

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

May 2004
No.146 UK Price £3.65

the children's book magazine



WORDS ABOUT PICTURES • VERSE NOVELS • JENNY NIMMO

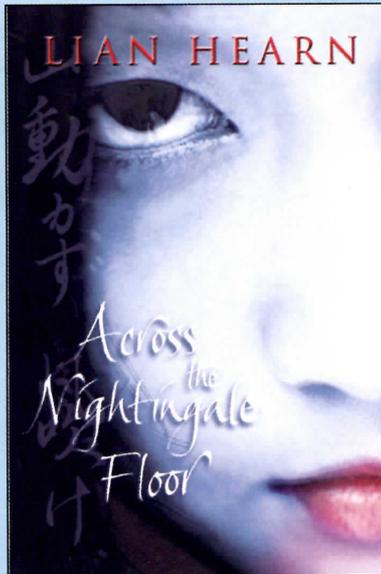
Across the Nightingale Floor

Lian Hearn
ISBN: 0 330 41528 X
Price: £6.99

This favourite novel is now available in a Young Picador edition. Loved by everyone who has already discovered Takeo's story, *Across the Nightingale Floor* was shortlisted for both the Red House Children's Book Award and the Carnegie Medal.

Brought up in a remote village amongst the Hidden, Otori Takeo has only learned the ways of peace. But he possesses supernatural powers that will lead him to a violent destiny within the walls of Inuyama where the murderous warlord Iida Sadumu believes that he is protected by his exquisite nightingale floor, and where Takeo will meet the girl who will change his life forever.

'A thrilling tale of love, violence, loyalty and betrayal.' *Guardian*
'A cross between Harry Potter and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, this is an atmospheric thriller.' *Daily Mail*



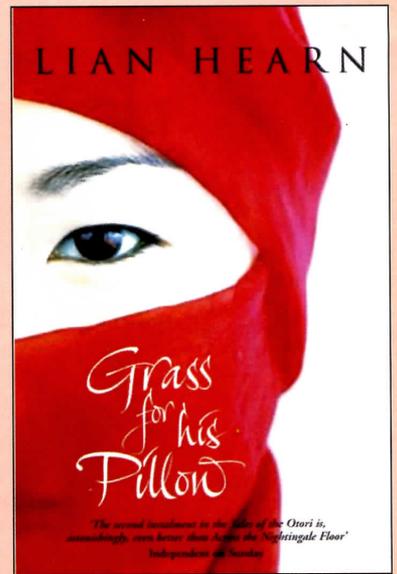
Grass for his Pillow

Lian Hearn
ISBN: 0 330 41526 3
Price: £6.99

Brand new in paperback, the second book of the Tales of the Otori trilogy continues the epic story of Otori Takeo and Shirakawa Kaede, whose fate is played out in an ancient Oriental world.

Takeo has pledged his life to the Tribe, a secret clan who claim Takeo's supernatural skills for their own ruthless purposes. If he doesn't agree then they will kill him, but in giving himself to them, Takeo must give up both his Otori inheritance and his love for Kaede. She, separated from Takeo, has to use her intelligence, beauty and cunning to assert her place in a world of all-powerful men.

Both journeys are ones of high adventure, treachery and passion. This is epic storytelling whose appeal crosses genres, genders and generations.



BfK Previews

WHERE PUBLISHERS ANNOUNCE THEIR MAJOR FORTHCOMING TITLES

YOUNG PICADOR

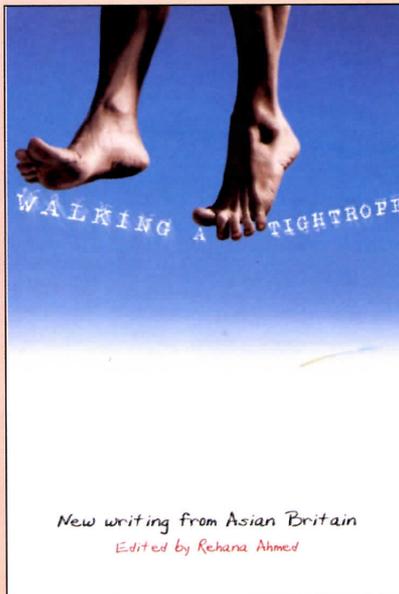
Walking a Tightrope

New writing from Asian Britain

Edited by Rehana Ahmed
ISBN: 0 330 41566 2
Price: £9.99

This is a lively and eclectic anthology of new stories by writers of South Asian descent living in Britain, which captures the diversity of Britain's South Asian population for a modern multicultural readership.

The stories take you on a kaleidoscopic journey, from Farrukh Dhondy's warm tale of an older India, to Jamila Gavin's story of Dilip whose passion for playing the drums offers him an escape from warring gangs, to Bali Rai's hard-hitting story of domestic violence. These are hopeful stories full of energy and humour in a which a second and third generation of young British Asians meet the challenges of growing up in more than one culture – and discover both the complexity and richness of experience that this can bring.



Sardines

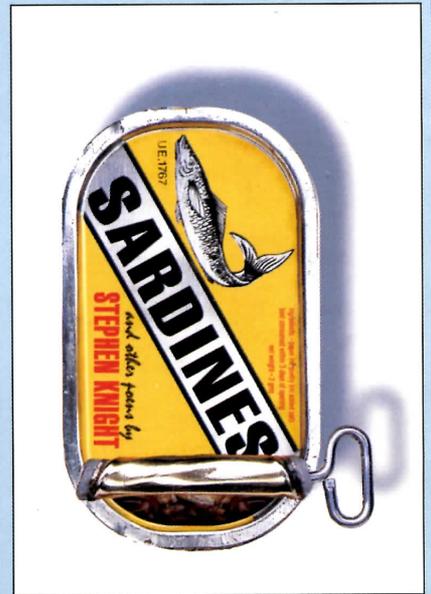
Stephen Knight
ISBN: 0 330 41355 4
Price: £7.99

This is the first single poet collection on the Young Picador list and it comes from a poet who has already been recognised on many shortlists including the TS Eliot Prize.

Andrew Motion, The Poet Laureate, has acclaimed Stephen's poetry as 'urban, allusive, seriously jokey, formally dashing'. Robert Potts in the *Guardian* has called him 'one of Britain's best, if undervalued, poets'.

In *Sardines*, Stephen Knight gives his readers a quirky look at childhood and his poems are surreal, magical and rich. They offer a different angle on school, play and family life and change the usual to the unusual.

This is his first collection for young adults.



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CoverStory

This issue's cover illustration is from Jenny Nimmo's *The Blue Boa*. Jenny Nimmo's work is discussed by Julia Eccleshare on page 14. Thanks to Egmont Books for their help with this May cover.

EDITORIAL

Much of this issue of BfK is devoted to the Words About Pictures seminar and workshop held in March. Organised by The Quentin Blake Gallery of Illustration, the Joint Education Department at Somerset House and Books for Keeps, it was the first children's books seminar and workshop to focus on the problems that confront the reviewers of children's illustrated books when they try to make critical judgements that involve expressing the visual in words. We reproduce here seminar papers from Joanna Carey and Brian Alderson as well as an account of the day from Ghislaine Kenyon. One of the participants, Martin Salisbury, Course Director for MA Children's Book Illustration at APU Cambridge School of Art, continues the conversation begun at Somerset House in this issue with his article on the changing role of illustration in children's books.

One of the many great pleasures of the day was witnessing the facility and confidence with which the invited practitioners (illustrators, art directors and leading reviewers) in the field *were* able to put into words the processes and thinking involved in creating illustrated books. Art directors Deirdre McDermott and Amelia Edwards from Walker Books quoted Maurice Sendak on the importance of the 'emotional quality' in illustration, not just 'picture quality'. In a riveting conversation between themselves and with the audience they described the 'invisible time' involved in the making of a book which involves such considerations as the

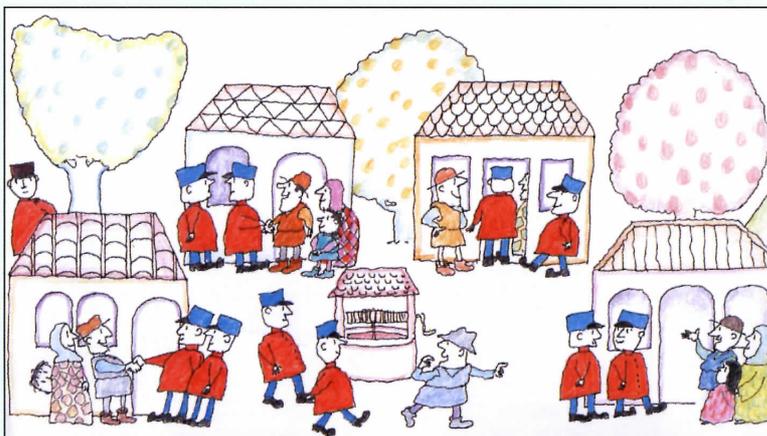


Rosemary Stones

...pacing of emotion, the manoeuvring of type and the enabling of the illustrator to take charge of the whole space available. There is also, they pointed out, the need to recognise where you, as Art Director, are needed and where you are not. They illuminated their talk with telling examples: Patrick Benson's owl babies in the title of the same name, hopping with joy when mother owl returns – the consummate solution when your babies have no smiles and no clothes; the emotional scale of mother and baby in *Guess How Much I Love You* with their dramatic diagonals and the graceful dancing of Charlotte Voake's hand lettering which is such an intrinsic (and often ignored) part of her drawing.

While it is the case that every time one sits down to write about an illustrated book the problem will be different, what the Words About Pictures day has left me with is a greater awareness of process and the hope that this fascinating conversation about illustration will continue.

Rosemary



'The people greeted the soldiers as if they were welcome guests.'

David McKee's *The Conquerors* is awarded five stars and reviewed on page 24.

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MAY 2004 No. 146

ISSN 0143-909X © School Bookshop Assoc. Ltd 2004
Editor: Rosemary Stones
Managing Director: Richard Hill
Design: Alec Davis, Lydney, Gloucestershire
Printed: The Friary Press, Dorchester, Dorset

Editorial correspondence should be sent to the BfK office, same address as for subscriptions.

Books for Keeps can be obtained on subscription by sending a cheque or postal order to: Books for Keeps, 6 Brightfield Road, Lee, London SE12 8QP. You can also pay by credit card (Access, Visa, Eurocard or Mastercard) and order via:

Tel: 020 8852 4953
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E-mail: booksforkeeps@btinternet.com

Website: booksforkeeps.co.uk

Annual subscription for six issues: £21.75 (UK), £24.75 (Europe including Ireland), £27.75 (airmail).

Single copies: £3.65 (UK), £4.15 (Europe including Ireland), £4.65 (airmail).

Towards a useful critical language
about children's books...

Beginning the Conversation

Beautifully illustrated' is the flat and summary little phrase that makes such regular appearance in reviews of illustrated books. It helped to prompt the setting up of a one-day seminar and workshop on how writing about the visual aspect of children's books might be improved. The occasion of a retrospective exhibition of the work of one of the best (and most articulate) of illustrators, seemed too good an opportunity to miss: **BfK**, the Joint Education Department at Somerset House and the Quentin Blake Gallery of Illustration collaborated in this first attempt to provide a forum for such discussion. The aim was to present some key elements (without claiming to be exhaustive), by inviting illustrators, journalists and art editors to hold a conversation with reviewers, librarians, teachers and other interested professionals, with the exhibition as a kind of benevolent background beacon.

The illustrator's task

The day began for its 30 or so participants in the lecture theatre of the Learning Centre with two 20-minute talks which attempted to put before the audience the kind of considerations that are present in the preparation of an illustrated book. In his talk ('What an Illustrator Thinks About') Quentin Blake explained that the illustrator of a children's book does not simply go into some kind of innocent child mode. Part of the interest of the task is that the artist has to consider a number of things at the same time – the mood and atmosphere of a book elicited from close acquaintance with the text, and from that the kind of materials indicated to produce the appropriate effect; the appearance of the characters, their gestures and behaviour; the moments chosen for illustration and how they relate to the words. Also to be considered are questions about where the physical text goes; where images should fall on the page; what their relation is to reality; how they could direct the spectator's eye; how the spectator could be encouraged to turn the page with particular expectations; and the appropriate scale and viewpoint of the illustrations; how the colour works and what is its function and what effect will the illustrations have on the audience for the book. He illuminated these points by reference to some of his own books, contrasting, for example, the cursory simplifications and lack of backgrounds of **Zagazoo** – a story which only exists, as he put it, on the page – with the importance of the richly-wooded surroundings of **The Green Ship** which provide the stage for a story which, importantly, *could* take place in a real world.



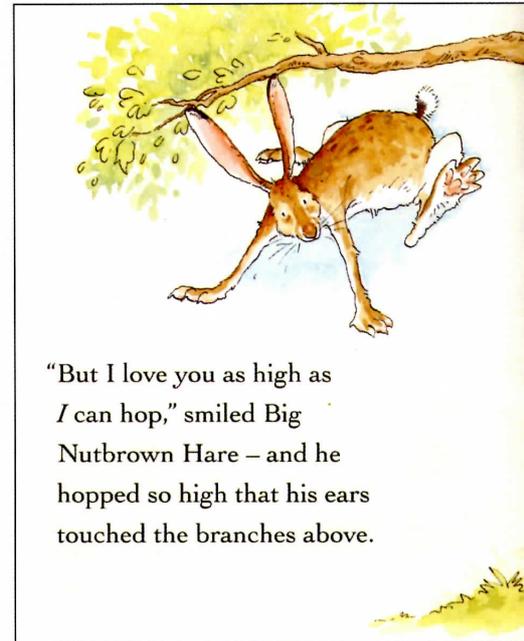
From **The Green Ship**.

Held on 6 March in the Learning Centre at London's Somerset House, the 'Words About Pictures' seminar and workshop was part of the education programme to accompany the exhibition at the Gilbert Collection, 'Quentin Blake: Fifty Years of Illustration'. The idea for the seminar came out of the need expressed by **BfK** reviewers themselves, and also endorsed by Quentin Blake, for reviewers of illustrated children's books to be better-equipped for their task. **Ghislaine Kenyon** explains.



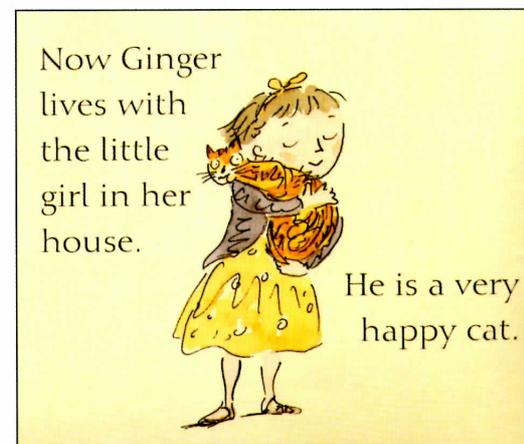
The role of the art director

Deirdre McDermott (Art Director at Walker Books) and Amelia Edwards (her predecessor) expanded on the points made by Quentin Blake as they explained how they set about putting together a picture book. They compared the graphic language and use of the page of artists such as Anita Jeram (**Guess How Much I Love You**) and Charlotte Voake (**Ginger Finds a Home**). Perhaps their most eloquent example was **Owl Babies**, illustrated with typography



"But I love you as high as I can hop," smiled Big Nutbrown Hare – and he hopped so high that his ears touched the branches above.

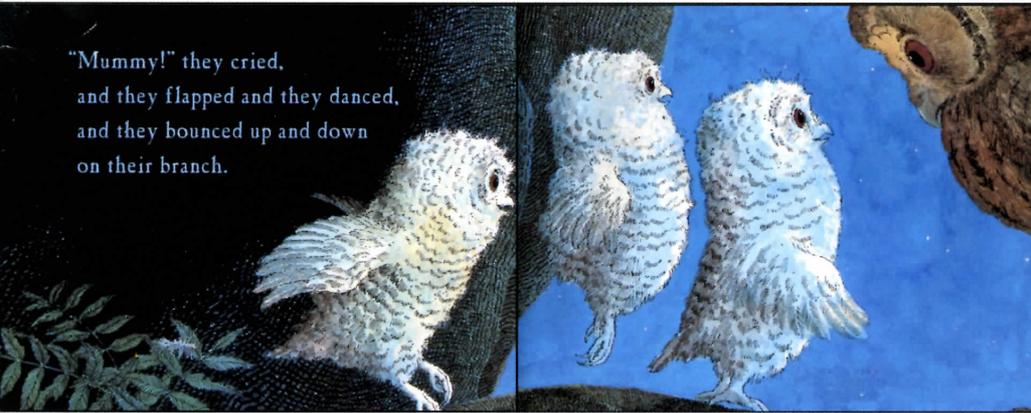
Top, from **Guess How Much I Love You**.
Below, from **Ginger Finds a Home**.



reversed out in white on largely black pages, by Patrick Benson – noting not only his techniques for producing effects of darkness, but the subtle drama in the positioning and stance of the owls and the pacing of the narrative; the grasp of narrative that makes what might at first appear to be a very simple story into a work that will repay frequent re-reading.

The purpose of these two talks was to put into the hands of potential reviewers a tally of some of the issues at stake, the relevant processes and procedures, ignorance of which may lead to superficial judgments and indiscriminately-bestowed praise which may in its turn actually encourage inferior illustration. (Additional vitamins were added, incidentally, in the form of some intensely relevant quotations from a letter* to the 'workers in the field' from critic Brian Alderson, who sadly was not able to be present on the day.) The third talk*, from reviewer Joanna Carey, could be seen as an object lesson in the skills of the reviewer.

"Mummy!" they cried,
and they flapped and they danced,
and they bounced up and down
on their branch.



From **Owl Babies**.

Practical tasks

The next stage of the day was for the participants to write some reviews. They divided into five groups, and each group had two books to write about. Every group had **Madeline** by Ludwig Bemelmans. First published in 1939, the book has iconic status, and the aim was to think how to describe the illustrations effectively, how they work with the text and how they may have contributed to the book's enduring popularity. The second book was different for each group; respectively illustrated by P J Lynch, Angela Barrett, Shirley Hughes, Neal Layton and Lauren Child, it is evident that they invited comment on both realism and informality.

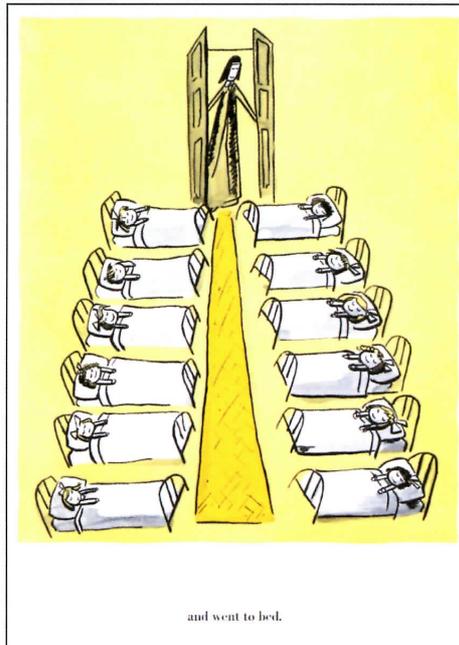
The groups took on with surprising enthusiasm the challenge of reading and reviewing with a two-hour deadline that no journalist would have accepted, and this work continued until after lunch, when Emma Chichester Clark and Sara Fanelli explained the ways in which they each set about the illustration of a children's book.

Visual Voices

Emma emphasized the need for the illustrator beginning her career to find her own visual 'voice' which has to do with line and colour and tone; *her* initial voice was dark and rich-toned oil pastels. However, she realized that this medium was not the right one for her and over a period of time she developed a new style using crayons and watercolours and a lighter palette to be found in the 'Blue Kangaroo' books for example. Sara Fanelli has always been deeply involved in the book as a form. She has made books since childhood and engages with every aspect of an illustrated book. Front and back covers, endpapers and typography (including handwritten text) all become part of the creative vehicle that drives her ideas as she searches for different ways of using the form. In **A Dog's Life** she uses paper flaps to make ears and legs; **Dear Diary** includes collage of ephemera such as labels and stationery, and in this book she employs different drawing styles including doodles. She also reminded her audience of the crucial role the publisher plays in helping an experimental illustrator such as herself to realise her ideas in print.

The talks led on to a plenary session where the reviews of the morning were presented and Quentin Blake chaired a discussion between the participants and a panel made up of the two artists, BfK editor Rosemary Stones and critic Julia Eccleshare. The reports themselves were encouraging, with many convincing analyses.

Space doesn't allow us to reproduce all the texts but these extracts give a sense of how 'review by committee' actually led to good insights into technique, page design, pacing and many other of the elements that people agreed went into the making of a successful illustrated book.



From **Madeline**.

On Ludwig Bemelmans' **Madeline**:

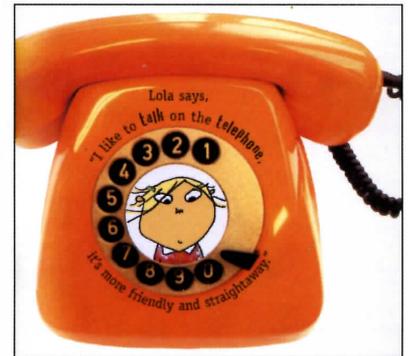
'Fifty years after her first appearance, **Madeline** is still in the bookshops. A strong 1950s aesthetic still somehow seems fresh, witty and elegant. Bemelmans' view of France is presented through a kind of celebration of awkward draughtsmanship, a certainty in his slightly clumsy line. Each page is in the form of an individual print or tableau with its rhyming couplet. The combination of full- and two-colour plates is probably attributable to the technical/financial limitations of printing in the period rather than conscious reasons of visual pace. The two-colour pages carry the irreverent cheeky humour, while the colour plates with their evident Dufy/Matisse influences are particularly effective in painting the atmospheric Parisian backdrop of rainy streets and moonlit buildings. A combination of media that appears to include ink, watercolour, gouache and charcoal is an uneasy mix that shouldn't work but somehow it does.'

People were also prepared to be critical: on **Rover** by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Neal Layton:

'This is the story of an ordinary family doing ordinary things which it is easy for the 4-7 year old child to relate to, but we felt the illustration and design were somewhat bity and rather too busy. The dog is not sufficiently emphasised and is sometimes hard to find. We thought the scale was not right in many cases and that there was almost too much colour with insufficient distinction and clarity... however we enjoyed the book's subversive humour and it may be that the child reader would not have made any of our criticisms!'



Above, from **Rover**; below, from **I Am Too Absolutely Small for School**.



Finally, Lauren Child's **I Am Too Absolutely Small for School**:

'... it's not completely true to describe Lauren as an illustrator; she is a picture maker – the pages in her book are a symbolic fusion of design, illustration and text. Lauren employs scale, perspective drawing, collage and photography to convey the inner turmoil of a five-year-old girl who is refusing to go to school. This is direct emotional narrative and the lack of visual sequence from page to page contributes to Lola's sense of unease. Lauren makes the reader look and search quite differently on each spread. By placing the type in circles and curving lines, she encourages the reader to use the book as an object. This also helps the reader believe the narrative; by using everyday photographic elements, the pens, the fridge door, the biscuits and combining them with her minimal, eloquent, naïve line, Lauren achieves a complete reality.'

Several of the authors of these texts were teachers; it's perhaps appropriate to end this report with a thought about the transference of the critical skills acquired during this day to future generations of reviewers. If such ideas could inform the thousands of book reviews written daily in the nation's classrooms, maybe there is a chance that the children's book reviewers of the 2020s will never need to resort to that little phrase, 'beautifully illustrated'. ■

Books discussed

Zagazoo and **The Green Ship** by Quentin Blake are published by Random.

Guess How Much I Love You by Sam McBratney, illustrated by Anita Jeram, **Ginger Finds a Home** by Charlotte Voake, and **Owl Babies** by Martin Waddell, illustrated by Patrick Benson, are published by Walker Books.

Dear Diary by Sara Fanelli is published by Walker Books. **A Dog's Life** is now out of print.

Madeline by Ludwig Bemelmans is published by Scholastic.

Rover by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Neal Layton, is published by Bloomsbury.

I Am Too Absolutely Small for School by Lauren Child is published by Orchard.

