

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

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the children's books magazine

Carnegie Medal

Greenaway
Medal

Hilary McKay



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CoverStory

This issue's cover illustration is from Terry Deary's *The Thief, the Fool and the Big Fat King*, illustrated by Helen Flook, from A & C Black's 'Tudor Tales' series. Terry Deary is discussed by Sue Unstead on page 3. Thanks to A & C Black for their help with this July cover.

EDITORIAL



Rosemary Stones

In this issue of BfK Margaret Meek discusses *Ways of Being Male*, a collection of essays on how masculinity is depicted in children's fiction and film and to what extent that depiction reflects changing views of masculinity in society. But what about the depiction of femininity?

As we know, for generations it was the experience of girls which lacked cultural validation. At her mother's knee a girl learnt that her job was to channel her creativity into making things right for others and to manage her own wishes and desires by sublimating them. And what girls felt, experienced and saw was denied, distorted or not put into words at all.

The changing views of femininity in society after feminism have resulted in changes in the depiction of fictional heroines. One recent example is Jennifer Donnelly's splendid novel, *A Gathering Light*, a perceptive portrait of a girl at the beginning of the last century who fights against the compliance expected of her – despite witnessing the ostracism of her feminist teacher who is threatened with committal to a mental institution for such subordination. Like Ms Donnelly, many writers for young readers today, whether they write historical novels or novels with a contemporary setting, validate femaleness in their fictions in ways that would hitherto have been unthinkable.

But if feminism has allowed girls to be different and to have separate desires, it

has also allowed us to recognise that girls can be aggressive. And if girls can be aggressive, perhaps we can also allow that boys can be fragile. In the real world many are – there has been a dramatic increase in suicides among teenage males, the topic of Anne Fine's recent novel, *Up on Cloud Nine*. Again in real life, it is boys who are known to miss out on education about sex and relationships. That such vital information still isn't seen as 'boys' stuff' ignores boys' needs. Is their fiction any better? After reading the reductionistic relating of Melvin Burgess's *Doing It*, I am tempted to say no. Fortunately there are other novels for teens which reflect the fact that boys as much as girls seek to have relationships.

Rosemary

A Gathering Light is published by Bloomsbury, *Up on Cloud Nine* by Doubleday and *Doing It* by Andersen Press.



'The Little Red Hen: A Deliciously Funny Flap Book' is Editor's Choice with five stars, reviewed on page 19.

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BfK PROFILE

Horribly Successful Author

Ask a group of 8-10 year olds to name their favourite author and Terry Deary's name is bound to crop up. Rarely out of the bestseller lists in the past ten years, he has collected two Blue Peter awards, was voted 'Outstanding children's non-fiction author of the 20th Century' by BfK readers, and was found to be the most-borrowed author of non-fiction in a library survey. With more than 130 books to his name in the UK and over 350 worldwide, he is best known for 'Horrible Histories', which have sold over 8 million copies.

Thanks to the success of the 'Horrible Histories' series, Terry Deary is labelled as a non-fiction author, but this is only part of the picture. 'In fact it's far more enjoyable writing fiction,' says Deary. His very first book, **The Custard Kid**, has recently been reissued by A & C Black, along with seven other Deary classics in the 'Black Cats' series.

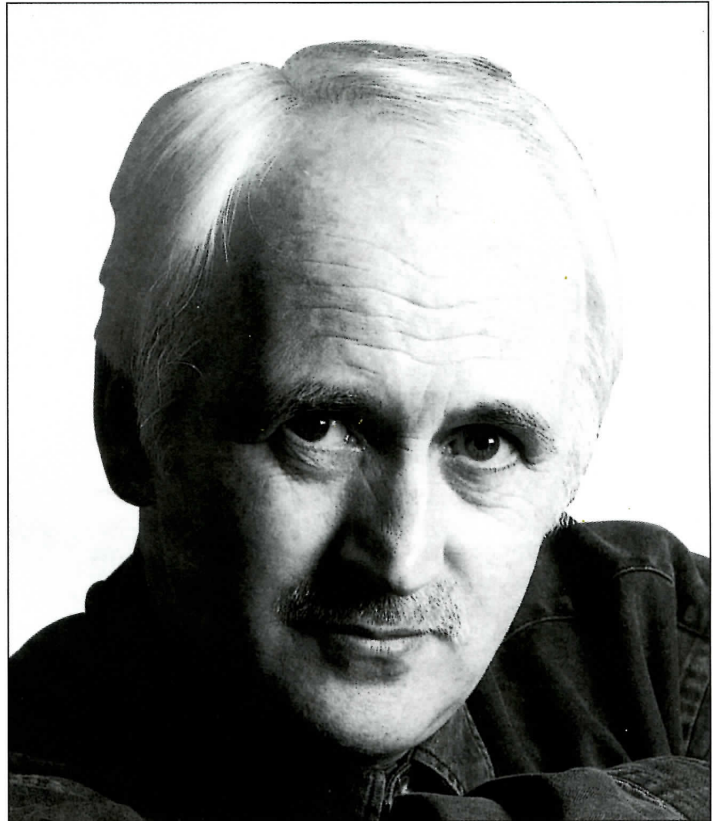
Born in 1946 in Sunderland, Deary's first venture into writing came about as a result of his work with Theatre In Education. Deary studied drama and then went into teaching before his dream-job came up as an actor-teacher with a theatre group in Wales performing plays in schools and community theatre. Frustrated by the poor quality of published plays, he started writing material himself. The company wanted a Western for their next play ('so they could talk in American accents all the time and get away with it'). Deary turned the genre on its head and created a cowardly cowboy – The Custard Kid. Adapted into a

book, it was rejected 23 times before a discerning editor appreciated the humour and published it alongside another teacher-turned-author, Jeremy Strong.

Other fiction series followed, several of which were targeted at reluctant readers. A change of direction came with an approach from Scholastic to write a Father Christmas joke book. Not wanting to turn down work as a fledgling writer, he made such a good job of it that there followed a request for a history joke book. This was originally to include such gems as 'Where did the French keep their guillotine? In the chopping centre', with historical anecdotes alongside the jokes. In the end the historical content proved much more interesting than the jokes, and 'Horrible Histories' emerged, the first title being **The Terrible Tudors**, followed by **Awesome Egyptians** and **Rotten Romans**.

Now Deary alternates writing fiction with non-fiction, though often he combines the two, as in 'Tudor Terrors', an historical adventure series published by Orion, or 'The Time Detectives', another adventure series, this time from Faber in which a young team of investigators uncovers the truth behind real historical mysteries. 'Tudor Tales', a new collection of stories for younger readers from A & C Black, bear all the Deary hallmarks with their descriptions of the underbelly of Tudor society – a world of greasy taverns, rat-infested attics, scullions and potwashers. The Henry VIII we meet here is no Renaissance prince but a bloated elderly king behaving like a playground bully, while Elizabeth I is not the Gloriana currently being celebrated in quattrocentennial exhibitions

Sue Unstead on TERRY DEARY



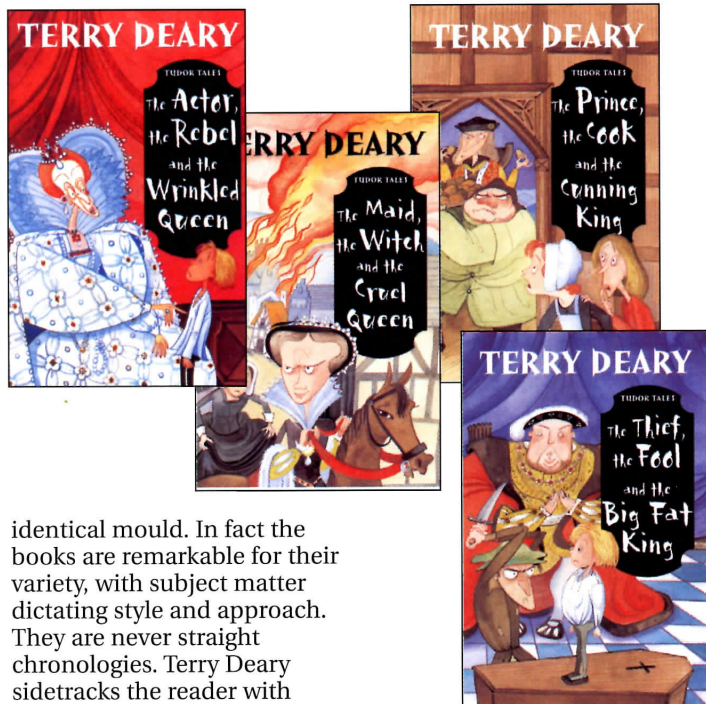
but a raddled old hag with rotting teeth and foul breath. In each tale the plot turns upon the brave or cunning actions of the smart kid who outwits the adult. That child is also the narrator, so we are immediately drawn into the story with convincing dialogue, and sharply drawn historical detail.

According to his website, books pop out of his wordprocessor like 'eggs from a chicken's bottom'. Clearly Deary is not a man who suffers from writer's block, for he is a prolific author who sorts out ideas in his head and then gets them down at speed. Most books are completed in a month. As a result he hates rewriting or revising, and though he puts trust in his sales and marketing people, he views most editors as 'a waste of space', an unnecessary obstacle between author and his audience. 'Mostly middle-aged, middle-class women from the south of England', he is reported to have announced to a startled conference of publishing worthies!

Deary has a strong authorial voice, a feature that

distinguishes his books in a field where bland encyclopedic information is too often the norm. He writes with his imaginary reader always in his mind, someone who is not a particularly fluent reader or with a long attention span. His tone is conspiratorial – not 'I'm a grown-up so sit still and I'll tell you what I know', but 'I'm no expert but you'll never believe what I found out when I read this book'. His huge popularity, especially amongst boys, is undoubtedly a result of this genuine enthusiasm – a big kid who just wants to share the information with others kids, big or small.

It's now ten years since the first 'Horrible History' titles were published and a mass of publicity and special events have marked the anniversary. There are now 30 books in the series ranging from curriculum favourites like **Awesome Egyptians** and **Rotten Romans** to specials on **Ireland**, **Bloody Scotland** (a book that caused huge fuss when it was launched) and **France**. It would be easy to assume that having found a winning formula, the content of each book is poured into an



identical mould. In fact the books are remarkable for their variety, with subject matter dictating style and approach. They are never straight chronologies. Terry Deary sidetracks the reader with features on Terrible Tudor clothes or witches, Rotten Roman childhood or Vile Victorian schools. And there are practical projects (such as how to make a ruff – and once you've put it on how to stroll around singing 'Greensleeves'), recipes, sample menus, games, quizzes, diaries, letters and of course the witty and subversive cartoons by Martin Brown which perfectly match Deary's text. Much copied, much maligned by envious publishers, children can't get enough of them, while parents and teachers praise the books for encouraging reluctant readers, especially boys.

Those who give the series little more than grudging praise make comparisons with *1066 and All That*, although the latter is a quite different beast. Originally written as a series of articles for *Punch*, the authors of *1066* celebrated our 'frail recall of the salient facts of history' and the humour comes from getting them wrong. The premise for 'Horrible Histories' is that history is horribly boring unless enlivened by a joke or three a page and a generous helping of gore. Actually I never did find history boring, but then I had a father who wrote popular history books for children...

Perhaps the last word should go to the little boy who paid Terry Deary what he describes as his best compliment: 'I don't like books, but I read yours.' ■

The Books

'Black Cats' series (A & C Black) including:

The Custard Kid, 64pp, 0 7136 5989 0, £3.99 pbk

'Tudor Terror' series (Orion)

'Tudor Tales' series (A & C Black) including:

The Thief, the Fool and the Big Fat King, 64pp, 0 7136 6434 7, £4.99 pbk

The Actor, the Rebel and the Wrinkled Queen, 64pp, 0 7136 6428 2, £4.99 pbk

'Horrible Histories' (Scholastic) including:

The Terrible Tudors, 128pp, 0 590 55290 2, £3.99 pbk

The Rotten Romans, 128pp, 0 590 55467 0, £3.99 pbk

The Vile Victorians, 128pp, 0 590 55466 2, £3.99 pbk

'The Time Detectives' series (Faber) including:

The Princes in Tower, 86pp, 0 571 20117 2, £4.99 pbk

'Spark Files' (Faber) including:

Light and Wrong, Barbara Allen and Terry Deary, 96pp, 0 571 19742 6, £3.99 pbk

Talking Books (includes an interview with Terry Deary) by James Carter, Routledge, 266pp, 0 415 19417 2, £12.99 pbk

Terry Deary's website:
www.terry-deary.com

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

Giving Something Back – the St Lucia Libraries Project

A chance meeting can lead to unexpected outcomes. When librarian Anne Marley visited St Lucia, she could not have foreseen how a visit to Castries Central Library would lead to an eventful year. **Anne Marley** explains.

In January 2002 I went off on a Caribbean cruise as a reward for getting through a Best Value Review of our School Library Service (if you don't know what one is, just be grateful!). I never dreamed when I disembarked from the P & O cruise liner, the *Arcadia*, one beautiful sunny day in St Lucia that I would be back within the year, only this time with 86 boxes containing almost 4,000 children's books and a cheque for £6,000 for the librarians of St Lucia to spend on whatever they wanted for their children's libraries.

When I first arrived in St Lucia, all I intended to do was visit the capital, Castries, have a quick look round the Carnegie Library in Derek Walcott Square, and then go off and explore a little of the rest of this wonderful island. That was before I met Agnes Alcide, one of the librarians there.

I am always fascinated by how library services are provided in other parts of the world and I like to see what we can learn from them. I learned a lot from Agnes. I saw when I went into the children's library that it was well used – there was a group of children from the 'Happy Moments' Playgroup and quite a few other children and their parents in there. I could also see that the books had been loved to death – a sure sign of a popular and well-used library – but that they could do with a bit of a boost in terms of new books.

Setting up the project

We chatted for quite a while – over an hour – and that time changed my life. I have always believed that all children in the world are entitled to education, information and pleasure from books and other resources and I thought it was about time we gave something back to St Lucia, an island that lots of British people go to on holiday. My gift was to be something that I hoped the children of St Lucia would benefit from educationally, but also enjoy – books. Agnes thought this might be OK, so we said goodbye and she went back to work and I went off to explore.

Back in the UK, I was determined to do something and I am very privileged in that I know quite a few people in the children's book world. So, I wrote to all the authors, illustrators and publishers I knew – in fact anyone I thought might be able to give me books to send over. I wanted new, up-to-date books – not used or inappropriate to their needs. Throughout this time, I liaised with Brenda Paul, Acting Head of Libraries in St Lucia, on the best way of working together. The British High Commission got involved, as did P & O Cruises, who generously agreed to freight the books out there.

Nearly 4,000 new children's books poured in from everywhere in the UK. Anne Fine, Philip Pullman, J K Rowling, Terry Jones and Jacqueline Wilson, to name but a few, supported the project by donating copies of their own books. More than 50 authors and 15 publishing houses and reviewers offered books, which was absolutely wonderful and quite overwhelming.

Jane Ray, Ian Beck, Michael Foreman, Anthony Browne and others donated original artwork, which raised money at YLG, SLA and



From the left, clockwise: Children from Hook-with-Warsash Primary School handing over Christmas books to the Captain of the Oriana in November, just before the ship sailed; Agnes Alcide, Anne Marley and Brenda Paul, Acting Head of St Lucia Libraries; Girls from a local school at the presentation of a cheque in Castries Central Library; Girls helping out in Dennery Library on the east coast.



ASCEL Conferences – so the librarians played their parts too! Children in schools in Hampshire, including Hook-with-Warsash Primary and Admiral Lord Nelson schools, had raffles and cake sales. Terry Pratchett, a recent Carnegie medal winner, donated part of his prize money, and he and a number of others, including Bob Swindells, Jane Nissen and Hugh Montgomery also made cash donations. The £6,000 thus raised was for St Lucia librarians to spend on books themselves.

Delivering the books

The *Oriana* left Southampton in November and a group of children from Hook-with-Warsash School in Hampshire gave the Captain, Rory Smith, a special parcel, containing Carnegie Medal winning books and Christmas stories to give to children from Castries library when the ship arrived in St Lucia as a Christmas present. They also sent letters as they hoped to find pen pals – an opportunity to find out more about each other and to share information about the books they like.

I flew over on holiday at the beginning of December and was there when the ship docked and the books were unloaded. We had an official handover on the ship, with the Captain, the British High Commissioner, a Senior Officer in the Education Ministry and of course Brenda Paul and Agnes Alcide of the library service. We had a second ceremony at the library with children from two local schools in Castries, at which the Governor General, Mme Pearllette Louisy, accepted the cheque for £6,000 and I in turn received a gift of – yes – books! Mine, however, were a beautiful full colour guide to St Lucia and some St Lucian picture books, which will go to Hook-with-Warsash School.

A tour of the libraries

I went on a tour of the seventeen libraries with Brenda and one of her colleagues. Though the island is quite small in area, the roads are often very twisty and often in need of repair and the trip took a whole day. The scenery is breathtaking. From the coast, with its blue seas and warm breezes, we went inland, climbing ever higher on the road through the tropical rainforest. Then down again, on badly rutted roads to small villages, which, because of their isolation, need their own libraries. Though there is affluence on the island, not everyone benefits from the tourist trade and education and books are vital if the children are to progress in life.

The tour was fascinating, because, of course, I got to see the island with people who lived there. The libraries vary in size; some are no larger than a room in a house, others are quite spacious but they all had three things in common: the staff was friendly and welcoming, the children who used the libraries valued them and the opportunity to learn but crucially, the stock was desperately in need of editing and revitalising.

Continuing the project

4,000 books sounds a lot, but they don't go very far when there are 17 libraries to provide for and children who need to feed their reading habit. The provision for pre-school children was particularly in need of re-stocking. I received a call from the Head of a Montessori Pre-School, who had seen a piece they did on St Lucia TV about the project, asking if we could help provide books for them. This set me thinking about continuing the project, but this time, focusing on books for under 5s. So I contacted the Chair of the Hotel and Tourism Association while I was still there to see if they might offer sponsorship to provide kinderboxes and picture books for some of the libraries on the island. We're working on that at present.

Transport is always the most difficult aspect of any scheme like this, but P & O Cruises have generously offered to help again and will ship books and furniture out to the island. I have in mind some of the wonderful kinderboxes that Peters Bookselling Services sell in their Kit Shop. They are bright and attractive, and when full of picture books, will be a great asset to the libraries over there. All I have to do now is raise the money, and persuade publishers to send me books!

It was a wonderful year – people's generosity was extraordinary and I found it a very emotionally rewarding enterprise. The best parts, though, were meeting the St Lucians, a very warm and friendly people, visiting their wonderful island and being able to give something back to them from the children's book world in the UK – something that hopefully will help their children in years to come. ■

Anne Marley is Head of Children's, Youth and Schools Service, Hampshire Library & Information Service.
Email: anne@marleyhcl.freeserve.co.uk

The Carnegie and

The winners of the 2003 Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals, the most prestigious children's book awards in the UK, will be announced in July. But what about the shortlists? **Jan Mark** and **Martin Salisbury** investigate.

Jan Mark on the Carnegie Medal Shortlist

In its original manifestation the Carnegie medal was awarded for 'The Best Children's Book of the Year'. Selecting the best book of 1936, for which it was first awarded, must have been a fairly straightforward exercise. There were relatively few contenders and those were simpler times. There can have been little debate about what constituted a children's book because there was not much doubt about how one identified a child. Now the citation reads 'For an outstanding book ... for children and young people'. There are thousands of children's books published annually, vast sums are involved, children are a targeted consumer group and we have witnessed the emergence of the 'crossover book', initially a work of fiction which found an adult readership (not the other way about, take note); more recently a book which is published on both adult and children's lists.

Children's books have always had an adult readership, the difference now being that adults read them unblushingly in public, and books for both children and young adults deal with material which once no one would have dreamed of making available to them. That first Carnegie Medal went to Arthur Ransome's *Pigeon Post* which was published only eight years after *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, of which an overheated journalist infamously wrote, 'I would rather give a healthy boy or girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel'. *The Well of Loneliness* was never intended for boys and girls in the first place, but the prussic acid would have been out for *The Shell House*, Linda Newbery's sympathetic and considered look at the confused sexual orientation of a contemporary teenager set alongside the story of soldier lovers in WWI – incidentally the time-setting of Hall's novel – which is, rightly, intended for boys and girls.

But the lads in it are not children and would not consider themselves to be children.

Is *Martyn Pig*, Kevin Brooks's debut novel about an accidental parricide and its ramifications, for or about children? It is the Essex setting that gives it its air of gritty realism, the drab vicissitudes of modern low life. In fact it is cheerfully preposterous, part of the fine old British literary tradition of the fun to be had with misappropriated corpses, but the persons of the tale are well into their teens, or older, as are the characters in Alan Gibbons's *The Edge*, a powerful study of domestic brutality and racial hatred. The multiple-viewpoint narration is not quite so successfully deployed here as in his *Caught in the Crossfire*; it can make a few seconds of violence seem interminable and there is a lot more than a few seconds, but it is strongly felt, strongly written, for rather older young people, perhaps.

