to work hard to make these connections, for these are not obvious parallels.

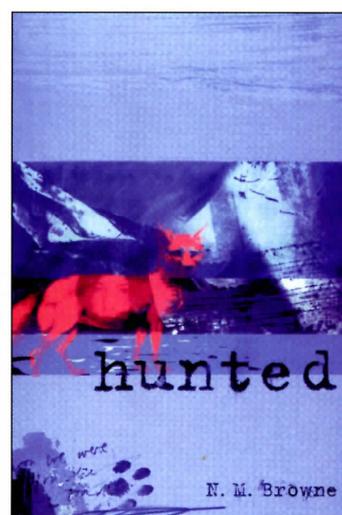
Much of that reader's pleasure might lie in the manner of the telling, as well as in the content of the tales. Crossley-Holland invests the language of the brief chapters of Arthurian myth with a sense of otherness. Readers will need to change pace, to allow the imagery to work on their minds' eyes. In the descriptions of a hunt or a journey, there might be echoes of the rhythms and alliterations of Old and Middle English verse to be relished. This is storytelling of subtlety and nuance and, for the reflective reader, all the more satisfying for that. GF

### Hunted

★★★★★

N M Browne, Bloomsbury, 336pp, 0 7475 5519 2, £5.99 pbk

Intriguing storytelling and a fascinating fantasy world are built up in earthy detail in this novel. It starts with the awful beating given to Karen which leaves her in a coma but growing out of this, and running parallel to it, is the story of Karen's spirit emerging in a fox in a medieval fantasy world - a reminder of *Fire*,



*Bed and Bone* in the narration and the physicality of the sensations. The fantasy is another rich vein of imagining where historic injustices must be righted amongst a community aware of the power of spirits and the presence of the girl within the fox. AJ

### Chocolate: Riches from the Rainforest

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Robert Burleigh, Abrams, 40pp, 0 8109 5734 5, £11.95 hbk

From the outside this one looks good enough to eat. Open the box and the array is dazzlingly confusing as design triumphs, spread after spread, over clarity and the exposition of what turns out to be a most informative text. This is a totally American book (chocolate is our 'favorite flavor') which is not inappropriate, considering chocolate's Mexican origins from which this remarkable comestible's history is traced up till today. We learn about cacao's growth and harvest, its development first as a drink and then (not until 1828) as a suckable solid, the memorable contribution of Milton Hershey and that the many Tootsie Roll factories around the world daily produce 49 million wrapped candies.

Burleigh touches but lightly on chocolate's miserable association with the slave trade both past and present, and misses the opportunity to mention that cocoa products are one of the foodstuffs of which fairly-traded brands are widely available (but then in America perhaps they aren't?).

So if you can stomach the utterly over-the-top (well chocolate-box, really) production, there's quite an interesting read here, not least about the American attitude to this potent brown stuff that Aztec sacrificial victims drank mixed with blood. TP

## REVIEWS 12+ Secondary

### The Memory Prisoner

0 340 85061 2

### Factory of Shadows

0 340 84179 6

★★★★★

Thomas Bloor, Hodder, 160pp,

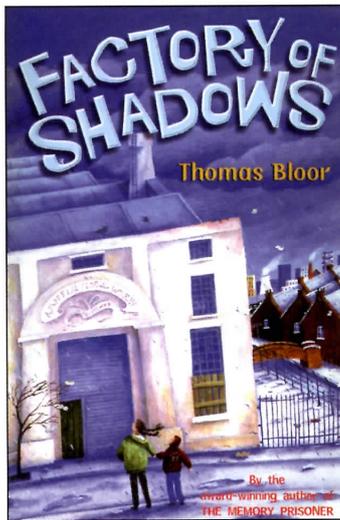
£4.99 each pbk

The first of these novels (A Kathleen Fidler award winner) features a 15-year-old who suffers from agoraphobia and obesity following the traumatic loss of her grandfather at the age of two. For 13 years she languishes in her house until the life

of her vulnerable younger brother, who has acted as her eyes and ears, is threatened. In seeking to rescue him, Maddie has to confront the sinister librarian who seems to wield an inexplicable power over her community.