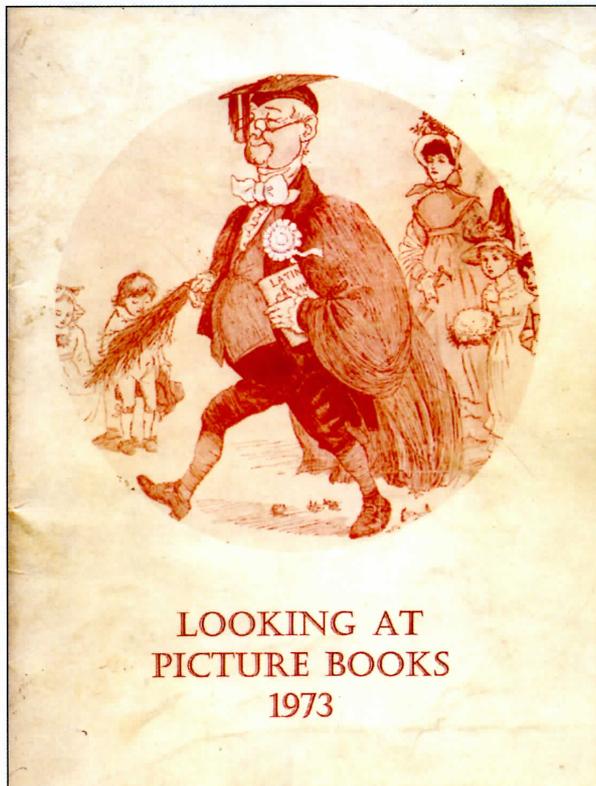
Ghislaïne Kenyon is Head of Learning, Joint Education Department, Somerset House, London

* Reprinted in this issue.

Towards a useful critical language
about children's books...

The Primacy of Text

What are the underlying principles which determine the critical assessment of picture books? In 1973 **Brian Alderson** was invited to curate an exhibition at the National Book League (now Booktrust) on the theme of words and images in picture books. His catalogue to the exhibition, **Looking at Picture Books 1973**, remains seminal. As Brian Alderson was unable to be at the **Words About Pictures** workshop, the organisers invited him to send a written contribution. **BfK** is delighted to take this opportunity to bring it to a wider readership.



LOOKING AT
PICTURE BOOKS
1973

At risk of being found an intellectual sclerotic I would like to maintain, more or less unchanged, the critical position that I asserted (youch!) thirty years ago in my catalogue for an exhibition at the old National Book League: **Looking at Picture Books 1973**. Here I elaborated through thirteen chapters first the need to establish the primacy of text, and the adequacy of that text, in the critical estimate of a picture book, and second the importance of distinguishing the many variant subjects which may find themselves treated as picture-book texts. By text here I mean the narrative structure from front cover to back, even if it lack all words, or consists merely of letters of the alphabet or cardinal numbers, and if the composition and sequencing of that text is flawed it will not easily be redeemed by the most stirring or beautiful of illustrations.

The illustrator is servant of the text

Furthermore, insofar as texts differ either categorically (alphabet books, 'concept' books, story books, fairy tales, nursery rhymes etc.) or individually (the varying 'voices' of the text-makers) they place interpretative demands on those who seek to illustrate them. The illustrator is servant of the text, not its master, and the task of judging how sensitively illustrators have responded to the character of the text can be a demanding craft. (It is useless in this brief space to go on to articulate the importance of historical awareness: the place of one book within an illustrator's oeuvre, or within a register of its genre, or even of alternative efforts to tackle the selfsame text – cf. some strictures in the March **Books for Keeps** which I levelled at P J Lynch's assault on **The Bee-Man of Orn**, Sendak's illustrations for which happened to be singled out for their perfection in that old NBL exhibition.

What a lay person needs to know

All that has to do with the donnés of material within

the public domain. Where the Workshop Day programme begins however is (I think) with questions relating to those events which take place before a work's final publication, and what a lay person needs to know to enhance the authority of whatever judgements they may choose to make. These are questions concerning the technique adopted by illustrators – perhaps in conjunction with authors and editors – in determining the style and sequencing of their graphic contribution and the technology by which it is transferred to the page (which, importantly, includes the nature of the paper of which that page consists).

These are matters which I find endlessly fascinating (and very tricky) and which I have explored in my books on Edward Ardizzone and Ezra Jack Keats* where I was concerned to look closely at the pre-publication history of individual books. That experience disposes me to believe that the fundamental elements in any picture book can only be elucidated (if at all) by access to material, records, and technical data which are not 'given' and may only be available by courtesy of the artists themselves, or their publishers, or the owners of national, local, academic, or private archives which are as often as not on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

A generalized awareness of the processes

For – as I am sure most illustrators will agree – every book has a private history of its own, both of its conception and its execution – and some of those histories turn out to be passing strange. They can hardly be a subject for a Workshop though – except by way of anecdotal diversion – for what the working critic needs to get at is not so much the evolution of individual works as a generalized awareness of the processes that customarily pertain in most creative efforts. (At a conference at Exeter some years ago, a college lecturer specialising in picture books confessed to not realising how their form is governed by the need to fold sheets so that the gatherings turn out to be – usually – in multiples of eight leaves.)

Developing such an awareness will surely give vitality to the process of judgement – and may encourage a greater respect for bibliographical studies – but it is, in the end, subsidiary to an articulation of the quality of the finished product: text and the distinction, or otherwise, of the illustrative accompaniment. ■

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

***Ezra Jack Keats, Artist and Picture-Book Maker** (Pelican Publishing, 1 56554 006 9, £43.50). **Ezra Jack Keats, A Bibliography and Catalogue** (Pelican Publishing, 1 56554 007 7, £35). Both available via Gazelle Books, 01524 68765.

Edward Ardizzone: A Bibliographic Commentary (0 7123 4759 3, £45) is published by The British Library.



Judging Illustration

I fell into reviewing by accident, when I was an art teacher. I was talking one day to the literary editor of a national newspaper; he was temporarily without a children's books editor, and anxious about the ever increasing pile of children's books accumulating in the office, awaiting reviews. I agreed to write a piece about picture books, illustrated books. What could be easier, I thought... and the next day a taxi disgorged an avalanche of books. I didn't realize that the books lying in the office had been well picked over by staff, and most of the 'plums' had been removed – what I got was a mountain of undistinguished, unattractive, mediocre books, lots of pop-up books, lots of bad drawing, horrible design, a rude awakening as to the unimaginably vast quantity, and the hugely variable quality of books published – all with alluring press releases, all clamouring for attention. My heart sank at the thought of having to write a thousand words on them. I nearly gave up, then, right at the bottom, under a pop-up book of Bible stories, I found not a picture book, but a handsome cloth bound volume with a silk marker ribbon. It was **Treasure Island** from the Everyman's Library Children's Classics series, with Mervyn Peake's

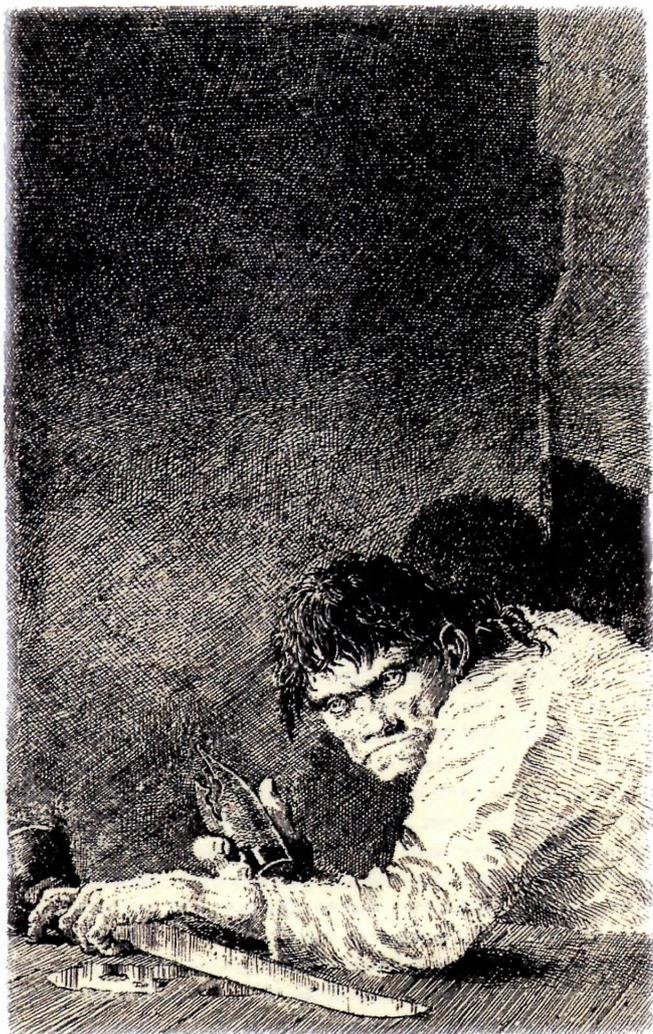
Just how much does the reviewer of children's illustrated books need to know about illustration? What about the quality of the drawing, the use of colour and so forth? Does technical knowledge help? An idea of the processes and procedures? The kind of paper on which the book is printed? **Joanna Carey** sets out some of the criteria involved in serious critical assessment.

extraordinary 1947 black and white illustrations – a reminder of the days when all respectable novels had at least a sprinkling of beautiful line drawings. Here at last was something to write about – those sinister figures, looming out of dark, densely hatched and stippled backgrounds had something of the drama, and the texture of Goya's etchings... But then the thought struck me, maybe Peake's illustrations weren't really, but suddenly I wasn't quite sure and it was a salutary moment, for if you are going to try to write about illustration, you certainly need to feel a degree of confidence in what you are saying.

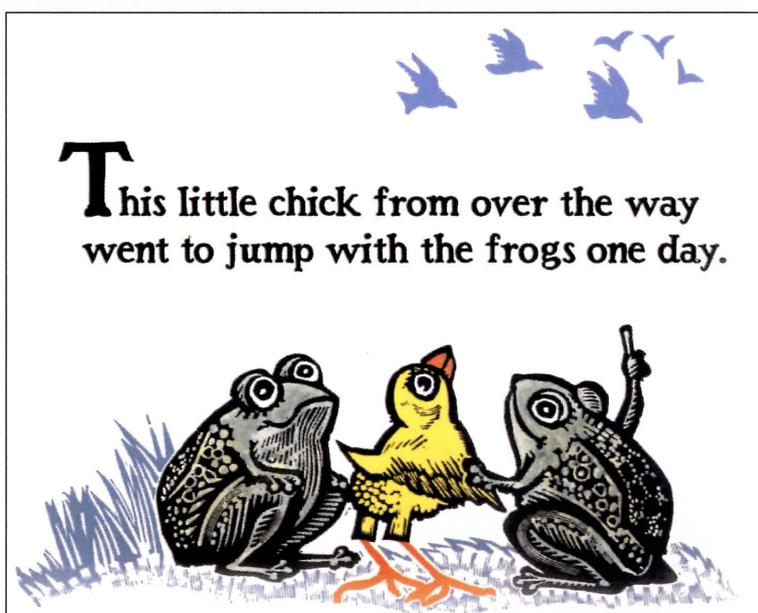
An elementary grip on the terminology

So exactly how much *do* you need to know?

How much technical knowledge is necessary? Obviously you can't be an expert in every area, but you need at least an elementary grip on the terminology, on the different media – pen and ink, line and wash, watercolour, gouache, collage. And while innovative illustrators today, like Lauren Child, use new technology – scanning, and manipulating images on computers – what about all the older traditions, like the different forms of printmaking, all with their very different textures – from etching and lithography to lino cuts and wood engraving... and what's the difference between a wood cut and a wood engraving? Or a vinyl engraving? But do these details matter? Of course they do – which is why, in John Lawrence's picture book **This Little Chick**, the note on the title page is so welcome, explaining that the various techniques the artist has employed – vinyl engravings, watercolour washes and printed wood textures – are all brought together with computer technology. But that sort of attention to detail is rare (American publishers often offer this kind of information as a matter of course).



'He had an alarming way now when he was drunk of drawing his cutlass and laying it bare before him on the table,' from **Treasure Island**.



This little chick from over the way
went to jump with the frogs one day.

Tactile qualities

And then there's the size of the book, the format, is it horizontal or upright or is it a fat comfortable square shape – is it big enough for two or more children to look at together, or is it a tiny book like

those Beatrix Potter created, to fit perfectly in the hands of a small child?

And what does the book feel like? Although we should celebrate the scope and availability of paperbacks, the *tactile* qualities of hardbacks – fine paper, cloth covers, sumptuous dust jackets, the stitching, the endpapers – are unforgettable but cost inevitably means that fewer and fewer children today get the chance to handle hardback picture books. But what a sense of occasion they present – like little laptop theatres: and what a colossal difference good *paper* makes to the impact of the artwork... an example here would be Helen Oxenbury's **Alice in Wonderland**, where the texture of the paper allows both the watercolours and the pencil drawings to retain all the subtle nuances of the originals.

A good picture book can be explored at many different levels of understanding; the reviewer shouldn't make the assumption that it is only for young children so, aside from production values, what are the main points to consider?

Composition, colour and atmosphere

The composition – the way things are placed on the page – some artists fill every available inch, others make eloquent use of the space around the images, giving the figures the freedom to inhabit the page with just the minimum of essential detail. Then there's colour – that obviously requires a chapter of its own, and atmosphere. There are myriad ways in which atmosphere is created; look at Angela Barrett's wonderfully 'atmospheric' **Snow White** – colour is layered and mysterious, achieving a rich bloom on the page like that on a ripe damson. She uses a whole battery of effects – airy vistas, floating points of view, intimate close ups, classical references, symbolic details, and she heightens the magic with theatrical handling of scale, light and perspective.



The importance of line

And do the illustrations sit comfortably with the text? (We're assuming here of course that the text is perfect.) Do the illustrations go beyond the limits of the text and how do the pictures propel the story from page to page – or is there a more contemplative mood that requires a gentler pace? Perhaps most important is the drawing, the quality, the integrity of the drawing... and the LINE. Most illustrators seem to agree that line takes precedence over colour. It's almost always the line, its character, its personality that helps you to identify the artist and to engage with the pictures. In the 18th century when books for children were first published early methods of reproduction could never accurately reflect the spirit of the artist's original drawings – the success of the illustration depended



Top, from **Clown**.
Below, from **The Magic Bed**.



on the skill of the reproductive engraver... and it was Thomas Bewick, the innovative wood engraver, who changed the course of illustration, developing a much finer line which could be accurately reproduced, retaining its individuality and allowing tonal variety. Bewick's method of engraving was in use for a long time – that's how Tenniel's illustrations for **Alice** were reproduced.

Printing technology advanced in leaps and bounds, but right up to the 1950s – when black/white line drawings were such a vital (and now much missed) ingredient of so many novels it was still the case that any tone had to be created with line – this varied from the breezily atmospheric hatching of Ardizzone, to the controlled energy of Mervyn Peake's finely wrought technique.

Nowadays, printing technology allows illustrators almost complete freedom – but still the line is of paramount importance, and exploring its character – whether it's emphatic, hesitant, capricious or whatever, is a good starting point and I'm briefly going to look at the work of three very familiar artists, all well known for their expressive but very different use of line.

Quentin Blake's line is instantly recognisable. You tune in immediately to its rhythmic calligraphic energy, its wit and its spontaneity. Blake draws with a deceptively casual precision and although he *observes* he doesn't draw from life – the trick is, he says, having looked at and understood nature, you must then turn away and draw from the imagination. He works fast, usually with pen and ink and you can almost hear the nib scratching with jagged intensity or, with the easy momentum of a skater, fluently unfurling celebratory flourishes on the page. Blake's line expresses a wide range of emotions – never more clearly demonstrated than in his wordless book **Clown**, in which, with speed, grace and economy, the line tells a moving story entirely through the exquisitely mimed

gestures of its eponymous hero.

John Burningham employs a very different kind of line. He keeps the drawing to a minimum and his hesitant, broken line has a uniquely vulnerable quality that manages to be both funny and sensitive. Several of Burningham's stories are about relationships between young and old and with his oblique humour he subtly suggests the gulf of benign incomprehension that divides the generations – figures are very simply, sparsely drawn, they stand detached and their faces, with minimal almost non-existent features, wittily emphasize their lack of communication: Georgie, for example, in **The Magic Bed**, alongside his overbearing grandmother, is drawn with a submissive tilt to his head – the pen sidles tentatively round his face, and although he has a nose, and a tiny dot for an eye, he has no mouth to speak of – or *with*, come to that.

Burningham often uses crayons and coloured pencils, but unlike many illustrators who draw in a way that, superficially, a child might aspire to, and in contrast to the noisy clamour of so many picture books, there is always a thoughtful element of reserve in his drawing.

Raymond Briggs draws with an altogether more muscular line. The drawing has a strong narrative quality, the line is sure and vigorous, with an all-embracing understanding both of form and body language that gives a robust reality to his characters – even those on the wilder shores of his peculiarly vivid imagination, like Fungus the Bogeyman. But while the drawing always maintains its authority, the character of the line does change. It was after Fungus, 'after spending two years immersed in slime' that he went for 'something clean and pleasant' in the shape of **The Snowman**; in which the tenderly observed, naturalistic drawings of the little boy are magically enhanced by the use of coloured crayons whose gently diffused lines subtly suggest the comfortable textures of the child's immediate world. Like many illustrators of his vintage, Briggs always used to draw in pencil, and then ink over it, until some friends asked him why he did 'such nice sensitive pencil drawings, and then mucked them up with ink'. It was true, he says, they did lose their freshness... and he talks about the way the Victorian illustrators had to surrender the vitality of their original drawings to the brilliant but very different skills of the engravers.



So now, to preserve the character of his original pencil line, he simply photocopied them – lots of copies, so he can afford to 'muck them up' and then works on the photocopies with colour 'and using crayons,' he says, 'the colour grows into the picture, and you get a certain softness...'

Children's fiction today often makes front page news, but one of the problems with picture books is the lack of review space – often little more than seasonal 'round ups' with enthusiastic one paragraph reviews that too often end up heaping unqualified praise on too many titles distorting the overall picture. It's good to talk in detail, but I'm sorry I've covered so little ground, and that, alphabetically speaking, as regards the artists, I haven't even got beyond B. Let's hope that the Quentin Blake Gallery of Illustration will provide a regular forum for discussion on this vast subject. ■

Joanna Carey is a writer and illustrator.

Continuing the Conversation

'Most dictionary definitions of the verb "to illustrate" include the likes of "elucidate", "explain", and "shed light on" (or even more prosaically, "provide with pictures"). But in picture books at least, illustration is now performing a far more complex and less easily definable role, sometimes purposely contradicting or playfully challenging the meaning of the text.' But is it suitable for children? **Martin Salisbury**, a participant in the Words About Pictures workshop, continues the debate.

There was a time when you knew where you stood with illustration. In John Ryder's delightful little book **Artists of a Certain Line, A Selection of Illustrators for Children's Books** (Bodley Head, 1960), a cross section of artists of the day is presented in the form of a succession of single images arranged in an orderly fashion alongside each respective potted biography. All are in black and white, and beautifully printed through the by then moribund letterpress process, with that lovely, slightly embossed finish. The important names are all there, Ardizzone, Einzig, Lamb, Jacques, Keeping, Wildsmith; each displaying excellent draughtsmanship and awareness of design, most having received a rigorous academic training in these areas within the British art school system of the time.

In those days, it seems, illustration knew its place. It usually took the form of an elegant, well-drawn, essentially representational visual interpretation of a text. Many of these illustrators were (and in some cases happily still are) also painters and printmakers, exhibiting in private galleries and perhaps the annual Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Book illustration would, for many of them, be seen as a closely related activity that was informed by work for exhibition, and yet was at the same time entirely separate. 'Commercial art' was the term, reasonably enough, in common usage. A scan of children's book illustration today reveals a rather different landscape. An increasing number of artists are recognising the potential of the picture book as an outlet for self-expression, choosing to indulge their own visual and conceptual preoccupations in this particular arena. The range of stylistic approaches of artists working today is vast, reflecting and exploiting the breadth of media now available, traditional and digital. It seems unlikely that a future review of early 21st-century children's book illustration would identify a 'style' or movement in the way that the Arts and Crafts movement was embodied by Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway a century or so before.

Pushing at the boundaries

In some other areas of the graphic arts today, editorial, advertising and design for example, illustration has suffered from being regarded as the 'graphic designer's plaything', often commissioned and used unimaginatively as 'ambient' decoration, or deeply predictably as in the annual wheeling out of Ralph Steadman to provide a newspaper image for the budget/war. In some ways this

may have been to the benefit of the world of children's books. Illustrators looking for ways to assert a more authorial approach have found their way to the picture book and many are pushing at the boundaries of what we think of as 'suitable for children'.

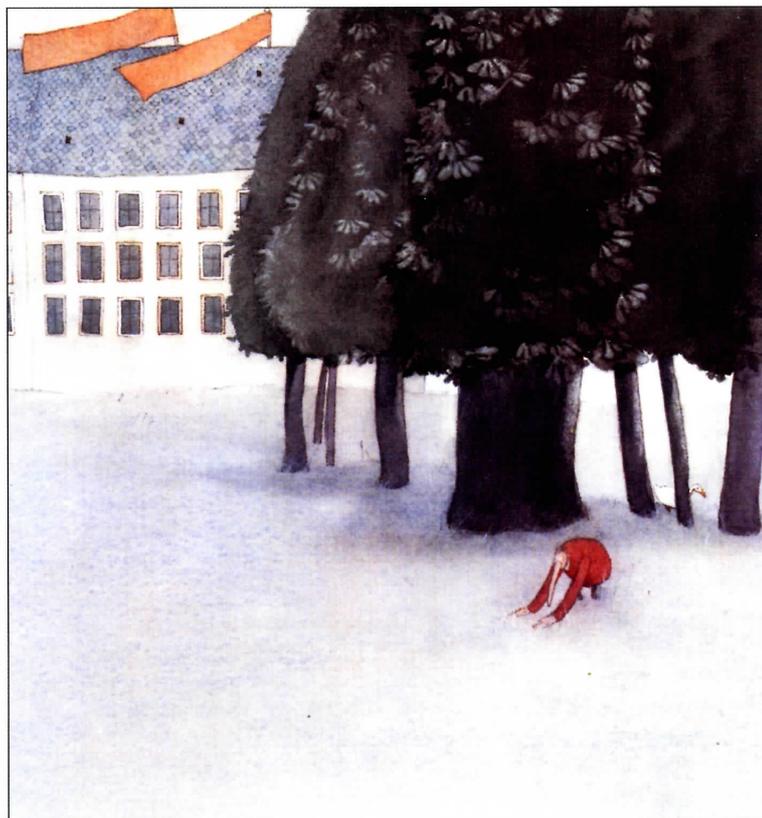
Questioning the relationship to text

The relationship between 'art' and illustration has ebbed and flowed over the years. Recently, perceptions of 'fine' and applied art have drifted further and further apart with the *concept* becoming everything in the world of gallery art. Some feel that skill or craft disqualifies art. A few years ago, in a wonderfully apposite and articulate rant under the ironic heading 'That's Not Art, That's Illustration*', the leading American illustrator, Brad Holland expressed the view that the word *art* had become totally devalued; 'Everybody is an artist these days. Rock and roll singers are artists. So are movie directors, performance artists, make-up artists, tattoo artists, con artists and rap artists.' He went on to describe the ever-expanding categories of activity that lead to the perpetrators being described as 'artists' and concludes dejectedly, 'The only people left in America who seem not to be artists are illustrators.' In the three or four years since these sentiments were expressed, I have become conscious of a shift in attitudes, at least in this country, toward illustrators for children's books, and their endeavours. The brightening spotlight on children's literature has spread to the increasingly sophisticated visual feast that accompanies it. And not only are the pictures themselves becoming more and more demanding for the reader/viewer, the nature of their relationship to text is being questioned, challenged and redefined. Most dictionary definitions of the verb 'to illustrate' include the likes of 'elucidate', 'explain', and 'shed light on' (or even more prosaically, 'provide with pictures'). But in picture books at least, illustration is now performing a far more complex and less easily definable role, sometimes purposely contradicting or playfully challenging the meaning of the text.

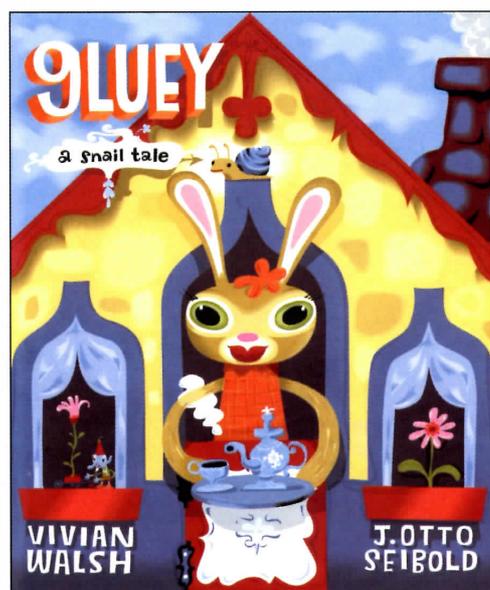
So how important is the actual artistic quality, or integrity of the image, and of the book as whole in this context? How do we evaluate its aesthetic merit? Do such things matter? Working with advanced level art students who have a particular interest in the children's book, involves nurturing in students the highest possible levels of personal engagement with their subject matter. The theory being that if the artist isn't satisfying himself, he is unlikely to be satisfying the child. There is no doubt in my mind as to the importance of providing children with a truly nourishing pictorial diet. Bombarded as they (and we) are by quick-hit trash imagery through a range of screen-based media, the finely illustrated book provides a stimulus that can be absorbed and relished at a reflective pace. It can be a child's first contact with the arts, and the intellectually demanding and rewarding activity of reading pictures. But each time my heart misses a beat as I marvel at a truly original and inventive piece of student work, a little voice is nagging away in my head telling me to prepare her for that first contact with the publisher, and the possibility of the all-too-frequent, 'brighten up your colours and make your characters cuter'.