Up on Cloud Nine by Anne Fine is a rollicking account of a very odd couple, related by Ian at the hospital bedside of his friend Stolly, recovering from a near-fatal mishap that may not have been an accident. Ian has seen the dark heart of the hilarity. It is an engaging read but there is something hasty in the execution that begs the question, in both senses, of whether Stolly's obsession with child mortality arises from his reluctance to become the adult his childhood is making him. Lian Hearn's *Across the Nightingale Floor* is an ambitiously conceived, meticulously researched and elegantly written ripping yarn of ninjas, samurai, murder, massacre and some really impressive scenery. The protagonists, although young, are in a society where they function as adults, as does the young hero of *The Dark Horse* by Marcus Sedgwick. This is a portrait of

The Carnegie Medal Shortlist

The Shell House, Linda Newbery, David Fickling Books, 0 385 60389 4, £10.99 hbk

Martyn Pig, Kevin Brooks, The Chicken House, 1 903434 99 8, £5.99 pbk

The Edge, Alan Gibbons, Dolphin, 1 84255 094 2, £4.99 pbk

Up on Cloud Nine, Anne Fine, Doubleday, 0 385 60372 X, £10.99 hbk

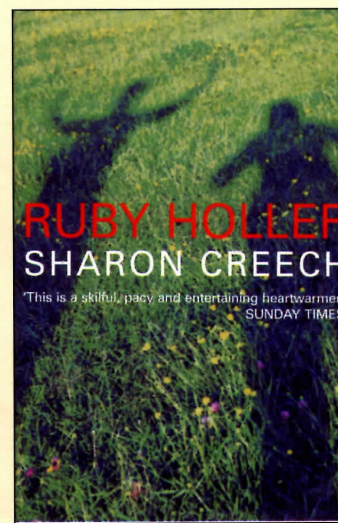
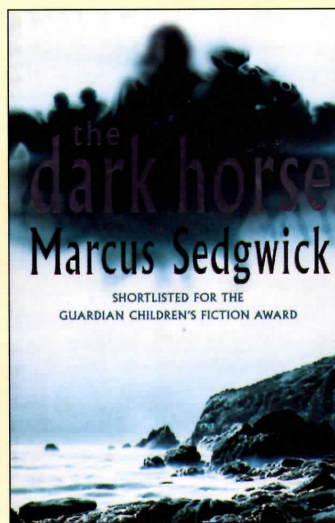
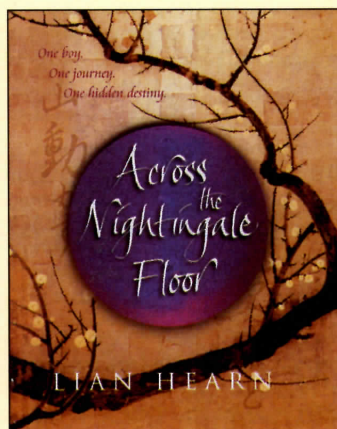
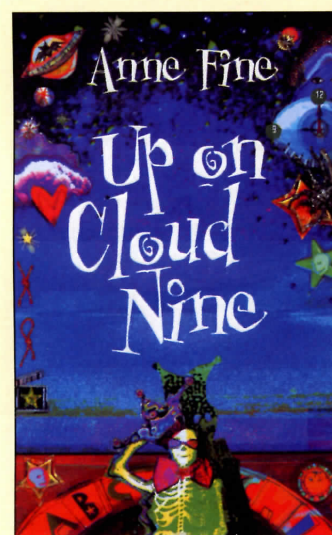
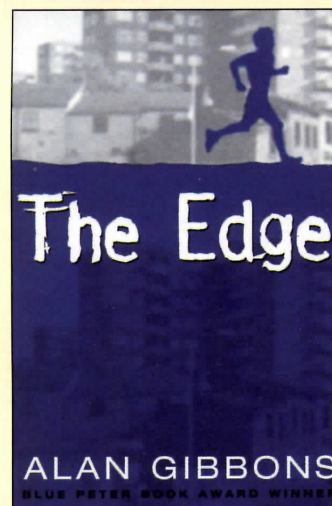
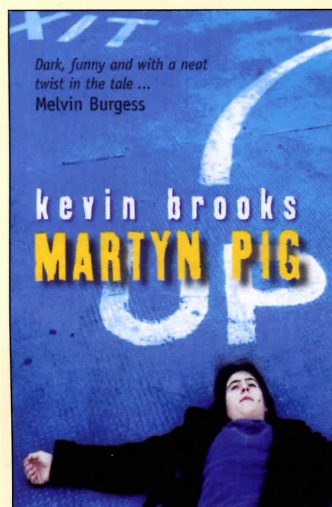
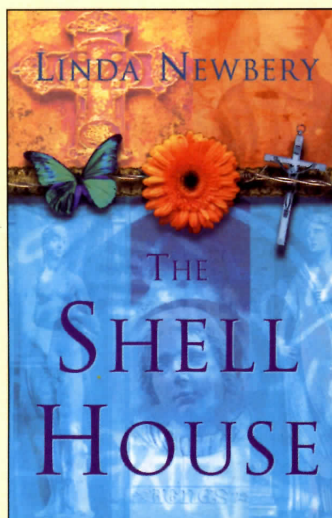
Across the Nightingale Floor, Lian Hearn, Pan Macmillan, 1 4050 0032 5, £12.99 hbk

The Dark Horse, Marcus Sedgwick, Dolphin, 1 85881 884 2, £4.99 pbk

Ruby Holler, Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 0 7475 5617 2, £10.99 hbk (see also p.18)

someone ill-equipped to handle the responsibility thrust upon him. The shamanistic element is unnecessary; this tale delivers a genuinely shocking denouement in purely human terms.

None of these novels is unsuitable for children – no book is unsuitable for the right reader and they are all stimulating reads, but neither is any of them, except perhaps the last, written with *children* in mind. Everyone in them is young, but when we talk about young adults the operative word is adult. We are less certain now about what a child is, and rather too willing to let other people tell us. Which leaves Sharon Creech and **Ruby Holler**. Her twin heroes, Dallas and Florida, are 13 but seem much younger, for very convincing reasons. This is a traditional North American story of orphans taken in by unlikely fosterers, with the inversion that it is the orphans whose hearts have to be won. It is unashamedly charming; funny, optimistic and above all, kind-hearted. The media have worked hard to convince us that we are surrounded by cold-eyed acquisitive calculating cynics. Children are actually far more child-like than we are led to believe. We don't insult them by taking this into account.



Greenaway Medals

Martin Salisbury on the Greenaway Medal Shortlist

For the second year running the hugely popular Lauren Child has two titles in the Greenaway shortlist.

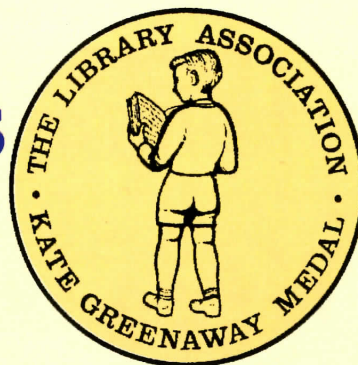
Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book? is a clever, anarchic subversion of the traditional text/image relationship and, as with **That Pesky Rat**, is executed through Child's now familiar combination of the hand-drawn line and scanned photographic textures, digitally arranged on the page. Nick Butterworth's **Albert Le Blanc** demonstrates a far more traditional approach, both to design and use of media. His soft, delicate watercolour figures, occasionally highlighted with coloured pencil, are carefully positioned and allowed to breathe in relation to the white space of the page, the characters tending to enter stage left and depart stage right. **The Kiss That Missed** by David Melling also falls into the 'traditional' category, skilled draughtsmanship of the Disneyesque variety, with pleasing contrasts of scale, and overprinting of a fifth colour, gold, to describe the trail of the elusive kiss. Bob Graham's deceptively simple drawings for **Jethro Byrde, Fairy Child** have real charm. His bemused looking characters recall those of the late Mel Calman in their minimalism. Somehow they manage to co-exist successfully on the page with other comparatively detailed and lovingly observed elements such as garden flowers and weeds. Nick Sharratt's **Pants** are aired through his well known bright, flat, digital colour palette, thoroughly exploring the contemporary preoccupation with such garments.

One of the many strengths of Helen Ward's **The Cockerel and the Fox** is the exquisite sense of page design. The artist shows a mastery of the double-page spread. Every millimetre is considered in relation to the graphic possibilities of the spread as a whole, and to the dynamic of the shapes against the white of the page. The colour is sensitively and skilfully applied, and as a

bonus, we are introduced to a range of rare breed varieties from the farmyard. Finally, an equally well produced book is **Man on the Moon** (a day in the life of Bob) by Simon Bartram. These latter two are especially worthy candidates and would be fighting for my vote from this shortlist. Each one displays many of the characteristics defined in the judging criteria.

So what of Anne Marley, the Chair of Judges', claim that the shortlist displays '... not only the best of modern illustration, but the incredible variety of style and content on offer?' There is no disputing the excellence of the work of the shortlisted artists, and of course any selection process is guaranteed to bring out the would-be Sven Goran Eriksson in us mere punters. It is hard not to notice though, the glaring omissions of the last few years. Perhaps this points to an inevitable chasm between perspectives on 'art' from librarians, as compared to those of artists, designers and art-educators. The recent heightened awareness of the depth and quality of artists working in the field of children's picture books, and the growing interest in their methods and processes, has come about largely thanks to the curatorial efforts of Quentin Blake. To some extent this may have further exposed this gulf in perceptions.

2002 saw the publication of a number of highly original British picture books. **Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece** (Walker) by Sara Fanelli gained an honorable mention at Bologna but did not make the Greenaway list. Fanelli is one of our most innovative illustrators. Yes, she is working on the boundaries of the discipline, but such creativity is vital to the all-round health of the subject. She is an inspiration to art-students everywhere. John Lawrence's **This Little Chick** (Walker) was at the same time innovative and traditional, more importantly it was exquisitely beautiful and was good enough to win the New York Times Certificate of Excellence. Once again, it was nowhere to be seen in the Greenaway list.



The Greenaway Medal Shortlist

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book? Lauren Child, Hodder, 0 340 80555 2, \$5.99 pbk

That Pesky Rat, Lauren Child, Orchard, 1 84121 276 8, \$4.99 pbk

Albert Le Blanc, Nick Butterworth, Collins, 0 00 711970 4, \$9.99 hbk

The Kiss That Missed, David Melling, Hodder, 0 340 79718 5, \$5.99 pbk

Jethro Byrde, Fairy Child, Bob Graham, Walker, 0 7445 8863 4, \$10.99 hbk

Pants, Nick Sharratt, text Giles Andreae, David Fickling Books, 0 385 60434 3, \$10.99 hbk

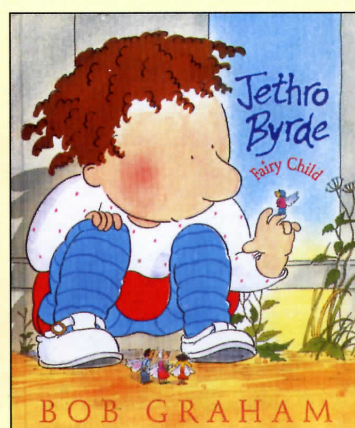
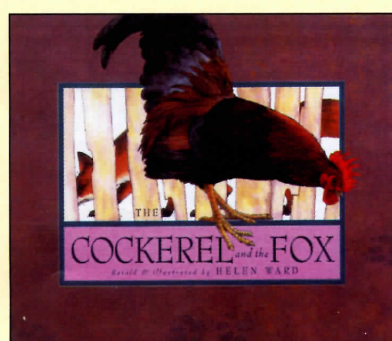
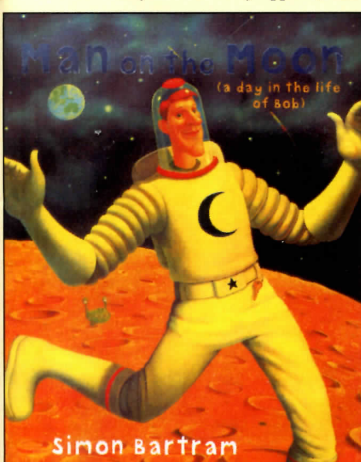
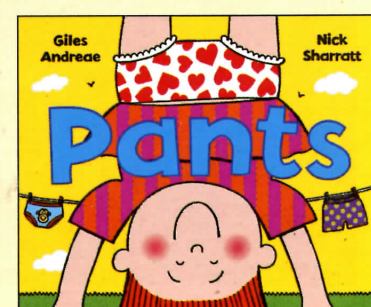
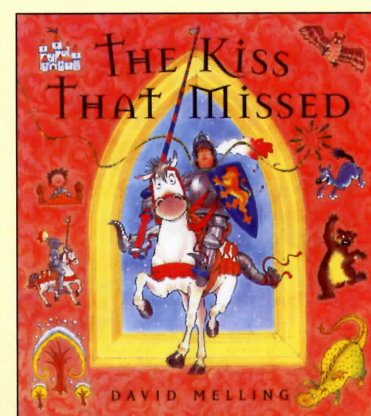
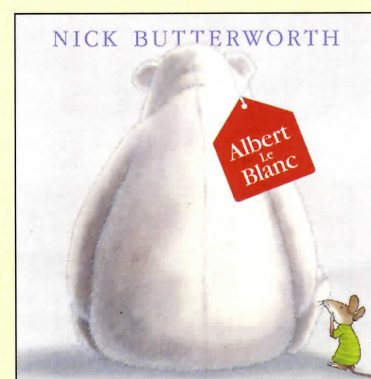
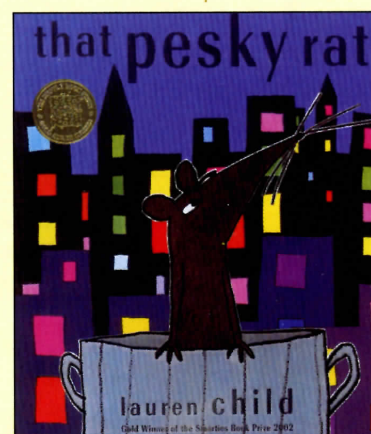
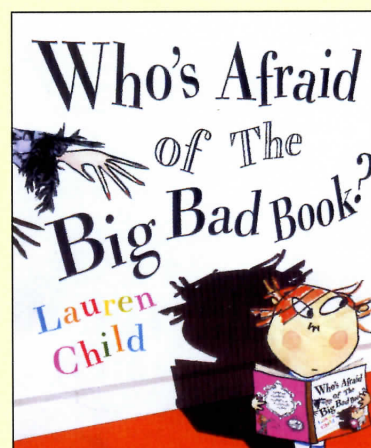
The Cockerel and the Fox, Helen Ward, Templar, 1 84011 515 7, \$9.99 hbk

Man on the Moon, Simon Bartram, Templar, 1 84011 445 2, \$9.99 hbk

Alexis Deacon's stunning debut, **Slow Loris** (Hutchinson), is similarly noticeable by its absence. Surely his astonishing follow-up, **Beegu**, cannot be ignored next year. And where is Emma Chichester Clark in the awards list? One of the most consistently magical and enchanting artists we have ever had, it seems inconceivable that she can have been overlooked. Speaking of magic, Angela Barrett's darkly enchanting vision has clearly also escaped the judging panel's notice. Charlotte Voake, Patrick Benson, Posy Simmonds, Stephen Biesty, the list goes on. Perhaps, with the planned creation of the new Quentin Blake Gallery of Illustration, it is time to look at ways to reward the sort of artistic excellence which may not always win the popularity awards or top the sales lists, but which displays the kind of artistic integrity essential for lasting value. ■

Martin Salisbury is Course Director for MA Children's Book Illustration at APU Cambridge.

Jan Mark won the Carnegie Medal in 1977. Her latest book is **Something in the Air** published by Doubleday, 0 385 60539 0, \$10.99 hbk (see p.25).



Authorgraph No.141

Hilary McKay

Hilary McKay

interviewed by Stephanie Nettell

A first novel may be so rich and mature that its admirers fear its author has packed everything they had to offer into that one book. That's how the Guardian judges thought in 1992 on giving their Children's Award to Hilary McKay's exuberant family comedy, *The Exiles* – only the second time a first novel had won the award. And when we met the author herself... well, she seemed so quiet, so self-effacing, with such a light, delicately enunciating voice... where had those vigorous, opinionated characters sprung from?

Hah! Her second novel, *The Exiles at Home*, won the Smarties Prize, and pressure from fans brought a third a few years later, *The Exiles in Love*, before she cried 'Enough!' In between and since, there have been more than 20 books overflowing with that same energy and humour, the same crisp dialogue and cool prose.

Now she may have found herself

enmeshed in another trilogy. Last year that gem, *Saffy's Angel*, won the Whitbread Children's Award, and a sequel about Saffy's brother is coming this September: *Indigo's Star*. The atmosphere is recognisably McKay – good-naturedly crazy family, engagingly tough little sister, sharp, empathetic insight into her characters' frailties – but although her work, while shunning sentimentality, is always touching, here is a seriousness, an extra tenderness, to make readers demand more.

However, she hates committing herself: a deliberately precise, self-aware writer (taking two years over her 'real' books), she shies away from publishing demands for samples, synopses and multi-book contracts. She seems both disciplined and unpredictable, fretting crossly over copy-editing interference in *Indigo's* proof but often self-doubting and grateful for guidance – the highly experienced Chris Kloet, her first editor at Gollancz,

remains a friend and mentor, and it was out of loyalty to her that when Penguin swallowed Gollancz but spat out Kloet she opted to go to Hodder.

Expecting an anarchic household, I found an immaculate garden round a modern bungalow, with the living room's glass wall looking out past Derbyshire stone cottages to a steep wooded hillside, husband Kevin offering tea and the eminently civilised Bella, aged six, and Jim, ten, raising scarcely a squeak with their Playstation. Everything had been madly tidied up for me, she said – but there could not be a less bohemian study than her neat, sparse little room, its eclectic selection of books, 'read to rags', hardly suggesting a rebellion: shelves of Elizabeth Goudge, the Chalet School and Tolkien, plus Meindert DeJong, Ransome or early Pullman.

'I've always written assuming children read like I do, but I've recently discovered they *don't* read a book 30 or 40 times, that



Photo of Hilary McKay courtesy of Hodder Children's Books.

they expect to get the whole story first time round, so I shouldn't be putting in all these things that just darken the water. They'll tell me, "Oh I loved such-and-such" – but they've loved it and given it to the school bazaar! She wistfully wonders if this is why **The Amber Cat**, in her Porridge Hall trilogy, about a small ghost seeking friends through the long years, an intriguingly crafted story which repays pondering, 'has passed almost unnoticed'. (The real cat is actually agate, but became amber 'because of the sound, softer and more hummy for a summer ghost story'.)

But those characters? Family life, sometimes chaotic, always interesting, is the mortar of her stories – 'my childhood still seems close enough to touch' – but like so many growing up in a loving, closely held family unit, she did indeed turn rebel.

'Yes, my mother was certainly interesting. She started nursing when she was 14, when her father died and she had to leave school and be out there earning. But she did everything she could and finally got a degree in nursing. Opinionated, very much into books, she always read to us, and Dad, an engineer, always making things, was also a great reader.' Hilary, now 43, was the eldest of four girls, two and two separated by six years. They weren't allowed a television ('You could always read a book' their father would say), but were free to roam, light bonfires or swim, get messy or lost, which brought an independence that makes her ashamed of her own protective fear for Jim in today's world. Yet they still longed for television.

'A whole language was closed to me – I really hated not knowing the programmes. We were allowed to see only one, **Little Women**, when a neighbour said, "Your children would like this," and dragged us in to watch, but that was it.' When she and Bridget were about 14, they got a set, 'so the younger ones benefited from our whingeing. My parents have been glued to it ever since...'

They lived in a tiny village between Boston, where they went to school, and the coast, so she has gone 'from the flats to the hills – and Lincolnshire is *flat*. Flats of sky, but not much you can do with it without wings. But I did enjoy the birds, and spent happy days and nights on the

Gibraltar Point reserve as a volunteer warden.' Loving wildlife, she chose to study zoology – a mistake – at St Andrew's – not a mistake.

'Today you can do a degree in, say, ecology, but then zoology was very old-fashioned, with three hours four afternoons a week dissecting your way up the animal kingdom until you were doing humans with the doctors. Not my idea at all.'

St Andrew's, however, was. 'I applied only to the four universities furthest from home to make it as hard as possible to visit. I didn't want my parents turning up with my three little sisters in tow!' Although far from unhappy and knowing they were much loved, the older girls felt strictly watched. An all-girls family, an all-girls school: boys were definitely unwelcome.

'We were *held* closely, if you can understand that. "This is your family, and these are your friends," who could not be at the same level of intimacy as family. I didn't agree with it – I used to like my friends and quarrel with my sisters. Six strong personalities made too much of a houseful. Four girls sharing bedrooms, sharing homework desks, sharing everything – boarding school was my ideal! I just wanted a bit of freedom, so I deliberately planned to be out of driving distance.'

St Andrew's, despite the zoology, came through for her. 'All my friends were arts-based, so I went to their lectures – brilliant English Language ones... Anglo-Saxon... I loved it! Peter Bayley ('the Spenser Bayley') generously let her take their exams, 'so I came out with a science degree, but had passed the English exams for my own satisfaction.' And at St Andrew's she met Kevin, equally far from his Belfast home.

Uncertain of what she could do, she tried teacher training for a year. 'I loved the children – *they* didn't make mincemeat of me, but the whole system did. You need such patience! Kevin teaches maths at secondary level: he can persist – you know?' She returned to the sciences. They lived four years in Cumbria, then Berwick, before Derbyshire, where she worked in a county council analytical lab until Jim was a year old. 'People don't know these exist, but they're very interesting places, testing tap water or make-up, fireworks, restaurants, toys,

furniture – a huge range of things.' The children have settled them here, and (nice twist) 'it's only two hours from my parents'.

She says her sisters have objected to her family portrayals ever since the first **Exiles**, although her readers covet such relations. Especially a Big Grandma. Variations of this amazingly competent soul (she's 95 in the Pudding Bag School story, **The Birthday Wish**) turn up throughout her work, from the picture book, **Pirates Ahoy**, to **Indigo's Star**: brisk, no-nonsense, wise. She was 93 for **The Exiles's** publication – could she still be alive? 'I'm afraid she went at 99. She'd lived by herself, doing everything and had just two weeks in hospital before dying, which was how she wanted it, never dependent. We loved her very much, she was so warm and strong.'

So her characters – dazzling creations like Sun Dance, a small boy in the Porridge Hall stories, whose mind runs with a speed and logic of its own, and Saffy's friend Sarah, a demon in a wheelchair – have roots in real life, even amid the playful magic of her younger stories (like the wilful little Queen duo, **Practically Perfect** and **Happy and Glorious**, or **The Magic in the Mirror** in Paradise House, or **A Strong Smell of Magic** in Pudding Bag School).