The second book features a

bohemian family who live in a disused factory which the visionary but ineffectual father is trying to turn into a film studio. When the factory changes hands, its new owner hires a band of thugs to effect an eviction, but matters are complicated by an eerie interloper who lurks almost



unseen in the factory labyrinths. Both of the books feature families tangled in surreal plots spun by pantomime rascals, culminating in farcical climaxes which mingle menace and slapstick. They convey an atmosphere of suburban decay in which struggles between human villainy, frailty and fortitude are played out. Readers who enjoy the work of Philip Ridley should find these well paced and eventful books very appealing. **GH**

**For Better or Worse According to Alex**

★★

Kathryn Lamb, Piccadilly, 160pp, 1 85340 785 2, £5.99 pbk Alex, star of the teen diary novels *The World According to Alex* and *The Last Word According to Alex*, is back. In this latest offering Alex's older sister, Daisy, is getting married. Typically, Alex's diary charts the trials and tribulations of the wedding plans and the attendant embarrassment of chief bridesmaid duties.

*For Better or Worse* is mildly amusing. Lamb has a sharp eye for the comedy of situation and there are some good moments but overall they fail to lift the book out of the ordinary. Readers who enjoy this genre and have established empathy with Alex from previous books will no doubt be entertained. **NG**

**The Rag and Bone Shop**

★★★★★

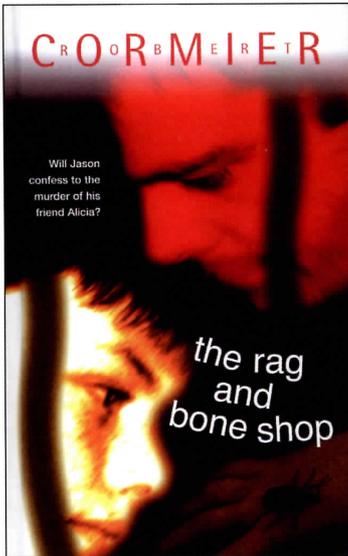
Robert Cormier, Hamish Hamilton, 160pp, 0 241 14164 8, £10.99 hbk

The late Robert Cormier (author of *The Chocolate War*, *All Fall Down*, *After the First Death*) wrote disturbing books about human corruptibility so the lines from Yeats from which the title of this book is taken might constitute an apt epitaph:

*I must lie down where all the ladders start*

*In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.*

Trent is a professional interrogator working in New England, who specialises in extracting confessions from murderers. When a seven-year-old girl is murdered in a Massachusetts town, he is called in to interrogate the person last known to have seen her alive, a diffident 12-



year-old boy who enjoys the company of younger children. Cormier sketches in the social, political and emotional forces which shape Trent's approach to the case, but most of this painfully enthralling book is given over to his dialogue with Jason. Reading it is like seeing a conscious child anatomised and stuffed with refuse. Complex questions of truth, conscience and identity are explored through writing which is simple and penetrating. Cormier's pessimism is suffocating, and may upset some readers, but I found the book impossible to set aside once I'd started to read it. **GH**

**Breakers**

★★★

Julia Clarke, Collins Flamingo, 176pp, 0 00 711688 8, £4.99 pbk

Cat mothers her younger sister while they both cope with the dramas of their actress mother (who now whisks them away from London to Yorkshire) and the slings and arrows of life in general and the move in particular. Within a disappointing, formulaic teenage lurve story there are strands of much more: a range of different emotional needs are explored in relationships which span the generations and reverberate between them. The problems are interestingly juxtaposed but seem to disappear with the kiss from Mr Right. **AJ**

**Never Ever**

★★★

Helena Pielichaty, Oxford, 176pp, 0 19 271891 6, £6.99 pbk

Should the sins of the father be visited on his children? When Erin's father is declared bankrupt the family are forced to move from their comfortable middle-class home to a run-down council estate. Erin has trouble adjusting to her new circumstances but Liam Droy is keen to help her settle in. Erin's old friends are supportive and her parents, though realistically flawed, are warm and compassionate. Erin continues to regret the loss of her former lifestyle but she gradually comes to appreciate the new dimension added by her increased social circle.

Pielichaty has written a witty and entertaining story of changing fortunes which avoids taking a simplistic moral stance. She has an excellent ear for teenage vernacular and captures the witty repartee