Negligent of cultural goals?

Despite the expanding pool of talent in illustration in this country, there does still seem to be an excessive level of preconception among publishers and booksellers about the kind of imagery that is deemed 'appropriate' for various age groups. A tour around the Bologna Children's Book Fair reveals wide differences between countries in the levels of respect accorded to their children in terms of picture book art. In France for example, the wonderful little publishing house, Editions du Rouergue has been producing illustrated books of the highest quality since the mid 1980s. Its mission to give children a diet of something visually sustaining was initially met with widespread scepticism, but the company's distinctive approach has become highly influential and is now much imitated. A glance at the Scandinavian stands reveals a sophisticated visual world, albeit one that appears somewhat

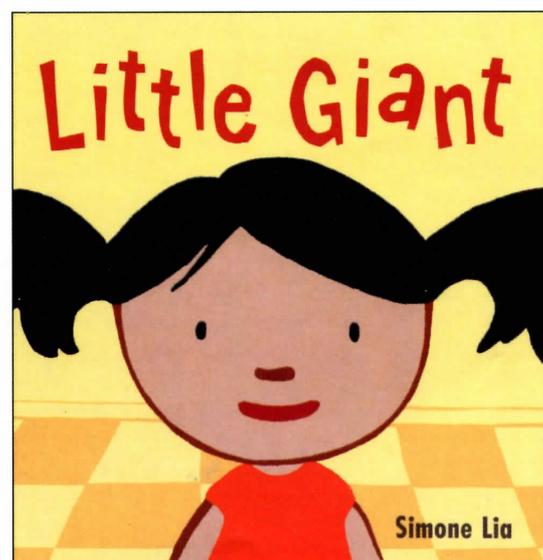


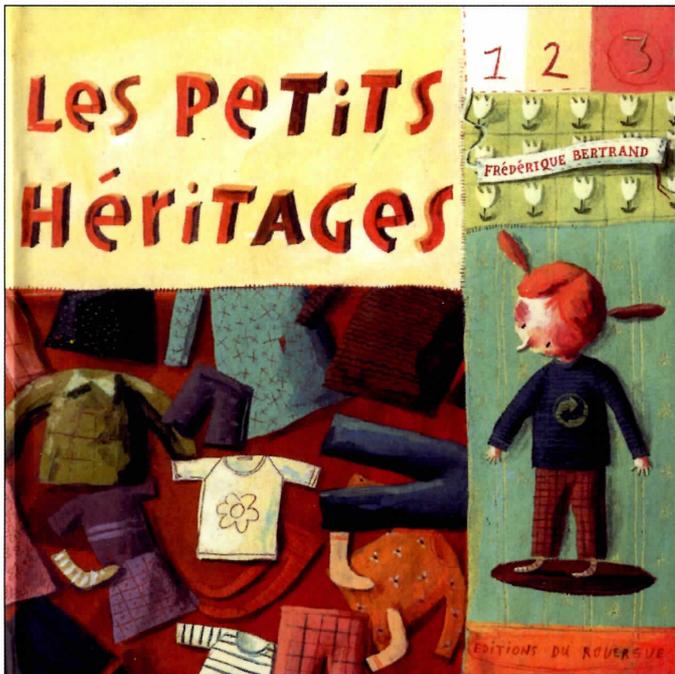
Above, from Lisbeth Zwerger's version of **Dwarf Nose** (North-South Books, Zurich 1993).



Left, **Gluey, a snail tale** by Vivian Walsh, illustrated by J Otto Seibold (Harcourt 2002).

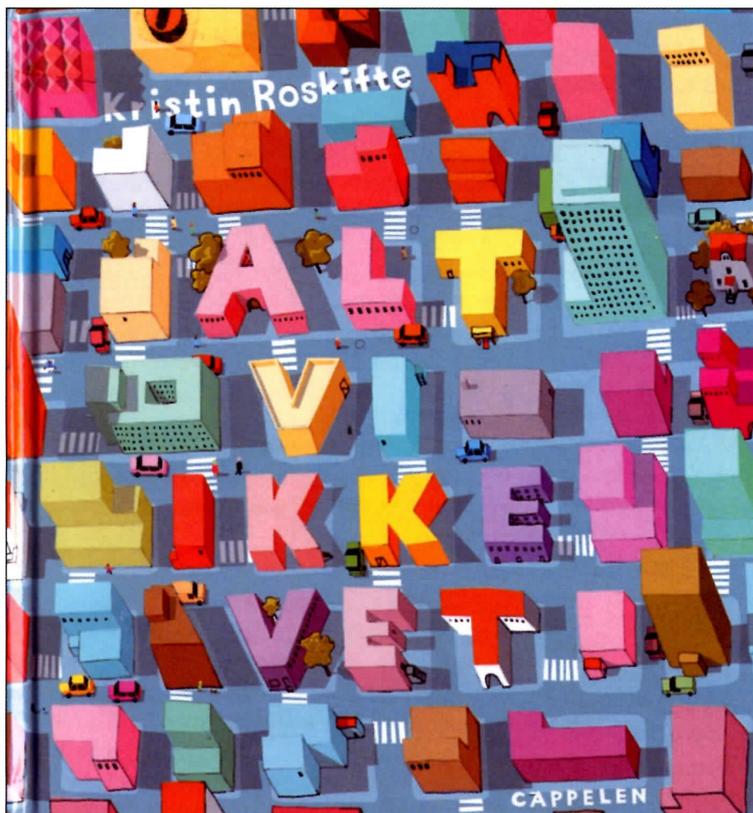
Below, **Little Giant** by Simone Lia (Gullane 2003).





Above, **Les Petits Héritages** by Frédérique Bertrand (Editions du Rouergue 1997).

Below, **Alt Vi Ikke Vet** (All That We Don't Know) by Kristin Roskifte (J W Cappelens Forlag, Norway 2003). A wordless journey through shifting perceptions of reality.

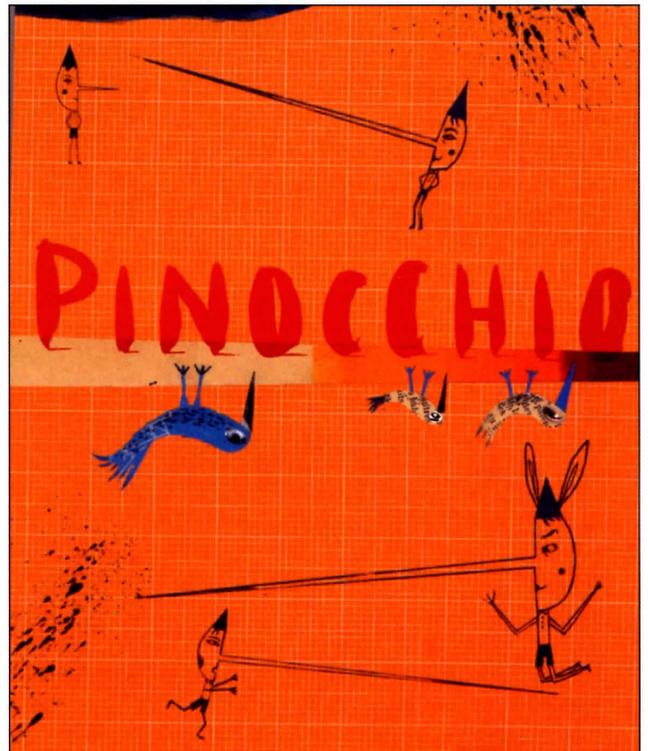


preoccupied with introducing children to death, sex, devils and trolls. Books from Spain and Portugal seem to be awash with graphic invention, and of course Eastern Europe has been for many years in a different class as far as innovation, invention and design goes. The extraordinarily rich heritage of book illustration from these countries was highlighted at Bologna last year by the choice of Poland as guest of honour. This meant an opportunity to marvel at the original artwork of the great József Wilkón, and to come away clutching a copy of the specially published **Almanach Polscy Ilustratorzy dla Dzieci**, a beautifully produced if hideously translated tour of contemporary Polish picture book art. The political transformation in Eastern Europe though, is threatening this glorious tradition, as the newly discovered rush for

profit drives publishing houses to be 'negligent of cultural goals', the book tells us. Before 1989, Polish children's books, in terms of creativity, had been 'a reserve of relative freedom' and 'had set as their peculiar priority education through art and for art'.

Perhaps the greatest living example of this threatened heritage is the Czech artist Květa Pacovská, another guest at last year's fair. Pacovská's work blurs boundaries between fine and applied art. Her passion for colour, paper and letterforms is communicated through both children's books and gallery based installation art. She says, 'Without drawing I cannot exist. It is like breathing. A drawing is such as it is. It should not and cannot pretend it expresses our feelings and our thoughts.*'

Such integrity as this leads to the creation of very special books. But we are unlikely to be fortunate enough to find many of them on the shelves of our bookshops. The most common explanation for this is 'they're all well and good but they don't sell'. It is very difficult to test this theory as it is something of a self-fulfilling prophesy. The chain of people whose tastes come between the book and the child (from commissioning editor right through to teacher, librarian or parent) means that most children never have the chance to demonstrate a preference, and are too often plied with the visually patronising and sentimental. It is an unfair burden on the wonderful Sara Fanelli that she tends to be batted to and fro as something of a football in this argument, but I have to say it took me far too long to find a copy of her version of **Pinocchio** (Walker Books 2003), one of the loveliest children's books published in recent years. This, despite the fact that I live in a city full of bookshops.



But I like to think that the sheer weight of talent around at the moment is going to gradually force a change. I happen to know that at the present time, there are a number of truly original picture books in preparation for publication by some of the more enlightened publishing houses in this country. Let's get them on the shelves. ■

*1 **The Education of an Illustrator**, edited by Steven Heller and Marshall Arisman (Allworth Press/School of Visual Arts, New York 2000)

*2 **The Art of Květa Pacovská** (Michael Neugebauer, Zurich 1993)

Martin Salisbury is an illustrator and is Course Director for MA Children's Book Illustration at APU Cambridge School of Art.

Novels in Verse, for Better or Worse

The verse novel is a fairly recent but fast-growing addition to the repertoire of children's literature. Are they self-indulgent or a way into exploration of the human condition at a deeper level? Peter Hollindale explores.

When Melvin Burgess's *Junk* appeared in 1996, it became famous (or notorious) for its no-holds-barred depiction of the teenage drug culture and its physical consequences. The effect of the book depended just as much on the manner as the matter of its telling. After a short third-person opening chapter, the narrative switched from one voice to another, all pushing the story forward but also taking us inside each individual skull, showing different points of view on the same self-destructive adventure.

Imagine *Junk* written not in prose chapters but a sequence of short verse monologues, a rapid succession of voices and viewpoints. Here you have the emerging typical form of the verse novel, a fairly recent but fast-growing addition to the repertoire of children's literature. Sometimes there may be linking passages with no named speaker, sometimes one voice among many is central and dominant, as Gemma's was in *Junk*, and sometimes there is only one speaker throughout, making the novel a kind of fictional autobiography. But the essential pattern is the same: numerous 'chapters' of terse verse from single characters – unrhymed, colloquial, dramatic, and rarely more than two pages long.

A passing fashion?

As yet British writers have not been noticeably interested in verse novels, but that is sure to change. In America and Australia verse novels are proliferating, and they are starting to be published here. Several will soon be available at a bookshop near you. They may prove to be a passing fashion, or may represent a major step forward in the genres of children's literature, a way of bringing verse back into mainstream storytelling for older readers, opening up a new kind of realism and a new immediacy, as well as marking out some common ground where poetry, fiction and drama can meet. So far the signals are mixed. The verse

novels currently appearing here, and those already widely known and sometimes garlanded with prizes in America and Australia, range from outstanding excellence to rubbish. The works of the American writer Karen Hesse, who probably did more than anyone to create the genre, are the product of an extraordinary poetic imagination, acts of historical empathy based in careful research and moral commitment, so profound and enriching that even those on themes and events remote in time and place from the concerns of British teenagers deserve to be read here, because these faraway experiences touch the affairs of all humanity.

But not all writers are of Karen Hesse's stature, and the temptations she presents to lesser authors are all too obvious. Verse novels are very short. They cover a lot of pages with very few words. If you want to write a full-length children's book in a hurry, and do not mind letting 'everyday speech' excuse banal and lazy language, then you can produce a 'verse novel' without much toil, tears and sweat. If you are seeking an excuse for self-indulgent autobiography, your very own equivalent of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the verse novel may present a quick and facile way to a teenage reader's sympathies. And if your taste is not only for self-therapy but for doing your readers good, the verse novel is a ready-made vehicle for conveying medicinal literature. Things could go either way. So let us begin with the best.

Historical fiction

Newly out in Britain is Karen Hesse's *Aleutian Sparrow*. Like Hesse's previous verse novels, *Aleutian Sparrow* is essentially historical fiction.

It is hard to imagine anything less instantly engaging for a British teenage reader than a story in the form of miniature narrative poems about the experiences of native islanders in the

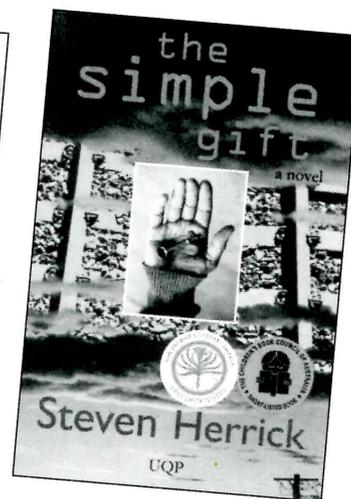
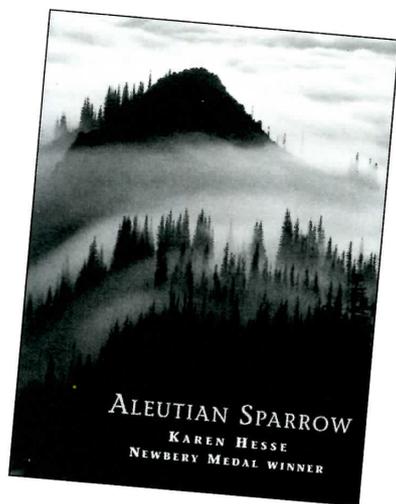
north Pacific during the Second World War. Most people would need an atlas to find where the Aleutians are; I certainly did. Seen on the map, their strategic position is plain. Strung out across the ocean between Russia and Alaska, not far north of Japan, they were an obvious confrontation zone. So the islanders, American citizens, were forcibly evacuated to Alaska for the duration of the war.

The Aleutian islanders were clearly treated with extreme insensitivity and neglect by the American authorities in Alaska, and in their absence their beloved islands were looted, vandalised and degraded by the occupying American troops. The islands' culture was unique, a combination of Christian observance drawn from earlier Russian influences, and their Spartan, sea-dependent life in a barren, treeless, unspoilt wilderness. From this they were transplanted to a forested encampment in Alaska, environmentally alien to their lifestyle. Deprived of proper medical support and other essential aid, they suffered and some died.

Karen Hesse tells the story of the islanders' war through the voice of Vera, a teenager, the child of a mixed marriage between her native Aleutian mother and a white American. Told in an impressive tone of calm and stoical indignation, Vera's verse-narrative is the story of the islanders' uprooting, maltreatment and eventual return. The miniature verse-episodes are very varied, and the book is a love story as well as a tale of communal misfortune. Hesse's humanitarian sympathies are expressed through Vera's experiences and judgements, as in the vivid details and elegiac cadences of this section, called 'The Spoils of War':

'Our fishing grounds and beaches
slick with oil,

Our berry pitches crushed under the
weight of Quonset huts, our churches
looted.



We cannot eat the war-poisoned clams and mussels; soldiers murdered our foxes and our sea lions.

Our very culture stolen or destroyed, not by the enemy, but by our own countrymen.'

Aleutian Sparrow speaks on behalf of all powerless native peoples the world over, whose traditional ways of life have been damaged or destroyed by war or the actions of uncaring governments. There are many counterparts of the Aleutians across the globe, and Hesse's humane political insights probably counted as much as her literary gifts in bringing *Aleutian Sparrow* to British children.

If so, then readers here should also have the chance to read her earlier verse novels, *Out of the Dust* (which won the Newbery Medal) and *Witness*, even though their subjects may appear more localised in American history. *Out of the Dust*, narrated like *Aleutian Sparrow* by a single 14-year-old girl protagonist, is the story of the Oklahoma dustbowl during the Depression years of the 1930s, and *Witness*, told through many voices from an imaginary small community, is the story of attempts by the Ku Klux Klan to implant its vicious racial persecution into civilized Vermont in 1924. *Witness*, probably the finest of all Hesse's books to date, is a topical warning that no place is immune to the politics of hatred when the times are dangerously right for it.

Hesse's books are documentary historical novels in verse, fully researched and imagined, beautifully written, and relevant everywhere.

Interweaving the elements

No one else yet equals Hesse, but other good work is appearing. Sharon Creech, a Carnegie Medal winner, is really an Anglo-American writer, and her *Love That Dog* was a kind of verse novel for the very young. For older readers she has now written *Heartbeat*. Annie, aged about 12, tells her own verse story of life

with her pregnant mother, affectionate father, loved and fading grandfather, and friend Max. Although family life, with its cycle of imminent birth and death, gives overall structure to the story, at its centre is Annie's love of art and above all of running.

Heartbeat is a hymn of praise to the joy of running. Annie and Max run barefoot for sheer pleasure. But pleasure for Max is mixed with ambition. He sees competitive running as his passport out of restricted small-town America, whereas Annie resists all efforts to lure her into team athletics. She runs simply in order to run. And that is the book's 'message', a wise one if sometimes over-explicit: do things not with ulterior purposes, but for their own intrinsic sake. It would be misreading *Heartbeat* to see it as a politically correct tirade against team sport; it is much more positive than that, and admirably done. And it exemplifies the capacity of verse novels to trace and interweave the varied elements of growing up, discovering and sorting out your expanding life.

Steven Herrick's Australian verse novel *The Simple Gift* is another book in this category, but the comparison does it no favours. Told mainly through three voices, it is the story of 16-year-old Billy's escape to freedom from his drunken, violent father. Taking to the road and the hobo life, he fetches up in deserted railway carriages outside a small Australian town. Here he befriends Old Bill, the beer-swilling drop-out in a neighbouring carriage, and attractive Caitlin, who works in McDonalds.

The Simple Gift is not so much drop-out as cop-out. Chance and accident make Billy a Club Class hobo. Old Bill the human wreck just happens to have his own house and an investment income, while Caitlin just happens to have a rich father (whose generosity and hopes for her she unappealingly belittles). This is a fairy story masquerading as teenage

realism, and its lifeless, prosy apology for verse betrays its falsity and thinness. If verse novels become too fashionable, we risk many more turgid imaginings such as this one.

If things go really badly, though, this promising new form will fall hostage to outright bibliotherapy. Some recent American verse novels might well carry their own version of a familiar warning. 'If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this poem, then please call Poetry Doc. Restore your emotional balance with bedtime reading!' In America, and no doubt soon in Britain, you can find a verse story about discovering you are gay, a verse story about anorexia nervosa, a verse story about child sexual abuse (inflicted, as so often in life, by another child). This last is Ann Turner's memoir *Learning to Swim*, and the dangerous temptations inherent in this new genre are apparent in Turner's afterword about her book:

'By taking something so painful and transforming it into words, rhythm, and images, the experience changed inside. Memories took on a cadence, almost a loveliness, so that it became a gift instead of a tragedy.'

Tosh. Honestly exploring childhood ordeals is one thing. Glamourising them is quite another. Self-indulgence of this kind is a world away from Karen Hesse's intelligent and unselfish explorations. Verse novels provide rich opportunities for both. Fingers crossed. ■

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

The Books

Aleutian Sparrow, Karen Hesse, Simon & Schuster, 0 689 83776 3, £7.99 hbk

Out of the Dust, Karen Hesse, available via amazon.com

Witness, Karen Hesse, available via amazon.com

Love That Dog, Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 0 7475 5749 7, £4.99 pbk

Heartbeat, Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 0 7475 6902 9, £9.99 hbk

The Simple Gift, Steven Herrick, Egmont, 0 7022 3133 9, £4.99 pbk

Learning to Swim, Ann Turner, available via amazon.com

Authorgraph

No.146

JENNY NIMMO

interviewed by
Julia Eccleshare

Jenny Nimmo appears to be shy and retiring and her books are full of sympathetic and sensitive characters with strong internal narratives. How easily I'd short-circuited in my mind making Jenny match her creations. But, on visiting her at her home in Wales, I found someone quite different. Jenny is quiet but not shy. She's very direct and, above all, she's very funny. She has a wry, dry humour that enables her to see the amusing side of things. She's also full of passion, not to say rage, when necessary. She thinks nothing of telling you that she almost killed one of the visitors to the art course she and her husband David run every summer because she was such a fussy eater – Jenny's eyes flash dangerously. She came close, you know for sure.

Jenny and David live in a water mill converted by David's parents (with himself as reluctant labour during the school holidays) just across the border into Wales. Set down beside a stream, with the narrow-gauge railway that features in *Tatty Apple* running along at eye level on the opposite bank, it is a place of exceptional beauty and character. Jenny and David both work at home and everything about their lives revolves around the house. It – and their three children are the inspiration for most of Jenny's writing. The interweaving of Jenny's life with the place, the children and the writing is an important part of what she writes so it wasn't surprising that we began our conversation with the children. Now in their twenties, they are close in age. The younger boy had difficulties as both a dyslexic and a dispraxic and the girl is also dyslexic.

Like most parenting, none of it was easy, but Jenny manages – at least with hindsight – to be gently amused by the traumas. 'We got through Ianto's struggle with dyslexia and the lack of support for it by laughing,' she says. 'It was the only way.' But it's laughter tinged with sadness and rage at the misery that it caused both Ianto and Gwenhwyfar.

All of this provided a background for



Jenny Nimmo

Jenny's early stories, although even before the children were born she'd had her first book published. 'Any storytelling begins from within you,' Jenny says. 'I began with my own experiences. I'd been looking after a little boy who'd lost his mother. I was about 20 and he was about 12. He was very angry about not having a mother and I told him that I hadn't got a father.' Jenny doesn't need to explain. Although

apparently diffident, she has a natural empathy that touches people and it's easy to understand how a little boy came to trust and confide in her and how she came to write about his loneliness and loss.

Although Jenny felt that she was writing about the boy's experience, she was also writing about her own and the theme of isolation recurs in her books. Jenny's father died when she was five

and from then on she lived an unusually isolated life. After her father's death, her mother was very ill and Jenny was sent off to boarding school when she was only six. Here she wrote her very first book – and got a dramatic response to it: 'I loved writing. Even now I can feel my hand flying over the page. When I was about 10 I wrote the longest thing I'd ever done at school. It was about a man on a train whose wife was killed in a train crash and so, in revenge, he sets out to kill the driver. I'd got most of it from the thrillers that were in the school library but I think I was also setting down a trauma from my own childhood. I was living with my grandparents and I had a terrible nightmare in which my uncle was hurt in an accident. The very next day I heard that he'd been in a very bad train crash. Putting these two influences together, I wrote this story. The teacher was appalled. She threw my book at me and hit me on the head.' Jenny stills feels a sense of grievance that the school didn't see the obvious correlation between what they had allowed her to read and what she had written.

Jenny didn't let this incident put her off writing and, although she left school as soon as she could and went off to act, she was drawn back to writing through one of her first jobs as a producer for **Jackanory**. 'I loved working for **Jackanory** and especially for Anna Home.' It was Anna Home who read Jenny's first story and suggested that she take it to an agent and get it published. The book was **The Bronze Trumpeter**, written for the lonely boy she had been looking after.

But, it was when Jenny had her own children that her flow of writing began. 'When my children were small I kept trying to write *for* them. That's what the stories were meant to be. But, I found I was always writing *about* them. Now that phase is over, I'm writing for them as they were. My stories are getting younger and younger.' Recent titles for six to nines include **The Stone Mouse** which was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal and **The Owl Tree** which won a Smarties Prize. Most of Jenny's earlier books are for older readers but all of them owe a lot to Hellan Mill and the busy life that goes on there. Details of the setting, such as the narrow-gauge railway in **Tatty Apple**, the chickens in that and subsequent titles such as **The Night of the Unicorn** are always there. Perhaps of even more importance is the influence that came simply from living in Wales. Jenny had been introduced to **The Mabinogion** even before she began to live there but, once settled, it provided her with inspiration.