Dialogue is the motor powering her narrative, a rare skill she shares with the likes of Jan Mark. Has she always been funny? She looks puzzled, thinks a moment. 'I was always an *observant* child – probably a knowing little beast, actually. You know when people have a photographic memory? I have photographic ears. I can play back conversations, the atmosphere, the feeling, the manner of speaking. It's what I remember about people, more than their appearance.'

After ten years of children's writing, she may be chafing at its restrictions (and its advances), wondering if a gamble on an adult book would endanger the mortgage, but one thing is certain: when the judges picked **The Exiles**, they were merely tugging at the first bright handkerchief of a conjuror's endless string. ■

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

The Books

published by Hodder Children's Books

The Dragon Downstairs, ill. Amanda Harvey, 0 340 84141 9, £9.99 hbk, 0 340 84142 7, £4.99 pbk (November 2003)

Happy and Glorious, 0 340 64074 X, £3.99 pbk

Indigo's Star, 0 340 87578 X, £10.00 hbk (September 2003)

Pirates Ahoy, ill. Alex Ayliffe, 0 340 73698 4, £4.99 pbk

Practically Perfect, 0 340 65574 7, £3.99 pbk

Saffy's Angel, 0 340 85079 5, £10.00 hbk, 0 340 85080 9, £5.99 pbk

Was That Christmas? ill. Amanda Harvey, 0 340 86626 8, £6.99 hbk

Exiles

The Exiles, 0 340 72691 1, **The Exiles at Home**, 0 340 72692 X,

The Exiles in Love, 0 340 72693 8, £4.99 each pbk

Pudding Bag School

The Birthday Wish, 0 340 69833 0, **Cold Enough for Snow**, 0 340 69834 9, **A Strong Smell of Magic**, 0 340 69835 7, £3.99 each pbk
Porridge Hall

Dog Friday, 0 340 72694 6, **The Amber Cat**, 0 340 72695 4, **Dolphin Luck**, 0 340 79186 1, £4.99 each pbk

Paradise House

The Zoo in the Attic, 0 340 72286 X, £3.99 pbk

The Treasure in the Garden, 0 340 72287 8, £3.99 pbk

The Echo in the Chimney, 0 340 72288 6, £3.99 pbk

The Magic in the Mirror, 0 340 72289 4, £3.50 pbk

The Surprise Party, 0 340 75301 3, £3.50 pbk

Keeping Cotton Tail, 0 340 75302 1, £3.50 pbk

ways of being MALE

Two generations ago young readers and cinemagoers recognised heroes and heroines by their conformity to traditional conventions of appearance – their clothes – and the actions and demeanour that established the differences between them. The impact of feminism on the gendered contexts of childhood is the subject of a collection of essays edited by John Stephens. Margaret Meek explores.

Heroes used to be assertive, singular, detached, given to facing danger and saving the world. They were tough cowboys and successful pilots, not always law-abiding. Conventional heroines were softhearted, insightful, manipulative, shy, except when they imitated their brothers. The perceived wisdom about young readers' text preferences was that girls would read stories with heroes, Biggles for example, but boys disdained heroines, even girls like Worrals. They preferred, we are told, the heroic figures of popular cultures; Tarzan in his early appearances.

In the intervening years, feminism, one of the most highly charged, 'huge commonalities of an age' (1), changed, amongst other things, the gendered contexts of childhood. These included the representations of boys and girls in books and films. (I date this from the appearance of the Disney version of **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**.) Perceptions of what counted as normal masculinity and femininity have changed not only in the

appearance of boys and girls, but also in the 'normative' ways of looking at them. Nevertheless, the strenuous influence and power of cultural conventions about manhood may be more likely to confirm traditional masculinity than to change it. 'When it comes to what it means to be a man, boys are less likely to listen to their mothers and librarians than to other boys and older male figures'. (2)

READING AGAINST YOURSELF

Anne Fine's revisionist tale, **Bill's New Frock**, exemplifies a particular paradox. The readers' gaze is directed to what happens when Bill appears in school wearing a frock. He is occupying a female space, so he is looked at as female. He discovers what girls' experiences, including bullying, are like. But, at the end of 'the most horrible, frustrating day of his life', the author emphasizes his relief when he 'pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt', that he was 'definitely a boy'. His empathy for girls was convincing, but temporary. The implied audience for the story is clearly

male. Girls still have to read the story 'against themselves'. Or rather, new masculinities need new readings.

In **Ways of Being Male: representing masculinities in children's literature and film** the editor, John Stephens, has brought together a group of authors from different but related academic disciplines: literary, historical, psychoanalytic, sociological and filmic to explore how modern boys are expected to 'read themselves' in stories and films made especially for them. (How they do it is a different matter, but there are some response examples too.) A common agreement is that 'as long as people are categorized using a crude and essentially binary system which sorts on the basis of sex and sexuality, the sense of the self as unknowable and unstable will continue to impede the formation and performance of identity.' (3)

In Stephens' view, these papers 'fill a gap in critical and analytic discourses in studies of children's literature' which have 'seemed surprisingly slow to generate a body of discussion drawing conceptually on the discourses dealing with masculinities in literary and cultural theory more generally, while at the same time maintaining a clear grasp on the more specific ontological and social issues pertaining to textual representations created for the young, such as the thematic dominance within the literature of social issues and character development'. (4) This is the kind of academic language used to refocus ideas where these things are discussed but the ideas would fare as well in other places seriously devoted to reading and interpretation of books for the young.

THE NEW AGE BOY

Stephens' argument, that modern young readers need books that take account of current world views of gender, and the fact that masculinity has emerged increasingly as an issue, is illustrated clearly by his reading of Gene Kemp's **The Wacky World of Wesley Baker** (1996), a book for the pre-teens. The hero wants to be a writer rather than an athlete. This will bring about a serious change in the relation of father and son. Stephens again: 'Wesley casts off the wimp label and his father releases him from his Old Age Male expectations and instead encourages him to develop as a New Age Boy.' In the New Age language he has 'reshaped his subjectivity'. (Note, one of his teachers 'insists that creative imagination is a female attribute'.) Stephens then goes on to explore Terry Pratchett's **Only You Can Save Mankind** (1993) and James Moloney's **Swashbuckler** (1993). The conclusion is, the New Age Boy 'fashions the self'.

The focal issue in most of these essays is that masculinity and femininity are not simply neutral. Instead, these attributes are



historical, social and cultural constructions of their time and place. Thus gender is an aspect of the ways stories are told, and the way a reader is invited to view the world the author or filmmaker has created. So now that masculine subjectivities include some of the characteristics once claimed for women only, we have to 'picture' males as heroes of a different kind.

Think of Raymond Briggs' **The Man**. The hero is a diminutive, virile, hairy male who gives a boy who takes care of him imperative commands. Anthony Browne in **The Big Baby** pictures a comparable situation. In exploring pictures of males, Kerry Mallan is careful to point out that when picture books let children see the world in certain ways, 'the images also have the capacity to perpetuate stereotypes as well as to promote non-conformity resistance and alternatives'. (5) This is part of Robyn McCallum's essay on Masculinity as Social Semiotic.

Reviews should be more than offering samples to taste, and every essay in this collection offers a reward for close reading of the argument. I have taken most things from the ingredients rather than the recipe, but I praise this book for widening current readings of books for the young. I read with particular interest the comparison of Norwegian and Australian young adult fiction, where the 'tentative conclusion' of the authors is that, in both literatures, male

and female authors seem to thematize masculinity differently, with the different perspective reproduced in basically the same way in each literature. New subjectivities do indeed need new readings. I take note of makeovers, cross-dressings (with Shakespeare as my guide), and I am relieved to know that 'gender remains a primary mark of identity'. My interest in Harry Potter is roused and extended in time for the next volume, and my concern is alerted to the fact that that children's literature may be 'unintentionally but implicitly homophobic'. I have thought about queer theory and a queer 'aesthetic or sensibility'. I think I have come far since **The Paper Bag Princess** (6), not a moment too soon. ■

REFERENCES

The reference to **Bill's New Frock** is from Beverley Pennell's essay 'Redeeming Masculinity at the End of the Second Millennium', p.55

(1) From Peter Hollindale. (1988) **Ideology and the Children's Book**, Woodchester, Glos. The Thimble Press.

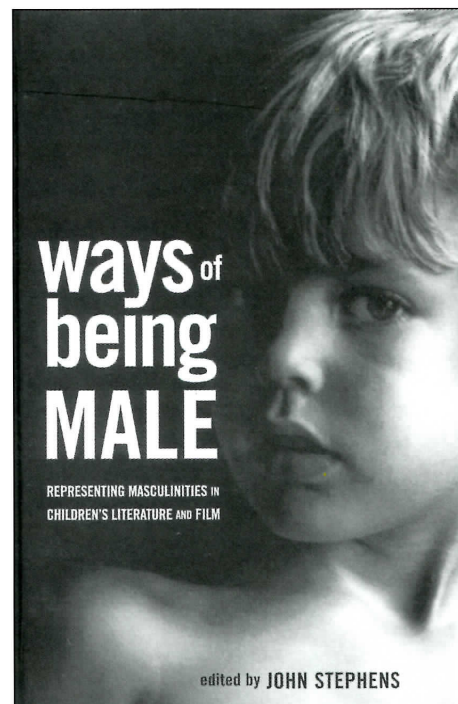
(2) Perry Nodelman, 'Making Boys Appear', p.12

(3) Kimberley Reynolds, 'Come Lads and Ladetts', p.110

(4) James Stephens, Preface, p.x

(5) Kerry Mallan, 'Picturing the Male', p.35

(6) **The Paper Bag Princess** by Robert Munsch and Michael Martchenko (Hippo 1982) was an early 'feminist' picture book where the princess saves the prince from a dragon and they 'didn't get married'.



Ways of Being Male: representing masculinities in children's literature and film, edited by John Stephens, is published by Routledge, New York and London 2002, 0 415 93861 9, £65.00 hbk.

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

Hal's Reading Diary

Hal is now 28 months and videos are claiming more of his attention than books. His father, **Roger Mills**, explains.

Something that I have been increasingly aware of over recent months is that Hal seems far fonder of watching videos than he is of reading books. He certainly still enjoys his bedtime read. But whereas with videos he will often get obsessed with one film and demand to see it over and over (we are just exiting a two-week **Wizard of Oz** phase), he almost never develops a craze for a particular book. What is more, reading seems to be very much a nighttime thing for him and while he rarely, if ever, asks to be read to during the day he will frequently request a video.

To the book-loving parent this is mildly depressing. Looking at Hal motionless in front of the screen I invariably feel that I am letting him down somehow. To a lot of people this will probably seem to be a rather precious reaction. Get real. Every parent knows that vids buy you the most precious commodity you can have – time. But though I remind myself to be realistic, the sight of Hal transfixed by TV still produces a pang.

The fundamental difficulty here is that I have a firm conviction that reading is better for you than watching something on TV. My fear is that, even now, habits that will be with Hal for the rest of his life are being laid down. If he becomes a viewer rather than a reader now perhaps that is the way he will be as he grows up. Where does this visceral feeling that reading is better for you come from? Part of it stems from the thought that people with a habit of reading tend to have better stocked minds than those who depend on radio and TV for their information. But another argument, that feels even more important, is to do with the nature of reading itself, or to be



exact the nature of reading fiction.

When you read fiction, however exhaustively something is described, you have to recreate what is being evoked with your imagination. The words provide a skeleton, but the reader makes the picture complete. Film, it is true, requires the viewer to reconstruct the narrative in some ways, most obviously when snappy editing or visual clues ask you to put two and two together. But the fact that a film presents both sounds and sights means that there is so much less for the imagination to do. The reconstructive work of reading fiction, I'd argue,

makes your mind more alive, and consequently more fulfilled, than the more passive act of viewing. This is the real root of my anxieties that Hal might not develop a reading habit.

But perhaps my concerns are a little premature. Though it seems likely that a basic predisposition towards reading is influenced by whether it is a part of life from the earliest years, at the same time it would be impossible to argue that Hal, at this stage, is turning his back on the reconstructive pleasure of reading. Hal's principal literary pleasure at the moment is looking at images in his picture books and naming the things he sees. Some of these books have narratives or course, but it doesn't feel as if he connects with the emotional tensions at the moment, and until it does, it will probably be impossible to tell whether he is going to be a keen reader or not.

And if it is too early to tell, why am I fretting about it? Perhaps the real reason is that there is someone else in our household who is more of a viewer than a reader, while feeling constantly uneasy about not finding more time for reading. I regret to have to admit that that someone is me.

Roger Mills is a Psychodynamic Counsellor.

Signal 1970–2003

When **Signal** ceases publication this summer with its hundredth issue – a bumper year's worth of essays in a single book-length volume – it will instantly become an indispensable archive for everyone in future who wishes to understand the extraordinary changes that have overtaken children's literature since its launch in 1970. **Peter Hollindale** pays tribute to its unique contribution.

1970 was a good year for children's books. As well as the launch of **Signal** it saw the start of **Children's Literature in Education**, which thankfully is still flourishing. Between them they marked a newly confident liveliness and seriousness in adult professional concern for children's reading.

Although their territories have naturally overlapped, they are distinctive voices. **CLE** sticks firmly to the terms of its title: it is strictly a critical and educational journal, and does its job admirably. But **Signal** has always trawled more widely in the seas of writing for children, and what we shall lose and deeply miss after this summer is its unpredictable, generous, inclusive, endlessly surprising spirit of enquiry into current thought and scholarship on children's reading. Look at a single issue of **Signal**, and its content will seem stimulating but maybe random and eccentric. Look at a year's issues, and you find a cohesive set of regular interests. Look at the whole archive, and you find the communal intelligence of children's literature specialists faithfully recorded throughout a turbulent and explosive generation.

Signal has many voices. Not for nothing is it subtitled in the plural, **Approaches to Children's Books**. But its composite voice is that of its editor, Nancy Chambers. She and her husband Aidan have created and sustained it double-handed over many years, and it is Nancy's irrepressible adventurousness, the sheer breadth of her interests and sympathies, her own professionalism and her respect for the multiple professionalism that keeps children's books alive, her sensitive antennae for what still matters from the past and is going to matter in the future, that make **Signal** such a matchless register of its long and crucial moment in the history of books for children.

Raising the Issues

In 1995 Nancy published a truculent, shrewd, uncompromising lecture by Michael Rosen called 'Raising the Issues' – one of numerous significant ephemera that she has spotted over the years and recognized as too important for oblivion. Rosen's diatribe is packed with timely thought, but two snatches of it could serve as retrospective mission statements for **Signal** as a whole. 'Where are we as a community of writers, editors, readers, publishers, teachers and children? What are the problems? What are we getting right? What are we getting wrong?' And he tries, he says, 'to view children's literature from different angles and in doing so see ways in which it is caught up in prevailing conditions and ways in which we can intervene to keep it an alive, hopeful, nonconforming, questioning place to work.'



Aidan and Nancy Chambers, photo by Chris Robertson.

Signal has done just that three times a year for over thirty years. Here are just a few of its more notable achievements.

It has celebrated, commemorated and partly kept alive the lost art of children's publishing in these days of publishing conglomerates, hype, brief shelf-life and dead backlists, giving voice and status to such quietly essential people as Grace Hogarth, Margaret Clark, Judy Taylor, Ethel Heins of **The Horn Book**, and Patrick Hardy of **Kestrel**, the annual memorial lectures in whose honour it has regularly printed. (Issue 100 gives them a rousing send-off with a Rosen-like fusillade from the outgoing Children's Laureate, Anne Fine.)

Signal (like Aidan Chambers in his own parallel domain) has constantly promoted children's literature in translation, so long a Cinderella. It has recovered lost voices from the past in models of concise scholarship. Conversely, it has pushed theory forward in major essays by Margaret Mackey, Lissa Paul and others; I would especially pick out David Lewis's seminal essays on the history and theory of picture books. It has invited authors and critics to write personally about the origins of their craft in private lives, with unforgettable short autobiographies from Margaret Mahy, Jane Gardam, Lance Salway and others. Above all, through the **Signal Poetry Award**, it has single-handedly enhanced the status of poetry for children.

And then there are the offshoots – the short, user-friendly bookguides and studies from Thimble Press that include some miniature classics – Margaret Meek's **How Texts Teach What Readers Learn**, Margery Fisher's **Classics for Children and Young People**, Jane Doonan's **Looking at Pictures in Picture Books**. What shall we do without them? Thankfully we don't have to. **Signal** may have come to its finale, but Thimble Press has not, so the booklets will still be there, and others may yet join them. As for **Signal** itself, it is not just about children's literature, but has become a part of it. ■

Thimble Press, Lockwood, Station Road, Woodchester, Stroud, Glos. GL5 5EQ, telephone 01453 75 5566. All publications, back-issue availability and order forms: www.thimblepress.biz

Peter Hollindale, formerly at the University of York, is now a freelance writer and teacher. He has been a frequent contributor over the years to **Signal**.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger

Securing an interview with Hans Magnus Enzensberger, one of Germany's most distinguished authors, on a rare visit to London was quite a coup for **Books for Keeps**. Fresh from Radio 4's **Front Row** interview with Mark Lawson, starring later on at a sell-out poetry reading at London's Goethe Institute, in public conversation next day with Eric Hobsbawm and turning down many other invitations, the great man could easily have overlooked our own session. But there **Nicholas Tucker** found him when the time came, now aged 73 but still a handsome figure with an endearing smile and perfect English.

Tucker: 'Your best-known children's book, **Where Were You, Robert?** came out in 1998 and sold over a million copies. Hamish Hamilton published it over here in 2000, translated by Anthea Bell so perfectly that she has now gone on to win this year's Marsh Award for children's literature in translation. For apart from the seven times that fourteen-year-old Robert is whisked back into different periods in the past, this is not an obviously magical piece of writing. Descriptions of everyday life in Stalinist Russia, 1930 Germany, seventeenth-century Amsterdam or wherever else come over very much as the real thing. The people Robert meets are similarly convincing. So when you wrote this story to answer some of your teenage daughter's questions about history, was there anything else you were hoping to achieve?'

Enzensberger: 'I don't believe we can all draw the same lessons from the past. But history is where children today can still find the best adventures. Although they often know their own countries and various others well enough, their daily lives may be quite boring and circumscribed. But a trip back through time can offer them all the excitement of a visit to a dark continent still relatively unexplored.'

Tucker: 'When Robert briefly becomes a robber-chief during the Thirty Years War and nearly commits an atrocity, was this a warning about the way that different times can sometimes produce very different behaviour?'

Enzensberger: 'I suppose so. But this is also a chance for Robert to resist temptation and so prove himself, in the manner of all epic heroes.'

Tucker: 'Although Robert is bored by the bourgeois life he finds in nineteenth-century Norway, he also loathes the anarchy of civil war. Is there any period of history that he might have liked without qualification?'

Enzensberger: 'I don't think so. We are a dissatisfied species. There is no golden age.'

Tucker: 'Yet the fact that Robert is always



given shelter and support on his travels suggests an overall optimistic message about people. Or does this happen simply because it is a children's book?'

Enzensberger: 'I don't like these distinctions. Great classics like **Alice in Wonderland** or **Treasure Island** did not prettify the events they described. I made Robert the sort of pleasant, open type who does tend to bring out the best in others.'

Tucker: 'Could a fourteen-year-old girl have been the main character? Or would that have brought in new problems, for example the possibility of her being at sexual risk?'

Enzensberger: 'I made Robert a boy because I was to an extent basing him on myself at that age. At 16 I was put in a uniform and told to fight. Coming out of our cellar one day I found there was no

longer any house above it. By the next year I had become an authority on the black market. So with such a background I felt I could get into the skin of another boy faced by different sorts of unexpected situations. I had also visited every place that Robert goes to and therefore knew something about them.'

Tucker: 'Robert gets to meet a couple of the great European cultural figures from the past. Is preserving and then passing on culture the most important gift history can make to the present?'

Enzensberger: 'Culture reminds us of the best that humans are capable of. Not just in art and music; think of the enduring work of craftsmen, gardeners and

builders. Think of the wonderful work of mathematicians, creating whole new cathedrals of the mind. The reason I wrote my other book for children, **The Number Devil**, was that I was furious at the dull maths teaching my daughter was receiving at school. How could she ever discover that the development of mathematics in the twentieth century is one of the greatest of human achievements?'

Tucker: 'Robert's journeys also reflect the dominance of different media at different times. First he disappears into a film, then a photograph and after that a painting. The objects he carries in his pockets from one age to another also play an important part. Why?'

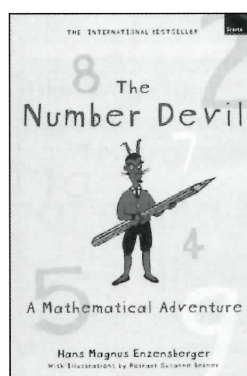
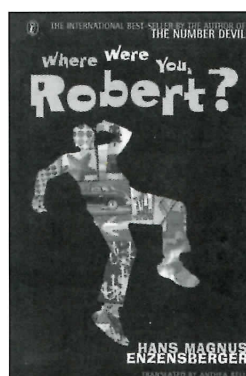
Enzensberger: 'Because readers will then look in their own pockets and wonder what someone from long ago might also make of what they possess. In that way, history becomes more real as well as personal.'

Just as it does throughout this novel: a truly imagination-stretching story from one of the great European authors. ■

Where Were You, Robert? trans. Anthea Bell, Puffin, 0 14 130680 7, £4.99 pbk

The Number Devil, ill. Rotraut Susanne Berner, trans. Michael Henry Heim, Granta Books, 1 86207 391 0, £12.00 pbk

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.



NEWS

Morpurgo is new Children's Laureate

Michael Morpurgo, winner of the Children's Book Award, the Smarties Prize and the Whitbread Children's Book Award, is the third Children's Laureate. The role of the Children's Laureate is awarded once every two years to an eminent British writer or illustrator. The illustrator Quentin Blake was the first Children's Laureate from 1999 to 2001, and the author Anne Fine held the position from 2001 to 2003. Michael Morpurgo says of his appointment as Children's Laureate, 'Quentin and Anne had the right idea. The best way is to be yourself, do what you do best. So I shall tell my stories wherever I go, far and wide, in this country and abroad, to teachers, to parents, to children and to anyone who is interested, to show that literature comes before literacy – and let's call it literature hour instead – for we want more children, all children (grown up ones too) to discover and rediscover the secret pleasure that is reading, and to begin to find their voice in their own writing.' The award is sponsored by Waterstone's.