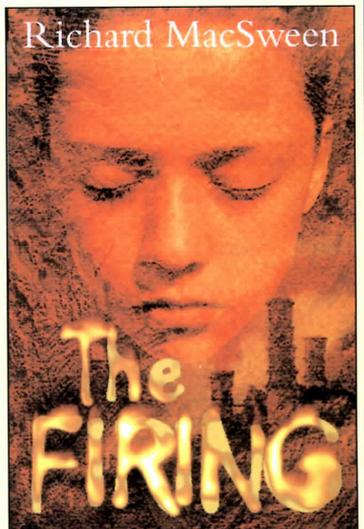
**NEW Talent**

**The Firing**

★★★

Richard MacSween, Andersen Press, 176pp, 1 84270 055 3, £4.99 pbk

14-year-old Anna resents her mother's boyfriend Brian, ignores his twin sons and detests life in their council house in Whin, a small village outside Manchester. When trendy potter Colette moves into a nearby cottage Anna is intrigued by her and by her silently morose son, Wolf. The external drama of this debut novel – did Wolf sexually molest a girl in Berlin or not – which leads to various unlikely twists of plot is utterly unconvincing but MacSween paints a most entertaining and credible portrait of the dynamic that is played out between Anna, her hairdresser mum, her feckless dad and the long suffering Brian, not to speak of the twins, Declan and Diarmid.



MacSween's narrative voice is laconically informal and his ear for dialogue and the minutiae of family life spot on. A talent to watch. **RS**

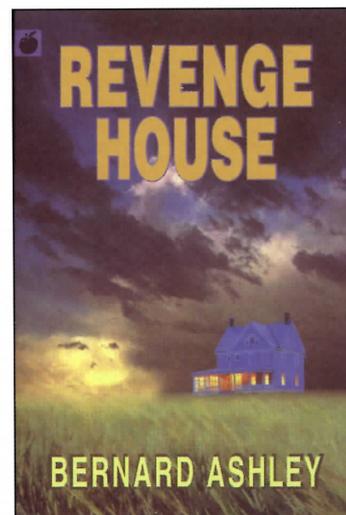
common amongst close friends. Dual narration provides insight into Liam and Erin's developing romance and their maturation. **NG**

**Revenge House**

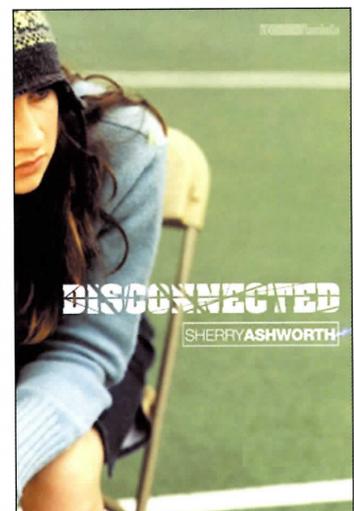
★★★★

Bernard Ashley, Orchard, 224pp, 1 84121 814 6, £4.99 pbk

This is a tense, classy thriller for an older readership, with a well-plotted double narrative and with sections of verse that might require a bit of tenacity. Ashley sets a tone and style that is very contemporary and should have wide appeal. Some of the heavies seem a bit as though they are out of a naff detective series, but central characters are sympathetically drawn.



London girl Sophia has no choice but to become 'buried' in marshland Kent after the untimely, accidental death of her father. The possessive, grieving mother feels that here her daughter will be safe. But she hasn't reckoned on Sophia developing a relationship with a local motorbiking Romeo or the gangland thugs that descend on their isolated B & B and put them all in grave danger. **DB**



**Disconnected**

★★★★★

Sherry Ashworth, Collins Flamingo, 224pp, 0 00 712045 1, £4.99 pbk

Catherine Holmes has always been a model student, delighting her teachers and parents with her GCSE grades and set to take A-levels, the golden path to Oxbridge and a distinguished career. The inflexibility of this inexorable life-plan unnerves her and she begins to experiment with another lifestyle altogether.

Her ability to work, her relationship with Taz, a bisexual Asian boy, and her increasing involvement with heavy drinking are brilliantly conveyed in a series of letters to those most deeply involved in her life. Ashworth documents superbly the sweet, hard kick of alcohol addiction, setting it against Catherine's middle-class parents' hypocrisy: as daily drinkers they still see fit to criticise their daughter's habit.

As events spiral downwards and out of control, Catherine longs to leave home and desperately clings on to her friendship with Jan, seeing it as a gateway to freedom for them both. It is her discovery that Jan is a child prostitute which brings her up short: rescued by a stranger from a

dangerous part of town she realises that there is no courage in running away from home – only in returning. Her belief that survival lies in connecting again with those she has damaged is neither convenient nor pious. Ashworth's skill in exploring and explaining a teenage mind gives the narrative voice a ringing credibility. VR

## No Fear

★★★★

Sylvia Hall, Scholastic, 272pp,  
0 439 99860 3, £5.99 pbk

This is teenage fiction at its most engaging with a crisp, fast moving narrative and with stylish dialogue that evokes the world of London's strife-ridden inner city estates that is the story's setting. 15-year-old Goldie and her mixed race family are devastated when circumstances force them to move from their friendly neighbourhood to a council estate dominated by two rival gangs, split along race lines. Goldie, in spite of her best efforts, is sucked into their world of hatred and bigotry but sees her membership of the new multiracial band 'No Fear' (with her heart throb Josh as lead guitarist) as a way out. In the meantime she witnesses a stabbing and has to face some tough moral dilemmas. The various strands of the plot are expertly interwoven and are finally resolved in a stirring climax, which provides however no safe haven for complacency or sentimentality regarding race issues.