'When we first moved here, I got very excited by Wales. I loved the way the mythology fitted the countryside. I'd had the stories from **The Mabinogion** in my head for some time. They were bursting to get out. Gwythion is the greatest storyteller in the world and the stories themselves have magic and fantasy, larger than life characters and, of course, lots of death and destruction.' The gleam returns to Jenny's eye. She couldn't wait to weave these stories into her writing and **The Snow Spider** and its sequels **Emlyn's Moon** and **The Chestnut Soldier** were the result. '**The Snow Spider** took about a year to write but it was all there in my head. I loved writing it though initially I wasn't sure that children would like it – especially as Ianto drifted off when I was reading it aloud.'

Jenny's knowledge of **The Mabinogion** comes from an English translation as, although she can speak Welsh a bit, and with excellent pronunciation, she can't read it. Jenny's children, however, are bilingual and Welsh language, culture – and rugby – are very important in the family.

Wales and its mythology provide the background but the characters and what happened to them come from Jenny's own children. 'There was a lot of Gwen in **Emlyn's Moon**. As a dyslexic, she was crushed by school – a teacher even told her that she was an idiot. She had very low self-esteem and was socially isolated. The problems aren't stated in the book but they are there in the children's attitudes to things.'

The isolation and helplessness of childhood are recurring themes in Jenny's books as is the power of magic, not always on the scale that is found in **The Mabinogion** but enough of an outside force to provide crucial help. In **Griffin's Castle**, Dinah draws the stone animals from the walls of Cardiff Castle and uses them to shore up her uncertainty. 'I wanted to do someone who is bright but who still isn't in control.' And she used the same kind of child in **The Rinaldi Ring**. But though Jenny thought Dinah was an expression of Gwen, David believes that Dinah is Jenny and, rather ruefully, Jenny agrees.

Now that Jenny's children have all left home, she has moved back in time and is drawing on her own childhood. 'Much of what happens at Bloors comes from my memories of boarding school.' She recounts ghastly incidents such as being shut up in an outside classroom on her own in the dark and nights spent in a freezing classroom on a mattress as punishment for talking after lights out. The horrible details of life and the people there are still vivid

in Jenny's mind and she is weaving them into the 'Red King' titles. It's an ambitious series and Jenny, who usually has several story strands running through even the youngest of her books, loves the scope that the books collectively give her. 'Hopefully what I'm trying to do is put different perspectives in. I want to show the five children in their different ways. I'm exploring their lives as I do it. I'm particularly interested in Olivia. She's about to fail an audition.' Jenny speaks of her characters as though they and not she control what happens. That's how it feels, she says. 'A character does become real. It takes you in a direction that you didn't know was coming. But once they've led you that way, what happens next becomes inevitable.' She then describes a moment from when she was writing **The Snow Spider**. 'When Eirlys grasped Gwyn's hand it was a real shock. It came as a good surprise.'

Maybe it's because of surprises from her characters that Jenny is always propelled into writing something new. With each book, she offers something fresh and surprising. There's an excitement and originality about her writing in both the words she uses and the stories she tells that make her books a constant delight. And there's an integrity about children and childhood which she sums up simply as: 'I just couldn't write without the children.' ■

Julia Eccleshare is the Children's Books Editor of *The Guardian*

The Books

(published by Egmont Books unless otherwise stated)

'Children of the Red King' titles:

1 **Midnight for Charlie Bone**, 1 4052 0410 9, £10.99 hbk, 0 7497 4888 5, £4.99 pbk

2 **The Time Twister**, 1 4052 0125 8, £10.99 hbk, 1 4052 1134 2, £5.99 pbk

3 **The Blue Boa**, 1 4052 0126 6, £10.99 hbk

Griffin's Castle, 0 7497 4887 7, £4.99 pbk

The Night of the Unicorn, Walker, 0 7445 9072 8, £7.99 hbk, 1 84428 631 2, £4.99 pbk

The Owl Tree, Walker, 0 7445 5400 4, £3.99 pbk

The Rinaldi Ring, Collins Educational, 0 00 713438 X, £3.99 hbk, Egmont, 0 7497 2819 1, £4.99 pbk

The Snow Spider Trilogy:

1 **The Snow Spider**, 1 4052 1138 5, £4.99 pbk

2 **Emlyn's Moon**, 1 4052 1139 3, £4.99 pbk

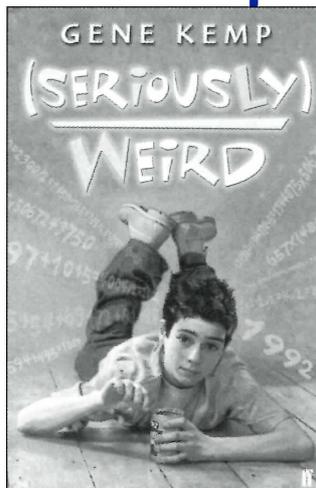
3 **The Chestnut Soldier**, 1 4052 1140 7, £4.99 pbk

The Stone Mouse, Walker, 1 84428 632 0, £4.99 pbk

Tatty Apple, 0 7497 0400 1, £3.99 pbk

BfK PROFILE

Philippa Milnes-Smith in conversation with Carnegie Medal winner, **GENE KEMP**



PM-S: *Autism and Asperger Syndrome are in the news at the moment. Is this why you decided to write your latest novel, **Seriously Weird**, about a girl whose brother has Asperger's?*

GK: The writing of **Seriously Weird** went like this:

Down in Plymouth I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen for ages and he was in a helluva state because his son had just been diagnosed as having Asperger Syndrome. He felt he didn't know how to cope or what would become of his boy, who's aged ten.

'You and your husband used to tell us about Troy (not real name) and the things he did. He must have had Asperger's.'

'Yes,' I answered. 'Though in those days we had no idea what it was and we received no help from anybody, only criticism.'

We fell to reminiscing and comparing notes of our similar experiences. My daughter, Troy's sister, now joined us and added her anecdotes. Soon our friend relaxed and after a while actually began to laugh.

'I must go,' he said at last, 'but you've helped me so much. I think I can manage now. Troy is OK these days now he's older, isn't he?'

'Yes, he's fine. Happier than most of the people I know. Calm and amiable. We're a cottage industry and he edits, prints and writes. Don't worry. Your lad will be all right. Best of luck.'

He thanked us. 'Write a story about Troy,' he said, 'and I'd like to read it.'

So I did. After all, if it made someone laugh it could be good.

But first, I had to ask my son if he agreed, or would he find it too embarrassing. But he didn't mind at all. 'I tell you what,' he said. 'I'll help you. Especially with the Maths. You won't be able to manage that.' After all, he'd already contributed towards some of my books especially **Jason Bodger**, **Bluebeard's Castle** and

some stories in **Roundabout** which had been broadcast on radio. Last of all, a title. Someone said to my middle granddaughter, 'You're seriously weird.' 'That's it,' I cried. 'That's my title.'

PM-S: *Do you want **Seriously Weird** to be thought of as an 'issues' book?*

GK: 'Issues' books do not make really good fiction. Characters, plot, description and dialogue make a book and what I most enjoy when writing are unusual people setting about their lives as best they can, and, most of all, I care for the inadequate, the rebels, the fearful, the bullies and the bullied, the deprived and the underdogs and the strange. The latter quality in Troy and the chaos he causes because of this strangeness is the theme of the book and this is what I want to bring home to the readers. But the real interest lies in his character.

PM-S: *Did your direct experience of raising a child with Asperger Syndrome influence your writing?*

GK: Raising a child with Asperger Syndrome has made me aware of the problems children face in coping with home and school and this has influenced me a great deal in my writing. Danny in **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler** is not at all bright and stutters badly. Rocket in **Charlie Lewis Plays For Time** is so intellectually challenged that my editor thought that there couldn't be children in a mainstream school like him and was surprised when I said that I'd taught several. **Seriously Weird** is just part of this pattern with difficulties caused through Asperger Syndrome.

PM-S: *What did you think of Mark Haddon's **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time** and its depiction of a boy with Asperger Syndrome?*

GK: It's a fine book that has done very well and has awoken people to the existence of people like the narrator which is an extremely good thing. The

character himself is very appealing and I can see why it's very popular. I didn't like the production much, especially the print, but that's a matter of taste. I probably shouldn't say this but I found it rather contrived and unreal and I didn't like the pitchfork in the dog. However, I should like to commend such an original and progressive book.

PM-S: ***Seriously Weird** looks in at an autistic child from the outside; Mark Haddon's book looks out at the world from inside an autistic child's point of view. Why did you choose your particular narrative approach?*

GK: In several of my other books, especially 'The Cricklepit' books, I have written from the inside out, but this time I did not wish to do so because I did find Troy's reactions to life very different from mine and I wasn't sure that I could do it with the same conviction that I had with Tyke, for instance. His thought patterns and motivations were so unlike mine which was fascinating for me but I decided to use the middle daughter, Claire, as my narrator as she was so squashed down by her beautiful, clever, elder sister and the dreadful Troy. She's the child most helpful to her parents, but gets very little appreciation for it and finds her role so trying that she invents a doppelganger, Clarry, whom she talks to in the mirror. A reader who grew up with a schizophrenic brother found Claire's viewpoint very appealing because she could identify with it and all those whose own needs are neglected looking after the strange ones. ■

Gene Kemp won the Carnegie Medal and the Other Award in 1977 for **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler** (Puffin, 0 14 031135 1, £3.99 pbk). **Seriously Weird** is published by Faber (0 571 21824 5, £5.99 pbk).

Philippa Milnes-Smith is a literary agent.

See also reviews of **Looking After Louis** (p23) and **Al Capone Does My Shirts** (p27).

NEWS

Diversity in publishing?

In **Full Colour** is a survey undertaken by the Arts Council in conjunction with the **Bookseller** on cultural diversity in the publishing industry. It concludes that if publishers fail to employ a more culturally diverse workforce, they risk losing out on the spending power (£32bn) of Britain's ethnic communities.

Tops in libraries

Jacqueline Wilson has overtaken Catherine Cookson as the UK's most popular author in public libraries according to Public Lending Right.

'A near-miraculous triumph'

'A near-miraculous triumph' is how Archbishop Rowan Williams described the stage version of Philip Pullman's anti-Christian polemic, 'His Dark Materials' in an article in the **Guardian** (10.03.04). Williams explains that he read the books and the play as a 'sort of thought experiment'.

More Potter?

J K Rowling has hinted (during an internet web chat for World Book Day) that she may write a seventh Harry Potter book. 'Probably not. But I'll never say never' were her actual words.

William Mayne

William Mayne, winner of the Carnegie Medal in 1958 and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize in 1993, has pleaded guilty to 11 indecent assaults on young girl fans in the 1960s.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Words About Pictures

Dear Editor

The reasons I had wanted very much to participate in the Words About Pictures workshop, and found that the day more than fulfilled its promises are:

* to support Quentin Blake's ambitious and necessary project of the Quentin Blake Gallery of Illustration, which will promote just that kind of stimulating exchanges, conferences and workshops, cross-fertilising relevant experiences.

* Because I have welcomed the 'debate' aired by Rosemary Stones and Quentin Blake about picture book awards in these very columns of **BfK** – and this workshop was a perfect answer.

* Because I knew the programme of the day was devised in such a balanced way to include the intellectual viewpoint of an eminent critic (Joanna Carey), the empirical hands-on app-

roach from expert practitioners, publishers (Walker), and the life account from frontline illustrators: Emma Chichester Clark, Sara Fanelli, not to mention the master himself, Quentin Blake, who is both the exemplary emblematic illustrator and the lucid analyst.

* And it would be also a lively mix of theory and practice, since we had a 'real time' exercise to graft hard on!

* And because I felt the day would be a stimulating model for that type of exercise to be developed in France, my country, where we desperately need more training, more knowledge about children's books – where picture books in particular are neither reviewed enough nor introduced in schools enough.

Christine Baker

Editor-in-Chief, Editions Gallimard, 5 Rue Sébastien-Bottin, 75341 Paris, France

PRIZES

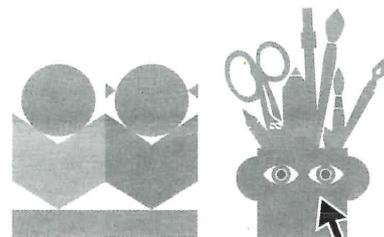
Harvey Darton Award 2003–2004

The Harvey Darton Award 'for a distinguished contribution to the history of English children's literature' has been awarded to Jane Cooper for **Mrs Molesworth: a biography** (Jane Cooper at Pratts Folly Press, Crowborough).

Bologna Ragazzi Award 2004

The Fiction Award went to **La Grande Question** by Wolf Erlbruch (Editions Etre); The Non-Fiction Award to **The Tree of Life** by

Peter Sis (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux) and the New Horizons Award to the Shabaviz Publishing Company (Iran).



British Book Trade Awards

David Fickling, publisher of **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**, won Editor of the Year while his company won the Stora Enso Design and Production Award for work by Heidi Lightfoot and Daniel Edwards on **Lyra's Oxford**. **Jacqueline Wilson** received the **Bookseller's** award for services to bookselling.

W H Smith People's Choice Book Awards

J K Rowling won the fiction award for **Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix**.

Publishers' Publicity Circle Awards

The **Bookseller** Award for Hardback Fiction went to Clare Hall-Craggs of Random House for **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**. The **Ottakar's** Award for a Children's Book went to Justin Somper of JustSo and Tamar Burman of Walker for **Eagle Strike**.

EVENTS

The Illustration Cupboard

Tony Ross and Friends

An exhibition of original book illustration artwork by Tony Ross (all work is for sale) will be held from 17–22 May at The Illustration Cupboard at Thomas Williams Fine Art, 22 Old Bond St, London W1. The exhibition is available for viewing on The

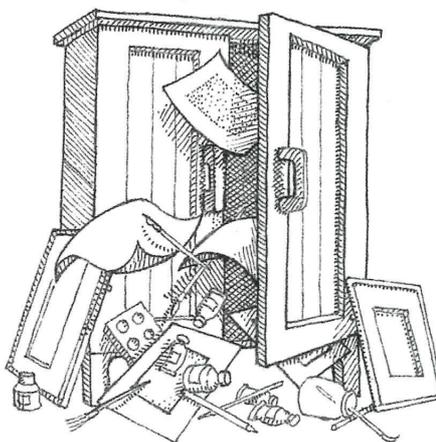
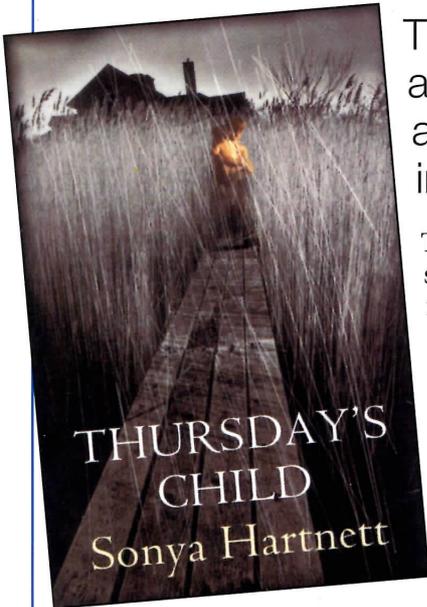


Illustration Cupboard website (www.illustrationcupboard.com) from 7 May. Further information from The Illustration Cupboard on 020 7610 5481, or illustrationcupboard@yahoo.com

BRIEFING • BRIEFING • BRIEFING • BRIEFING • BRIEFING • BRIEFING •

I wish I'd written...



Theresa Breslin on a book whose atmosphere seeps into your life...

This remarkable book seduced me with the very first sentence: 'Now I would like to tell you about my brother, Tin.' The voice is that of Harper Flute relating her childhood in rural Australia between the two World Wars when her father, a scarred survivor of WW1, brings his family to live on an almost

unsustainable parcel of land during the Great Depression. Tin, Harper's young brother, becomes obsessed with tunnelling beneath the earth.

The writing never falters. The book has an immensely powerful realisation of place, compelling characters, soul

tearing moments, and atmosphere that seeps into your life. Hartnett's plain way of recounting this story is underpinned by a composite mastery of the art of creative writing.

At the end of the book, as her brother Tin digs on, 'past the bones of cavemen and dragons', Harper Flute, now grown up and moved away from the family farm to live beside the ocean, tells us that she misses him. In her memory he is still a boy. Harper realises that she also misses the little girl who stayed behind, the child whom she once was.

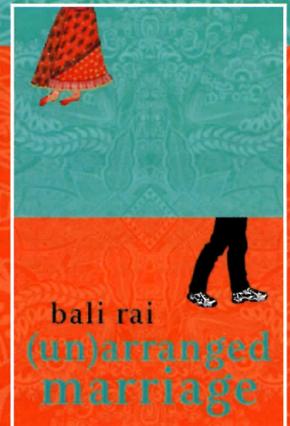
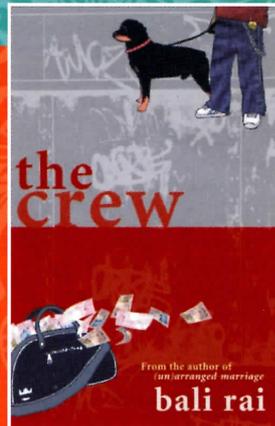
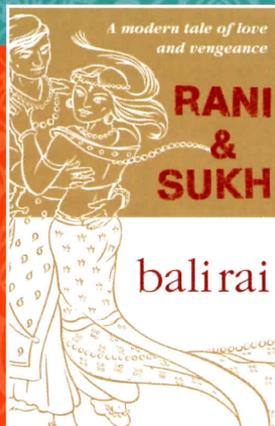
When I finished this book and put it down I experienced my own sense of loss. I picked it up to read again.



Thursday's Child by Sonya Hartnett is published by Walker Books (0 7445 5996 0, £4.99 pbk). Theresa Breslin's latest book is Saskia's Journey (Doubleday, 0 385 60482 3, £10.99 hbk).

bali rai

'Rai has ... an appealing subversive edge' *TES*



www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk

www.balirai.com

GOOD READS



Left to right: Jack Edwards, Katie Meadows and Laura Draycott.

Chosen by pupils from The William Allitt School, Swadlincote, Derbyshire.

Thanks to Lynn Webster, School Librarian.

Artemis Fowl

Eoin Colfer, Puffin, 0 14 131212 2, £5.99 pbk

Artemis Fowl is the first in a series written by Eoin Colfer. It is about a twelve-year-old criminal mastermind Artemis who is incredibly interested in fairies. The story starts when Artemis goes to visit a fairy with his manservant and best friend Butler. They manage to get the fairies' holy book – one problem is that it is written in Gnomish. However, when Artemis manages to translate it, he kidnaps a fairy captain – Holly Short of the LEP recon unit. Just as the book states, these are not the fairies of bedtime stories, they are armed and dangerous and so when Artemis thinks he's got them where he wants them, he could be very sadly mistaken with explosive results.

This book will get you reading as once you've started you won't be able to put it down and then you will want to read the next!

Other books in the series are *The Arctic Incident* and *The Eternity Code!* Jack Edwards, Year 9

The Suitcase Kid

Jacqueline Wilson, Corgi Yearling, 0 440 86311 2, £4.99 pbk

The book is about a 10-year-old girl called Andrea, Andy for short. Since her parents split up Andy has spent her life living between houses, one week at her Mum's and one at her Dad's. The only thing that she can rely on is her toy rabbit called Radish.

When Andy is at her Mum's house she has to live with her stepfather 'Bill the Baboon' (called this because he has thick black hair and a squashed up face, Andy also imagines that there are other similarities namely things that baboons are famous for) and his three kids, Katie a 10-year-old

baby, Paula who insists on playing her extremely loud music regardless of other people and Graham who tends to lock himself in his room. At her Dad's she has to live with his pregnant new wife Carrie (an anti junk food hippie) and her 5-year-old twins Zen and Crystal.

The book explores the way Andy is torn between both parents while all Andy wants is for things to go back to how they were. Andy's way of coping is to escape back to the house she once shared with her parents, where she is befriended by elderly neighbours who help Andy realise that she has to make the best of both families if she still wants to see both of her parents.

Katie Meadows, Year 7

The Lovely Bones

Alice Sebold, Macmillan, 0 330 48538 5, £7.99 pbk

Murdered and raped by a neighbourhood recluse, Susie Salmon dies a horrific death on December 6th, 1973. Brutally descriptive, *The Lovely Bones* could pull on even the toughest heart-strings, yet this compelling novel grasps you to read on as Susie watches her grief-stricken friends and family cope with their heartbreaking loss. As her parents become torn apart and her elder sister Lyndsey forgets her, Susie can do nothing but observe their everyday lives from her own special heaven. Even her old school friends seem to be forgetting her and living their own individual lives away from the torment they once suffered.

But there is one man who'll never forget her; the last man whose eyes she gazed into, as he lay on top of her – her murderer, Mr Harvey. Forced to watch him go about his life as though nothing ever happened, Susie seethes as he walks free despite her own father's suspicions. Will she ever see justice?

It is impossible to simply enjoy this book when Sebold writes with such beauty that you become transfixed on every single page.

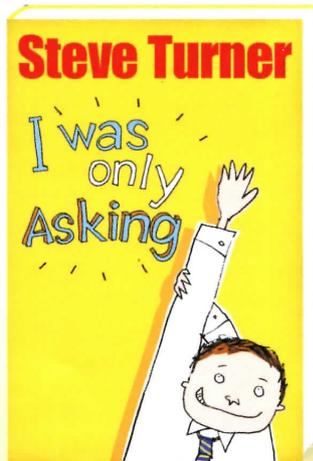
Laura Draycott, Year 10

New Poetry from Lion

Poems about life's big questions

'Steve Turner's funny, accessible poems are popular with children and those included in *I Was Only Asking* are guaranteed to hold their attention. He has a knack of encapsulating important truths in deceptively simple language.'

Times Educational Supplement

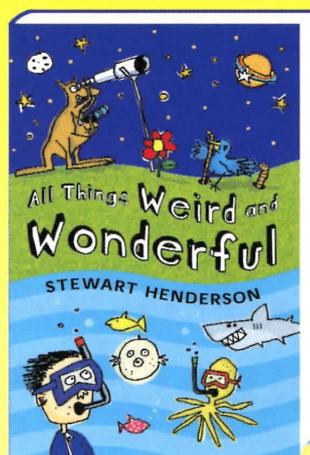


ISBN 0 7459 4821 9 £9.99 hbk

Poems of fun and wonder about the animal kingdom.

'There is a lot to admire about Henderson's relaxed composing style: the poetry emerges as easy-on-the-ear rhymes and reads smoothly... This tidily presented book... will be readily gobbled-up by the majority of eight to ten year-olds.'

Junior Education

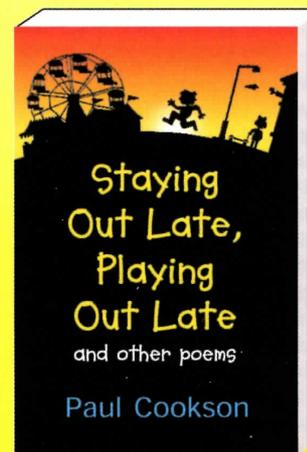


ISBN 0 7459 4678 X £9.99 hbk

Paul Cookson's sequel to Crazy Classrooms and Secret Staffrooms includes poems about everyday life, but not about school this time!

'A collection of poems with guaranteed kid-appeal.'

Publishing News

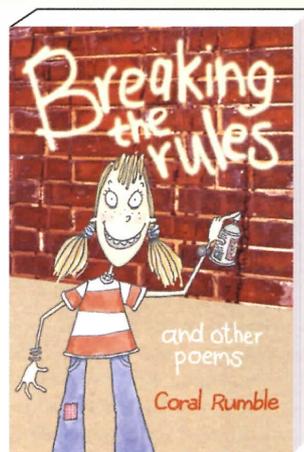


ISBN 0 7459 4812 X £3.99 pbk

And coming next month... Poems about being different.

A new poet in the Lion collection. 'Coral Rumble understands the world of childhood. Her poems are both entertaining and thought-provoking and she speaks with an authentic voice.'