Palestine becomes the 65th IBBY Section

Palestine has become the 65th IBBY Section. The Section will be housed at The Tamer Institute for Community Education in Ramallah whose work was described in BfK No. 138. IBBY (The International Board on Books for Young People) was founded in 1953 by Jella Lepman, a German Jew who had been forced to flee Germany with her children in 1938. Her vision – to promote understanding among the world's children who are the hope for a peaceful future 'by supporting and unifying those forces in all countries connected with children's book work' – is as relevant today as when she founded IBBY in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Terry Pratchett gives name to Gifted Youth Scholarship

The comedy fantasy writer Terry Pratchett has agreed to the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth at the University of Warwick naming one of their Summer School

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS No.27:

Book Aid International (BAI)

39–41 Coldharbour Lane,
London SE5 9NR

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7733 3577

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7978 8006

Email:

richard.leggatt@bookaid.org

Website:

<http://www.bookaid.org>

(Registered charity no.
313869)

Book Aid International (BAI) is the major UK support for libraries in sub-Saharan Africa. It is a cost effective agency that believes in people's potential for self-development, change and transformation through education and learning – and that the development of human capacity is essential for escaping poverty. The shortage of books and information presents an urgent need. This is where



BOOK AID
International

BAI comes in. The charity works to support libraries and schools in around 40 developing countries, and makes over 750,000 up-to-date and relevant books available to its network of partner libraries each year to meet the needs of poor and disadvantaged communities. The organisation sets a high priority on supporting the development of the local book trade in the longer term, and also works to influence key players in the UK and internationally to give greater recognition to the essential role that libraries have to play in development.

Scholarships after him. The Scholarship will be given to support a gifted young person from a less privileged background who wishes to take part in the Creative Writing stream of one of the National Academy's Summer Schools. Terry Pratchett was declared to be one of the UK's top two favourite authors in the BBC's Big Read Survey – only he and Dickens had five books nominated in the Big Read top 100, making him the UK's most popular living author. Further information from www.warwick.ac.uk/gifted

Roehampton rehouses prestigious Children's Book Collection

The Booktrust Collection of more than 50,000 toy and board books, picture books, juvenile fiction and non-fiction is now housed in a purposely-refurbished building on the Roehampton University's Mount Clare site and is open, free of charge, to anyone with an interest in modern children's books. Since the 1970s, most UK publishers have sent copies of every children's book they publish to Booktrust, where they are displayed for two years. Following this, the books were stored in the National Museum of Childhood at Bethnal Green. The collection provides a good overview of British children's book publishing of the recent period. To make an appointment to visit the collection, contact Julie Mills or Sue Mansfield on 020 8392 3772, email J.Mills@roehampton.ac.uk or S.Mansfield@roehampton.ac.uk or at Information Services Learning Resources Centre, University of Surrey Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5SZ.

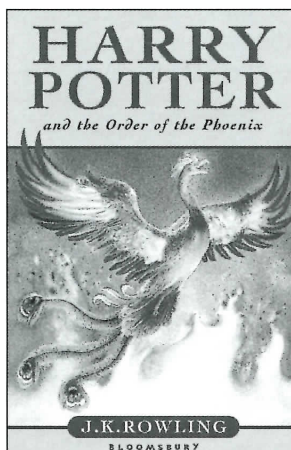
Harry Potter headlines

● For the first time since library loans records began, Catherine Cookson has been ousted from top of the most borrowed list to be replaced by J K Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

● A fork-lift truck driver at Clays, the company printing the long-awaited *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (which was finally published on 21 June), was given an 180-hour community service order after admitting stealing pages from the book. He tried to sell them to a newspaper pre-publication.

● *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, J K Rowling's fourth Harry Potter book, published in 2000, was the fastest selling book in history on the first weekend of its publication. All four Harry Potter books have been Number 1 bestsellers and are currently on bestseller lists in Britain, the USA, and around the world.

● It is reported that J K Rowling is now richer than the Queen.



PEOPLE

Many congratulations to BfK's Chairman and loyal advocate, **Martyn Goff OBE**, on his 80th birthday. Best known as Director of the National Book League (now known as Booktrust) from 1970 and its Chair from 1992 to 1996, he is also the Prize Administrator of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction besides being a novelist and reviewer in his own right. And these are just a few of the many hats he wears. Much respected and admired, Martyn has been one of the most influential figures upon the literary world for the past 30 years. We wish him the happiest of birthdays.

Following the retirement of **Leena Maissen**, **Kimete Basha** has been appointed Executive Director of IBBY. **Liz Page** has been appointed Administrative Director.

Professor Peter Hunt has been selected as the ninth recipient of the prestigious Inter-

national Brothers Grimm Award presented by the International Institute for Children's Literature, Osaka and the Kirin Kai Foundation. He is the first British winner of the award.

At Oxford University Press **Liz Cross** has been appointed Publisher for Fiction and Picture Books and **Lara Dennis** Commissioning Editor for Picture Books. **Vineeta Gupta** has been appointed Head of Reference and **Catherine Stokes** is Head of Marketing.

Susan Winton has been appointed Rights Director at HarperCollins Children's Books. **Polly Nolan** has been appointed Senior Commissioning Editor at Macmillan Children's Books.

Julia Wells has been appointed Commissioning Editor at Faber. She was previously at Macmillan Children's Books.

PRIZES

NATIONAL

Branford Boase Award

The winner of the 2003 Branford Boase Award is Kevin Brooks for *Martyn Pig* (Chicken House), his first children's novel. The editor's award went to Barry Cunningham, Publishing Director of Chicken House, who spotted Kevin's talent and oversaw the publication of this first book. The annual Branford Boase Award celebrates the most promising new children's writer of the previous year, and highlights the importance of the editor identifying and nurturing new talent. *Martyn Pig* is also on this year's Carnegie Medal shortlist (see p.6).

CLPE Poetry Award

The new Centre for Literacy in Primary Education Poetry Award has been won by John Agard and Grace Nichols for their anthology, *Under the Moon and Over the Sea* (Walker). The judges of the award were Morag Styles, Reader in Children's Literature at Homerton College, Cambridge; Michael Rosen, poet and author; and Margaret Meek of the London Institute of Education, who also chaired the panel.

INTERNATIONAL

The Patricia Wrightson Award

Simon French has won the prestigious Patricia Wrightson Award for his novel, *Where in the World* (Little Hare Books; UK distribution by Bounce).

• OBITUARY •

Anthony Masters

1940–2003

It is perhaps as a writer of books for children that Anthony Masters will be best remembered although he also wrote eleven novels for adults. His exploration of the inner world of the male adolescent carries a sensitivity that few writers can match. He fathomed the mind of the adolescent, stranded on the cusp between childhood and maturity, struggling with trust and distrust of family, with confusion and awe towards life, and wrote about it with harsh reality and magical fantasy. His most recent children's work, finished just weeks before he died, is a novel for young adults exploring the relationship between an Irish teenager caught on the fringes of terrorism and a reclusive World War Two hero. To excite children about books Tony devised a series of adventure workshops, which he called Book Explosions, and which he personally ran in schools all over the UK.

• OBITUARY •

Audrey Laski

1931–2003

Ed Zaghini writes...

Audrey was educated at Colwyn Bay Grammar School. She then won a major scholarship to Newnham, Cambridge, when she was awarded a first in English. She undertook research on 'Romantic Novelists' at Kings College, London and then on 'The Myths of the Hero in Victorian Fiction' in Cambridge. She taught at Sheffield High School for Girls and then became Deputy Head of Peckham Girls School before moving to become head of Teacher Training at Central School of Speech and Drama. Reputable author of various novels for adults such as *Venus in Transit* (1964), *The Keeper* (1968) and *The Dominant Fifth* (1969), she began reviewing children's books for the TES and became passionate about children's fiction. Her knowledge, love and dedication of children's books were eminent. She applied the same critical approach to baby books as to the most complex secondary sources on this subject. All those who knew Audrey were drawn into her charismatic personality and she will be very much missed among friends and those working with children's books. Audrey died of cancer at the age of 71.

• OBITUARY •

Paul Zindel

1936–2003

Zindel's first novel, *The Pigman*, was part of a new wave of US writing for teenage readers in the late 1960s and 1970s which dealt with the realities of life for young adults – including having feckless parents – with honesty and humour. His zany titles (eg *Pardon Me*, *You're Stepping on my Eyeball* and *My Darling, My Hamburger*) were often suggested by his readers.

I wish I'd written...

Allan Ahlberg on a lovely, ace book...

Two hundred words, said Rosemary. Right, there's five for a start – no, eleven! – no... I should stop this. I had a job once as a grave-digger. Ambrose, a fellow worker, and I would argue endlessly on philosophical topics, which mostly concluded thus: 'It all stupidity you talkin', Allan.' He had a point.

Where was I? Yes, two hundred words on the book I wish I'd written. That's not so difficult. I wish I'd written, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (Farrell), *The Member of the Wedding* (McCullers) and *True Grit* (Portis). Oh dear, I see now that won't do. Children's book, Rosemary said. Trouble is I don't read children's books; actually that's not altogether true. *Clockwork*

(Pullman) – read that and definitely wish I'd written it. Oh no! – that won't do either. It has to be a book not previously chosen by someone else. Oh yes, and a 'recent' publication, Rosemary says. So I can't very well have,

How Tom Beat Captain Najork and His Hired Sportsmen (Hoban/Blake), or *The Elephant and the Bad Baby* (Vipont/Briggs) or even, more's the pity, *Humpty Dumpty* (anon.).

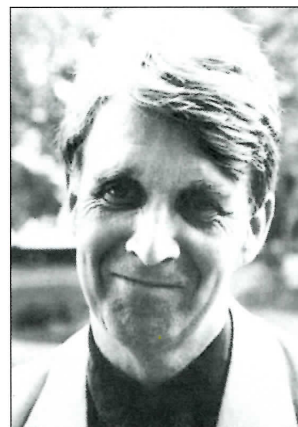
Well, anyway, two hundred words... must be nearly up. It's amazing really, how language just seems to run away with us, no matter how strict or severe or economical we are, don't you find? One minute flush with words, and the next, bankrupt. Hm... and where did they all go? To what purpose? Ah yes, who can say?

Where was I? Got it. My choice for the book I wish I'd written (I am opening the envelope now) is assuredly, *Dear Diary* by Sara Fanelli.

A lovely, ace book (you have to let me have done the pictures too). So graphic! So distinctive! Such fun!* Any man, woman, child, ladybird or chair, even, could not fail to enjoy it. And there we are: three hundred and twenty two words... on the button.

*Plus: magical, mysterious, subtle, clever, simple and unfathomable. And short.

Dear Diary by Sara Fanelli is published by Walker Books (0 7445 8263 6, £5.99 pbk). Allan Ahlberg's latest book, *The Little Cat Baby*, ill. Fritz Wegner, Puffin, 0 670 91286 7, £7.99 hbk, will be published in October.



Chosen from reviews of the Carnegie Medal shortlisted titles posted by Carnegie Shadowing Groups on www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk

GOOD READS

Thanks to Sara Wake, Wendy Wurley, Angela Pascoe, Mrs Higgins, Mrs Dean, Brenda Meliniotis and the Carnegie Shadowing Scheme.

Across the Nightingale Floor by Lian Hearn

I thought this book had strong characters that developed and the plot was well constructed but I was left wondering what happened to Kaede which I thought ruined the end. It is also quite gory in the way it describes people's heads being chopped off and blood pouring out. This is not really suitable for younger people in Year 7, so it should not have been put on the shortlist for a children's book award. I also thought the beginning was rushed a bit and too much happened in the first chapter compared to what was in the other chapters, but otherwise it was well written.

Rebecca Callaby (Year 10), Ansford Community School, Somerset

The Edge by Alan Gibbons

This was the last book in the box, nobody wanted it. I picked it up unwillingly but no one would swap. I took it home and read it. Chapter 1: Family violence, and people trying to run away... not my thing at all. Chapter 2: More violence... think about giving up. Chapter 3: OK, I admit it's getting better. Chapters 4-8: Starting to look more promising. Chapters 9-11: Racism, racism, racism... OK, so maybe this isn't exactly my cup of tea but now it's getting better. Chapters 12+: First I couldn't pick it up... now I can't put it down. This book is brilliant with an excellently thought out plot, characterisation and a progressing storyline making you care more and more about the characters the further you get into the book. A must-read and a definite Carnegie

winner. This book certainly tingles and lingers!

Oliver Daniels (Year 7), Ansford Community School, Somerset

The Shell House by Linda Newbery

This book covers sensitive issues like being gay and girls. As the book flits between the First World War and modern day it is almost funny how the stories interact. The WW1 characters Edmund and Alex show you the problems you have to face being gay and especially in the army. Meanwhile Greg is experiencing an identity crisis as worries about girls change into a battle to see if he is gay. Girls, gays and history are entangled into one compelling read. I couldn't put it down and it changed my views on a couple of things! The religious issues which are woven into this story make you develop an inner battle with yourself. Parts make you want to question your own beliefs but in the end you don't want to change. 10/10

Sian Burnett (Year 10), Somervale School, Bath

The Dark Horse by Marcus Sedgwick

I really enjoyed this book. All the way through I was thrilled and wanted to keep reading. It was very painful at the end because by this time the Storm had taken you in and you felt part of them, especially after the Dark Horse invaded and they had nothing. By feeling part of the Storm this book made you understand their emotions. Ragnald made you tense and fearful and like the

villagers you were unsure of what to do. The only thing that let the story down was that it all became too convenient for Mouse and I knew what was going to happen. Knowing this when the villagers did not, made your attachment unrealistic and reminded you that the emotions you had were in the book rather than in your mind. Everyone should read this book because despite a small slip up at the end it is fantastic.

Melanie Todd (Year 9), Camberley Libraries Young Readers Group, Camberley, Surrey

Up on Cloud Nine by Anne Fine

When you read this book you will either get it straightaway or it will leave you being very puzzled. It shows you more closely how a boy thinks if his friend is in trouble. It has some very moving moments and covers some issues such as suicide and why someone might do it. Stolly (one of the main characters) is very different and that is what makes the book so interesting. It is good because he shows you the world from a completely different angle. I don't think this is one of Anne Fine's best books but it is still good. You have to really concentrate when reading it as it becomes quite complicated and confusing. I would give it 7/10.

Hannah Grant (Senior 1), Madras College, Fife

Martyn Pig by Kevin Brooks

This incredibly powerful but humorous book tells the story of one boy's dark secret as it becomes

more difficult to conceal. In a period of less than one week Martyn's life goes from pretty bad to unbearable. His dad is an alcoholic, and Martyn's pessimistic overview on life is portrayed in the way he views the world he lives in. The vivid first-person description really lets the reader get an insight into the desperately deprived Martyn's life. Martyn's situation is a very unusual and complicated one, yet easy to relate to. The novel kept me absolutely glued; the tension is always sky-high, and a major twist at the end left me gasping for more. If anything, the epilogue was a little unsatisfactory but generally an excellent read. A brilliantly told story, which never fails to captivate, entertain and even frustrate!

Hannah Wilson (Year 10), Meole Brace School, Shropshire

Ruby Holler by Sharon Creech

This story was very touching, it showed how children can see adults, big and scary. It showed how people cannot always trust each other straightaway. The children had been brought up awfully and it was nice to see a happy ending although their past had been dreadful. The characters were carefully thought out, as were their relationships. It was difficult to find out who Z really was, this made it effective but a bit frustrating. Overall it was a very good book.

Jenny Wholley (Year 9), The Meridian School, Royston, Herts

For publisher details, see page 6.

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*.

Nick Attwood teaches English at the Dragon School, Oxford.

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.

Urmi Chana previously worked as a researcher and lecturer on bilingual issues in primary education. She now teaches part-time in the primary sector.

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

Olivia Dickson works for Children's BBC (CBBC and CBeebies Online).

Sheila Ebbutt is director of BEAM Education, a former LEA mathematics advisor, and a member of the Early Childhood Mathematics Group.

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian Jackson is General Adviser - English, West Sussex.

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.

Martin Salisbury is Course Director for MA Children's Book Illustration at APU Cambridge.

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

Rosemary Stones is Editor of Books for Keeps.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

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

Jessica Yates is a school librarian working in the London Borough of Haringey.

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REVIEWS Now Out in Paperback

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

UNDER 5s PRE-SCHOOL/NURSERY/INFANT

No Trouble at All

★★★★

Sally Grindley, ill. Eleanor Taylor, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 0 7475 6112 5, £4.99

Reviewed *BfK* 137, November 2002:

'Bespectacled Grandfather Bear baby-sits his two grandchildren and as the story unfolds a view of two angelic little bears unfolds. But, read the pictures – some divided upstairs/downstairs or left/right by the gutter – and a very different story emerges with pillow fights, hide and seek, and midnight feasts. The cosy watercolour and pencil interiors of Grandfather's log cabin cum tree house are full of detail, nooks and crannies for little bears and readers to "paw" over.'

5-8 INFANT/JUNIOR

Inside Mary Elizabeth's House

★★★★

Pamela Allen, Puffin, 32pp, 0 14 056711 9, £4.99

Reviewed *BfK* 127, March 2001:

'Like so many of Allen's books, this one, with sparse text and bold illustrations, oozes humour. Little Mary Elizabeth is a toughy, brazenly telling the doubting big boys there is a monster at her house but the boys just laugh at her. When Mary Elizabeth calls their bluff we meet the huge, hairy monster, screeching at the fleeing boys. A very satisfying story, one to snap shut, before re-opening for another read.'

The Adventures of a Nose

★★★★

Viviane Schwarz, ill. Joel Stewart, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 9464 2, £4.99

Reviewed *BfK* 137, November 2002:

'A large nose, disembodied but for two legs protruding from its nostrils, embarks upon a journey of self-discovery, seeking a place where it can "fit in and stick out". The story is as surrealistic as Gogol's tale of the same name, and shares some of its concerns with identity and alienation, but it can be read quite comfortably with younger children as a tale of higher silliness. Large, bold simple print faces or overlays bright and vivid episodes in the Nose's quest, whilst alongside, pencil drawings and collages of "found text" related to the episodes form thought-provoking, talk-evoking palimpsests.'

8-10 JUNIOR/MIDDLE

Look! Zoom in on Art!

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Gillian Wolfe, Frances Lincoln, 40pp, 0 7112 2021 2, £6.99

Reviewed *BfK* 137, November 2002:

'Wolfe chooses eighteen paintings on different subjects and from different periods and invites children to look at them in a variety of ways. The book has a wonderfully uncluttered look and the quality of the paper helps each picture shine out of the pages. So it would be a lovely book for a child to own as well as a good text to support art and English work at school. There is a useful "look it up" section which tells us more about the artists and where the paintings discussed in the book can be seen.'

10-12 MIDDLE/SECONDARY

Child X

★★★★

Lee Weatherley, Corgi, 224pp, 0 552 54800 6, £4.99

Reviewed *BfK* 135, July 2002:

'Weatherley's first novel plunges us into the world of media sensationalism, as 13-year-old Jules gradually discovers why her parents have suddenly separated and her father refuses to speak to her. The X of the title refers to the way in which Jules is identified by press and television because they are legally restrained from naming her. Told in the first person, the story moves swiftly, keeping the reader's interest with a large cast of characters, a central plot which depends on sexual revelations and media harassment, and subplots involving bullying at school, Jules's part-time career as an actress and her growing romance with a school friend. All in all, there is rather too much going on but Jules herself is a solid, three-dimensional figure, self-conscious and vulnerable, funny, touching and exasperating at turns, who gradually acquires self-confidence as she makes her way through the usual embarrassments of adolescence and the sudden extraordinary collapse of her family life, all in the glare of national publicity.'

10-14 MIDDLE/SECONDARY

Ruby Holler

★★★★

Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 320pp, 0 7475 6029 3, £5.99

Reviewed *BfK* 138, January 2003:

'Dallas and Florida, 13-year-old twin boy and girl, have been abandoned as babies by their mother and raised in a Dickensian orphanage, unsuccessfully farmed out at

intervals to a succession of equally Dickensian foster-parents. At 13, not surprisingly, they are suspicious of the entire human race except each other. When an elderly couple of would-be foster-parents called Tiller and Sairy turn up, allegedly to recruit the children as companions on eccentric journeys, things do not look promising. But starting from the couple's remote cabin in an unspoiled valley called Ruby Holler, a sequence of comic misadventures forges a durable bond between old and young, with Ruby Holler itself as the magical catalyst for change. A lively and enjoyable reworking of familiar stuff.'

12+ SECONDARY

The Raging Quiet

★★★★

Sherryl Jordan, Simon & Schuster, 320pp, 0 689 83686 4, £4.99

Reviewed *BfK* 122, May 2000:

'Set in a mythical past at a time when Christianity and superstition lived side by side, this novel tells how Marnie is forced into marriage with the wealthy lord in order to save her family from ruin. Raped by her husband on their wedding night and widowed after only two days, Marnie becomes the victim of suspicion and branded a witch. Raven, a deaf young man, is also an outsider, brutally treated and labelled as mad by the superstitious villagers. Together they invent a system of signing which gives Raven language for the first time and make him "whole". Jordan's treatment of prejudice and ignorance is well done and the historical detail, such as Marnie's trial for witchcraft, is well researched and thoroughly engaging. This is a long book but worth the effort and the exciting ending rounds things up in a most satisfying way.'