Only a few minor incongruities in the use of otherwise convincing dialogue, and discernible only by close scrutiny of the text, hint that Sylvia Hall is in fact a pseudonym used by an American author – though the book's absence of any biographical blurb does fuel speculation regarding authorship. Anyway, this barely detracts from the novel, and her foray into British fiction, by whatever name, should only be encouraged. EL

## Zero Per Cent

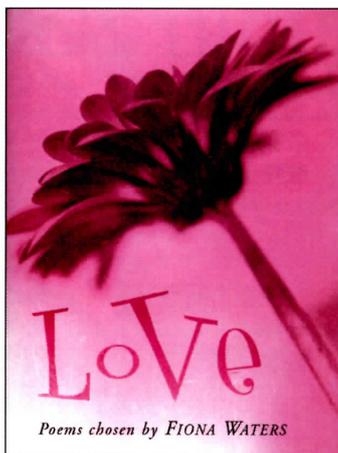
★★★

Mark Swallow, Collins  
Flamingo, 272pp,  
0 00 712649 2, £4.99 pbk

It is the last exam of the year and Jack Curling reflects on his school career as the remaining minutes count down.

Determined to prove to his father that he can succeed at the local comprehensive school, Jack's entrepreneurial spirit quickly marks him out from the other students. But when Dad leaves home, Jack, confused by the apparent betrayal, decides that all endeavour is futile.

Swallow takes a fresh approach to his subject. *Zero Per Cent* raises some interesting questions about the development of autonomy and the benchmarks that are used to measure success. Clearly written from the teenager's perspective, it moves towards allowing some insight into the parental point of view while resolutely remaining on the side of the young person. NG



## Love

### POETRY

★★★★

Chosen by Fiona Waters,  
Macmillan, 144pp,  
0 333 90348 X, £7.99 hbk

A beautifully produced small hardback of love poems from past and present, covering all aspects of love. Waters has mixed the old and the new to create a hypnotic collection of poems which will make you smile and tug at your heartstrings. New voices to this type of anthology are Michael Ondaatje, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Maura Dooley and Hugo Williams, bringing a younger feel to the usual love poem selection. At a time when we have been remembering Spike Milligan, his poem 'Love Song' is particularly moving: 'If I could write words / Like leaves on an autumn forest floor / What a bonfire my letters would make. / If I could speak words of water / You would drown when I said / "I love you".' HT

## An Ancient Land: Prehistory – Vikings

Mike Corbishley, 80pp,  
0 19 910828 5

## Medieval Kingdoms: Alfred the Great – Henry VII

John Gillingham, 104pp,  
0 19 910829 3

## Crown and People: 1500–1700

Rosemary Kelly, 104pp,  
0 19 910830 7

## Empire and Industry: 1700–1900

Ian Dawson, 96pp,  
0 19 910831 5

## A Century of Change: 1900–2000

James Mason, 96pp,  
0 19 910832 3

### NON-FICTION

★★★★

Oxford, £7.99 each pbk

When the publisher says that 'some material' in these five books was previously published in *The Young Oxford History of Britain and Ireland* in 1996, what is meant is that nearly all of what is in these five paperback titles appeared in the earlier single hardback version. Only the last few pages of the final volume by James Mason have significant additions to bring it up-to-date.

These are excellent continuous

narrative accounts of the history of the British Isles. It is rare and welcome to find information books that expect children to read them in exactly the same way that they read fiction rather than in bite sized paragraphs served up in double page portions. The division of the longer history into five roughly equal length volumes makes perfect sense. In fact, the sections were the work of individual authors anyway, although the consistency of subject matter and presentation suggests a strong lead from the overall editor, Professor Kenneth O Morgan.

Apart from the misleading claim about how much material had already appeared, these histories do exactly what they say they will do. They include all the British Isles, so that it is possible to track the separate histories of Wales, Scotland and Ireland through the indexes of all the volumes; and they are authoritatively written, judiciously balancing political, social and economic history.