John Foster



ISBN 0 7459 4857 X £4.99 pbk

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

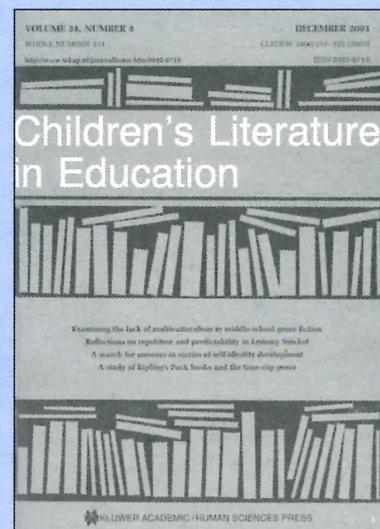
No.32 Children's Literature in Education

UK Editor: Geoff Fox, Aller Down Cottage, Coppice Lane, Sandford, Crediton EX17 4EG

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Children's Literature in Education (CLE) is an international, refereed journal that has

been publishing some of the best writing about children's books since 1970. It is wide-ranging in its approach to the subject and the words 'in education' chiefly indicate that the editors have always believed that it is unwise to ignore young readers them-selves when discussing their books. The journal appears quarterly and reaches a world-wide audience of teachers, academics, researchers, librarians, students and other enthusiasts. CLE is co-edited from the UK and from North America. It has published many very well-known authors (from Ted Hughes to Philip Pullman) and almost all the well-known critics in the field – but it is also very interested in submissions from first-time contributors. Unlike most academic journals, it actually pays its contributors, however modestly! Issues in 2003 have included articles on Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea Quintet, Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, John Ryan the creator of Captain Pugwash, *The Amber Spyglass*, and other titles ranging



from 'The Magic of Harry Potter' to 'Capitalist Bears and Socialist Modernisation: Chinese Children's Literature in the Post-Mao Period'. Eclectic or what?

Contributions to **BfK Briefing** (People, Events, Letters to the Editor) are always welcome.

Hal's Reading Diary

Hal is now three and a quarter and stories in which he has the starring role are in demand. His father, **Roger Mills**, explains.

In my last entry I was describing how Hal is now connecting increasingly with the narratives in stories and, as a result, he is nothing like as dependent on a book offering lots of pictures to maintain his interest. These days he sits and listens for the story. Indeed it seems pretty clear to me that the story has now become for him far and away the most important bit of a book.

In keeping with this he has recently started asking my wife Jo to tell him a story when they are driving in the car. Hal gives her a start by telling her who he wants to have in it, and also, the opening plot development. Almost without exception Hal's dramatis personae feature himself, his best friend from Nursery, Louis, and a figure of evil – a 'nasty giant' or sometimes a 'naughty pirate'. The plot starter is fairly predictable too. The forces of evil figure has abducted Louis (Hal always seems to exempt himself from this fate) and it is down to Hal to sort things out. Over to you Mummy.

Hal's scenario, of course implies the rest of the tale and Jo duly provides it with the forces of evil being overcome by plucky young Hal. In one way or another, the nasty giant or naughty pirate finds himself outmanoeuvred and then punished and told he must never do it again. The invariable final scene has a tired but happy Hal and Louis making their way home to tea and then bed. When Jo was telling me about these stories the impish part of my mind wondered about giving a narrative an unhappy ending – the giant locks Hal and Louis up in his castle for ever perhaps. But as soon as I imagined trying this out on Hal it was obvious that I would never dream of doing it. The pressure to make the story console your child, to convince him or her that bad will always be overcome is so huge. It feels as if you are dealing with your child's internal sense of safety.

Hal's infantile narrative isn't that different, in essence, from many of the narratives adults consume. How much fiction, how many movies feature the same basic plotline of good overcoming evil and making the world a safe and decent place. Just think of two recent blockbusters – **The Lord of the Rings** films and the Harry Potter books. The basic driving tension behind both sets of stories is good versus evil with good always winning out in the end. I suppose it is just possible that J K Rowling is preparing to shock the world by having Voldemort kill off Harry at the end of Book 7 but would her readers ever forgive her for it?

In one way it seems strange that these stories of wish fulfilment, which have so little to do with the way much of life actually happens, should be hungrily consumed by adults who in much of the rest of their lives can be rational and realistic. But maybe the answer lies in an existential point. If growing up is seen as, amongst other things, a struggle to feel safe, it would go a long way to explain why narratives of safety threatened but ultimately restored are so compelling. You might say that humans need two kinds of stories: ones that show us how things actually are, and ones that dramatise for us, and then resolve, the internal tensions in our psyches. Hal's little tales of good outdoing evil are, I would argue, a part of what makes life feel safe to him. And I don't imagine him becoming interested in the realist breed of fiction for many a long year.



Roger Mills is a Psychodynamic Counsellor.

BfK REVIEWS

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.

Jill Bennett is the author of *Learning to Read with Picture Books*. She was Early Years Coordinator and teacher at an infant school but is currently doing freelance and consultancy work.

David Bennett was Senior Teacher and Head of an English Faculty in Nottinghamshire. He now works as an English consultant and supply teacher.

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

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

Tania Earnshaw is Community Librarian - Early Years, Chatham Library, Kent.

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

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

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

Susan Goodsall is a freelance writer and website producer. She worked at the BBC for 12 years and spent four years producing children's websites.

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

Adrian Jackson is General Adviser - English, West Sussex.

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

Rudolf Loewenstein is a Dominican friar working in a London parish. He also teaches part time in a primary school.

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

Shereen Pandit is a writer and teacher.

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

Felix Pirani is Emeritus Professor of Rational Mechanics in the University of London.

Val Randall is Head of English and Literacy Co-ordinator at a Pupil Referral Unit in Blackburn, 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 Schlenker 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.

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REVIEWS Books About Children's Books

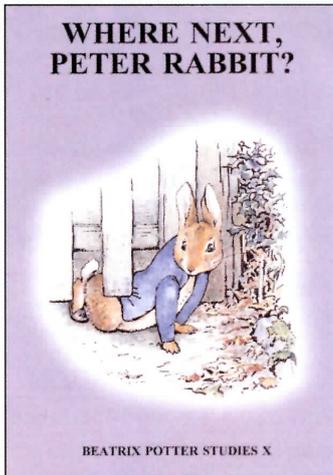
Where Next, Peter Rabbit? Beatrix Potter Studies X

★★★

Edited by Libby Joy and Judy Taylor, Beatrix Potter Society, 116pp, 1 869980 20 4, £10.50 pbk

Every two years the Beatrix Potter Society holds an international study conference, usually in the Lake District (this year though it will be in Scotland). A broad theme is chosen and although this may be rather loosely adhered to it suggests a general purpose both for the meeting and the subsequent publication of the conference papers in the 'Studies' series.

The present collection provides a good example of the latitude given to contributors, for very few of the papers speculate about what the future holds for Peter Rabbit and company. Probably the most directly relevant is Elizabeth Booth's account of Frederick Warne's plans for the already highly professional BP digital archive – a fascinating example of electronic indexing capabilities which holds out a prospect for everybody in the world soon to be



instantaneously able to 'research' almost any aspect of the author's life work and influence. Readers of BfK may also be attracted to the Society's developing scheme for reading 'the little books' in schools – a collaborative venture whose creative potential was described by three speakers (although one of them may give you the shivers with a display of what look horribly like keystage worksheets).

Much else in the volume gives evidence of the diversity of subjects that may fruitfully be studied in relation to Beatrix Potter's busy and productive life or to the way in which her writings have made their way in the world. A professor from Vermont (not completely au fait with the history of English children's book publishing) examines some of the 'hand-size' books that appeared in the early 1900s when Peter Rabbit first arrived. The chairman of The Copyrights Group Ltd proffers some authoritative facts about the merchandizing of Potterana. The author and gardener Peter Parker ingeniously combines a description of the plants and gardens that feature in 'the little books' with a knowledgeable account of BP's own enthusiasm for growing things. (A project for laying out a tennis-court was swiftly despatched in favour of potatoes.)

Two other elements in the 'Studies' may be particularly germane to points raised elsewhere in this number of BfK. The first is a set of short papers on translating Peter Rabbit into Russian, Lithuanian and Japanese, each of which brought out problems related both to linguistic usage (Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-Tail will appear to be boys in

Lithuanian) and cultural context (apparently the story of Peter Rabbit had to be somewhat modified to get him past the Bolshevik MacGregors). Indeed, given the divergences apparent here one can see scope for an international conference that would occupy itself entirely with the manifold issues raised by the translation of these children's stories.

The second topic – and for me the most absorbing essay in the book – was a commentary by the book-designer Douglas Martin on the methods which he adopted in planning the posh new printing of 'the little books' that was launched in 2001. His close analysis of requirements relating to all aspects of design (except, alas, colour printing) was set out with admirable clarity and might well have been illuminating for the discussions on picture-book production that were the subject of the BfK Workshop Day.

BA

As President of the Beatrix Potter Society your reviewer must declare an interest – if only nominal – in the above publication. Readers interested in the Society and its activities should apply to Jenny Akester at 9 Broadfields, Harpenden, Herts. AL5 2HJ [beatricepotter@societysociety.tiscali.co.uk].

REVIEWS Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant

Traffic Jamboree

★★★

Sue Nicholson, ill. Christyan Fox, Campbell Books, 12pp, 0 333 96573 6, £9.99 novelty hbk

This is a feely counting book, starting at 10 and going down to 1. The illustrations are busy, silly cartoons that make the counting difficult. We start with 10 ridiculous horses in a coach eating sandwiches and cake, but we do get to feel, stroke and count their manes, and that's nice. Then we get a jumble of 9 monkeys, and their sticky bananas – yuck! The feelies are irresistible: squashy balloons, fur, mirrors, glitters, net, and texture. It's a robust book that will take lots of feeling, and encourage lots of traffic and animal noise. And tactile counting. SE

Shape Up Goz

★

Steve Weatherill, Frances Lincoln, 16pp, 1 84507 005 4, £9.99 novelty hbk

There are lots of Goz books, sweet lift-the-flap books about a gosling growing up and saying goodnight. But it's such a mistake to go worthy and educational and try to focus on shapes when you get it so wrong. Confusion and flaps come in pairs. You open two square flaps to see the horse in the rectangular door frame saying 'My special shape is a square'. But we're looking at an oblong door frame. There's a family of ants under a brick. No, Goz, that's a cuboid, not a rectangle. The third has bats living in a triangle. But, Goz, a roof is (often) a prism with two triangular faces. Eggs aren't oval. And ponds are rarely round. You can't deal with 3D

shapes by pretending they are 2D. Don't contrive the real world to fit the naming of shapes. The pictures of Goz are nice. SE

Bunny and Bee's Playful Day

★★

Sam Williams, Little Orchard, 32pp, 1 84362 034 0, £9.99 hbk

Bunny and Bee are tree-dwelling 'toddlers' clad in baby-gro type outfits suitably adapted to character. The two go out to play, no matter what the weather, doing the things small children enjoy, splashing in puddles, a game of hide and seek, singing and dancing, then return home to sleep.

Their activities are recounted in a short rhyming text printed in large, clear type intended for sharing with a young audience. However, its presentation also makes it suitable for young beginning readers. Gentle watercolour illustrations, given a soft focus through the use of pencil outlining and shading, portray the world in and around their home: a home filled with character co-ordinated items. All very cosy but do they *never* squabble? JB

SCOOP the Digger!

★★★

David Wojtowycz, Orchard, 32pp, 1 84121 486 8, £9.99 hbk

The fun begins with the endpapers in this book, where eye-catching tractors, fire engines, cement mixers and diggers are all personalised with a jolly smile. Bold, primary colours give a cheerful glow, whilst softer tones add to each page's texture. On the building site, Scoop the digger boasts he can do ANYTHING. The picture shows him flexing his

muscles, claiming all the other machines have easy jobs. Tipper the truck and Tumble the cement mixer let him try their jobs, as Scoop cries, 'I'll teach you a thing or two!' and 'Easy-peasy!' Then Tumble the cement mixer says Scoop can have a go at HIS job... Lots of fun! GB

Oww!

★★★★

Michael Rosen, ill. Jonathan Langley, Collins, 32pp, 0 00 712442 2, £9.99 hbk

Even if you have not come across Rosen's *Snore* (the book!), you will enjoy this new story about Piggy Piglet and his farmyard friends. Piggy P has a prickly problem when a thistle, entangled in his curly tail, causes distress. He calls for help to creatures slumbering nearby, and all try different ways to remove the thistle, but to no avail. They think Donkey might help, but decide not to ask him, as all he ever thinks of is eating. But when Donkey turns up ... YUM, YUM, problem solved! Rosen's use of rhythm and repetition and the cumulative story-style will ensure even the youngest reader can engage with the text. The illustrations are charming and full of fun, each animal expressively drawn, each intent upon the prickly task in hand. GB

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?

DUAL LANGUAGE ★★★

Bill Martin Jr, ill. Eric Carle, Mantra, 32pp, Turkish/English, 1 84444 127 X, £7.50 pbk

This well-known picture book is

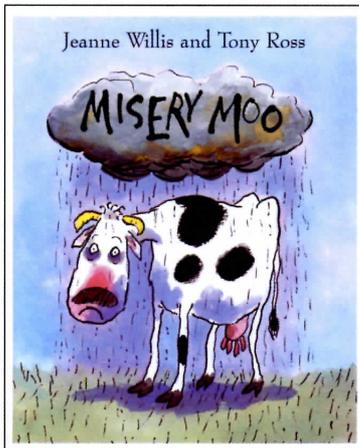
much used and enjoyed in infant classrooms. The rhythmic text and clear, large illustrations combine very effectively to encourage oral participation, prediction and recall. A dual text version of any popular title is obviously a welcome addition and this is no exception; the Turkish text is well spaced in relation to the English and clearly distinguished by using a slightly different and bolder font. However, I can't help feeling there's been a missed opportunity in this title to provide all readers with the words for colours in Turkish. An older group of children (or adults) might be drawn to analyse the 'other language' text to see if they can isolate the colour words, but for the intended audience, an accessible resource could have been provided by superimposing the words onto the rainbow of colours at the front and back of the book. (Available in 17 dual language editions.) UC

Misery Moo

★★★★★

Jeanne Willis, ill. Tony Ross, Andersen, 32pp, 0 84270 294 7, £9.99 hbk

The latest creation from this prolific and highly successful team features a lugubrious cow whose glass is always half empty, and his friend, an indefatigably chipper lamb whose optimistic nature is gradually undermined by Misery Moo's determination to see the downside of everything. Ross's drawings just seem to get better and better, his ability to describe complex emotions with a few swift strokes of the pen has few equals. When Willis describes Moo's eventual decision to produce '...the biggest, sunniest smile in the whole, wide, wonderful world', Ross gives us a wonderfully



contexts. One is in the nursery school, where it could be used by the teacher as a starting point for movement and drama round the theme of animal movements. The other is at home where the settling down, 'going to sleep' postures at the end of the book make it a good choice for parent and child to share at bedtime. MM

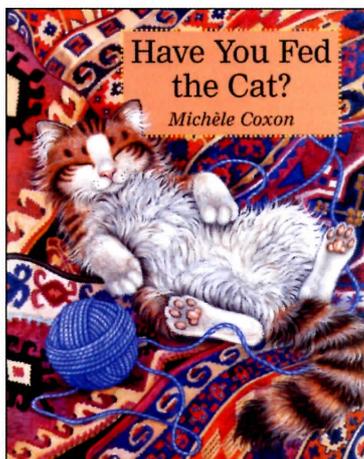
Have You Fed the Cat?

★★★★

Michèle Coxon, *Happy Cat*, 32pp, 1 903285 49 6, £9.99 hbk

Anyone who lives with a cat will recognise this repetitive feeding syndrome involving Sam, a gingery and white tabby longhair, and his family. But what Sam really wants is attention and when he gets stuck in the cat-flap – a result of all that food – the family realises it is time he got more exercise.

Each opening contains a full page picture opposite a page of text which also has a vignette providing an aside to the text and main picture, such as Sam's raids on various food sources. Evidently the problem isn't only to do with his family's



pained grin that is all teeth and not supported by the rather anguished eyes. These little laugh-aloud moments are liberally distributed throughout the book, Moo's disconsolate body shape as he sits almost dripping from the branch of a tree and lamb's increasingly desperate grin as he tries to cheer the old girl up. The portrayal of the effect of gravity on Moo's udders as she tries a headstand will surely have the effect of reducing children to tears, as it did this reader. Another winner. MS

Can You Cuddle Like a Koala?

INFORMATION PICTURE BOOK ★★

John Butler, *Orchard*, 32pp, 1 84362 186 X, £10.99 hbk

Young children will find this book about 'animal actions' reassuring rather than an invitation to think and question. The illustrations are appealing but show us soft and comfortable images of wild animals playing down their more dangerous characteristics. Nevertheless, the book would be useful in two

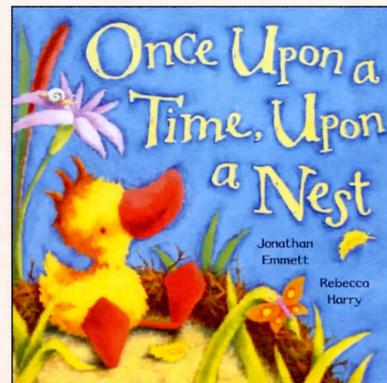
NEW Talent

Once Upon a Time, Upon a Nest

★★★★

Jonathan Emmett, ill. Rebecca Harry, *Macmillan*, 32pp, 1 405 00913 6, £9.99 hbk

Painterly texture expressively applied ensures that every spread in this engaging picture book is full of movement and life and every slight curve of a beak or inclination of a neck convey the emotions of Father and Mother Duck as they worry about Ruby, the last hatched and smallest of their brood. While her siblings, Rufus, Rory, Rosie and Rebecca, forge independently ahead, Ruby lags behind... Will she



ever do it? 'In her own time,' Mother Duck reiterates patiently. But when Ruby eventually spreads her wings and flies off into a glorious sunset it is Father Duck who reassures Mother Duck that she will come back 'in her own time'. Harry's debut picture book artwork is an assured and confident interpretation of Emmett's warmly sensitive text. RS

unregulated food offerings. Coxon's paintings are detailed and have a photographic intensity. Sam looks so realistic as he gazes out that you almost expect him to meow. Backgrounds are richly patterned in many instances and gorgeously textured fabrics almost invite touch. Humans are shown as hands and feet, arms and legs: the focus is on Sam.

A delight for cat admirers which will also be enjoyed by others! VC

Caribbean Animals

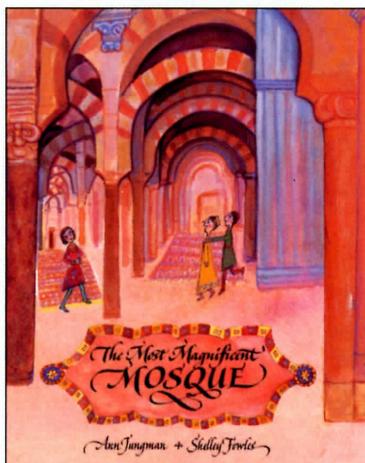
NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Dawne Allette, ill. Alan Baker, *Tamarind*, 32pp, 1 870516 67 2, £4.99 pbk

Nobody does fur better than Alan Baker, and he gets plenty of chances here in this charming alphabetical

thesaurus of – er – Caribbean animals, from Agouti to Zandoli at a rate of one species per (un-numbered) page, each one being the subject of a wall-worthy painting from Baker. All are observed from his tree-house by a cheerful boy called Ned (rhymes with Zed, see) and a mouse who, during the unfolding of the scenario, builds his own tree-house. Many of the creatures will be familiar to British readers (bumble bee, rabbit, spider); others are more exotic – kiskadee, quail and x-ray fish (the alpha-zoologist's xylophone). The informative accuracy of Baker's pictures is reinforced by a zoological appendix containing further information about the stars of the show – and show it is – very pleasing and ideal for sharing. Just one minor quibble – N for Nanny Goat? TP

REVIEWS 5–8 Infant/Junior



The Most Magnificent Mosque

★★★★

Ann Jungman, ill. Shelley Fowles, *Frances Lincoln*, 32pp, 1 84507 012 7, £10.99 hbk

In a world whose political divisions are often described in religious

terms, and in which Islam is often portrayed as a source of antagonism to liberal values, it is good to have a picture book that recognises the common inheritance of the 'People of the Book' – Jews, Christians and Muslims – and that, implicitly at least, gives proper credit to Islam's record of religious toleration.

The book carries its message lightly. It is set in Cordoba at the end of the period of Moorish rule in Southern Spain in the thirteenth century. The mischief of three boys – one of each religion – in the gardens of the Great Mosque causes the Caliph to sentence them to work for three months with his gardeners. Years later, when the boys are men of substance in their respective communities and the city is in the hands of a Christian King who wishes to pull down the Mosque, they come together to ask for the building and its gardens to be preserved.

With a jaunty text and bright, lively illustrations that acknowledge Islamic and European art traditions, Jungman and Fowles celebrate our common humanity, the irreverence of childhood, and the beauty, joy and solace contained in all of the great

faiths. No, it's not the whole story; but it's a part that needs to be told, particularly to children, at this time of apparently deepening divisions. CB

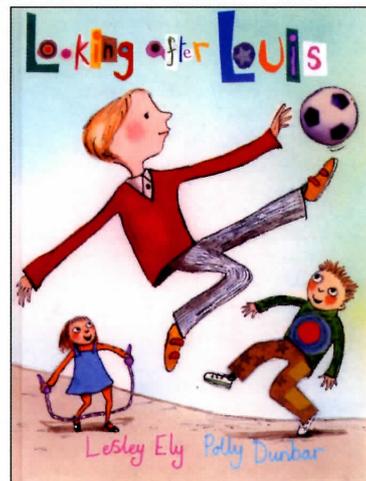
Looking After Louis

★★★★★

Lesley Ely, ill. Polly Dunbar, *Frances Lincoln*, 32pp, 1 84507 011 9, £10.99 hbk

Louis is 'not quite like' the other children. He often stares into space, and when he is spoken to, he repeats what has been said to him. Louis has an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, and the other children in his class work hard to understand him. When they are playing football, Louis likes to run about amongst the boys with his arms held high in the air. Sometimes this is irritating, but Sam twigs that Louis wants to join in, and he gears the game to Louis's abilities. The children learn that each person has different needs, needs that must be met in diverse ways, and they accept Louis as he is.

Individuality is central to this story. Each person is painted distinctively, showing us the importance of each individual, and the lively interaction



of the children emphasises this, as do strong colours and vivid faces. There is also the realisation that children themselves can identify the needs of their mates, sometimes better than even the most sensitive teacher. There is an endnote about autism, but this book should also be useful in any primary classroom where there is a child with less specific learning difficulties. ES

The Big Ugly Monster and the Little Stone Rabbit

★★★

Chris Wormell, Jonathan Cape, 32pp, 0 224 07003 7, £10.99 hbk

The Big Ugly Monster isn't ugly on the inside, he's just sad and lonely. All the creatures run away from him, the sun disappears when he goes sunbathing and pools of water dry up when he wants a paddle. He has no-one to talk to except the rocks. So he decides to build some friends out of stone, but not even the rock can withstand the full force of the monster's smile. They all shatter, except one, a little stone rabbit.

The Big Ugly Monster is happy to have the stone rabbit as his constant companion, something to which he can dance and sing and perform tricks, even though the rabbit never responds to him. The rabbit becomes the monster's lifelong, lifeless companion. Upon the death of the Big Ugly Monster many years later, the cool blue and brown desolate landscape which characteristically marks the Big Ugly Monster's habitat, changes. The creatures return. Flowers bloom. Trees and grass grow. The poor stone rabbit is almost hidden from view in this explosion of vibrant, warm colours, leaving new visitors to ponder how he got there. The contrast of these warm watercolours at this point makes the story even sadder.