REVIEWS Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant

Blue and Square

1 84059 343 1

Yellow and Round

1 84059 344 X

★★★★

Hervé Tulley, Milet, 26pp, £4.99 each board

These board books about shapes are highly original and challenging. They have the shape punched through, with the last page as a backdrop. The author plays with the shapes on each page. A stick person with a square body and head leans jauntily to the side of the square hole, or the hole punches through his body at a slant. A stick person with a round body and head has a centre hole, then a hole to one side, then a hole outside above and then below. The author plays with position and with mood. He uses colour and paint techniques to illustrate emotions in a very French



way. Children might be intrigued by this. We have 'sad', a page grey and blue, and the square person drooping and weeping, then – guess the word – a bright yellow and red

page, sparks flying; and a leaping, alive square person. Yes, 'happy'. The round person is below, then above, far and then near, ill and red with spots, and then yellow and bright when better. There is much here to discuss: What do you think this word says? What might the next page be about? Where is the person now? Have you ever felt like this? Could you paint an angry picture? What is square on this page? Both books are a rich stimulus for a range of ages. SE

Little Lamb: A Soft-to-Touch Book

★★★

Piers Harper, Macmillan, 32pp, 1 405 02060 1, £10.99 hbk

This 30cm square picture book with 'touch-and-feel' lamination on each page, is an ideal size for sharing and

exploration. Pigs, dogs, mice and cows are wholly or partly furry to the touch, along with iris, bulrushes and dandelion clocks, demanding a thorough tactile exploration of every page. Hide-and-seek is a favourite game, and Little Lamb joyfully skips off to find a hiding place. Leaving the safety of the field, she meets Cow, Pig and Duck, asking each for suggestions for a good place to hide. In gentle, repetitive language, Lamb is led further and further from home. Thoroughly lost and desperately wanting her Mother, she is eventually led home by wise Sheepdog. Lots of comparisons with real life as small children become more aware of the world, this is a charming book for one-to-one sharing. GB

My Best Friend, Bob

★★★★★

Georgie Ripper, Macmillan, 32pp, 0 333 96084 X, £9.99 hbk



Ripper burst onto the scene by winning the Macmillan Prize for Children's Picture Book Illustration a couple of years ago. She entered two picture books for this important national competition for art students, and the judges felt that either could have won in its own right. The first, *Little Brown Bush Rat*, was published last year. *My Best Friend, Bob* (originally titled 'Brian and Bob') is the other. The two guinea pigs while away their days in the pet shop by playing games such as 'I Spy' ('Brian was terribly good at I Spy and almost always won with clever words like "budgerigar" and "dog food"'). Their idyll is shattered when Bob is whisked from the cage and bought by a customer. The disconsolate Brian pines badly until he too is suddenly bundled into a cardboard box. Just as he feels things couldn't get much worse, he discovers that he has been bought by the grandfather of Bob's new owner – as a present for his grandson. The ensuing happy reunion concludes a book whose success is built on the totally convincing visual characterisation of the animals. Their facial expressions, gesture and movement are all spot on. The image of the dejected Brian, lying in his food bowl, idly flicking a peanut in the air, is a particular delight. MS

A Chick Called Saturday

★★★★★

Joyce Dunbar, ill. Brita Granström, Doubleday, 32pp, 0 385 60235 9, £10.99 hbk



Granström's airy, confident watercolours are an excellent foil to Dunbar's amusing tale of Saturday, the free spirited chick that refuses to

conform. Saturday is convinced that there must be more to life than scratching and pulling worms. His mother's fruitless attempts to convince the wayward chick of his appointed place in the world are described through a succession of beautifully drawn and designed spreads. These culminate in a wonderful blast of colour as we encounter the farm cockerel, and Saturday at last discovers a role model.

Granström's work is usually seen in tandem with that of her partner, Mick Manning. The contribution that these two have made to the picture book scene in recent years has been considerable. Dunbar's text is here enhanced by a combination of high quality draughtsmanship and a convincing, unmannered economy of line. Visually, the characters sit comfortably in what is essentially a naturalistic, painterly backdrop. As for Saturday, he learns that it is possible after all to assert his individuality, and without needing to copy the pigs, sheep, geese, ducks or cows. This is a handsomely produced book, worthy of its excellent authors. MS

Marvin Wanted MORE!

★★★★

Joseph Theobald, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 0 7475 5631 8, £9.99 hbk



On the cover, Marvin is a giant fleece ball with tiny legs, ten times as big as the trees. He wears a staring and grim expression, his mouth shut tight, as if he doesn't feel well. Nor would you, if you'd eaten what he has. The endpapers give an insect's eye view of a peaceful pastoral scene, with a sheep grazing beneath a tree in the distance. In the pages between, Theobald follows Marvin's growing appetite, from a grass starter, through hedgerow and forest, out into space, to make a meal of the earth itself.

The storyline, which mixes warnings about the dangers of eating too much and of getting above yourself, is hardly new or conveyed with any great force in the text. But it is a vehicle for some memorable images and a lot of pictorial humour. Here's Marvin standing on the moon, floating serene and alone in space, after he has swallowed the world; here's Marvin sucking it all up again, Eiffel Tower, kangaroo, Big Ben and all; and look at the teeth marks on those tree stumps!

This is a good first picture book from an illustrator who knows how to tell a story in pictures. It will amaze and amuse. CB

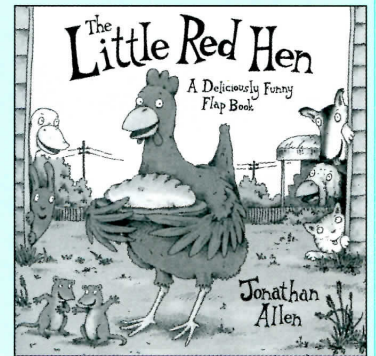
Editor's Choice

The Little Red Hen: A Deliciously Funny Flap Book

★★★★★

Jonathan Allen, Picture Corgi, 24pp, 0 552 54812 X, £4.99 pbk novelty

Allen's dynamically vibrant line and crosshatching together with his vibrant palette convey character and mood with seemingly effortless aplomb in this witty flap book. The sloth, suspicion, greed and selfishness of the Little Red Hen's farmyard friends who have no time



to help contrast amusingly with the indignation of the field mice who provide a commentary on events. As ever, Allen's use of the flap is organic to his visual narrative, moving the story briskly and entertainingly forward. A treat. RS

Drat That Fat Cat!

★★★★★

Pat Thomson, ill. Ailie Busby, Scholastic, 32pp, 0 439 98213 8, £10.99 hbk

If you want a new rollicking read-aloud for young children, try this cumulative tale! With tones of 'There was an Old Lady who swallowed a Fly', That Fat Cat eats anyone or thing but this still fails to provide him with a hearty meal. Children will love the repetitive language; 'But was that cat fat enough? NO, HE WAS NOT!'... the latter in *huge* font. Inside the fat cat can be heard 'Drat that fat cat! Woof! Woof! Woof! Quack! Quack! Quack! Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!' as another creature, pictured on the cover, enters both the story... and the cat. There's a noisy resolution with which children can join with gusto. The illustrations are big and bold, the swathes of strong primary colours vibrating with fuchsia pink and brilliant orange. With strong artwork, rhythmic text and varying sentence length, this is a book children will love to tackle themselves as well as enjoy for story time. GB

The Wolf who cried Boy

★★★★★

Bob Hartman, ill. Tim Raglin, Lion Publishing, 32pp, 0 7459 4831 6, £4.99 pbk

A diet of Chocolate Moose, Minced Mole Rolls and Three Pig Salad has little appeal for Little Wolf. He listens attentively to his parents' accounts of the days when they dined on Boy Chops, Baked Boy-tato and Boys-n-Berry Pie and decides to liven life up a little by crying 'Boy'. After two fruitless boy-hunts instigated by Little Wolf, the parents tumble to his tricks which really is a pity for them as a whole troop of boy scouts arrives in the woods. Discredited, Little Wolf just has to learn to like the food on offer and so the boys can live happily ever after.

One of an increasing number of books which seeks to destabilise traditional stories, *The Wolf who cried Boy* succeeds wonderfully well in its aim. Raglin's illustrations, a homage to Maurice Sendak, show him as a talented artist in his own right. Both illustration and text, and this includes design and layout of text, conspire to create a book which is sure to be returned to again and again. VC

Imagine you are a Dolphin

Ill. Mike Bostock, 0 7502 4317 1

Imagine you are a Crocodile

Ill. Mike Bostock, 0 7502 4318 X

Imagine you are a Tiger

Ill. Peter Melnyczuk, 0 7502 4316 3

NON-FICTION

★★★

Karen Wallace, Hodder Wayland, 32pp, £5.99 each pbk

The books in this series encourage young readers or listeners to empathise with the daily life and activities of an adult creature and its young. In each title, habitats are strongly realised in words and pictures, as indeed we would expect from this author and the two illustrators.

The books are for very young children of about age three to five years but, even so, I would have welcomed there being more detail in the main narrative and, perhaps, in notes at the end. Parents and teachers know how profound some of the questions that young children ask can be. To be fair, a number of the pictures have the kind of detail and drama that encourage talk and reflection. In *Imagine you are a Crocodile* there is an image of the animal rearing from the water to catch a heron in flight. Another beguiling picture – in *Imagine you are a Dolphin* – shows a shoal of squid, a 'feast deep in the ocean' for the dolphin, lying luminous against the darkness of the ocean. *Imagine you are a Tiger* communicates well the power of instinctive behaviour – showing, for example, how the playful fights of tiger siblings are a preparation for their survival as successful predators. MM

Cow

NON-FICTION

★★★★★

Malachy Doyle, ill. Angelo Rinaldi, Pocket Books, 40pp, 0 7434 6215 7, £4.99 pbk

The involving illustrations and text in this picture book introduce young children of about age three to age five to the texture of a cow's day from early morning to nightfall. This might not sound engrossing – but somehow it is.

How does the book work so well? The large format – for a large creature –

helps and so do the fine double spreads (yes, they deserve praise here!). The illustrator's oil paintings give an exquisite, and sometimes rather dream-like, view of the rural landscape. And the animals, contented if rather solemn, are beautifully painted too, often in stunning close-ups showing their liquid brown eyes, pink moist muzzles and big patterned bodies. We get a tremendous sense of creatures living through the long, hot day – grazing, swishing their tails, resting in the midday sun and ambling to the milking parlour. They may not have very varied lives, but children will be helped to see them as calm and useful creatures driven by instinctive longings and worthy of our respect. Talk will arise from the glimpses of the people who work in the countryside and of the farmer's children going to school through the fields and returning home at the end of the day. This fine introduction to an aspect of living in the country would be a welcome addition to the nursery school collection or to the bookshelf at home. **MM**

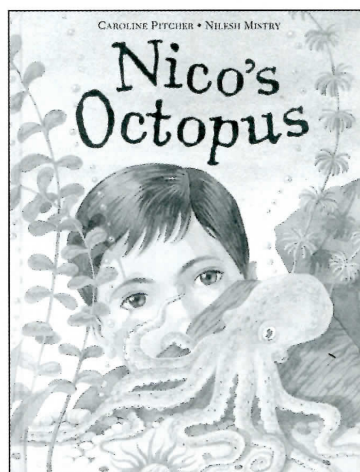
Nico's Octopus

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Caroline Pitcher, ill. Nilesh Mistry, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 0 7112 2061 1, £10.99 hbk

I read recently about an octopus called Frida, living in Munich zoo, which has learnt how to open a screw-top jar to get at the tasty shrimps inside. So I picked up this book about a young boy's passionate concern for his octopus pet with special interest.

Nico rescues an octopus from a fisherman's net and the story invites us to share all the interesting things he finds out about this most fascinating of sea creatures. Often likened to a shell-less snail, the octopus has eight endlessly flexible and extremely sensitive legs. Young learners between about five and eight years will be interested to learn that the creature has three hearts to pump its blue blood and can show its feelings – turning white with fear and red with anger. Nico finds it is intelligent enough to get to know him, reaching out gently with the tip of its tentacle when it sees his face



through the glass of the tank.

There is a telling contrast between the octopuses hung up to dry 'like old grey bagpipes' ready for the pot in the cafe and the pink, moving, changing creature Nico is caring for. He calls his pet 'the chameleon of the sea' because of its ability for camouflage and refers to it as 'an

alien' because of its strangeness. There is an intriguing, if rather sad ending – the octopus dies (as all female octopuses do) giving up her life to produce a large number of baby octopuses which Nico releases into the ocean. If children ask, as they probably will, why the mother dies in this way – we find in the note at the end that it is because she is so absorbed in nurturing her eggs that she does not feed.

The book communicates a strong sense of place – a sunny Mediterranean fishing village where the people live an open air life. We see the fishermen on the shore pulling in their nets, the waiters serving the card-playing men in the seaside cafe below Nico's family's flat and we get glimpses of a devotional picture and of women in the background dressed in traditional black.

An illustrated story of this quality is worthwhile in its own right, but this one also provides a context for a great deal of learning – about a particular sea creature and about a lifestyle. **MM**

REVIEWS 5–8 Infant/Junior

The Pea and the Princess

★★★★★

Mini Grey, Jonathan Cape, 32pp, 0 224 06459 2, £10.99 hbk

From the opening endpapers to the closing ones, both of which have a role in the story, *The Pea and the Princess* is an absolute delight. And yes, the title is correct for this take on a familiar tale is told from the perspective of a pea destined for greatness. From the moment it was born it knew that somehow it would be important, and indeed it ends up in a very special glass case in a museum as the pea which revealed the identity of the woman the 34-year-old prince would wed.

Not only does Grey play with an old story, she also takes a poke at a more modern palace romance. There is a leguminous motif throughout the pages including many visual jokes, and there are asides like the masthead on the newspaper, The Globe, the logo of which is an artichoke. The familiar looking Queen complete with crown and headscarf has pea-like eyes and the heir apparent is seen reading a gardening book.

Grey's change of perspective is exemplified in her artwork which plays around with points of view. This is a very domestic monarchy: only the Queen and prince are visible members of the royal household, and their surroundings are comfortably middle-class. There is a great deal to look at and discuss in this picture book with great appeal for older children, gardeners, royalists (maybe) and republicans. **VC**

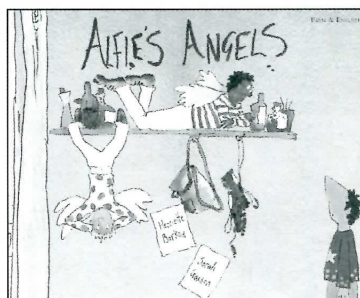
Ben's Magic Telescope

★★★★★

Brian Patten, ill. Peter and Siân Bailey, Puffin, 32pp, 0 14 056807 7, £5.99 pbk

After first reading this magical book, I immediately turned back to the

beginning for a more leisurely enjoyment of Patten's poetic text matched with the Baileys' beautifully crafted illustrations. Nine-year-old Ben lives in a tower block in a large, ugly city. Bored by the view, he wishes for something wonderful to happen. And because he makes this wish at a magical time, in a heap of rubbish he finds a silver telescope, carved with tiny images of the sun and moon. On the next page the colour palette changes, as the view through the telescope is seen brilliantly lighting up the centre of the spread. The lens powerfully picks up incredible details as Ben examines the distant market where his mother shops. The telescope shows 'bumps on oranges, bruises on apples that look like maps'. Each vivid view through the telescope holds the reader's eye, before drifting around the rest of the scene on the page, depicted in soft, muted tones. The illustrations serve to tell so much of the story that at times the text seems almost hidden, but on reading the words, one is held by the flowing, sparse yet glowingly descriptive prose. Ben looks through the telescope at his boring, everyday world, and it astonishes him. Beyond the factory chimneys he catches sight of the natural world, breathing, growing, flying, spinning, and, adjusting the telescope, finds he can see across oceans to a world of snow and glittering ice. The text changes into rhyming couplets before Ben stands, 'exhausted and full to the brim with seeing so many miraculous things'. In reflective mood, he realises his eyes have been opened, that he will never see the world in the same way again. The book closes with a spiral sentence, asking if the reader spotted the centipede, pram, wheelbarrow, double rainbow, setting sun, an astronaut's footprint... A wonderful book for reflection, a treasure for city and country child alike. **GB**



Alfie's Angels

DUAL LANGUAGE ★★★

Henriette Barkow, ill. Sarah Garson, trans. Milada Sal, Mantra, 32pp, Czech and English, 1 85269 962 0, £7.50 pbk

Why do teachers always choose girls to be angels? 'Alfie wanted to be an angel. He'd seen them in his books. He'd seen them in his dreams.' This and another refrain carry this appealing story along and it's one that children will enjoy listening to as well as reading for themselves. The illustrations, in a style reminiscent of Quentin Blake's, bring to life Alfie's dreams of all the things he could do if he were an angel. There is the sort of humorous detail that young children will love pointing out so this is a book that will easily engage them in talk. The use of a handwriting-style typeface for the English text is a pleasant feature and the overall layout in the two languages is excellent. (Available in English only, 21 dual language editions, big book and audio CD.) **UC**

Bob Robber and Dancing Jane

★★★★★

Andrew Matthews, ill. Bee Willey, Jonathan Cape, 32pp, 0 224 06465 7, £10.99 hbk

For any illustrator, this is a text to die for, and Willey has done it full justice

with her darkly luminous and newly 'digitalised' imagery. How refreshing it is to come across an unsanitised dark tale in the best theatrical traditions of the genre.

'Bob Robber was a thief. He could steal the honey from the bees and the scent from the flowers. He could steal the truth from a promise and make it into a lie.' The sinister Bob lurks in the oily gloom, waiting for his moment, but he is bewitched by the nightly appearance of Dancing Jane, and longs to be able to join in. 'I can sneak and I can thief, but I can't dance a step!' In the ensuing enchanting pages he steals Dancing Jane's shadow, but it won't dance with him, only hanging limply in his arms. He loses his heart to her, returns the shadow, and then she '... danced the night out of him. She danced the honey back into the bees, the scent back into the flowers and filled the darkness with unbroken promises.'

Perhaps some parents will be concerned about the book's content, at a time when children are taught never to trust strangers, but this is an uplifting tale of conversion and transformation, and the authors and publisher are to be congratulated for producing it so beautifully. **MS**

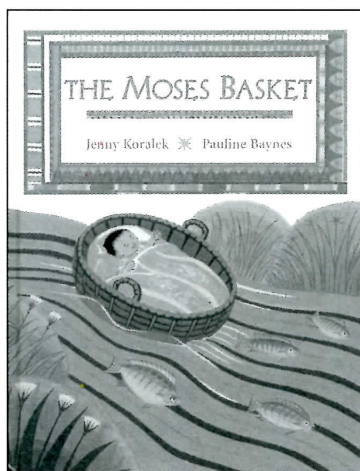
The Moses Basket

★★★★★

Jenny Koralek, ill. Pauline Baynes, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 0 7112 2066 9, £10.99 hbk

It is hard to believe that Baynes' first published illustrations appeared almost sixty years ago. One of our finest and most respected book illustrators, she is perhaps best known for her work on the C S Lewis 'Narnia' series. She won the Kate Greenaway Prize as far back as 1968 for her illustrations to *A Dictionary of Chivalry* (G.Uden, Longman).

Here Baynes teams up with Koralek to create a delightful interpretation of the Moses story. Baynes has had a life-long interest in historical



costume and period detail, her research is always meticulous, and her love of Middle-Eastern painting and decorative arts makes her the perfect choice for this production. The artist strikes a sophisticated balance between the western three-dimensional approach and the Eastern schematic traditions in her beautifully designed double-page spreads. As the ever-harrowing narrative unfolds, each page is alive with birds, fishes, flowers and fruits, creating a fecund and operatic backdrop to the new-born baby's river journey. Production-wise, the chalky gouache paintings might have benefited from printing on a slightly heavier stock of paper and less fiercely laminated cover boards.

MS

Sleeping Beauty

1 84121 144 3

Jack and the Beanstalk

1 84121 146 X

Cinderella

1 84121 150 8

Rumpelstiltskin

1 84121 152 4

★★★

Margaret Mayo, ill. Philip Norman, Orchard Colour Crunchies, 32pp, £3.99 each pbk

These four fairy tales form part of a series of first readers entitled 'First Fairy Tales'. The illustrations are great fun, and use colour and detail well – thus enabling the readers of these books to enjoy a little more magic in the reading or sharing of the books. The language used by Mayo is well in line with what one would expect for the intended audience. These books should form an enjoyable part of the KS1 classroom. (Also available: *Hansel and Gretel*, 1 84121 148 6, and *Snow White*, 1 84121 154 0.)

RL

Pegasus and the Proud Prince and The Flying Carpet

★★★

Retold by Margaret Mayo, ill. Peter Bailey, Orchard 'Myths', 48pp, 1 84362 078 2, £8.99 hbk

If the rest of the series lives up to the standard of this book, then I would recommend buying the whole of the series of Orchard 'Myths'. They would be an excellent asset to the classroom library as they are well told by Mayo, who knows just the right turn of language to use for

children. The illustrations by Bailey are simply done, but nonetheless convey just what meaning is required by the text. In *Pegasus and the Proud Prince*, children read how Bellerophon defeats the Chimera and then gains the hand of the king's only daughter in marriage. Unfortunately his pride leads to his downfall. This is contrasted with the story of the Indian prince who also uses his wits to gain the hand of his princess – he is wise and more humble than Bellerophon, and lives his life to a happy ending. The notes at the back of the book form a useful background to the myths for adults or interested children.

RL

Blobheads

★★★

Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell, Macmillan, 256pp, 0 330 41353 8, £4.99 pbk

This riotous collection is made up of three separate blobby books first published in 2000 but now appearing in one volume. Emerging one day from a bathroom toilet, the Blobheads are under the impression that Billy Barnes's one-year-old brother Silas is none other than the Most High Emperor of the Universe – an impression that his various well-filled nappies does nothing to shift. This is because the Blobheads are highly inefficient, with everything they touch quickly turning into the sort of chaos which usually ends with everyone crying out 'Waaaah!' Jokes about Billy's father's advanced cookery course mingle with cruder efforts involving snot, vomit and other juvenile comic stand-bys. Beautifully illustrated by Riddell, these endlessly inventive stories include toasters talking amorously to kettles and giant cockroaches the size of elephants. For those who can stand the pace, they make extremely lively reading.