All the authors draw on a thorough knowledge of their periods, using contemporary accounts from a variety of sources that provide a portrait of the time from those who lived it, as well as how it appears in hindsight. The illustrations and photographs, predominantly in colour and contemporary to the time they are illustrating, are fully captioned to add more information than is in the body of the text. As you read, you are constantly aware that there is much more to be discovered and discussed beyond the space that the book allows, and each of the authors conveys implicitly, through their attitude to their subject, the provisional nature of historical judgement.

My only complaint is that the quotes in the text are not fully attributed and that there is no bibliography, so that there is not as much help as there might be for keen readers to follow a subject further. There is a good index, and useful tables of the English Royal Succession and the Kings and Queens of Scotland, and a list of British Prime Ministers, although, in the last volume at least, the editor could perhaps have dispensed with the royal family trees. Each of the volumes is a thorough, lucid and interesting general introduction to its period for young people and adults. CB

## Drinking: The facts about alcohol and you

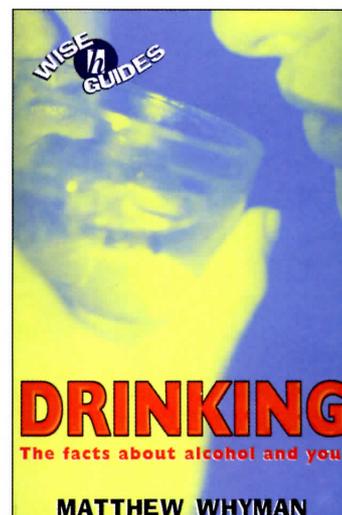
### NON-FICTION

★★★★

Matthew Whyman, ill. Harry Venning, Hodder 'Wise Guides', 128pp, 0 340 81805 0, £4.99 pbk

This book on alcohol awareness aims to help readers make informed decisions about their drinking. It also gives advice on the difficulty of living in an environment with problem drinkers.

In the opening chapter on understanding alcohol we are given the often-quoted safe levels of drinking for adults. The author claims it is impossible to give sensible drinking guidelines for under-18s. However, I think this is needed. It is not illegal for teenagers to drink and some are drinking regularly. The research I have been involved with suggests that 3-7 units



is a safe bet, not all at once and with the proviso that a safe amount depends on age and body weight.

Young people want to know the facts about alcohol, the strength of different drinks, why people drink, how to avoid the risks and what to do if things go wrong. These topics are covered here. There are also extensive and presumably authentic quotes from young people themselves. One says: 'it washes away your nerves especially when it comes to chatting people up. The downside is you risk talking rubbish, of course.' While a 13-year-old reflects on a parental drinking ritual: 'My dad fixes himself a drink as soon he gets in. He doesn't even ask how my day was not until he has a gin and tonic in his hand.' There is a helpful section on the impact on health, which considers alcohol and diet and the effect on the skin. Body image is important to teenagers and they are likely to take note.

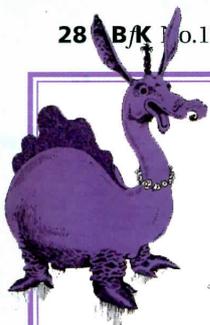
A chapter on risks links alcohol with violence with an example of a young person's salutary experience in a pub which nearly cost him his life, after he had edged his way to the bar past an aggressive group of drinkers. In a later chapter advice is given to someone worried about friends drinking. A friend is said to be often best placed to express concern and give advice. The 'recovery position' is recommended for a drunk person but it would have been useful to show it in diagrammatic form.

This book is well researched and covers a lot of ground but I am not sure if young teenagers would buy it. It is more likely to be bought by worried parents after noticing raids on the drink cabinet. It could also be used by teachers as a resource in a PSHE lesson and for youth workers wanting to help young people create their own booklet on alcohol. CC

## PICTURE BOOKS REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE RELEVANT TO OLDER READERS:

The Red Tree (see p22)

The Story of the Search for  
the Story (see p23)



# CLASSICS IN SHORT No. 33

Brian Alderson



*Chop down the gallows on Execution Dock;  
fill us a bumper of Jamaica for – once again...*

## Reports from the log of the 'Black Tiger'

first came to the world's notice in the hand of Ship's Calligrapher, Mervyn Peake, when the world had more devilish villains to attend to than the crew of a ramshackle galleon.