As a picture book for young children I found this to be an unrelentingly sad and moving story but one which is ultimately rather depressing. The Big Ugly Monster's life and death are solitary. His passing is marked by the previously desolate landscape bursting into life; Nature celebrating the death of the Big Ugly Monster. No happy ending or beginning or middle, unless you are a Big Ugly Monster who is happy for the small mercy of having a rock for a friend. Plenty of shade but not much light which young readers of this story might be expecting. AK

The Princess Knight

★★★

Cornelia Funke, ill. Kerstin Meyer, trans. Anthea Bell, Chicken House, 32pp, 1 904442 01 3, £10.99 hbk

In the fairy tales of old, if a king organised a joust to decide a suitable partner for his daughter, she would be more than pleased to accept the outcome. Not so in this feminist rewrite. Princess Violetta abides by the terms of the joust but gains the right to decide her own fate by herself appearing as a mysterious black knight and, in time honoured style, defeating everyone. It's not an original idea. Older readers may remember *All the King's Horses*, a Michael Foreman picture book on a similar theme from 20 years ago. Foreman's princess was tall and muscled, wrestling her hapless suitors out of the ring. In contrast, Violetta is small but determined, crafty and agile. While Foreman's tale was all action and big gestures, Funke's tale is wry and affectionate, finding some sympathy even for foolish and arrogant males. Meyer's illustrations are pale and detailed, full of incidental humour, often

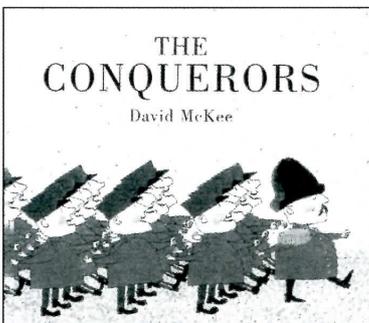
using the whole width of the double page in two or three narrow bands to create smaller narratives for the reader to discover within the story. The highest compliment that can be paid to Anthea Bell's translation from the German original is to say that if she hadn't received her credit on the title page, then no one would have known. CB

Angus Rides the Goods Train

★★★★

Alan Durant, ill. Chris Riddell, Picture Corgi, 32pp, 0 552 54889 8, £5.99 pbk

Riddell has few equals when it comes to draughtsmanship in the great British illustrative tradition. He stands alongside Rowlandson, Gilray, Cruickshank and Searle as a prolific and versatile graphic artist whose drawings are as comfortable in the context of political satire as they are in that of the children's book. Here the two genres are brazenly straddled in Durant's didactic allegory of the iniquities of the contemporary world order. Small boy Angus climbs aboard the clanking food train as it sets off on its exotic journey to deliver to 'somewhere important'. To Angus's dismay, the train rattles past the water-starved trees, the hungry and orphaned children and the caged animals. The train's destination is the dinner table of kings and despots. This book is a demonstration of the sheer virtuosity of Riddell's craft. Few other artists could describe the features of a desperate bear with such perfection, or drive a great iron steam engine onto a child's bedclothes so convincingly. MS



The Conquerors

★★★★★

David McKee, Andersen, 32pp, 1 84270 330 7, £10.99 hbk

The word 'timely' crops up a lot in the pre-publicity for this book, and there's no denying that its underlying message has a particularly strong resonance in these early years of the 21st century. McKee's conquerors are the army of a 'large country' that habitually invades smaller territories. 'It's for their own good,' the ruling General explains, 'So they can be like us.' A small country remains the only unconquered neighbour, so small that the General has never bothered with it. To the surprise of the army, the people of the small country quietly welcome the invaders and continue to get on with their lives. The soldiers, to the annoyance of their general, spend their time playing the locals' games, eating their delicious food and sharing their wonderful stories and games. As we turn the pages we become increasingly aware of who is conquering whom.

The author's sense of timing and pace make this a beautifully understated comment on a universal theme, easily avoiding the didactic, whilst effortlessly delivering the message. McKee's drawings are rooted in a tradition that flows through André Francois and Tomi Ungerer. It is a graphic style that eschews any semblance of technique in favour of a highly direct line that is 'coloured in' with pencil crayon in a child-like manner, allowing the white of the page to predominate. It is an approach that somehow perfectly underlines the seriousness of the message through its elegant simplicity. MS

And The Good Brown Earth

★★★

Kathy Henderson, Walker, 40pp, 0 7445 8141 9, £10.99 hbk

Whatever the season, whatever the weather, Nan and Charlie visit and tend their vegetable patch. Sometimes they dig and sometimes they sow. Well, mainly it's Nan who works, while Charlie is intermittently interested, being somewhat distracted by hosepipes and mud. Sometimes Charlie just lies in the long green grass and sings and all the while, the good brown earth gets on with what the good brown earth does best.

And The Good Brown Earth is a well-written story, containing characters with whom the reader can empathise, but it is let down by the over fussy illustrations. Much of the artwork lacks a focal point and is just too busy. Some double spreads seem to have been created with the intent of packing in as many different watercolour painting techniques as possible, including, amongst others, sponging, splattering and scratching but the more successful illustrations are the minimalist ones. A sparing approach to the use of busy illustrations (for example, when all Nan and Charlie's hard work literally comes to fruition) would have worked better. AK

The Generous Rabbit and other animal stories

0 7459 4697 6

Why Dogs Chase Cats... and other animal stories

0 7459 4696 8

Bob Hartman, ill. Brett Hudson, Lion, 64pp, £3.99 each pbk

★★★

These two collections of folk tales retold by Hartman are just the right length for reading aloud at the end of the school day – or maybe they could be bedtime stories, or perhaps stories that newly confident readers could read on their own. Both books contain eight stories from different parts of the world, with different animals each time. They are told with humour and in a straightforward style with pictures on most pages. Hartman includes a useful list of sources at the back of the books. More, please! RL

Strike!

★★★★

Rob Childs, ill. Martin Chatterton, Corgi Pups, 64pp, 0 552 55031 0, £3.99 pbk

Jake loves football and fishing, though he rarely catches any fish. His best friend Adam thinks fishing is cruel. Jake also hasn't been doing very well, playing football for Rangers in the team's Sunday league matches. He is determined, however, to prove himself, score a hat trick and win the match ball in the game against their arch rivals, Villa. Adam makes the stakes even higher by suggesting a deal with Jake – he'll help Jake to score his three goals but in return Jake will have to give up fishing!

There is the usual scenario of our hero's side going down 2-1 in the second half with seemingly no hope of the team winning or of Jake netting his hat trick. No prizes for guessing what happens in the end.

Young readers with an interest in football and/or fishing will enjoy this undemanding and simply illustrated book. Just one small niggle for me; the league table on page 20 contains details of matches won, lost and drawn and goals scored and conceded which do not add up correctly. AK

Now We Have a Baby

Ill. Jane Massey, 0 7459 4885 5

When Goodbye is For Ever

Ill. Sheila Moxley, 0 7459 4879 0

★★★★★

Lois Rock, Lion, 32pp, £4.99 each pbk

While love is a theme in both of these books, the subjects could not be more different, the first being about birth, and the second about death.

Now We Have a Baby is a warm, straightforward account of a new baby in a happy family. The soft-focus, chalk illustrations show us that the middle child is finding the newest member of the family a little hard going. But the text tells us that love helps the baby learn – to smile, to talk, to help, and to share – and that love is what makes a family. The gentle joy in the pictures adds much to the theme. An excellent choice for families coming to terms with a baby.



When Goodbye is For Ever explains different kinds of partings – short ones, long ones, some that mean new beginnings, and some that are very final indeed. The emotions involved are honestly and lyrically presented, and the illustrations in rich, restrained colours emphasise these emotions with naive simplicity. The ending, a specifically religious

one, gives hope for the future and promises that we, as well as those in heaven, 'are safe in the love of God'. A good choice for families with strong faith. ES

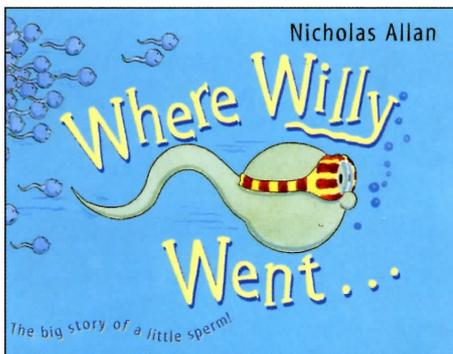
Where Willy Went...

INFORMATION STORY

★★★★★

Nicholas Allan, Hutchinson, 32pp, 0 09 189295 3, £9.99 hbk

Some readers will be startled when they open this original and explicit account of human fertilization presented with humour and wit. The story, told through excellent illustrations and a succinct but not banal text, will help answer young children's, often very detailed, questions about where they came from. We follow the journey of a sperm called Willy as he enters the Great Swimming Race to fertilise the egg inside Mrs Brown. The double spread showing the development of the fertilised egg from embryo to foetus, ending with a recognisable



baby form, would fascinate a young child. A lot of information, some of it quite subtle, is conveyed through image and word. The sheer generosity of nature in creating so many sperm, only one of which will fertilise the egg, is evident in a picture of a wonderful stream of individual sperm all rushing to their goal. The sheer poetry of the process comes alive! Human genetics is hinted at – baby Edna grows up to be

as bad at sums and as good at swimming as Willy. Above all, without tedious explanation, it shows everything in the context of a loving relationship. MM

Rocks and Minerals

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Caroline Bingham, Dorling Kindersley 'Eye Wonder', 48pp, 1 4053 0090 6, £5.99 hbk

This new addition to the DK 'Eye Wonder' series provides a splendidly comprehensive introduction to Rocks and Minerals covering rock formation, kinds of rock and the use we make of them. The dynamic nature of the changing landscape is revealed: 'rocks and forms are being destroyed as you read this book'. And over millions of years rocks can change their category from igneous to sedimentary to metamorphic. The

titles in information series can be formulaic and this makes it more difficult for the individual 'voice' and enthusiasm to come through. But here the written text that heads each double spread achieves a friendly and engaging tone.

An enormous amount of information is covered; each double spread is rich with annotated illustration – both photographs and diagrams. But the pages have been thoughtfully planned so that they are integrated and coherent. We have, for instance, a double spread devoted to Igneous rock with the different kinds on one page and on the other a large photograph of a striking example – the Giant's Causeway in Antrim. The sheer amount of information here would overwhelm most five-year-olds and they would need to share the book with an adult. Slightly older children will enjoy it at home or at school but will need the opportunity to talk about concepts such as 'weathering', 'erosion' and 'crystal formation'. MM

REVIEWS 8–10 Junior/Middle

Errand Lass

★★★

Theresa Tomlinson, ill. Anthony Lewis, Walker, 112pp, 0 7445 8321 7, £3.99 pbk

Tomlinson's Time Slip books bring her central characters and readers into contact with the workers of the industries of the 19th century. Here Maddy, teased and bullied at school because of her dyslexia, learns to stand up for herself when she is somehow transported back through time to spend a day working as an errand lass for the Buffer Girls – the women who shined the newly produced cutlery in the Sheffield steel works. Buffer Girls had a hard and dirty job and Tomlinson creates a strong sense of the clatter and turmoil of the factory floor, packing detail into her succinct description. She also captures the camaraderie of the Girls and the liberating nature of earning a wage.

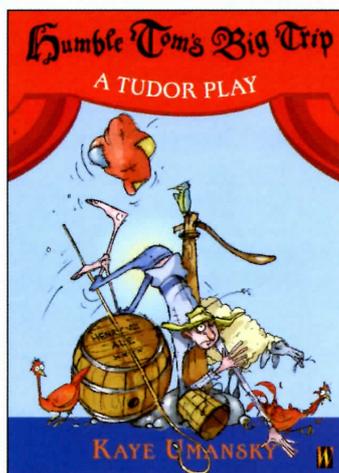
Back in the 21st century Maddy uses what she's learned to quiet the bullies, 'I'll sit where I want and I will not be called stupid or mad' and you can hear the Buffer Girls cheering. AR

The Legend of Spud Murphy

★★★

Eoin Colfer, ill. Tony Ross, Puffin, 96pp, 0 14 138016 0, £7.99 hbk

This story is great fun! Trying to get boys to read fiction is not always the easiest task in the world, but Colfer stands a good chance of managing it in his latest book. Girls too will appreciate Colfer's humour, which keeps the action going from start to finish. And with a truly fearsome librarian to encounter (does she really have a spud gun, and what does she do with all those rubber stamps?), readers are in for a most enjoyable romp. Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind reading it out as a class story... RL



Humble Tom's Big Trip: A Tudor play

Ill. Chris Mould, 0 7502 4123 3

Cruel Times: A Victorian play

Ill. Martin Ursell, 0 7502 4121 7

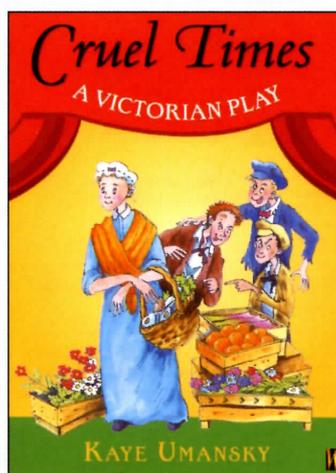
★★★★★

Kaye Umansky, Hodder, 48pp, £4.99 each pbk

These two plays are ideal for classes exploring historical and literacy topics in key stage 2.

Humble Tom's Big Trip is a comic play with a Tudor setting, suitable for class reading or performance. It explores the world of King Henry VIII prior to his meeting with the King of France at the Field of Cloth of Gold. Two narrators observe and comment on scenes with Henry and his courtiers as well as commoners such as Humble Tom, the shepherd boy who yearns to travel with the King to France. This entertainingly farcical play raises numerous issues concerning life in Tudor times, including the roles of men and women.

Cruel Times brings Victorian London and its people to life. Sissy is in her first job as a kitchen maid in a large household. Her mother desperately needs the money she



earns to support her younger siblings. Unfortunately, accident prone Sissy is threatened with the sack. With Sissy's brother feared killed in the war in the Crimea, there is a bleak outlook for Sissy and her family until a dramatic encounter with Charles Dickens brings a change in fortune.

Both of these illustrated plays have useful introductions, which outline the historical settings and provide ideas for staging, costume, props and make suggestions regarding the casting of parts.

Umansky is a writer with a wealth of experience as a teacher specialising in drama and with many plays to her credit. She is best known as the creator of Pongwiffy, the 'witch of dirty habits'. AK

The Head in the Sand: A Roman play

Ill. Ross Collins, 0 7502 4127 6

Bombs and Blackberries: A World War Two play

Ill. Philippe Dupasquier, 0 7502 4125 X

★★★★★

Julia Donaldson, Hodder, 48pp, £4.99 each pbk

The Head in the Sand is a clever play based on a true story about two Edwardian children who find a Roman bronze head, which they whitewash and sell for 5 shillings. The play opens in 1907 with a young Arthur Godbold discovering a bronze head of the Roman Emperor Claudius. As he tries to figure out how the head ended up in a Suffolk river, the dramatic story of the Roman invasion of Britain unfolds in front of his very own eyes. Emperor Claudius, British Queen Boudicca, ordinary Roman soldiers and British slave girls are all involved in this exciting play which takes us back to 43AD and forwards to 1965 when the actual head was indeed auctioned for £15,500 at Sotheby's.

Bombs and Blackberries opens as World War Two has been declared with the Chivers children being sent to the safety of the countryside. They are delighted to be brought back home as the Phoney War drags on. When the air-raid siren goes off to signal a real air raid, events take a dramatic and frightening turn. This touching play brings to life Manchester during the Second World War in a very accessible way for junior children.

These simply illustrated plays each take 45 minutes to perform either by a small group or whole class. Props and costumes can be kept to a minimum. There are useful suggestions at the back of each script about how to keep the productions as manageable and simple as possible. **Bombs and Blackberries** has three well-known and notated songs for the cast and audience to sing along to. Donaldson is a highly experienced children's dramatist, storywriter and songwriter as well as the author of the award winning picture book, **The Gruffalo**. AK

Lily Quench and the Dragon of Ashby

★★★

Natalie Jane Prior, ill. Janine Dawson, Puffin, 160pp, 0 14 131683 7, £3.99 pbk

Even before a dragon makes her first

appearance, the once happy town of Ashby is under a cloud. Good King Alwyn has been deposed by the evil Black Count, whose henchmen now rule with a rod of iron, forcing the entire population to work in the grim grommet factory. Lily, the last of a long line of dragon-slaying Quenches, is called upon to rid the town of the monster – can she drive out the human ones too?

The stage is set for a jolly, very satisfying adventure full of quests, self-discovery, baddies and heroes in disguise – not least amongst these Lily herself. After all, though she's mostly Quench she's also part gardening Cornstalk and bravery doesn't always come naturally to her. This is familiar territory but Lily is a feisty and appealing hero and this is a well told, very readable adventure.

AR

Greece

0 237 52444 9

Egypt

0 237 52447 3

★★

Shahrukh Husain, ill. Bee Willey, Evans 'Stories from Ancient Civilisations', 32pp, £10.99 each hbk

There is a well-intentioned feel to these books of myths with their introductions, glossaries and indexes; fact boxes mingle with the stories and on first sight we are intrigued and enticed. However, the retellings prove disappointingly scanty, and references difficult to follow up. The mix of fact box and story is confusing and distracting, and while a 'family tree' of the gods is a good idea, in *Egypt* the illustrations are inconsistent enough for it to be difficult to identify individuals quickly. There are also some inaccuracies in the text.

Willey's illustrations (mixed media

with a great deal of computer manipulation) retain something of her old naive style, but fail to convey the majesty and weight of the gods. The Greeks are over-romanticised: Zeus is more *roué* than chief god; his doe-eyed colleagues gaze vacantly while the 'hideous' Chimaera could be from *The Lion King*, giving the whole an air of fairy tale rather than conveying the essential power of myth. The Egyptians are appropriately stylised, but lack cohesion.

Trying to be all things to all purposes, these titles ultimately fail. *Rome* and *The Vikings* are also available. Use with care. AG

Mysteries & Marvels of Nature

NON-FICTION

★★★★

Elizabeth Dalby, ill. Candice Whatmore and Reuben Barrance, Usborne, 178pp, 0 7460 5298 7, £12.99 hbk

This colourful, fact-packed book is

sure to encourage children to find out more about the natural world. Although the book is described as 'internet-linked', it does not have to be used in conjunction with the Internet. It stands alone as a good reference book.

The stunning photographs on each page are immediately appealing, especially to boys. This age group may struggle with some of the text, but simple illustrations are used to help explain the concepts.

The recommended websites are linked via www.usborne-quicklinks.com but the site is not particularly child- or user-friendly. The links can only be accessed by searching for them using the page numbers of the book. This interactive resource may be useful for teachers and tutoring parents, but most of the suggested websites are not written or designed for children.

Usborne has sensibly included a guide to Internet safety, but it remains to be seen whether its website links are checked and updated on a regular basis. SG

REVIEWS 10–14 Middle/Secondary

Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet

★★

Michael Rosen, ill. Jane Ray, Walker, 80pp, 0 7445 8824 3, £12.99 hbk

This beautifully produced picture book presents Shakespeare's play in shortened form by mixing substantial snatches of the original with prose recount. In the main, Ray's illustrations do not attempt to respond to Shakespeare's vividly visual imagination but are more in the form of decoration and conventional pictures of the characters, although one or two are nicely intricate, such as the apothecary in his study surrounded by the elements of his work. It is strangely muted as a response to the text (the Queen Mab speech sounds an obvious invitation). In the text too, Rosen avoids creating a new voice, except in topping and tailing the telling where he more directly addresses the reader. His chosen role is to fill in the missing narrative and allow the text to speak for itself. But it is a curious hybrid where his contributions are mostly a slightly flat recount ('then... later... soon after... meanwhile... back at the house') with occasional shifts into something more engagingly colloquial: 'Meanwhile the news on the street... larking about'. The past tense undercuts the immediacy of the action and the flatness works against the bursts of emotion and the energy and liveliness of the characters themselves. It has a natural distance and coolness which is very much the style of this whole presentation, elegant as it all is. AJ

Kamo's Escape

★★★★

Daniel Pennac, trans. Sarah Adams, Walker, 112pp, 0 7445 8353 5, £4.99 pbk

It is good to see Pennac's distinctive novels available in the UK. *Eye of the Wolf* was published last year and while *Kamo's Escape* explores similar themes it will be accessible to

a wider readership.

Kamo is spending Summer with his best friend, the book's anonymous narrator, while his mother, half Greek, half Georgian, explores Eastern Europe for their 'roots'. The holiday is shockingly interrupted when an accident puts Kamo in a coma. While he hovers between life and death, Kamo begins his escape – a dream journey in which he breaks out of a Siberian labour camp to track across the frozen steppes. The journey is described only in hints – names and clues dropped by Kamo – yet it is vividly real, culminating in a gripping duel of stamina and will between man and wolf.

It comes as no surprise to discover that the journey mirrors his grandfather's life – and indeed that his grandfather was killed in an identical accident – but this is a mesmerising story, full of fascinating ideas and characters. AR

Other Echoes

★★★★

Adèle Geras, David Fickling, 144pp, 0 385 60688 5, £9.99 hbk

10-year-old Flora arrives in Borneo with her ex-pat parents, learning to adapt to a new culture. Seven years later, a bout of illness gives her a chance to reconsider events from that time only half-understood and half-forgotten, maturity giving her increased sympathy, distance a new perspective. Geras conveys well the difficulties of relating to 'a colonial community', and of being the new child – the need to fit in, the dares, the minor humiliations, and finally the triumph, the conquering of fear.

My readers, expecting another Troy, were disappointed – 'nothing happens!' – and certainly the resolution of the drama is tame, if poignant; a bit close to real life in its lack of true built-up tension. The introspection is well handled but Geras' style has grown looser, more assured, since this was first published in 1982. The jolly cover also indicates a younger age group than I'd suggest. AG

Agent Z Meets the Masked Crusader

0 09 971271 7, 160pp

Agent Z Goes Wild

0 09 940073 1, 176pp

★★★★

Mark Haddon, Red Fox, £3.99 each pbk

There are four titles in the 'Agent Z' series. They were first published 10 years ago and no doubt owe their sudden re-emergence to Haddon's Whitbread winning *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

The books are great fun, fast paced, highly imaginative and well worth promoting amongst upper junior boys. The humour is easy and laddish, the dialogue is at times very droll and Haddon has avoided simplistic character stereotyping. Lots of fantasy comic strip scenarios are relayed within the yarn, which are often little gems in themselves.

In book one Ben and his fellow members of the Crane Grove Crew decide to pep up the end of term with a few pranks in the name of Agent Z. They are a wily trio, bright mischievous boys who usually think/talk their way out of every predicament, but they get the willies (fleeting) when someone seems to be beating them at their own game.

Book two sees Ben, Jenks and Barney in the wilds of Wales, where they are meant to suffer an Outward Bound week. Naturally they live things up with their good humour, role-playing trips into their fertile imaginations and sheer naughtiness. What they haven't reckoned with is that yet again there's someone else on their case and that someone is better at living things up than they are! DB

Secret City

★★★★

Jan-Andrew Henderson, Oxford, 160pp, 0 19 271957 2, £4.99 pbk

Something evil lurks deep in the

ground under the ancient city streets of Edinburgh – something that will link the lives of Charlie Wilson, in the city for the Festival with his parents, and Peazle, orphan, pickpocket - and dead for 100 years.

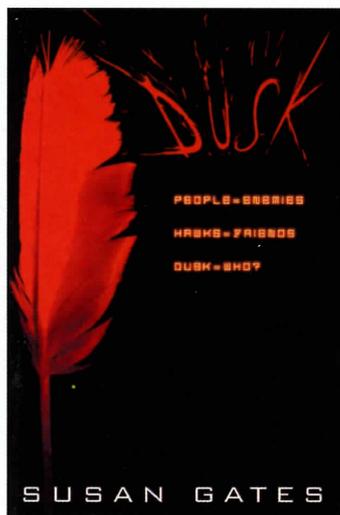
Fans of the supernatural won't find much to surprise them here – we've the story told in a diary, evil orcs, fairy princesses and even a magic sword – but they'll find lots to enjoy. Henderson weaves his different stories together skilfully using a genuine legend as the basis. Part of the pleasure of this kind of storytelling is knowing what will happen next – the treasure is bound to be cursed, there's obviously more to the strange young girl than meets the eye – but the author builds up the tension then springs some creepy surprises. An epilogue setting the scene for the sequel will no doubt please many young readers. AR

My Mum's from Planet Pluto

★★

Gwyneth Rees, Macmillan, 176pp, 0 330 42041 0, £8.99 pbk

The playful title of Rees's novel – and its equally playful cover design – may well prepare a reader for something rather different from what lies within its pages. Initially, it seems as if the plot will focus on the embarrassment to which, according to 12-year-old Daniel, he will be subjected when his mother becomes principal of his new secondary school. When, however, we are informed of her history of psychiatric illness and when that illness returns (she insists on abandoning her medication), we realise that Daniel's problems are more real and more painful than his worst imaginings. While Rees moves her readers towards the resolution of these problems with some skill and some humour, the final impression is of a novel lacking in overall consistency of tone or purpose. RD



Dusk

★★★★

Susan Gates, Puffin, 184pp, 0 14 131705 1, £4.99 pbk

Dusk is a product of a military medical research centre – human, but with the genetic coding of a hawk imprinted on her own. She is held, drugged in a laboratory, until she can be of some use to the authorities.

When the lab burns down Dusk escapes into an environment she knows nothing about and is befriended by Jay – himself a loner, torn between his anxious, overworked mother and his drunken father. Together they learn to communicate, to re-forged their identities and to trust each other.

There are dramatic, tightly-written scenes depicting the terrifying warfare between the rats who are liberated from the lab at the same time as Dusk and who battle for control of the territory which human beings have now abandoned – a clear allegory for a world laid waste by war and corruption.