NT

Is It Right to Fight? – A first look at conflict

NON-FICTION

★★★★

0 7502 4262 0

The Skin I'm In – A first look at racism

NON-FICTION

★★★

0 7502 4260 4

Pat Thomas, ill. Lesley Harker, Hodder Wayland 'A First Look At', 32pp, £10.99 each hbk

These two new books cover issues very relevant to children in today's world. *Is It Right to Fight?* with its two-page spread showing war and its effect on children has a particular resonance. The main emphasis, however, is on conflict resolution in everyday life: fighting and screaming is never a good thing; anger can be useful if channelled properly; being around people who fight makes one unhappy; children and adults often fight about the same things; a few simple rules can help avoid fights. The discussion points are ample and to-the-point.

The Skin I'm In has a semantic problem. The issue here is racism, but in reality the book deals with bigotry in all its forms. One picture shows a Jewish family with their menorah, and the clear implication is that Judaism is a race – which it isn't. Racism and bigotry are two issues, overlapping and similar in many ways, but different. The very

title indicates that the book is meant to be about skin colour. While there are abundant illustrations of children of different races, it is also apparent that we are talking about ethnicity, cultural background and religion too – all of which are quite different from skin colour alone. The issues raised are important ones – and well handled – but the title could have had more thought, considering the breadth of the book.

The pictures in both volumes, innocent, bright and sympathetic, are well realised, and there are instructions for teachers and parents on the use of the books. A list of contacts, and some material for further reading will also prove helpful. The 'A First Look At' series includes a number of other topics useful for PSHE and Citizenship lessons.

ES

Grizzly Bears

0 7502 4139 X

Leopards

0 7502 4129 2

NON-FICTION

★★★

Patricia Kendell, Hodder Wayland 'In the Wild', 32pp, £10.99 each hbk

As an introduction to different animals living in the wild, this series offers simple text combined with close-up photographs. We see animals hunting, rearing their young and adapting to their environment – in the case of bears, preparing to hibernate for the winter or, for leopards, settling down to sleep in a tree in the heat of the day. We also learn of the risks presented by these animals when they stray too close to human civilisation, and the importance of maintaining their natural habitats. Written by an education officer of the WWF backed by specialist consultants, the series carries the endorsement of the WWF and a clear message that we have a responsibility to ensure the survival of each species. Useful child-friendly website addresses are included, as well as lists of further reading and other sources of information, making this a useful addition to the primary library.

SU

Minibeasts

0 7496 4859 7

Weather

0 7496 4860 0

NON-FICTION

★★★

Lynne Huggins-Cooper, ill. Shelagh McNicholas and David Burroughs, Franklin Watts 'First-hand Science', 32pp, £11.99 each hbk

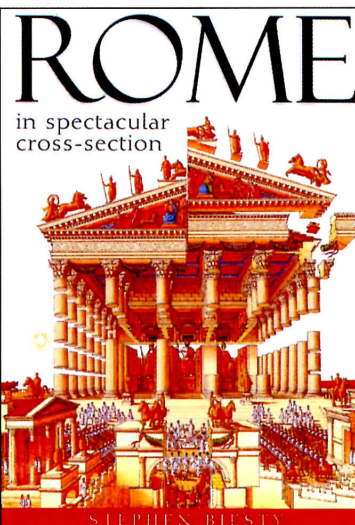
In *Minibeasts*, Ellie finds a ladybird and establishes its insectivity by counting its legs. She then becomes acquainted with other six-leggers – butterflies (who drink through a hollow tube like her straw), bees and dragonflies. She then discovers spiders and we deduce that they're not insects before going onto snails. Each subject's life-cycle is explained and the underlying principle of 'the fewer legs you have the more you, in infancy, resemble your parents' is neatly defused by the observation that hatchling spiders are 'perfect tiny spiders'.

While you have to look for minibeasts, weather will find you wherever you are. Joe lives in a nice house with a view of trees so the hot

weather takes him and his sunscreen out for a picnic. Then he goes kite-flying (where do you think the water goes when the washing dries?), gets wet, sees a rainbow and relishes the ripeness of apples and tomatoes. And this all in one day, seemingly. Next day it's a thunderstorm – he stays inside but acknowledges that a tree may fall on the house. Happily all that does fall is hailstones which remind Joe of last winter's snow and ice. Thoroughly inspired, Joe and his mum set up their own weather-station and a new Michael Fish (and, heaven knows, we need one) is in the making.

A friendly pair of starter-books are here made more valuable by the incidence of unanswered (but well-clued) questions amongst a lively text.

TP



Rome in spectacular cross-section

NON-FICTION

★★★★★

Stephen Biesty, text by Andrew Solway, Oxford, 32pp, 0 19 910765 3, £12.99 hbk

Ancient Rome provides an ideal subject for the Biesty treatment as he anatomises and characterises this touchstone of urban organisation. It's the 'Castor and Pollux' Festival and we explore the city with young toff Titus Cotta and his senator dad. We observe the cool splendour of their own home, the busy street, sacrifices at Jupiter's temple, Forum, Colosseum complete with elephants, and the busy docks before having a good scrape and bath and taking in a chariot race. Given these opportunities to portray cardinal features of Roman life, Biesty excels in the manner to which, if we're used to it, we react with renewed admiration. For the first-time Biesty-reader, this will be either unforgettably absorbing or a total turn-off, according to personal inclination.

The pictures are admirably illustrated by Solway's text which matches Biesty's contribution in precision. In a happy conjunction of the two the word 'pizza' accompanies a dog lifting its leg on the bakery wall. And I'm still wondering 'Ubi Wally est?' For everyone from five to 95.

TP

REVIEWS 8-10 Junior/Middle

Now You See Me. Now You...

POETRY ★★

Chrissie Gittins, Rabbit Hole Publications, 56pp, 0 9543288 0 9, £4.99 pbk

Children's poetry is currently a mess of good intentions. A sense of humour, a liking for language and wordplay, and a friendly, matey concern for children seem to be the only qualifications needed to win over the anthologists and get into print. Standards are confused, anything goes, and adverse critics are made to feel like spoil-sports. Risking that, I have to say that the poems of Chrissie Gittins, which have won quoted approval from respected commentators including Michael Thorn, Helen Dunmore and Morag Styles, leave me deeply unimpressed. There are plenty of good ideas and starting-points, but the execution repeatedly shows the faults now all too familiar in many other writers: clumsy metre, haphazard and lazy rhyme (now you hear it, now you don't), arbitrary details which don't add up to a whole, forced humour, limp endings, a heavy dependence on mere comic oddity. A few of the poems work (notably 'The Tale of Dotty Cuddletum' and 'Gillian Costigan') but most badly need to be worked at.

PH

Eye of the Wolf

★★★

Daniel Pennac, ill. Max Grafe, Walker, 112pp, 0 7445 9010 8, £4.99 pbk

This is an extremely handsome book, beautifully presented, Grafe's illustrations complementing it perfectly.

Two very different stories are woven together. Blue Wolf is from the icy North. Captured by hunters, separated from his family he paces his cage in the zoo. The boy Africa is also far from home. His stories are interwoven with those of his animal friends, Saucepans the dromedary, cheetah, hyena, gorilla. All the different stories are finally brought together in the zoo when boy and wolf stare into each other's eyes. There's a drifting lilt to the narrative which conjures up the sense of both snow and sand and which gives the book the immediacy and imprecision of a dream. First published 20 years ago its environmental message now seems heavy-handed but the effect of the mood created is undeniable. A particular type of child will get a great deal from this.

AR

The Unholy Grail

AUDIO BOOK ★★

Anthony Horowitz, read by Nickolas Grace, BBC Cover to Cover, 3hrs 33 mins, unabridged, 1 85549 810 3, £10.99 tape

The high drama of this second story set in the magical school of Groosham Grange involves shady characters from Eastern Europe and some skulduggery that looks like scuppering David's chance of

winning the Unholy Grail. Nickolas Grace's reading builds the tension well and is especially good at capturing David's bafflement at the string of unlikely events that contribute to his downfall. The only problem for the listener is that there are several unlikely events too many so that the story unravels just a little bit too slowly to hold attention to the bitter end.

JE

Death and the Arrow

★★★★

Chris Priestley, Doubleday, 176pp, 0 385 60492 0, £10.99 hbk

Reading this historical detective adventure reminded me of some big names, Chandler, Garfield and Pullman among them. Perhaps Priestley isn't in that class yet, but there's time. It's a clever, exciting tale, with surely drawn characters and a sense of style and atmosphere which are ably supported by Priestley's own illustrations and decorations.

In 18th-century London, young Tom Marlowe, thirsting for adventure and travel, is caught up in a series of murders, whose victims are marked by their possession of a calling card depicting a skeleton holding an arrow. Tom and his redoubtable friend, Dr Harker, investigate. They make a journey through the criminal underworld, face a struggle to the death on the dome of St Paul's (a touch of Hitchcock?), and visit Newgate Prison, to discover the origin of the mystery lies on the other side of the world.

The plot twists and turns satisfyingly. There are vertiginous chases across London rooftops. Some colourful historical detail is splashed in. There's even a consideration of the gap between law and justice that Tom's distant transatlantic cousin, Philip, would have no difficulty recognising. None of this is beyond a good reader of 9 or 10. I suspect it might read aloud well as a serial, and it's a lot more interesting than many written to order historical fictions.

CB

The Adventures of Pinocchio: the story of a puppet

★★

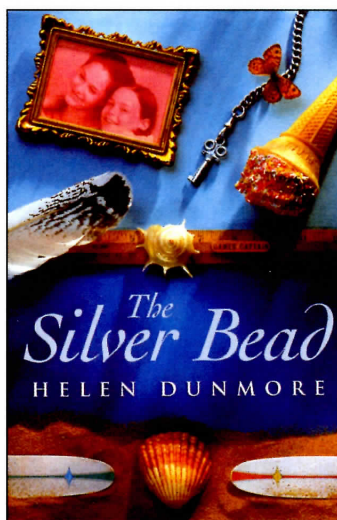
Carlo Collodi, ill. Iassen Ghiuselev, Simply Read (Canada), 160pp, 0 9688768 0 3, £16.99 hbk (available via Turnaround, tel: 020 8829 3000, www.turnaround-uk.com)

In defiance of their own name the publishers have not put out this fancy volume simply for reading. Like one or two other recent editions of *Pinocchio*, it's an exercise in de luxe bookmaking: a handsome imperial octavo in quarter linen, the rich red paper boards protected by a wood-grain paper jacket, all acting as a showcase for the artwork of its Bulgarian illustrator. Pen-drawn initials and vignettes and full-page – sometimes double-page – colour plates bear witness to sophisticated, virtuoso artistry, all beautifully printed. Gestures, physiognomies, props and costumes are handled

with an almost photographic *verismo* which is offset by some arty-farty design-work and angles of perspective.

That certainly doesn't make for a book intended to be 'simply read' and there's not much evidence that the publishers care tuppence for Collodi's story. For one thing they have merely tinkered about with a not-very-good translation that dates back to the 1920s (nowhere acknowledged in the book itself) although it looks as though Mr Ghiuselev was using a more accurate text since he illustrates what Collodi says rather than the translator's version. For a second thing *Pinocchio* does not need such pomp. As a story it is of the earth, earthy both in the vigour of its narrative and its language – a story for telling. Its folk tale simplicities and its comic satire are obscured rather than enhanced by the glitz of what looks very much like an artistic ego-trip.

BA



The Silver Bead

★★★★

Helen Dunmore, Scholastic, 160pp, 0 439 98286 3, £9.99 hbk

A Cornish farm, camping, cream teas, coves, swimming with seals, a couple of girls whose friendship is disturbed by the arrival of the daughter of a travelling family (complete with eccentric Great Gran) – it all seems like a traditional, secure read for late primary readers. And so it is for about half of its course – a question of shifting loyalties, of who's in and who's out, of small-scale child-sized dilemmas. But then Zillah, the narrator Katie's best friend (readers may know them from two earlier titles), develops nose bleeds and becomes untypically listless. She has leukaemia and everything changes. Dunmore observes both Zillah's illness and Katie's responses to it with compassionate accuracy. What had been important is now trivial – the stakes are for life or death and everyone, child or adult, is caught up in the desperate struggle. As you grow up, it is very likely that someone in your school contracts leukaemia. Often, with the best of intentions, the bedside curtains are closed around the victim and the family. This novel, without melodrama and without losing its

attractive top juniors voice, draws them aside.

GF

Ragweed

★★

Avi, Simon & Schuster, 224pp, 0 689 83651 1, £9.99 hbk

Ragweed is the prequel to *Poppy* in the 'Dimwood Forest Chronicles', and if the other chronicles were similar I wouldn't recommend them, unless you know a mouse-mad nine-year-old who doesn't care for authenticity or consistency. *Ragweed* is a golden country mouse who leaves his cosy home to find excitement in the city of Amperville. There he meets cool mice such as Clutch and Dipstick, and finds mice can be different colours, such as the laboratory-bred albino mouse Blinker. He also discovers cats, and how much they hate mice.

The story follows the mice's quest to successfully set up a club without being raided or eaten along the way by the cats. There's lots of 'cool' dialogue, painfully using words such as 'dude', 'phat' and 'sweet', showing how streetwise the city mice are, and how cool *Ragweed* becomes. There are some good scenes of tension and planning between the cat and mice, but the whole story feels lame and the concept is incomplete – adopting modern human ways such as reading, skateboarding, modern art and poetry, but still eating cheese and not wearing any clothes. Avi's creation has as many holes in as a Swiss cheese.

OD

Goodbye, Tommy Blue

★★★

Adèle Geras, ill. David Wyatt, 0 333 99867 7

Wicked Chickens

★★★★

Vivian French, ill. John Bradley, 0 333 99462 0

The Beast of Crowsfoot Cottage

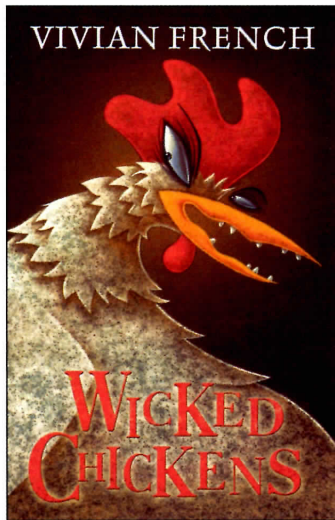
★★★

Jeanne Willis, ill. Chris Mould, 0 333 99464 7

Macmillan 'Shock Shop', 96pp, £9.99 each hbk

Here are three new additions to the excellent 'Shock Shop' series – and three good examples of what you can do with the ghost story.

Goodbye, Tommy Blue is a ghost story that is deliberately not scary. Nell's family are moving into a new house and on her first visit she sees the ghost – a young boy dressed in shorts. Nell is surprised because he's not frightening at all, just a boy even younger than she is. The family settle in and get to know their neighbours, an old lady whose family used to own both halves of the now split house, and her grandson. Nell guesses the ghostly little boy must be related to them and this is confirmed when she sees a photo of him in the old lady's album. Nell helps the ghost find what he is looking for – an old toy soldier, missing from a set – and he makes his last appearance when his grandson is in the room too.



Identifying the ghost is key in this book about family, connection to the past and memories of loved ones – the ghosts we all live with.

Vivian French also uses family relationships as a central theme to her very different, dark, but very funny story. Charlie's dad wins a substantial sum at bingo and uses it to fulfil his dream of an idyllic life in a cottage in the country. Unfortunately, he doesn't take the wishes of Charlie and his five sisters into account and when the dream cottage turns out to be a nightmare – damp, dilapidated, dirty and surrounded by squawking chickens – they round on him and their long-suffering mother. It's hard to think of a creature less threatening than a chicken but these are decidedly unpleasant. What's more, Charlie notices they are multiplying as if by magic and realises that the extra chickens are being created by the arguments, tantrums and squabbling in the cottage. Can he persuade his family to work together? The book is funny and chilling with a great sense of drama.

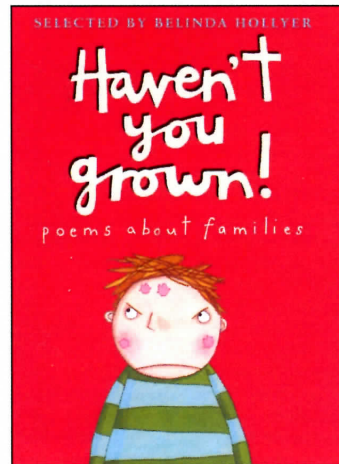
Jeanne Willis's book requires careful reading. A mysterious beast is terrifying the inhabitants of a peaceful part of the countryside – could it be a bear? Our narrator has different suspicions but who is the narrator and how reliable is she? It appears the beast is not the only monster loose in the countryside; there are hints at other more ordinary acts of violence. Tragedy seems to strike when a little girl and her step-father disappear, apparently killed by the beast, but that's not the end of the story. Only in the last chapter does the narrator confess that she is the girl, that she wasn't killed by the beast, a lion dumped by a circus, but befriended by him, that the beast helpfully ate her abusive step-father, whom she had shot and killed in a struggle over his shot-gun. The fairy tale tone and fairy tale ending don't lessen the bleakness and this is an unsettling read.

Haven't you grown! Poems about families

POETRY ★★★★★

Selected by Belinda Hollyer, ill. Holly Swain, Kingfisher, 224pp, 0 7534 0719 1, £12.99 hbk

This is a handsome production which gives each poem space to breathe and speak, which I suppose



is one of the things we would hope our families would do for us. Uncluttered and unhurried, with the occasional wry and affectionate comment from Swain's illustrations, it encourages its readers to enjoy and think about each poem.

Hollyer is keen to stress the diversity of families, whether it's where they come from, how many parents there may be (from single to step), or what can be expected of life within a family. And this extends to her choice of poets. The dust-jacket picks out those familiar to a UK audience – Causley, Rosen, and McGough – but Hollyer's trawl is wider, including many from the United States and Australia. Some of the poets are better known for adult work than children's, and some I don't know at all. But they are all good, and this shows an anthologist who is enthusiastic, knowledgeable and painstaking. These virtues shine through the selection and arrangement of the poems, which view the family and its members from a child's viewpoint in a variety of moods: looking at the special bond between grandparent and child, the ups and downs of brothers and sisters, the strange behaviour of distant relations, and the place of pets. It also contemplates the difficult to imagine worlds of parents who were once children, and children who will one day be parents.

The collection's perspective is pre-adolescent. This is a time when, for all the occasional awkwardness, discomfort and pain a child may experience, we can hope that the family provides a haven of love, acceptance and support. The anthology supports that hope. Yet it is neither complacent nor sentimental. Its poems are drawn mainly from recent collections, and, although none of them disturbs the young reader by touching on the serious problems there may be within real families, there is a poignant mood to some of the poems: of love hard won in difficult times, and cherished and celebrated.

CB

Badger

0 7502 4166 7

Fox

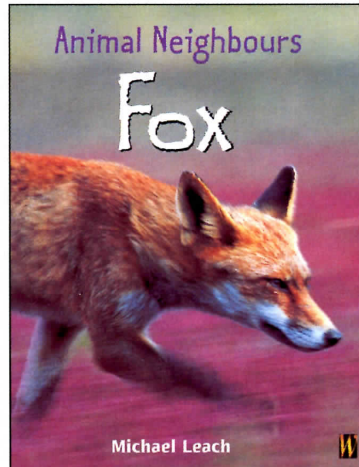
0 7502 4165 9

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Michael Leach, Hodder Wayland 'Animal Neighbours', 32pp, £10.99 each hbk

'In the summer, a badger can eat 700 worms in a single night' avers the author in one of the many 'unusual

fact' boxes that pervade his books. Foxes eat worms, too, though less avidly and both animals despite being 'top predators' with no natural enemies are surprisingly omnivorous. The progressive urbanisation of foxes has been well documented for many years now, but the increase in the rural badger population has been less publicised – and probably most effectively by a growing number of roadside badger-bodies.



Leach's introductions to these two creatures are properly professional in approach. Each takes us from its subject's infancy through habitat, feeding, reproduction, threats to survival and spotter-clues. As the author is a professional photographer and has both foxes and badgers 'in his Shropshire garden', high quality photographs illustrate his text, which is further salted by the aforementioned 'unusual fact' boxes. The result is a pair of excellent introductions to two creatures about whom, despite their 'household word' status, the man on the Clapham omnibus still knows but little and for whom foxes and badgers on the Common are a distinct possibility.

TP

Favourite Classic Writers

Nikki Gamble, 0 7502 4285 X

Favourite Classic Poets

Brian Moses, 0 7502 4291 4

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Hodder Wayland 'Weblinks', 32pp, £10.99 each hbk

Both of these titles are part of a series called 'Weblinks', the aim of which seems to be to introduce children to a range of authors and texts involving both book and internet. The volume on writers ranges from Alcott, Carroll and Nesbit to Crompton, Tolkien and Tove Jansson. **Classic Poets** includes Blake, Lear, Rossetti, Farjeon and Langston Hughes.

Each writer is allocated a double spread which consists of biographical information, an extract from a poem or novel, the answers to some questions along the lines of 'What makes Kipling's poems so special?', a quote from another writer about the one under scrutiny and a bibliography which includes film and video and the address of a website containing more information about the author.

The pages are attractive and well-illustrated containing a picture of the author and the cover of one of his

or her books. The snag with this is the inevitable one that for some entries a double spread is not the appropriate amount. The final two pages contain details of another six authors but this seems somewhat superfluous and the pages might have been better dedicated to another poet or novelist.

Selection of subjects will always be somewhat contentious in books such as these but there does seem to have been a genuine effort to find variety and the choice of writers is sure to satisfy curiosity about some old favourites and perhaps to introduce young readers to some new ones.

VC

Marc Chagall

Jude Welton, 0 7496 4665 9

Georgia O'Keeffe

Ruth Thomson, 0 7496 4627 6

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Franklin Watts 'Artists in Their World', 48pp, £12.99 each hbk

This new series looks at the lives and works of sixteen 20th-century artists, 'exploring' the blurb tells us 'their work in relation to their life and what was happening in the world around them'. This is an ambitious project which introduces young readers to some of the most influential artists to emerge from Europe and America over the last 100 years. Each book follows the life and loves of the artist in the context of the changing contemporary social and political climate.