## Nineteen-Thirty-Nine

was the year, and twenty-eight year-old Peake, who was making a name for himself as an artist, had had the book accepted by *Country Life* (probably through the agency of Noel Carrington, that progressive editorial spirit). It derived first from Peake's passion for islands – he had much of *Treasure Island* by heart – and second from several experimental drafts. What finally emerged was an 'integrated book', text and illustration hand-drawn as a unity, with the only colour appearing, rather drably, on the binding and dust-jacket.

## It was hardly a thrilling yarn.

Page by page you are introduced to the pirate-crew, including such buccaneers as Billy Bottle, Jonas Joints and Peter Poop, who has a cork nose. The chief event is their discovery of a pink island where, among many strange beasts, there dwells the Yellow Creature. He joins the gang and, surviving much offstage brigandage (unlike the crew), he returns with the Captain to the pink island where they spend their days catching baroque fish.

## What's classic about it

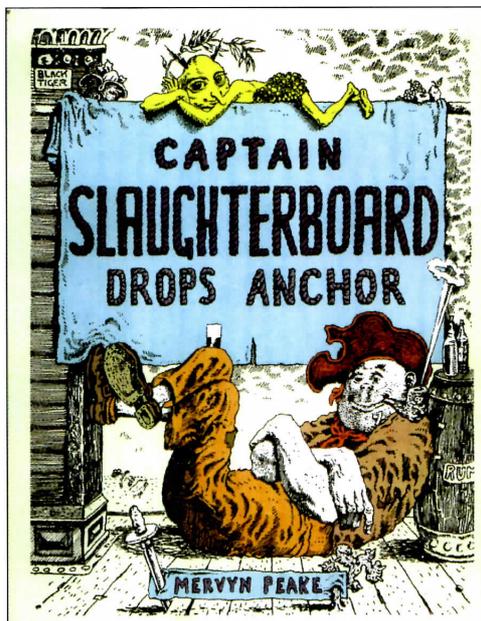
is its parade of oddity. The full-page portraits of pirates and local fauna (Balleroon... Dignipomp... Guggaflop ...) are pure caricature, and the antics of the Yellow Creature are pointlessly barmy – although he's a good cook and gets on well with the Captain, judging by the conspiratorial leer that he gives us while lazing on the grass, eating a banana. Peake's logging of events is serviceable and concludes with a beautifully-fashioned cadence.

## But then – Bang!

Not a ship's cannon, but a German bomb. Soon after publication *Country Life's* warehouse was hit and most copies of the Captain's history went up in smoke. (Unforeseen at the time, this would result in surviving copies changing hands for chestfuls of doubloons.)

## Not the end of the story though.

In 1945 a new edition was published by Eyre & Spottiswoode, one of whose directors was Graham Greene, who



admired Peake's work. According to the blurb, the artist had now 'coloured the plates' – presumably to relieve the earlier black-and-white severity – but with weird results. Here and there whole pages are washed with a single tint – blue, pink, grey, yellow – while elsewhere touches of a second colour may be added, or large portions of pirates or mythical beasts left entirely uncoloured.

## Such heterogeneous demands

made on the printer were expensive and, before long, the captain and his friend retired from view for some twenty-two years. Then a third version appeared in both Britain and the USA, making a rather weedy compromise: most of the book being monochrome but with a yellow tint introduced at strategic moments. This was not satisfactory and although by this time Peake was seriously ill with Parkinson's Disease he roused himself sufficiently to find the added colour offensive, claiming that it obscured his line-work.

## So what of Two Thousand and One?

For last year a wholly reconstituted *Slaughterboard* sailed in. The format was almost doubled and two designers, Julia Thompson and Daniel Devlin, had prepared a palette of tints which enhance rather than obscure Peake's subtle drawing and stippling. It may be a trifle sophisticated for an old stubble-chinned mariner with holes in his socks ('wot's it wiv them sky-blue endpapers then?') but the Yellow Creature will love it and I'm sure that Mervyn Peake would have done so too.

P.S. Peake's genius as writer and illustrator of books for children is largely disregarded (how many readers, for instance, recognise in Anthony Browne's *Gorilla* a 'quote' from Peake's wonderful nursery-rhyme book *Ride a Cock Horse*?) Just lately though his remarkable pen-drawings for the two 'Alice' books have been digitally re-mastered for publication by Bloomsbury, with a poncy limited edition of captioned images only from Libanus Press (folio in sky-blue cloth at £140 a time). ■

The illustrations are taken from the 2001 edition published by Walker Books (0 7445 8122 2, £12.99 hbk).

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