Dusk is a warning – one which we can't afford to ignore and which will resonate strongly with able teenage readers, immersed in the threat of global terrorism. To what lengths do we go to defeat a potential enemy and how do we look to the consequences of our actions? Nearer home – Jay and Dusk are metaphors, perhaps, for that lost race of young people who have no stable home life and so are prey to whatever influence may seek them out. VR

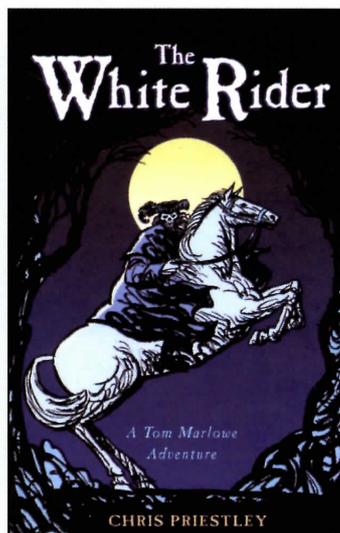
The White Rider

★★★★

Chris Priestley, Doubleday, 192pp, 0 385 60694 X, £10.99 hbk

15-year-old Tom Marlowe lives in the grimy city of London in 1716, where he helps in the family-run print shop. The streets of the capital are full of spies and buzzing with intrigue. Who are Jacobite rebels and who are loyal to the protestant crown? While Tom finds out some earth shattering revelations about his own family, there are even stranger happenings in the city, where a mysterious and seemingly supernatural highwayman haunts the roads. The White Rider is so fierce a robber, he apparently kills his victims simply by pointing at them.

Following on from their adventures in *Death and the Arrow*, Tom and his



mentor, the retired physician and seafarer, Dr Harker, try to unravel the mystery behind the highwayman's gruesome white mask. Tom is also desperate to find out more about the secrets of his own background.

This pacy historical novel, with some references to slavery and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, is full of dramatic twists and turns with one final surprise at the end. It would be ideal material for turning into a children's TV drama. The author has been a successful illustrator for many years and he has drawn the illustrations at the start of each chapter. AK

Freedom Flight

★★★

Bernard Ashley, Orchard Black Apple, 224pp, 1 84121 306 3, £4.99 pbk

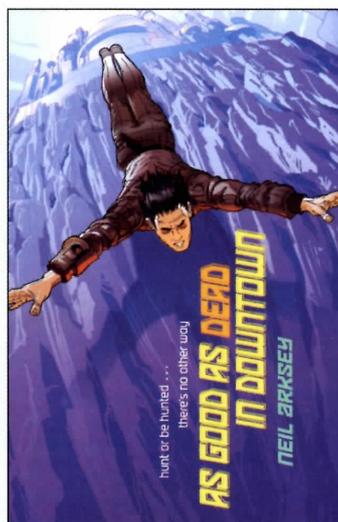
Teenager Tom Robinson Welton is described as living 'a wanting sort of life' – wanting, *inter alia*, to improve his literacy skills, to earn more of his father's respect and to develop his relationship with Emma Thorpe, daughter of the local big house. When, however, he rescues Danni, a Polish 'illegal' immigrant from the waves off his native Suffolk coast and decides to become involved in her past history, her present predicament and her future welfare, these particular goals acquire a new focus. Ashley's story reflects a young man's growth from negative self-doubt to a credible sense of self-worth, a growth in which a key role is to be played by a first 'real kiss, the deep kiss, the sexy kiss' bestowed on him by the dramatic new arrival in his life. Whither Emma now? It all amounts to a story strongly contemporary in its theme if at times rather traditional and predictable in its narrative techniques. RD

As Good as Dead in Dometown

★★★★

Neil Arksey, Puffin, 240pp, 0 14 131052 9, £4.99 pbk

Kai, Phoebe and Phoenix all share modified genes that enable them to swim for many minutes at a time underwater. In the future world of Nebula and Portobello this is particularly useful, as tsunami or storm waves and eventual flooding threaten the countries. Kai, though he knows he can survive underwater for longer than others, does not know his genes have been modified.



He lives as a hired assassin on the rough streets of Portobello.

Kai meets sister and brother Phoebe and Phoenix when he is hired by the Nebulose secret police to track them down; they have escaped from their protected compound in Nebula and come to Portobello to make a new life. While Phoenix dies in the ferocious whirlpool known as Medusa, Kai becomes friends with Phoebe and they plan an audacious escape from Portobello by riding on the rebound wave of the next storm wave.

As Good as Dead in Dometown is as breathtaking as the body surfing around which Kai plans his escape. Arksey has written a thriller that feels real, with the bustling Portobellan market, militia hunting Portobellan freedom fighters and a few key characters such as Kai's friend Clod and his father. The activities of the freedom fighters offer parallels to suicide bombers in the Middle East and sometimes feel too close to recent terrorist events. Phoenix's portrayal as more bloodthirsty than Phoebe originally believes is a neat contrast to Kai, the trained assassin who feels sick when he hears the Earth trembling and knows it signifies death. Some readers might like the relationship between Phoebe and Kai to be further developed but Arksey has kept tightly and gratifyingly to the confines of his thriller genre. OD

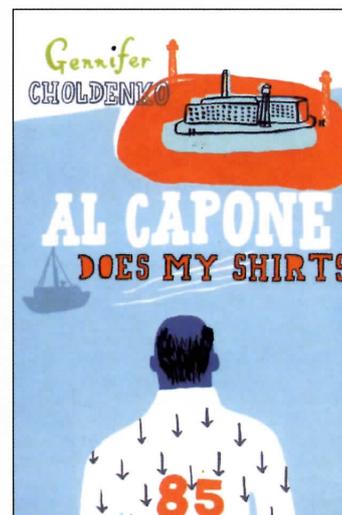
Al Capone Does My Shirts

★★★★

Gennifer Choldenko, Bloomsbury, 240pp, 0 7475 6898 7, £5.99 pbk

Moose and his family are new to Alcatraz Island where his father is a prison officer. It is 1935 and Al Capone is one of the inmates... Moose quickly discovers that the Island children's subculture is dominated by Piper, the Warden's daughter, who uses her position to cook up all sorts of schemes. Moose is concerned for the welfare of his sister Natalie, who suffers from what we now know as autism.

I commend this book for its sympathetic picture of a family struggling to accept and make the best of a difficult condition: the empathy of the other children towards both Moose and Natalie is a wonderfully unaffected model for the reader; not forced but simple and unselfconscious. Moose's mixed



feelings towards Natalie are well-depicted, as is his genuine amazement and joy as she begins to progress. His final scheme, involving Capone, successfully picks up on an earlier ploy of Piper's.

The author's note at the end of the book shows thorough research regarding the Alcatraz of the '30s, and explains her particular interest in autism. This incidentally introduces the young reader to academic referencing should they wish to find out more. A warm, affectionate introduction to an increasingly common condition, presented with humour and realism. AG

Ruby Tanya

★★★

Robert Swindells, Doubleday, 256pp, 0 385 41043 3, £10.99 hbk

If sledgehammers could write, they would surely produce a teenage novel very much like this one. Explosive, short-pitched, unsubtle and unrelenting, this is writing at its most urgent and sometimes at its most irritating too. Chapter after chapter ends with a wake-up call in its last sentence, just in case there's any chance of readers' interests slackening. Characters wear their hearts not so much on their sleeves but all over their bodies. Moral issues are simplified, and situations that are already menacing in real life are here made to seem even worse. The story concerns a village with an asylum seekers' camp on its outskirts. Ruby Tanya, the 12-year-old British heroine, has her best friend there. But her stupid, prejudiced father nearly does for them both when he becomes over-involved with some hard men of the extreme right. Reminiscent of Alan Gibbons' *Caught in the Crossfire*, this story makes an equally uncompromising stand against racism and to that extent should be welcomed, whatever its stylistic infelicities. NT

Last Train from Kammersdorf

★★★★

Leslie Wilson, Faber, 256pp, 0 571 21912 8, £9.99 hbk

Two days after a telegram arrives to say their policeman father has died 'fighting for the Fatherland', brothers Hanno and Wolfgang are drafted, against the wishes of their mother,

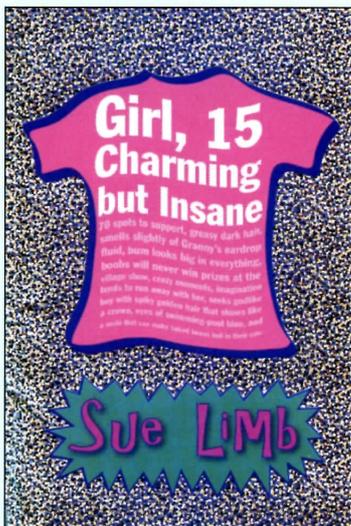
Editor's Choice

Girl, 15 Charming but Insane

★★★★★

Sue Limb, Bloomsbury, 288pp, 0 7475 7185 6, £5.99 pbk

Readers of *The Guardian* will remember how her hilarious column starring Dulcie Domum, wife, mother and romantic novelist, led to Sue Limb's career as the chronicler, in a number of tongue in cheek novels, of the contemporary female condition. In *Girl 15* Limb is on sparkling form. Her heroine Jess, concerned about the size of her breasts, makes her own bra inserts from small plastic bags filled with minestrone soup. Disaster looms following the party at which they burst from which she is rescued by her loyal friend Fred – but Jess's knees go weak for Ben. How do you assess a boy's worth? Amidst the slapstick Limb weaves such themes as friendship and rivalry, the importance or not of appearances



and so forth. Her characters, parents included, are recognisably real people made comically larger than life. Technically the novel is a delight with its cliffhanger chapter endings, incidents of nail biting tension and pacey humour. This is pink lit that girls (and boys with a copy in a plain wrapper) will love. RS

into the Home Guard. Eight pages into the novel, Wolfgang is cut down in a Russian assault and Hanno is forced to flee the marauding Russian advance. In a shack of a farmhouse he meets Effi, the blunt-mouthed, boyish daughter of a Communist. Initially wary of each other, the 'Hitler Youth' and the 'Berlin baggage' gradually forge a bond of friendship and trust as they join refugees fleeing the ruined Reich.

Bonded by bereavement, separated from friends and family, Effi and Hanno must face together the chaotic disorder of the disintegrating state. Travelling on foot, they miraculously escape death when an opportunist Russian aircraft bombs the refugee trail they have joined. Along the way, they meet dangerously unpredictable people, such as the psychotic Major Otto, a drunken deserter, and the deranged Dr Hungerland, a haunted figure involved in the Nazis' euthanasia programme.

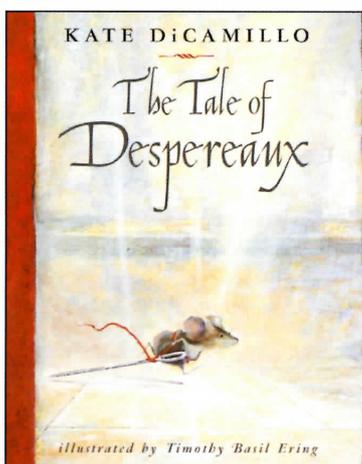
Last Train from Kummarsdorf does not sanitize the horrors of war or simplify the confused and conflicting feelings of a German population displaced and dehumanised by the actions of its leaders. Instead, its central subject is the remarkable resilience of youth, as embodied by Effi and Hanno, twin buds of bravery in a brutal world. NA

The Tale of Despereaux

★★★★★

Kate DiCamillo, ill. Timothy Basil Ering, Walker, 272pp, 0 7445 9869 9, £6.99 pbk

Where 'Reader, I married him' may feel as conclusive as Conclusions get, DiCamillo's frequent addresses to her Reader are very much part of a continuing narrative. Maybe this will give the flavour: 'Again, Reader, we must go backwards before we can go forwards. With that said, here begins a short history of the life and times of Miggery Sow...' DiCamillo's voice is at once confiding and decorous, for hers is a tale of love, of gallantry, and



of betrayal; except our hero is a mouse with big ears and unconventional attitudes and the Princess he adores is named Pea. So, for all the 'Book the Fourths' and chapter titles like 'Perfidy Unlimited' and 'to the dungeon', we are caught up in a wonderfully sustained mock-heroic adventure.

The dungeon in question is the domain of some splendidly wicked rats, notably Chiaroscuro and the magnificent Botticelli Remorso, as villainous as Russell Hoban's Manny Rat and as loquacious as E B White's Templeton. DiCamillo's rodents are constantly searching not only for a mouse supper, but for a Larger Truth. It would be a treachery to reveal the plot; suffice it to say that it is peopled by Princess Pea, a guitar-strumming King, a Cook boiling up an illicit soup (soup is Off, by royal decree), a melancholy jailer named Gregory, a council of ageing and timorous mice and a galumph of a serving girl, the aforementioned Miggery Sow. And, of course, Despereaux of the large ears.

Timothy Basil Ering's muted grey illustrations (decorations, if you will) marry with the tale – there are echoes of Steadman or Scarfe, without the savage edge. As with so many children's texts originating in the States, there's a sense that the design of the whole book has been

thought through with attention and pride. Walker Books, not unnaturally, are pleased to tell us that the author's recent *Because of Winn-Dixie* has sold 200,000 copies in hardback alone. *The Tale of Despereaux* might well do likewise. That intimate yet formal, witty narrative voice invites adult enjoyment too, and *Despereaux* would read aloud very well indeed, for all its generous length. It's different, and it's a delight. GF

The City of Ember

★★★★

Jeanne DuPrau, Doubleday, 288pp, 0 385 60687 7, £10.99 hbk

American author DuPrau evidently has 'a thrilling sequel' to *The City of Ember* in hand; and her transatlantic reviewers enthuse about her 'electric debut', 'full-blooded characters', 'the sheer thrill of the climax', 'breath-taking escapes' and 'harrowing journeys'. It's only fair to mention such judgements since although this makes for a good read it seemed to me somewhat short of electricity *et al.*

In fact, *Ember* itself is also short of electricity. Thanks to an intriguingly ambiguous introductory chapter, we know the city has been constructed by 'the Builders' as a haven to ensure the survival of the race. *Ember* is underground, lit day in, day out, by an increasingly erratic power supply. An eventual escape route for its citizens is programmed by the Builders to be revealed when, we infer, the surface will again be fit for human habitation. In this dystopian world, our heroine and hero, Lina and Doon, have never known blue skies or warming sun. The pair, released from a utilitarian schooling into a bleak workplace at the age of twelve, are determined to help their city. They are impatient with the decay, complacency and corruption they find around them. Their escape is certainly rapid and energetic, but the obstacles they face, physical and human, lack terror and menace. Somehow, in such stories, we need to believe the protagonists are in desperate danger – that they *might* fail, even when we know they won't. GF

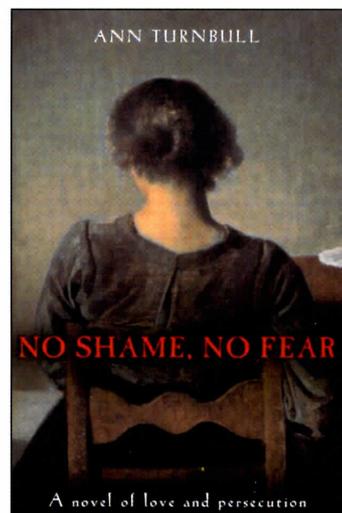
No Shame, No Fear

★★★★★

Ann Turnbull, Walker, 304pp, 0 7445 9090 6, £5.99 pbk

This gem of a book tells the story of love between two people, Will and Susanna, set against the persecution of the Quakers in 17th-century England. The unembellished but quietly passionate tone of the story perfectly realises the Quaker ideals of simplicity and truth and the privations which they endure with courage and dignity serve to engage reader sympathy in a powerful, understated way.

Thus Will's conversion to the Quaker faith becomes credible and the posturing of those in power is made to seem more foolish by contrast. Young love is explored with honesty – Will's impetuous desire to marry Susanna without thought for their future, blinded by the physical temptations and the need to sacrifice for his new cause – and Susanna's clear sight tempering this unseemly haste. Historical context is accurately and carefully used but it is the measured tone of the narrative



and its humble, quiet characters with their rock of religion which leave a lasting impression. VR

The Stowaway

★★★★

Karen Hesse, Simon & Schuster, 304pp, 0 689 86067 6, £4.99 pbk

Having scarpered from school, absented himself from his apprenticeship to 'The Butcher' and fled from his family, free spirit Nick Young stows himself aboard Capt. Cook's ship, *Endeavour*, bound for the Pacific. And here young Nick's adventures really begin. Written in the form of a journal, *The Stowaway* records his circumnavigation of the globe in this, the first of Cook's three voyages to chart waters and claim lands in the King's name.

In such an exceptional voyage, dramatic incidents abound. One of the most successful passages, perhaps, is the bit where, leagues from land, the ship grounds itself and takes on water. Here the journal entries are most sustained and the tension of the situation is fully exploited. Corkscrewed by coral, the sailors throw ballast overboard in a desperate attempt to lighten the vessel and so ease it off the snagging reef. But to no avail – the rising tide falls to free them. Eventually, however, and with *Apollo 13*-like ingenuity, a sail caulked with oakum is looped under the ship to plug the hole, enabling the *Endeavour* to limp into port for repairs.

Despite the immediacy of the journal form, the drama of what it is like, as an 11-year-old, to hang from the whistling rigging in perilously pitching seas is not, I feel, convincingly captured. Other potentially emotionally charged 'set-pieces', such as cat-o'-nine-tails floggings, the rituals of 'crossing the line' and confrontations with unbiddable locals are similarly under-developed, perhaps in a striving for journalistic verisimilitude. That said, with its useful map (Where is 'Batavia?'), glossary (What is 'fothering?') and Afterword (Did Nick Young really exist?) to finish, the novel may not have the symbolic resonance of a Conrad story or the elemental energy of a Turner painting, but it's a readable romp nonetheless. NA

Turner painting, but it's a readable romp nonetheless. NA

Piratica

★★★★

Tanith Lee, Hodder, 384pp, 0 340 85446 4, £10.99 hbk

Piratica is set in an alternate reality, the world of seventeen-twenty London (approx 1802, London, in our world), in the Republic of Free England, where the ruling class of landsirs own large amounts of wealth and land. Quite why the book is set in this mythical time and place isn't quite clear, since the setting adds nothing to the story, beyond giving the author an opportunity to play around with names. Nor is it quite clear why this is the Republic of Free England, since there is still a ruling, landowning aristocracy and there is little republican in the tale.

Nonetheless, the book is a ripping adventure yarn. It centres on feisty heroine Artemesia Blastside, who lives in a time resembling 19th-century England, but has a healthy dose of modern 'attitude'. She escapes from a charm school when a bump on the head restores memories of her mother, Molly, whom she imagines was a pirate queen, a female Robin Hood of the high seas. Artemesia wants to be a pirate too and she tracks down her mother's old shipmates. The old 'crewmates' claim that Molly was an actress killed in a tragic theatre accident and that the high adventures which Artemesia remembers were part of a play. Art finds this hard to believe and persuades the actor-pirates to help her steal a ship, and they set off to become real pirates, pirates who kill no-one. As their treasure seeking continues, Art realises that far too much of the play her mother supposedly acted in - *Piratica* - was real. And real stories come with real enemies, who pose dangers to our heroine's life. Fortunately stories also come with (in this case somewhat less than) dashing heroes to rescue our heroine.

As a derring-do adventure *Piratica* will succeed in gripping young readers but there's not really that much else to it. SP

Lirael

★★★★

528pp, 0 00 713732 X

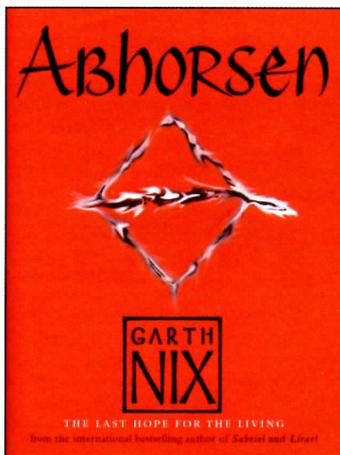
Abhorsen

★★★★★

400pp, 0 00 713734 6

Garth Nix, Collins, £12.99 each hbk

Readers of *Sabriel*, the first of 'The Old Kingdom' trilogy, will have been waiting impatiently for the second and third volumes. *Lirael* moves us on a generation from *Sabriel*'s youthful exploits in The Old Kingdom and sets in motion the desperate struggle (recorded in these two books) to contain the evil which, unharnessed, will bring the Kingdom to destruction. The shifting interplay between the four characters who confront the great powers of Death itself generates the energy which drives the narrative: the young and uncertain Prince Sameth; Lirael, the equally uncertain young woman who, to her astonishment, discovers she is the Abhorsen-in-waiting, charged with



mighty responsibilities; and two creatures who are anything but what they seem, The Disreputable Dog and the white cat, Mogget.

The Dog and Mogget are brilliant, unique inventions, at once spirits from ancient time and yet essence of dog and essence of cat. At one moment, they might be trafficking with elemental spirits, at the next, sniffing for rabbits or catching fish. Where The Dog is utterly loyal, Mogget is utterly ambiguous. Through them, Nix weaves a strong and often endearing strain of comedy within the high seriousness of his theme, and thus avoids the highfalutin'. And while Sam and Lirael are discovering their powers as a Wallmaker and as Abhorsen, they are also discovering their human adulthood.

Philip Pullman praised *Sabriel* for its 'fantasy that reads like realism'. Exactly so. Nix sustains a solidity of landscape, character and adventure throughout. There is a self-consistency also about the systems of magic at work, often in opposition to each other; you never feel that a trial will be easily surmounted through the arbitrary exercise of a spell. There are some marvellously inventive devices; for example, the Abhorsen's bandolier of nine bells, each with a different power to be deployed judiciously and with respect. And I know of no writer of fantasy who manages battles and skirmishes so graphically and with such pace.