Marc Chagall's intensely personal paintings and prints are analysed alongside the changing face of Europe, the Russian Revolution, the Holocaust and life on the Lower East Side of New York. The American painter Georgia O'Keeffe's voluptuous and sensual portrayals of natural forms come with an informative description of her journey from childhood in Wisconsin to advanced age among the Indians of New Mexico, via romance in New York.

The series is a welcome addition to the non-fiction shelves, but I do wish the design of the books could be a little more sympathetic to the subject-matter. The paintings themselves are lost amongst the bombardment of photographs, tables, coloured panels and borders, and the cover designs are particularly jarring. There is much talk of visual literacy these days, but it is not something which is acquired only by reading about pictures. We need the space and time to look, and better still, to draw.

MS

Who was William Shakespeare?

Rupert Christiansen, 96pp, 1 904095 34 8

Who was Florence Nightingale?

Charlotte Moore, 112pp, 1 904095 33 X

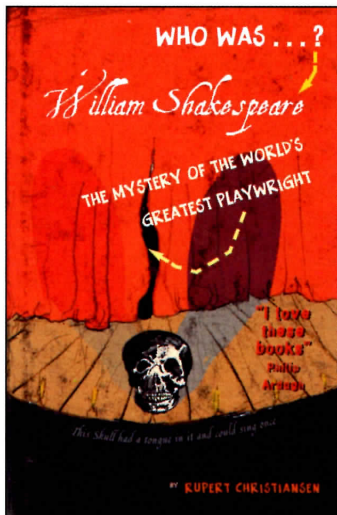
Who was David Livingstone?

Amanda Mitchison, 128pp, 1 904095 30 5

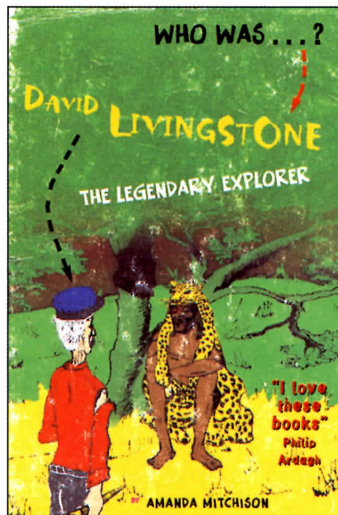
NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Ill. James Nunn, Short Books, £4.50 each pbk

Three new additions to this marvellously compact biographical



series from Short Books, the style and tone of each book reflects the character of its subject. **Shakespeare**, by music and theatre critic Robert Christiansen, investigates the mystery of our greatest playwright as a detective story, setting the known facts in the context of Elizabethan England and asking why we know so little about the man. Few references to this elusive figure crop up in contemporary letters and diaries, while a host of different theories



abound for other possible authors of the plays, from Bacon to Marlowe. A vivid picture emerges of a theatrical world of violence and intrigue, murder and revenge in London, contrasting strongly with Shakespeare's quietly anonymous existence in Stratford-upon-Avon. Clearly an enthusiast for his subject, Christiansen quotes widely from the plays with descriptions of the plots and examples from the text, reinforcing why Shakespeare

remains so relevant today.

Florence Nightingale reads more like a novel, with convincing dialogue and dramatic scene-setting as Florence returns from Crimea to her family home alone, eschewing welcome parties, regimental bands and a waiting escort of a man-of-war. Though she became the most famous woman in Victorian Britain, she hated any show of fuss or praise and in old age insisted that there should be no state funeral or memorial. Suffocated by the expectations of her wealthy family, she was determined to pursue her chosen career of nursing at a time when women were expected to remain at home. Nothing could have prepared her for the horrors of the army hospital in Scutari, yet she worked ceaselessly against huge prejudice to create order out of the filth and chaos, personally caring for the sick and wounded until she herself succumbed to 'Crimea fever'. She spent the next half-century campaigning tirelessly from her invalid's couch for proper training for nurses and improved standards of health and hygiene, creating a revolution not just in nursing but in the position of women in society.

David Livingstone portrays another towering Victorian figure, an extraordinarily determined explorer who twice crossed Africa in his

search for trade routes and the source of the Nile. From a poor background as a Glaswegian cotton mill-worker, he clawed himself an education to become a medical missionary, sent out on a placement to southern Africa. Surviving hostile tribes and an attack by a lion, he worked as a missionary before turning his attention to exploration. With wife and small children in tow, he was intent on finding the Zambezi river to open up a highway into the African interior to traders and missionaries, thus ending the Arab slave trade. Returning to England to a hero's welcome, Livingstone's account of his journeys with their detailed recordings of plants and animals became an instant bestseller. He enthused his audiences with possibilities of cotton plantations, mineral resources, coffee, sugar and wheat growing – all means to open up Africa to the three Cs of Civilization, Commerce and Christianity. His final journey to find the source of the Nile was plagued by every possible disaster and by his own ill health, and he was already a very sick man when Stanley finally hunted him down.

I can only endorse Philip Ardagh's recommendation on the cover of each: 'I love these books.' **SU**

REVIEWS 10-14 Middle/Secondary

Waiting for Mermaids

★★★

Sue Welford, Oxford, 128pp, 0 19 271896 7, £4.99 pbk

A family arrives at their beach chalet. Two young children tumble out of their car, eager to be first to the beach. Then an older child, a boy, appears. Head bowed, face scored in sorrow, he shuffles unsteadily behind them. Next, his parents come into view, both ashen-faced and distracted. What, we wonder, is the reason for their collective grief and will their seaside sojourn aggravate or alleviate their suffering?

Emma, the narrator-voyeur of these events, quickly befriends the 'boy', Jack, who views this tomboyish girl as a 'weird' but welcome distraction from his family's sadness. Slowly the mystery of these introspective parents and their isolated son begins to unfold. Only in the penultimate chapter is the reason for their grief explained, and it is not until the final chapter itself that the object of their grieving is made known, a haunting revelation that links the fates of both Jack and Emma. **NA**

Rocket Science

★★★★

Jeanne Willis, Faber, 128pp, 0 571 21275 1, £4.99 pbk

12-year-old Adam is a middle child and lives in the shadow of his more confident brothers and sisters. When his closest friend goes to live in South Africa, Adam is overwhelmed by loneliness, until he finds the strange ET-like, humanoid alien on a beach near his home: 'It looked nothing like any of the creatures in *Star Wars*. There were no tentacles, at least none that he could see. There were no extra limbs, no special breathing organs, none of the

extraordinary features he would have expected to find on a life-form that had evolved in a radically different atmosphere.'

From here the plot is reminiscent of Spielberg's *ET* which serves as a counterpoint to Willis' story. Adam undertakes to look after the creature and starts to build a space rocket to help it return home before it is discovered by the authorities. When the 'alien' disappears, Adam believes that his mission has been accomplished.

As we can expect from Willis, the story is told with cutting wit – but there is an underlying poignancy and the final revelation of the 'alien's' identity and fate is deeply moving. The child's eye view of reality that Willis presents is utterly convincing and prompts the reader to reflect on the adult construction of 'reality' and on what it means to be human. **NG**

Facing the Dark

144pp, 0 19 275269 3

Carried Away

128pp, 0 19 271907 6

★★★

Michael Harrison, Oxford, £4.99 each pbk

Harrison is a good storyteller. These two books are carefully constructed to appeal to an audience which wants a good, lively adventure story and isn't too concerned about total plausibility. Both have a boy and a girl protagonist. In each case, while they work together to solve a mystery, there are tensions between them, giving an extra dimension to the novels and with better adult characterization, raising them above the 'Famous Five' tradition of junior detectives.

Facing the Dark concerns the attempts of Simon and Charley to discover who killed Charley's father.

Was it a road rage accident or something even more sinister? Told in the alternating voices of Simon and Charley, the seriousness of the crime and the initial feelings of hatred and embarrassment between Charley and Simon provide depth and focus.

In **Carried Away** Jess tricks Dan into doing various misdeeds. Dan's seriousness and Jess's seemingly amoral attitude are contrasted, but while it is an enjoyable enough read, **Facing the Dark** is a better book. **VC**

Shadow of the Wolf

★★

Andrew Matthews, Orchard, 176pp, 1 84362 077 4, £4.99 pbk

Goss'-swappin', channel-hoppin', boy-clockin' Danni is your archetypal adolescent in most respects. She's in and out of relationships. That's normal. She shelf-stacks at a supermarket. That's normal. She doesn't appear to own a mobile phone ... How, like, weird! No matter. When old school friend Leah shows up out of the blue, Danni meets her match, or rather her metaphor. Superficially streetwise though she is, Leah is the eponymous predatory loner, a damaged child who craves a settled family life and secure friendships with others.

Peppered with the language of pubescence – life crises are 'full on', people are 'up themselves', 'reality checks' abound – and punctuated with pathetic fallacy to spell out the characters' see-sawing moods, **Shadow of the Wolf** might appeal to a (double-spaced) magazine readership, but is, in short, a depressingly undemanding read **NA**

Three Blind Eyes

★★★

Alison Prince, Oxford, 176pp, 0 19 271902 5, £6.99 pbk

'The house began to sound different as it emptied. Its old, cosy murmur changed to an echoing hollowness, and all its comfortable familiarity was gone.'

This well crafted, historical piece, set in Victorian London, doesn't dwell on detail so much as it explores what happens when sudden unlucky changes occur in our lives and how we can find hitherto unregarded resources to deal with them and make better luck for ourselves.

Lucy had it all, but her father's gambling was about to bring her genteel world to a close and send her into the dangerous, criminal milieu of London low-life and a desperate struggle for survival. Her resourcefulness and ability to take control makes an exciting and engrossing read, mainly likely to appeal to girl readers. **DB**

One River Many Creeks: Poems from all around the world

POETRY

★★

Chosen by Valerie Bloom, Macmillan, 176pp, 0 333 96114 5, £9.99 hbk

If a net is spread too far and the mesh is too thin, the fish fall through and nothing much is caught. This is essentially the trouble with Bloom's new collection. **One River Many Creeks** is a multicultural collection carried to extremes. Almost every significant cultural grouping on the planet is allowed its voice, but drowned out by the presence of so many others. Although certain

predictable themes appear and reappear – displacement, the stress of integration in a new country, nostalgia for homeland and for the past, celebration of loved places – there is no apparent organising principle of a thematic kind to give some purchase on the collection, so that diversity ceases to be a virtue and slips into disconnected randomness. Nothing accounts for the book as a whole except sheer cultural range, and nothing accounts for individual choices except that the editor clearly likes them. All readers will find some to like, too, but many of the poems are thin and inconsequential. The intrinsic simple depth and truth of such delightful poems as 'My House' by Annette Mbaye d'Erneville (Senegal) or 'Peace' by Yannis Ritsos (Greece) is rare, and the majority of the poems are too obvious and ordinary. A disappointing book, too widely and vaguely conceived. PH



Something in the Air

★★★★

Jan Mark, Doubleday, 208pp, 0 385 60539 0, £10.99 hbk

It is the 1920s and Peggy's family, adjusting to the lack of money that has followed the death of her father at Passchendaele, get on with the task of living. The ache of Peggy's newly filled tooth nags away 'forever' – as do her older sister and school, and she hankers for the freedom and openness that she can glimpse in the lives of her aunt and her friends, a future to aspire to. Meanwhile she has begun to hear strange sounds – is she going mad, are the dead trying to communicate with her?

Peggy battles against repressions and senses new freedoms: in simple, mechanical terms she wants a machine that would play 'any music you wanted, for as long as you wanted' and something to connect cloth so that 'when you put them together they just joined up'. But more than that, she wants an end to ignorance and the things that limit what she's 'allowed to know', a new world where 'anyone could learn anything ... No one could stop them learning because they were poor or because they were girls.'

As Peggy learns later, her strange messages have not been 'from the other side ... but from the future', a future that is where we are, easily accepting the freedoms that she yearns and fights for. This is a fine, intelligent book, immersing its layers

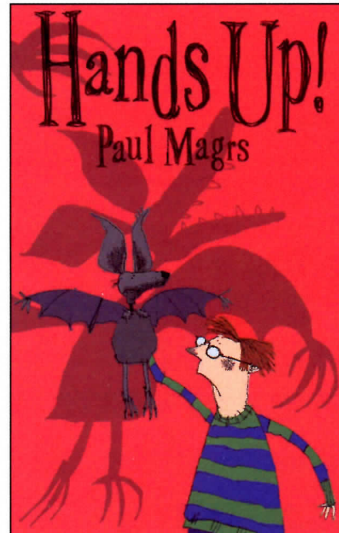
of questions in the apparently ordinary and everyday, sensitive to people's lives, providing a thoughtful linking of times past and times present, mixing wit and anger, and quietly advocating revolution. AJ

Hands Up!

★★★★

Paul Magrs, ill. Alan Snow, Simon & Schuster, 232pp, 0 689 83706 2, £8.99 pbk

The title, a clever pun on the world of puppets and ventriloquism, sets the tone for this extremely whacky and lively fun read.



Magrs introduces us to an eccentric and very egocentric mob of folk, who seem to crave fame and success on TV through both the manipulation of others and their furry toy friends. But who is manipulating whom? As the boy hero and storyteller Jason Lurcher rapidly discovers, maybe the puppets are controlling the asylum and maybe, just maybe, they themselves behave at the behest of the greatest puppet of them all, Mr Punch.

This is compulsive reading. Recommend it to early teenagers and watch them smile with disbelief and delight. There's a bit of suspect language but nothing too outrageous. DB

Bud, Not Buddy

★★★

Christopher Paul Curtis, Corgi, 256pp, 0 552 54852 9, £4.99 pbk

The eponymous hero tells of his adventures as he searched for his father in 1930s' America. This is related in an engaging mix of boyish over-imagination, the unsentimentalised, real-life struggle for the poor during The Depression, and the companionship and precarious lifestyle of the black American jazz fraternity.

There is a strong feel of family folklore to this yarn, explained in part by the Newbery Medal author's afterword, which interestingly explains how some of the main characters are based on his own antecedents. This is a fast paced, tightly plotted story, which deserves promotion, especially with boys. DB

NEW Talent

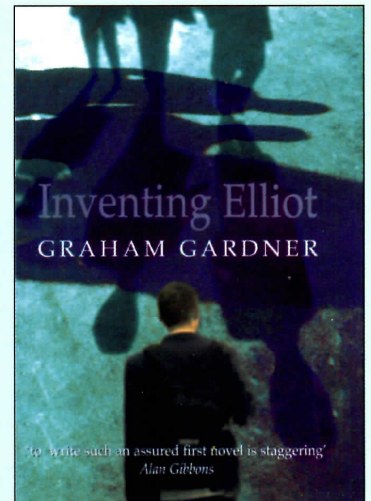
Inventing Elliot

★★★★★

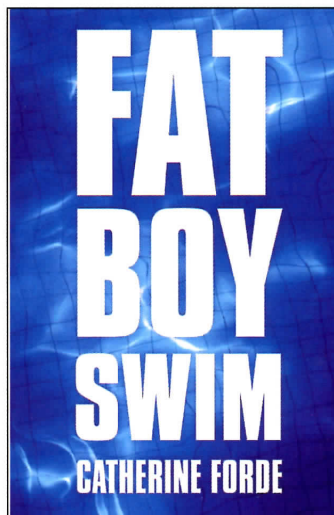
Graham Gardner, Orion, 192pp, 1 84255 263 5, £7.99 hbk

A victim of bullying at his old school, Elliot is determined to reinvent himself at his new school, Holminster. The coolly self-contained mask he presents to the world is so convincing that he is invited to join the Guardians, a sinister group of older boys who control by bullying and intimidation. 1984 is the Guardians' bible but, as Elliot's classmate Louise points out, although the hero of Orwell's novel is eventually destroyed, he has survived by defying the system. Has Elliot the courage to do the same?

Reminiscent of Cormier's now classic *The Chocolate War*, Gardner's compelling novel convincingly creates a world in which intimidation is both normalised and



internalised. Elliot tries to dissociate from what is happening but this, in turn, could bring about death of the self. His struggle for inner survival is subtly and powerfully drawn in this assured first novel. There will surely be much to look forward to from Gardner. RS



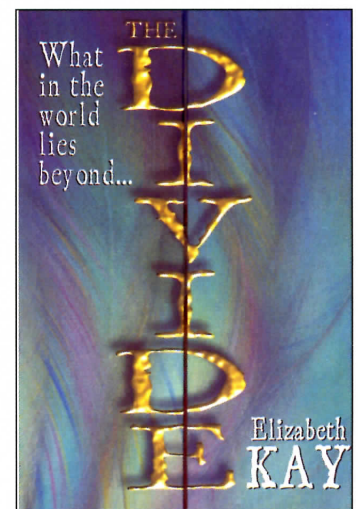
Fat Boy Swim

★★★★★

Catherine Forde, Egmont, 288pp, 1 4052 0239 4, £4.99 pbk

Fat children still make popular targets in fiction as well as in real life, with J K Rowling a particular offender, both with the Dursley boy and with Malfoy's thuggish henchmen at Hogwarts. A few writers have produced books taking the side of the fat, notably Judy Blume in *Blubber*, but mostly with nothing like the same success. This is therefore a fictional battle that still needs to be fought, and Forde's novel makes an effective case against the jocular but cruel bullying endorsed by Roald Dahl and many other authors past and present when it comes to getting at the overweight. Jimmy, her stout hero, eats to excess because he is miserable about his pariah social status, so creating a vicious circle that can only get worse. But he is saved by Father Joe, a Catholic priest turned sports coach, who helps Jimmy realise he is in fact a brilliant swimmer. Set in Scotland with broad dialect to match, this novel is written with force and a real sense of anger. There is always the risk that readers will learn new and even more diabolical ways of

insulting the fat from the actions of the chief bullies in these pages. But hopefully more will now feel ashamed for ever having enjoyed hounding the obese and could well think twice before doing so again. NT



The Divide

★★★★★

Elizabeth Kay, The Chicken House, 320pp, 1 903434 96 3, £11.99 hbk

The ingenious box-like binding of this attractively produced novel represents the Continental Divide of the title, the watershed in Costa Rica where it is possible to stand astride the flows towards the Atlantic and the Pacific. 13-year-old Felix is doing this as a last adventure in his brief life, because he is slowly dying of heart disease. While thus straddling the 'divide' he suffers an attack and momentarily 'dies', recovering to find himself in a magical parallel world where all mythical creatures are real, and human beings together with other earthly animals are the creatures of myth. There follows a fast-paced, complex, rollicking story of mythic villains and heroes, as Felix is befriended by assorted elves, unicorns and griffins, and pursued by greedy entrepreneurial pixies. The

aim of his friends' endeavours is to get him safely back across the divide, but also, more urgently and seriously, to cure his ailing heart. The book is a clever and original variant on the fantasies of transference which are commonplace in modern children's fiction, and it has a serious side. All the efforts to help Felix, especially by the gifted and wonderful griffins, vividly convey the excitement of ideas, research and discovery, while the unscrupulous pixies, marketing untested drugs for profit, are an emblem of our shady multinationals driven by commercial greed. The sub-text of the book is consistently intelligent and enlightened, and the story itself is a genuine page-turner, sometimes funny, sometimes moving, always captivating: a real winner. **PH**

Sticky Night Skies

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Laurence Holt, Four Walls Eight Windows 'Sticky Books' (USA), 256pp, 1 56858 253 6, £8.99 pbk (available via Turn-around, tel: 020 8829 3000, www.turnaround-uk.com)

At first sight an unpromising-looking

guide to the night sky – all in black and white and very definitely US in origin, with the Big Dipper rather than the Plough. But *do* persist. This is a really simple way to learn the constellations if you are prepared to follow the very specific teaching method in sequence and resist cheating by flipping forward. Page after page depicts a black night sky pierced by pinpricks of starlight, allowing you to pick out and recognise the stars. 'Sticky Books' promise that their 'unique learning method' will enable you to learn '6 constellations, 4 stars, a planet, a galaxy, and how to navigate at night – in one hour, guaranteed'. Better still, take on board the book's recommendation to reinforce what you have learned by going out and practising on the real night sky. Additional information is included on star maps, dates for future eclipses, observatories and stargazing equipment, and though the information relating to clubs is for US readers only, recommended websites are international. Future titles are promised on music and nutrition, but for now I'm off to hone my newfound skills in picking out the Pleiades, Betelgeuse, Vega and Cygnus. **SU**

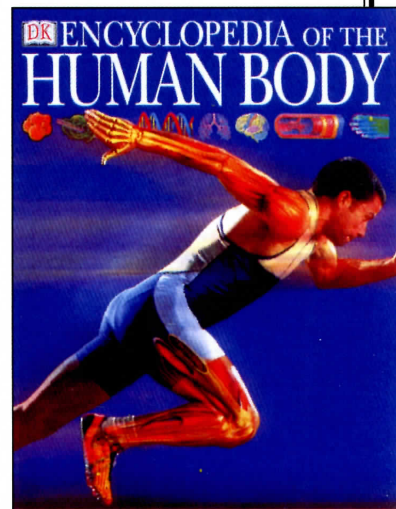
Encyclopedia of the Human Body

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Richard Walker, Dorling Kindersley, 304pp, 0 7513 3927 X, £19.99 hbk

Part of a new range of reference books for older readers, this latest encyclopedia from DK explores the human body through an amazing array of visual images ranging from close-up photographs, cut-away artwork, computer-enhanced images, scans and micrographs. Photos taken with the aid of electron microscopes are now so specialised that you need to turn to the glossary to understand the difference between a SEM and a TEM, not to mention different kinds of CT scans. Explanatory captions are vital to make sense of these images, and the team of medical writers here presents complex ideas in a straightforward manner. From this it will be clear that this encyclopedia is pitched at a cross-over audience that could include adults as well as GCSE students.

The encyclopedia is organised into separate sections that explain the major systems of the body such as the skeletal, digestive, cardiovascular



and reproductive. A final section explores key turning points in the history of medicine, including alternative therapies and complementary medicine, and there is a useful timeline and glossary. In this visually exciting and up-to-date reference book for the home or library, the human body is revealed as a remarkable master-piece of bio-engineering. **SU**

REVIEWS 14+ Secondary/Adult

Green Angel

★★★★★

Alice Hoffman, ill. Matt Mahurin, Scholastic, 128pp, 0 439 44384 9, £9.99 hbk

Following a disaster reminiscent of 9/11, 15-year-old Green is the sole-surviving member of her family. Numbed, she buries her old self under a carapace of self-inflicted tattoos, protected by thorns sewn into her clothes.

From this grim opening, a fairytale of love and loss, growth and redemption gradually emerges, rich in imagery, symbol and magic. With a sense for divining truth, Green makes her way among the looters and cheats, and the 'forgetters', drowning their sorrows in dance or drugs. Befriending others in need – an elderly neighbour, a school-friend lost to drink and begging, animals hurt in the fire, and most of all Diamond, badly burned but retaining his faith in the world – Green replants the garden which gave her her name and as Spring returns faces the future, her own person once again.

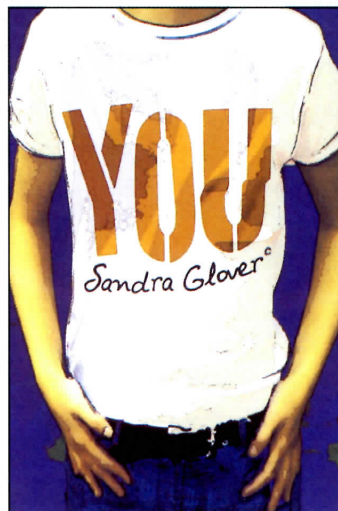
The spare, unsentimental prose, the densely packed imagery and the reflective nature of the story pack a punch powerful enough to reach many young people unsure of their values in a hostile world. The book is beautifully produced, the words complemented by appropriately green illustrations and an attractive cover. **AG**

You

★★★★★

Sandra Glover, Andersen, 160pp, 1 84270 168 1, £9.99 hbk

This book has already been read by my teenage Book Panel of Year 8 girls who were unable to put it down. I



had an identical experience – this is a compact and gripping read. Its strengths lie in the narrative twists which suddenly pitch the story into another perspective, genuinely surprising the reader.

At the beginning of the book the narrative voice is clearly that of a female college student, bemoaning the fact that her friend Alex is haunting her memory with stark examples of behaviour which graduates from the disruptive to the attempted murder of a young child.

Glover then makes it startlingly clear that the two characters are the same and that Alex has now been subsumed into Josie as part of a protection programme for young offenders who have been released back into the community.

This heady shift works beautifully because the two characters are so clearly delineated and the story is told so starkly, without a trace of sentimentality. It is made clear that Josie/Alex has endured a life of emotional mutilation and yet there is no sense of clumsily manipulating

the reader into a position of pity. Instead, the reader is encouraged to take a cool and distanced view which, shockingly, takes us far more immediately into the mind of the protagonist than if we had been drawn in.

The story ends on a note of hope – it seems that there will be a future for Alex/Josie, but it is made evident that it will be a long and difficult road to establishing any kind of normal links with society. The topicality of the narrative, with its resonant echoes of the Jamie Bulger case, will give pause to those who think that early release offenders have an enviable life, free of the horror of what they have done. **VR**

Love, Shelley

★★★★

Kate Saksena, Bloomsbury, 224pp, 0 7475 6122 2, £5.99 pbk

As the title hints, *Love, Shelley* is an epistolary novel – a very modern one. Shelley's world is one of a split family, a mother who suffers from depression and a fondness for alcohol, and of bullying. It is narrated in the first person by Shelley (14) in a series of letters to pop idol Ziggy whose brief messages in reply on postcards often help to tide Shelley over her latest troubles.

This is definitely Jacqueline Wilson territory, although Wilson's facility with dialogue is not altogether replicated here. It will appeal to a market for fiction which attempts to show that life is a tough station for many youngsters and perhaps to offer them hope for improvement. In the tradition of these stories Shelley is a likeable and feisty young woman. She is terrified that she and her younger brother will be taken away from their home if the authorities find that at times their mother is a negligent parent. Her father is a caring man, but also occupied with his new wife and

baby, and it is not until near the end of the book that Shelley alerts him to the extent of her mother's difficulties and that he becomes engaged in helping to confront unpleasant schoolmate Janice who tries to make Shelley's life a misery.

While at times a little uneven, *Love, Shelley* is a promising and entertaining novel, and I look forward to reading more from Saksena. **VC**

Coming of Age

★★★★

Valerie Mendes, Simon & Schuster, 240pp, 0 689 83716 X, £8.99 pbk

In the summer of her GCSE exams, Amy comes of age in more ways than one. As she sets out to discover the truth about her mother's death, six years before in a riding accident, which left Amy mute for a few months, she realises she's no longer her GP father's 'darling little girl' and learns her mother and her parents' marriage may not have been quite so ideal as she'd always thought.

Coming of Age feels a very middle-class novel: Amy's father is the GP for a Surrey village; she goes to a private school (and unrealistically carries on attending after her last GCSE exam); her brother Julian went to boarding school and then Cambridge; they are good friends with the local woman vicar. The list is endless, and the setting could mar a very sympathetic and compelling read for some teenagers. However, Amy is a strong and likeable character, portrayed persuasively so that the reader is always on her side, and her emotional discoveries (falling in love for the first time; hating her father's lack of attention for her as he too falls in love; coming to terms with her parents' imperfections) will be familiar to other teenagers. Her one episode of teenage 'normality' that might also be familiar, out celebrating after her GCSE results,

ends in vomit and a hangover.

Amy goes to Italy alone to find out more about her mother, without anyone knowing, and there meets her mother's lover. Her loneliness and anxiety about travelling alone are very well drawn, but the practicalities of the trip again feel terribly middle-class (plus no mention of mobile phones, which would have ruined the plan in real life). On her return, Amy finds out even more about her parents and her mother's death – a grim tale of miscarriage, jealousy, adultery and guilt. There are hints early on that her father might be implicated in the death, but the uncertain truth of accidental death and neglect is much more realistic, as is Amy's refusal to entirely forgive her father or accept his new wife. OD

The Crew

★★★

Bali Rai, Corgi, 240pp,
0 552 54739 5, £4.99 pbk

Kerb-crawlers. Corrupt coppers. Pimps. Prostitutes. Derelict houses. Drug dealers. Welcome to the mean streets of Britain where, in a city centre estate Stonehenge with tower blocks, a band of teenagers struggles to survive in an underworld of criminality and deprivation.

Billy, the narrator and leader of 'the crew', lives with his Indian mum, a community worker and her boyfriend Nanny, a cheroot-chuffing Rastafarian. The crew is similarly mixed and multicultural: there's baby-face Ellie who has a soft spot for our Billy, wildchild Della who boomerangs in and out of foster care, kick-boxing Jas, DJ wannabe Will, not to mention Zeus, the crew's mascot, a salivating but soppy Rottweiler.

Having introduced crew and community, the story really starts when they find a bag brimful of banknotes in an alleyway. Abduction follows. Then murder. And a police and public mutually suspicious must work together to uncover the Mr Big behind it all. Tick-tocking chapter headings help to create a sense of urgency and the switching of narrator at dramatic moments instils immediacy to the action. Engagingly direct in tone, this uncompromising, streetwise story is sure to appeal to teenagers. NA

Lola Rose

★★★★

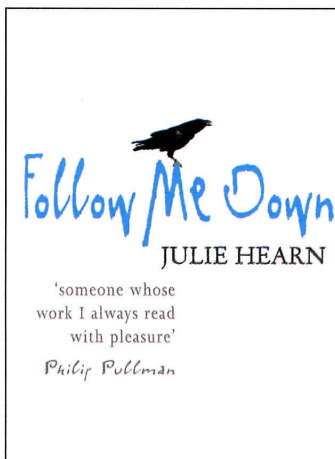
Jacqueline Wilson, ill. Nick Sharratt, Doubleday, 288pp,
0 385 60184 0, £10.99 hbk

More a catalyst for complications than a recipe for rejoicing, a £10,000 lottery win enables battered mother Nikki, an ex-model, to leave her lousy husband Jay, an ex-con. G.B.H.ed into action after yet another vicious beating, mother, daughter Jayni and young son Kenny flee their home in the middle of the night and head for the bright lights of London.

The runaways adopt pseudonyms and plain plumpish Jayni becomes 'Lola Rose', all glitz, glamour and grown-up. She needs to be. Her peroxide blonde mother gets pickled at work, befriends and beds an undergraduate student and fritters away their lotto loot on retail therapy. Just when you'd think things

could only get better, their lives are blighted again when their mother discovers a lump on her breast.

The domestic violence of the start is powerfully depicted and the emotional – and emotive – drama of the second half is sensitively presented. Throughout this dramatic and moving novel, the fragility of health and happiness is underscored by references to sharks, symbolic of the hidden threats that regularly and indiscriminately puncture the glossy surface of existence, the real 'lottery' of life. NA



Follow Me Down

★★★★★

Julie Hearn, Oxford, 288pp,
0 19 271927 0, £9.99 hbk

Oxford seem delighted with their new title and its author: 'submitted for all major prizes', 'much prepublication excitement', 'high profile marketing campaign in US, following a hotly-contested auction'. They have even secured an *imprimatur* from Philip Pullman, who can be relied upon to eschew sensationalism: Julie Hearn is 'someone whose work I always read with pleasure'.

So why all the fuss? Well, for once, here is a voice which is a genuine original. *Follow Me Down* is driven by an imagination which slides wildly from 18th to 21st century, from the fearful adventures of a bunch of Bartholomew Fair 'freaks' to three modern generations struggling to connect with each other. Mostly – but not always, just in case you think you've got a firm hold of the plot – our viewpoint is shared with Tom, an alert, sensitive 12-year-old who leaps over a literal and metaphorical gap in his grandmother's cellar into a desperate mission in a dangerous London underworld of 300 years ago. His comrades are the likes of Astra the Changeling Child, Angel the Gorilla Woman, Chang the Exotic and Malachi Twist, the Bendy Man. They are as engaging – even loveable – as their enemies are dangerous, for Tom and his friends are pitted against a gang led by Rafferty Spune, grave robber extraordinaire and provider of cadavers to the ruthless anatomist, Dr Jeremiah Flint. Back on Planet 2003, as it were, Tom's mother is as alive and vulnerable as Tom himself, recovering (or is she?) from a mastectomy and trying to heal a years-long rift with her own mother.

Keeping a grip on the plot isn't easy, leaping back and forth across the gap in the cellar, racing about the dripping alleyways and confronting,

with Tom, anything from his mother's 'false boob' dropping into the pot-pourri to the abuse of Astra by her 'gentlemen visitors'.

Who the readers of this book will be isn't easy to decide either. If they are Tom's age, they'll need to be able indeed, for A-level students and adults could well be absorbed by the book too, if they relish a crazy fairground ride of a read; but then, critics have been wrong so often about what readers can manage, as *Northern Lights* has taught us.

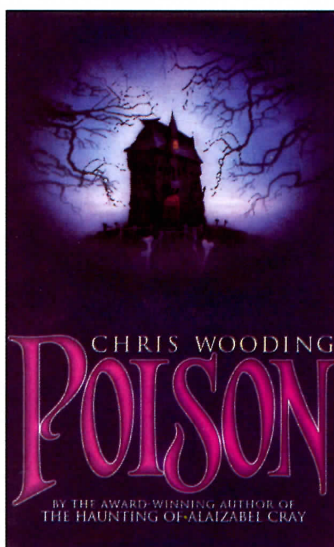
So here's a new, wild, free voice. Maybe it's not always entirely intelligible (or maybe I need to read the novel again after my BfK deadline), but no matter. Confusion is appropriate to this story, for it reflects young Tom's experiences. At the end, he knows, 'absolutely and for always, that anything is possible'. It won't hurt to try that on for size.GF

Poison

★★★★

Chris Wooding, Scholastic,
288pp, 0 439 98162 X, £12.99 hbk

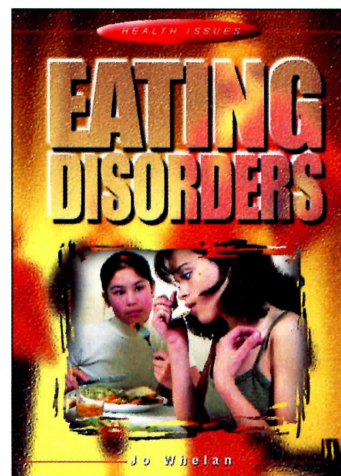
In a vividly-realised fantasy world, the humans living in a marshy land take their adult names at 14, and a 'gothic'-looking black-haired girl called Foxglove chooses the adult name Poison. She dislikes her limited horizons and reads stories: legends and tales of phaeries – this affected spelling is used throughout. Phaeries have conquered much of the Realm of Man, and humans have mostly given up city life to hide in the swamps and mountains.



Poison's life is drastically changed when her toddler sister is stolen by the evil Scarecrow and a changeling left behind. She resolves to go to the Phaerie Lord to get her sister back: the plot of *Labyrinth* and of Sendak's *Outside over there* before it, and of Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men*, coincidentally published this May. Poison acquires loyal companions, destroys an evil witch and reaches the Phaerie Lord's palace, where she finds intrigue and further obstacles. Her adventure in the Realm of Spiders is thrilling and her destiny unexpected; against tradition she is not reunited with her sister, which is surely sad. The powerful fantasy descriptions suggest Lovecraft and Dunsany rather than Tolkien, and the Great Library which 'reaches into any place where books are kept' recalls Pratchett's L-space.

It is good when storytellers become

heroes, and we leave Poison in her new role planning to take the Realm of Man back from the phaeries. I would certainly recommend this fantasy, but preferably for the upper age-ranges because of the murderous intrigues in the Realm of Phaerie. JY



Sexually Transmitted Diseases

0 7502 3544 6

Eating Disorders

0 7502 3543 8

NON-FICTION

★★★★

Jo Whelan, Hodder Wayland
'Health Issues', 64pp, £6.99
each pbk

It is good to see a series putting emphasis on solid text information. These two books are packed with history, statistics, and pull-no-punches facts, but they also use graphics, photographs and personal stories to stimulate interest. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* offers a long chapter on the causes, symptoms and treatments of every type of STD, but it also emphasises choice and responsibility. A graphic account of how to use a condom is only one of the practical and forthright suggestions. The statistical information is harrowing, and as 15- to 19-year-olds are most at risk, this book should be in every school library. Similarly, *Eating Disorders* will prove a goldmine of information to teenagers suffering from anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder or compulsive overeating – or those with friends or family with these conditions. There is emphasis on the dangers of dieting and good information on nutrition, as well as discussion of social, psychological and physical factors that can contribute to the likelihood of developing an eating disorder. Both books have glossaries, a list of websites, and helplines. *Eating Disorders* also has a list of six other books for further information. An important series for secondary schools. ES

**INFORMATION
BOOKS RELEVANT
TO OLDER
READERS:**

Rome in spectacular
cross-section (see p21)
Encyclopedia of the
Human Body (see p26)



CLASSICS IN SHORT No.40

Brian Alderson



Having done a modern classic last time round, and a school story (of sorts) the time before that, it seems fitting to synthesize matters with

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet.

'A superb, unconventional writer ... rare and intense quality ... a complete original, a damn-your-eyes individualist ...'

Aw! You can not be serious.

'A writer whom children will not read ... sound narrative technique, misdirected psychologizing ... he remains obstinately unread by children ...' (To which can now be added assaults on current sensibilities, here seen as elitism – all that Latin and posh music – and exclusiveness – not a female in sight, apart from a queen-bee and, possibly, a resident cat.)

Such strictures were not heard in 1955

when *A Swarm in May* first appeared and other dispensations prevailed. It was Mayne's third book and was greeted with universal praise, although both it and Philippa Pearce's *Minnow on the Say* were passed over for the Carnegie Medal in favour of Eleanor Farjeon's stories reprinted in *The Little Bookroom*.

Ostensibly the book was 'a school story'.

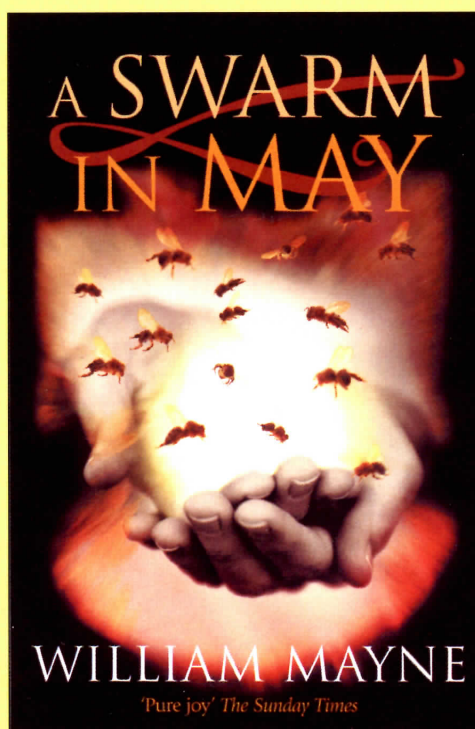
After all, most of the action occurs among schoolboy-boarders with a line in genuine argot: 'Potty Fido ... chiz ... well done ye ...' but none of Mayne's work is made for predetermined categories. The school is a choir-school and the narrative is focused upon the duties of John Owen as youngest Singing Boy present for the summer term. To him has fallen the lot of performing in the four-hundred-year-old ceremony of presenting a candle to the Bishop in the service following Ascension Day. It's not something he cares to do though and he resists in a manner disparaged by all.

His conversion

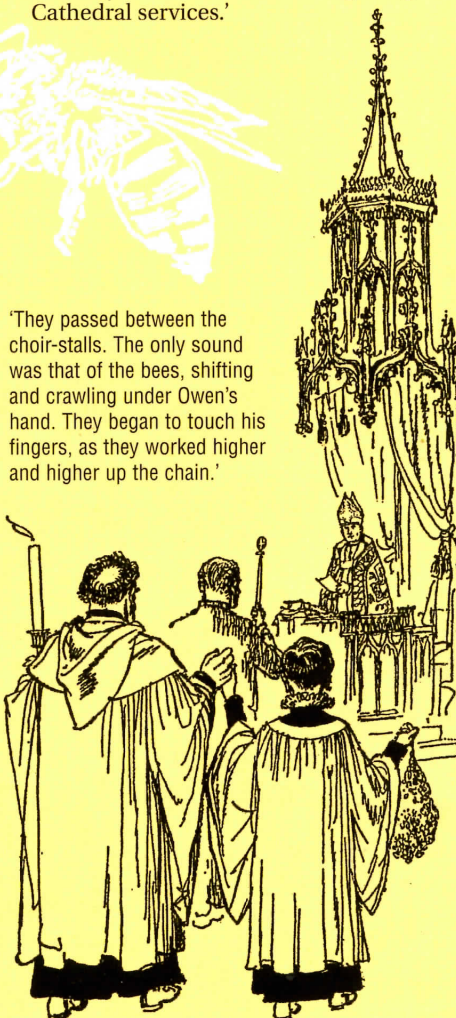
to the path of duty occurs through his own remarkable discovery within the cathedral's wall of the ancient beehive (a tiny room hidden in a tower) whence came the medieval candle-wax and the concomitant ceremony of blessing. By shifts and stratagems he and the head chorister rescue enough ancient wax to make a candle, while his further discovery of a globe, formed of a strange substance attractive to bees, enables him to bring a tethered swarm before the Bishop's throne: 'They hung in an egg-shaped brown lump, with a faint buzz coming from them; but they were perfectly docile.'

John Owen's conquest

of his aversions and his role in reviving the old custom may seem the point of the story, but in truth they are an excuse for a more telling inquiry. This choir-school is at Canterbury, where Mayne himself was a scholar (the book's dedication reads 'for my fellow choristers') and what is really being celebrated beyond the discrete story is the working-life of a *societas* – cathedral as hive. The relationship (wonderfully conveyed) between teachers and taught is essentially collaborative rather than conventionally oppositional. As the



headmaster, Mr Ardent (drawn after an actual teacher) says in a later book: 'We are only here to do one thing: sing the Cathedral services.'



'They passed between the choir-stalls. The only sound was that of the bees, shifting and crawling under Owen's hand. They began to touch his fingers, as they worked higher and higher up the chain.'

That one thing

cannot help but implicate both building and music in the events of the story. It is no accident that we first meet John Owen as he returns to the Cathedral Precincts at the start of a new term. For as he makes his way through the dark grounds the building looms as a presence that dominates the lives of its servants and their toils. Nor is it an accident that the book concludes with a poetic evocation of the Cathedral's music as the organist, Dr Sunderland (a mighty character) sweeps the reader along towards a final diminuendo.

What Mayne achieves here

is a *tour de force* of the writer's craft, having the capacity permanently to shift the reader's sensibility. Workaday authors given this story would plonkily explain settings, routines, activities – what a buttress is, or how bees swarm. With Mayne however our apprehension of these things is almost assumed so that his story gains an extraordinary density through the trust placed in the reader's own imagination. Less demonstrably means more.

Nor is this an isolated magic instance.

Homely examples occur in three successor stories (they are hardly sequels) – but later William Mayne presents us with a host of startlingly dramatic, wondrously varied examples of the storyteller's craft, a succession of imaginative explorations of unparalleled richness. *A Swarm in May* has no primacy among them. There are a dozen at least that equal or exceed its classic status – but they will hardly figure here. As is the way of things, they are all out of print. ■

Bibliographical note

Readers of the welcome new printing of *A Swarm in May* (Hodder) should know that it lacks the endpapers designed for the original edition (O.U.P.) which gave the words and music for the Beekeeper's Introit (the notes represented by bees). It also cuts the number of Walter Hodges's line drawings. He went on to illustrate two of the successor volumes: *Choristers' Cake* (1956) and *Cathedral Wednesday* (1960), but the third one, *Words and Music* (1963) had some disconcertingly different drawings by Lynton Lamb. William Mayne also wrote a quite separate choir-school tale for the Choir Schools Association: a slim paperback, *In Choirs ...*, with a companion information booklet, ... *And Places Where They Sing* (1985).

The line drawings by C Walter Hodges are taken from the 2003 Hodder Children's Books edition, 0 340 65681 6, £5.99 pbk.

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