To attempt to summarise adventures of such a scale and complexity would be to trivialise. Enough to say that throughout the two books the different groups of players in the epic drama move across the landscape inevitably towards each other and a resolution; throughout *Abhorsen*, the pace gathers steadily, driving characters and reader on to a climax which is worthy of the whole trilogy. That reader may assume success for our heroes, but may also fear the cost will be intolerable. Such narrative excitement and the treatment of the great archetypal themes will satisfy adults as well as youthful readers. In the States, there has long been less self-consciousness about adult pleasure in fantasy writing and, like 'His Dark Materials', *Abhorsen* stood high on the *New York Times* bestseller lists. It has taken the critical and financial

success of Tolkien, Pullman, Rowling *et al* to validate the appeal of such writing in the UK. GF

The British Museum Ancient Egypt Pop-up Book

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

James Putnam, paper engineering by David Hawcock, British Museum, 16pp, 0 7141 3033 8, £16.99 hbk novelty

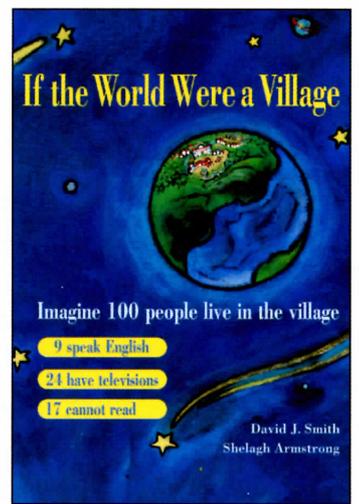
A big square volume with a spine nearly 2" thick, this looks authoritative rather than playful with the imprimatur of the British Museum and photos of Egyptian artefacts and wall paintings. Once inside you discover eight spectacular pop-ups by wizard paper engineer David Hawcock. These include a Nile-going boat, complete with oar and sail, King Ramesses II in his chariot, Tutankhamun's golden death mask, which can be folded and turned to reveal the mummified head and moving jaw. We also have Queen Hatshepsut's temple, although mine failed to open up properly, an Egyptian villa, the Great Pyramid complex at Giza and Tutankhamun's tomb at the moment of discovery by Howard Carter. In addition there are fold-out maps, a working shaduf for raising water, papyrus fragments and a board game. It is a sumptuous package, beautifully produced and sturdily crafted. And yet it remains as enigmatic as the sphinx, as if the author and paper engineer forgot to take the reader by the hand. Open up the book and you are straight into the first spread - no preamble or introduction to get your bearings. The text, by knowledgeable Egyptologist James Putnam, is approachable and informative, but physically quite difficult to read as you must peer over the boat's sails or through the horses' reins. More editorial intervention in the way of labels or numbered keys would have been helpful too. But these are minor quibbles, for the book remains an impressive three-dimensional guide to this fascinating civilisation. SU

If the World Were a Village

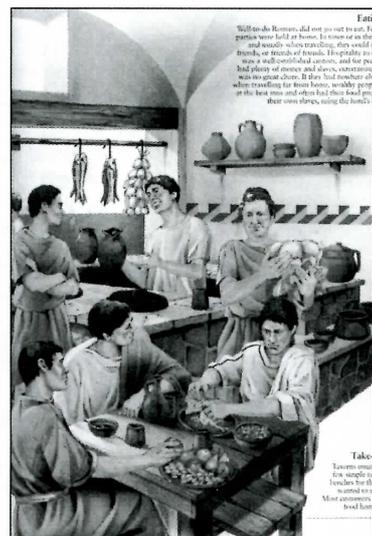
NON-FICTION ★★★★★

David J Smith, ill. Shelagh Armstrong, A & C Black, 32pp, 0 7136 6880 6, £6.99 pbk

Originally published by innovative Kids Can Press in Canada, this is a remarkable and thought-provoking book. Recognising the impossibility of comprehending the impact of 6 billion people on our planet, this book gets you to imagine the world as a village of just 100 people, each of whom represents some 62 million people. By learning about the villagers we can perhaps find out more about our neighbours in the real world. So in this global village 22 people speak a Chinese dialect, 20 earn less than 65p a day, 17 cannot read or write, 50 are often hungry and 25 spend a large part of their day simply getting safe water to drink, while 24 have a TV in their homes. Such contrasts should provide fertile ground for discussion about politics, cultural diversity, economics and religion in the classroom as well as at home. 'The people who are going to solve world crises 30 years from now



are today's children' writes author David Smith in his note for parents and teachers. His wish is to foster 'world-mindedness', which he describes as an attitude, an approach to life. The publishers support the book with additional activities online, and there are comprehensive notes on the sources and how the calculations were made. Beg, buy or borrow a copy for yourself, but it should be compulsory for every school to have at least one. SU



Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt

Neil Morris, 0 7141 3025 7

Everyday Life in Ancient Rome

Neil Grant, 0 7141 3026 5

NON-FICTION ★★★

British Museum, 48pp, £10.99 each hbk novelty

The novelty in these books is the use of four plastic overlay pages in each. Some of the overlays are more successful than others and are, perhaps, most enlightening when lifting aside roofs or walls to look at what goes on inside, for example, Roman baths and Egyptian tombs. Otherwise, these books are unremarkable productions. Each title covers a variety of aspects of its subject with an emphasis on social history and gives a good impression of what life was like across the social spectrum. Granted, there is some information that does not routinely appear: consideration of Roman urban apartment blocks and Egyptian

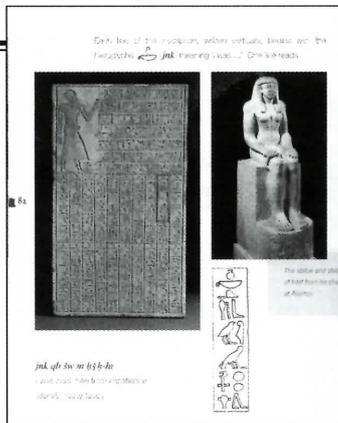
Nothing is explored in any depth and some topics are treated in such a perfunctory way that you wonder why they are included at all: Roman hypocausts sit in a small diagram scarcely explained, tucked away at the top of a page. There is vagueness about some of the larger illustrations that reconstruct scenes of Roman and Egyptian life. These tableaux are the work of a team of illustrators and generally lack the incidental detail and sense of a lived-in world that you get from the best historical illustration. Why these books bear the imprimatur of the British Museum is a mystery. While they have British authors, they seem to be produced in Italy and have all the marks of off-the-peg international production. There is very little in the way of research paraphernalia: no glossary, bibliography or web resources, only an index. **CB**

Pocket Guide to Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Richard Parkinson, British Museum, 96pp, 0 7141 3007 9, £7.99 hbk

A compact and stylishly produced guide from the British Museum that teaches you how to read and write like an Ancient Egyptian. The beautiful and strange picture sign language of hieroglyphs turns out to be quite tricky to decipher, for there are around 750 different symbols, some representing words or ideas, others representing sounds or groups of sounds. The Ancient Egyptians loved word play, so you also have to learn 'determination signs', essential for example for distinguishing between the word for 'beautiful woman' and 'cow'. Learning how to 'transliterate' hieroglyphics, ie turn the pictures into letters, is of course only useful if



you speak Ancient Egyptian, but you can learn to recognise groups of symbols for words such as pharaoh or king. Most useful will be the alphabet to enable you to write English words as hieroglyphs – either in the traditional pictorial form or as a quick version more like handwriting. Author Richard Parkinson, Assistant Keeper in the Department of Ancient Egypt at the BM, includes lots of lovely detail on how hieroglyphs can act as speech bubbles to tell you what is going on in a painting, and even swear words too rude to translate. He not only drew all the hieroglyphs in this book, but was responsible for many of the photographs taken on his travels in Egypt. A first-class guide for older readers, it is still hard to beat the Metropolitan Museum's Hieroglyph pack for younger children. **SU**

Trash! On Ragpicker Children and Recycling

INFORMATION STORY ★★★

Gita Wolf and Anushka Ravishankar, ill. Orijit Sen, Tara Publishing (Chennai, India), 112pp, 81 86211 69 1, £6.99 pbk

Recycling is a huge – and hugely effective – industry in India. The

reason it works so well is that it's driven by poverty, its labour-intensiveness satisfied by armies of street children who earn a pittance from 'Golden Dustmen' by picking through other folks' rubbish and salvaging the recyclable bits. So, by keeping the kids on the streets, the streets are kept clean – well, cleaner than otherwise. The narrative strand of this intriguing book follows a few weeks in the lives of two such 'ragpicker' children and especially documents the endeavours of some organisations to get their activities recognised as the important economic contribution that they are and to have them properly rewarded. The uncertainties and dangers of street life, as well as its warmth and humour, are sympathetically portrayed.

And the text is laced with facts and improving thoughts and messages, giving an overall impression of a sort of Indian *Waterbabies* with Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Bedonebyasyoudid well to the fore.

To readers used to standard English, the language limps a little, but the authors manage to create a warm enthusiasm for a world in which recycling is an essential part of everyday life. Here is a story ripe for dramatisation – or perhaps for *bande dessinée* treatment, and one from which our local authorities could learn a lot before they consign our 'waste' newspaper to landfill because it won't fetch 'an economic price'. **TP**

The Science of Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials

NON-FICTION ★

Mary and John Gribbin, Hodder, 222pp, 0 340 88159 3, £8.99 pbk

'His Dark Materials' is a trilogy of high-supernatural space operas in

cowboys-and-indians mode, embarking daemons, witches, angels and ghosts, laced with occasional shots of straight 20th-century physics.

Consequently the Gribbins, who are well-known popularisers of science, have a hard row to hoe. Their attempt to cope with Dust, a mysterious stream of 'particles of consciousness' (Pullman's words) is an example. They say that 'At one level, the Dark Materials are Dust', but that 'this is also a metaphor for... hidden knowledge and hidden forces'. Further on, they say that Cold Dark Matter, a currently popular cosmological hypothesis, is 'the real science behind the Dark Materials', but later 'Dust is like Jung's collective unconscious', and still further on, 'Dust is like the soul of Gaia' (the living planet of James Lovelock).

The alethiometer, a machine which tells the truth, isn't, for the Gribbins, 'really doing it at all'; instead Lyra, the central character who uses this machine, 'is doing the truth-telling in her own mind'. The problem with this interpretation is that the alethiometer provides details which could not possibly be found by introspection – for example that a person knowledgeable about Dust who is sought by Lyra can be found in a particular room of a particular building of which Lyra knew nothing beforehand.

The Gribbins wisely do not attempt to cope with the daemons. The continual violations of elementary physical laws by the daemons' transmogrifications would be difficult to justify. In between excursions to Pullman's worlds, the authors present some basic physics and astronomy with their usual competence. **FP**

REVIEWS 14+ Secondary/Adult

The Lost Boys' Appreciation Society

★★★★

176pp, 1 84255 095 0

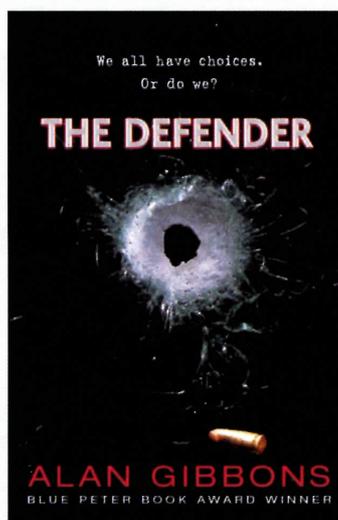
The Defender

★★★★

192pp, 1 84255 098 5

Alan Gibbons, Dolphin, £4.99 each pbk

The year following their mother's death in a road accident is a period of very considerable stress for teenage brothers Gary and John Cain. Each reacts in his different way. Gary begins to mix with a gang given to drugs, alcohol and car thefts, while John (the older, the more bookish and the more thoughtful) assumes the role of protector of what remains of the family, including a father who works all hours and who is already experiencing the need for new female companionship. To these familial developments must be added John's first romantic entanglements and his forthcoming examinations. Gibbons has a sure eye and ear for the dynamics of family dissension, his dialogue between parent and child is, most of the time, convincing and his



concluding note of optimism is just about credible in the context of what has gone before.

The day on which 14-year-old Ian Moore, in *The Defender*, begins to learn the truth about his parents' (and his own) past marks also the beginning of his own growth into early manhood. It is not the easiest of transitions, since it will involve an

initiation into the complexities of Ulster's history, politics and sectarian strife. All of these, in his father's Belfast childhood and adolescence, had combined to form the man originally known as Kenny Kincaid, now known as Peter Moore, and to impel him on to the road which would eventually lead 'to blood, sacrifice and exile'. A member of the Protestant community, Kincaid had become one of Ulster's 'young defenders', part of a loyalist organisation with which, however, he was eventually to become disenchanted and from which he was to flee to England. Inevitably, the past catches up and it is with ensuing events in England that this novel is primarily concerned. Gibbons, particularly in his flashback chapters detailing the Belfast background, convincingly depicts a time and an environment where, as Kincaid's mother had once expressed it, 'the Troubles had stolen all the wee boys' childhoods.' The far-reaching consequences of that theft provide the subject matter for a powerful and very well written thriller. **RD**

Dating Hamlet

★★★★

Lisa Fiedler, Collins Flamingo, 176pp, 0 00 716186 7, £4 99 pbk

This preposterous romp is the Hamlet story, but not as we know it. Borrowing from *Romeo and Juliet* (drugs which simulate death) and comedies like *Twelfth Night* (the embarrassing pitfalls of cross-dressing), it rewrites the story from Ophelia's point of view. This feisty Ophelia is a survivor, in every sense, and an active conspirator with Hamlet and Laertes in vengeance against Claudius. She does not go mad, but pretends madness just as Hamlet does. She does not drown, but simulates death with the aid of her convenient potion after a refreshing swim. The potion and its antidote also kill and revive Hamlet, Laertes and Gertrude, leaving Claudius and Polonius as the only permanent corpses at Elsinore. Ophelia does not mourn Polonius, since he is not her real father. The gravedigger is. All these plot adjustments convert Shakespeare's tragedy into a bodice-ripper (literally) and a melodrama, told in a style which mixes pseudo-

Shakespeare, gothic sensationalism and slangy modernity. There are plenty of puns and innuendoes, and (buyers be warned) two serious sexual assaults, which may or may not be read as part of the fun. The book is a bawdy pastiche, owing more to *Moll Flanders* or *Tom Jones* than *Hamlet*, and an entertaining joke for teenage readers who can take it in that spirit. Not one for the school library, I think. PH



Walking Naked

★★★★★

Alyssa Brugman, Faber, 184pp, 0 571 21926 8, £5.99 pbk

Published in Australia two years ago, this novel more than deserves shelf space over here. Narrated as if by 14-year-old Megan, who is very much part of the in-group at school, it describes the travails of one Perdita Wiguiggan, a bright girl in the same class. Perdita has more than her name to put up with; nicknamed 'freak' by the other girls, she is a loner at school and neglected at home. Her only comfort is poetry, and for a brief while Megan almost enters into her secret world too. But the dangers of appearing to opt out of her all-powerful group seem too great, and Megan allows herself to join in Perdita-baiting once again, with tragic results. Megan is not an appealing child, constantly putting herself first. But she learns some valuable truths as the story progresses, and so too may readers should they have ever been in a similar position themselves. Excellently written, making clever use of poets from Sylvia Plath to e e cummings, this is a book to read and then read again. NT

Love, Hate and My Best Mate: poems about relationships

POETRY

★★★★★

Compiled by Andrew Fusek Peters and Polly Peters, ill. Jane Hawkins, Hodder, 128pp, 0 7502 4420 8, £10.99 hbk

Love is still considered one of the primary topics of poetry. Love sells and so will this book. It looks attractive but I found some of the fonts used often detracted from the text. This collection tries hard to be inclusive with about two thirds of the poetry by men to a third women, a few translations thrown in, some parodies and a couple of poems by young people. But it isn't a great

collection and it has neither the skilled selection that makes collections like McGough's *Poems about Love* stunning nor the surprises that Matthew Sweeney throws into his collections. Brian Patten and Clare Bevan's love poems did charm me. But I finished reading this book wondering where were the great earlier women's voices (other than Emily), where were the big contemporary love poets, how many of their own poems should editors include in their anthologies and who the hell is Loveyday Why? TE

Now That I've Found You

★★★★

Rex Harley, Pont, 200pp, 1 84323 107 7, £4.99 pbk

The narrator of *Now That I've Found You* is an A-level student in Cardiff. He meets a mysterious red-haired girl on the castle bridge in the city and is bowled over by her immediately, despite not finding out her name (though we never find out *his* name). She seems to think it's 1968, even though the story is set in the modern-day. She maintains a convincing charade of coming from the 60s, with the clothes, the knowledge of the music (Pink Floyd and more obscure groups) and the incomprehension of mobile phones and computers. This is entertaining for the reader though frustrating for the narrator, and keeps us guessing as to whether we are in a quasi-fantasy novel or something more prosaic.

The story charts the few months of an academic year while the protagonist plays a bit of cat and mouse with the girl, has an interview for a university place and finds out the true story of his parents' relationship (he knows his mother died in a horrific train accident but his father belatedly, and somewhat anticlimactically, lets him know they were never married).

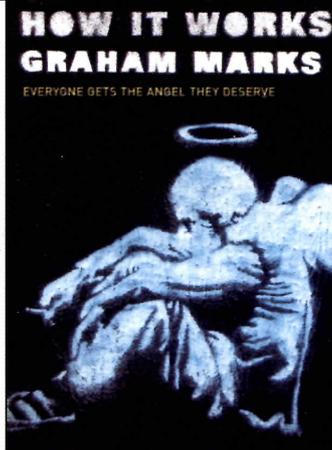
There are other revelations towards the end, not least that the girl is called Rhiannon. Rhiannon doesn't come from the 1960s but she'd probably quite like to as she is HIV positive after being raped as a young teenager. Harley deals sensitively and truthfully with having HIV, bringing in how school children often don't believe the statistics and think they are immortal and immune. However it's a shame that the Angel of Death hinted at throughout the book is only revealed to be HIV 20 pages from the end. Harley may have done this to make his book a young adult novel about young love but the lasting impression is that it's about HIV and a sequel is begging to be written. OD

How It Works

★★★★★

Graham Marks, Bloomsbury, 224pp, 0 7475 7015 9, £5.99 pbk

'Everyone gets the angel they deserve' announces the subheading on the cover, which has a marvellous image of a trainer-wearing, cigarette-smoking angel/teenager, sitting on the ground, all in white against a black background. We've had good guardian angel stories before but this one is different. Told in gritty terms, it opens with the aimlessness of Seb's life, 'another bloody day', as he drifts through the



final stages of A level and small scale drug dealing. There's further to go downwards yet, with the help of stolen money, a visit to a prostitute, an initial beating and then another, so bad he has to be rushed into intensive care. His life is saved there but by the mysterious stranger who stopped his attacker. The book from here on is partly a quest for that man, Jay Brill, a quest for the answers to his identity, with always the possibility of his being an angel (Jay Brill, Gabriel, Jabril?) and more and deeper questions. Seb pieces his life together, forging integrity out of the imperfections of his past, with an interesting art project based on a da Vinci human figure, a determination to say 'No' to an insistent drug dealer and a relationship with the prostitute which ought to be sentimental, but which, like the whole book, strikes a strongly human note of the everyday. The book succeeds so well because it grounds, in the solid details of being this kind of a teenager, a demonstration of taking control of the here and now while becoming alert to a series of increasingly intriguing questions – which are largely left hanging. So clever this mixing of the ordinary and the extraordinary and how it works. AJ

Black Mirror

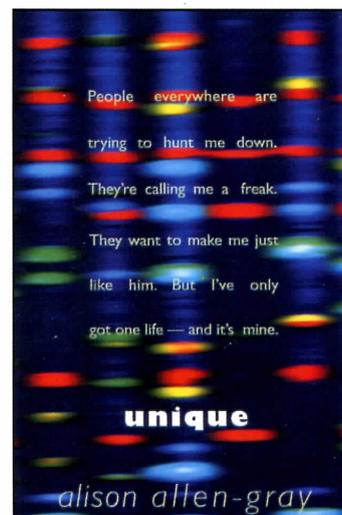
★★★★★

Nancy Werlin, Collins Flamingo, 240pp, 0 00 714168 8, £5.99 pbk

Frances hates the way she looks and she has been so absorbed in self-loathing that her brother's suicide has caught her unaware. She realises she was unaware of signs of distress or despair in him. She blames herself for this failure in communication and after a long and difficult struggle against her self-imposed isolation, decides to join the charitable organisation with which he was involved in order to give back some of the benefits she has reaped from the scholarship it provided her with.

Frances's artistic talent is translated into a rich source of inner visualisation and an internal dialogue illuminated with striking imagery. This, coupled with the Buddhist aphorisms beloved of her mother and brother, provides her with both challenge and comfort. When Frances discovers the sinister truth behind Unity, the charitable organisation which is a carefully constructed front for a drug dealing industry of huge proportions, responsible for her brother Daniel's death, events uncoil in a skilful and compelling way with tension maintained.

Frances comes through her experiences with a real sense of her own unique qualities and is able for the first time to see who she really is without the distortions of a society – corrupt in itself – which judges others only by its own narrow and stereotypical criteria. VR



Unique

★★★★★

Alison Allen-Gray, Oxford, 256pp, 0 19 275335 5, £4.99 pbk

This excellent novel is several things at once. Set in the very near future, about 2016, it is a kind of science fiction, following through the logic of experiments that both are and might be happening now, namely the techniques of cloning that first seized public attention with Dolly the sheep. It is also a thriller, a tale of discovery, escape, hiding and pursuit that ends dramatically on a Scottish mountain, and its pace, tension and ever-present sense of danger are worthy of a latter-day John Buchan.

Above all, though, it is the story of 15-year-old Dominic, the unique human being to whom the title refers. Dominic is unique, unenviably, because he is the only living clone of another person, illegally made at the behest of his rich, obsessive, domineering father to replicate his gifted 'brother', killed in a traffic accident at university. Worse still, Dominic stumbles on the evidence of his origins at a time of ruthless media interest and popular hysteria on cloning, so exposure makes his life unbearable. Dominic, an attractive character who tells his own story, endures a long ordeal of perilous adventure before proving to himself and others that he is unique in a different way – himself alone, resourceful and stubborn, and quite unlike his brother despite their shared DNA. His story makes a terrific book – exciting, heartening, intelligent, and all too topical. PH

PICTURE BOOKS AND INFORMATION BOOKS RELEVANT TO OLDER READERS:

Have You Fed the Cat? (see p23)

Caribbean Animals (see p23)

The Big Ugly Monster and the Little Stone Rabbit (see p24)

Angus Rides the Goods Train (see p24)

The Conquerors (see p24)



CLASSICS IN SHORT No.45

Brian Alderson

See here... who is this, wandering in the sacred wood of Story? It is



A cuckoo clock

was to be the subject of this present disquisition but a shocking event has intervened. So I've let the wheels run down and will wind the thing up again next time round.

What shocking event was that then?

Why – nothing less than the arrival of the last BfK with its cluster of obituaries on page 14. There you may find two dozen lines devoted to dear Bill Steig, thirteen to Jeff Brown (who he? ask some) and ten – that's t-e-n – to Joan Aiken.

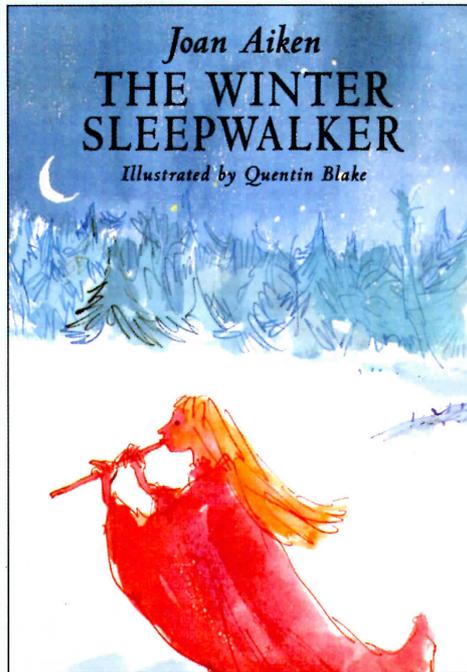
I should not have been surprised.

For this most versatile, most joyous, of writers for children has been the victim of critical neglect for the fifty years of her writing life. (What better proof of the dopeiness of book prizes than the fact that Joan's only direct award was from the *Guardian* in 1969 for *The Whispering Mountain*, one of her less successful books.) But it came a bit hard to see her obituary running at three lines fewer than the one for the author of *Flat Stanley*, so I thought that some redressing of balances was needed. Cuckoo clocks could wait.

How to select a classic though?

For, as with other modern writers figuring in this column – some, like William Mayne and Raymond Briggs, still writing – we stand too close to know what future they are going to be allowed. Where Joan's work is concerned the contenders could number over fifty children's books, for all are remarkably consistent in their imaginative zest and have hardly a sentence that does not pay its way. (A point which permits mention of her little handbook with the unpromising title of *The Way to Write for Children* [1982]. Along with her two essays 'A Free Gift' and 'Writing for Enjoyment' this packs in more good sense about the craft than shelves full of lucubrations from white-tile campuses.)

The Kingdom and the Cave which she wrote when she was seventeen already shows her gift for racy narrative, blending the mysterious and the comic. Although not published till 1960, it was the first in a line of full-length stories of which the most famous are the hijacked histories that began with *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* in 1962. (Ironically, a reprint programme for the series was put in train for later this year to celebrate her eightieth birthday, while the latest addition, *Midwinter Nightingale*, which showed no falling off in invention or in its commanding prose, was published a day or two after she died.) There were also individual tales, such as *Midnight is a Place* (1974),



which can be seen as supplements to the big series, and separate from these are the three wholly realistic, picaresque novels – 'the Spanish trilogy' – whose first volume was *Go Saddle the Sea* (1978).

Various experiments

are scattered along the way: her plays 'Winterthing' and 'The Mooncusser's Daughter', several short picture-book texts, and those *jeux d'esprit*, first composed for storytelling on *Jackanory*, about Arabel and her raven. Alongside these though, and parallel



with the novels, there flowed an inexhaustible stream of brilliantly managed short stories, beginning with her first published book *All You've Ever Wanted* (1953). A number of these were given full-dress sumptuousity by Jan Pieńkowski (who won a Kate Greenaway Medal for *The Kingdom under the Sea* in 1972), and with *A Foot in the Grave* in 1989 she accomplished the difficult role-reversal of composing tales to illustrate eight spooky paintings already completed by the artist. (She has always been well-served by her illustrators, especially the great Pat Marriott whose pen drawings for many of her books are superlative examples of the illustrator's art.)

What then to choose

from this galaxy of vivid storytelling? My inclination was to treat the Spanish trilogy as a three-volume novel and to claim it as indisputably her most sustained and impressive achievement (naturally therefore it's out of print). But I am helpless before a very different masterpiece: the eight stories, perfectly illustrated by Quentin Blake, that make up *The Winter Sleepwalker* of 1994, which I once called one of the most beautiful children's books of recent times. Like all her best work, there is no sense of these stories being planned (she would receive no marks from officials requiring her to follow Ministry rules for imaginative writing). Rather she is their minder, unleashing them to go off whither they will and rejoicing to watch and record their unpredictable gallowings. They are not susceptible to classroom precis (sorry, Minister), they have no life but in the words that Joan has found for them.

But what can be said is that beneath their divergent qualities of mystery, playfulness, farce and tragedy there is a unifying strength. Nothing really goes quite right – queens disappear for no good reason, Gondwana beasts rain down on village greens, a sailor-girl misguidedly goes to live with Neptune – but what counts 'in the teeth of the gale' is human resilience and a cheerful courage in adversity. Who cares if the geese don't turn out to be swans? As the boys and girls sing, when freed from enchantment, 'you'll always find a goose can be a lot of use'. ■

The illustrations by Jenny Nimmo are taken from the 1994 edition published by Jonathan Cape. It is currently out of print but there are rumours of a reissue

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