

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

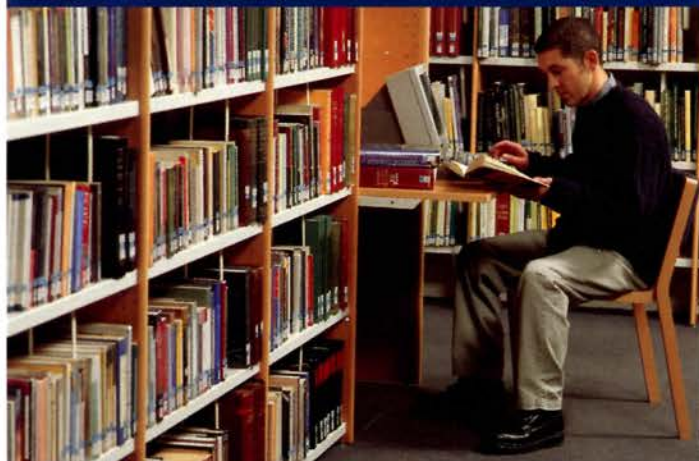
November 1996 No.101
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the children's book magazine



ALLAN AHLBERG • LESLEY HOWARTH
• BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS •

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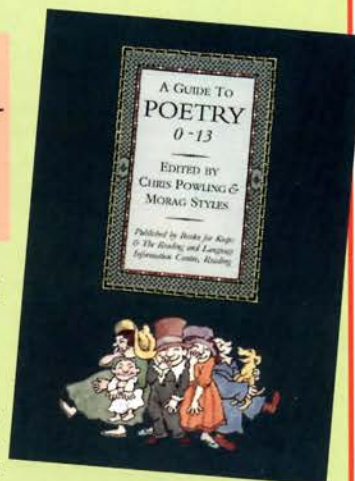
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A GUIDE TO POETRY 0-13

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& Morag Styles

Bibliography compiled by Jill Bennett,
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Styles and Helen Taylor

Price: UK - £5.50 (range of discounts available); Overseas - £7.50 (Airmail)
A4, 52 pages; ISBN: 1 871566 03 7



*'Writing verse is so much fun,
Cheering as the Summer weather,
Makes you feel alert and bright,
'Specially when you get it more or less the way you want it.'*

(Wendy Cope from *The Orchard Book of Funny Poems*)

Poetry: 0-13 is a complete revision and update of BFK's Poetry 0-16, published in 1988, which sold more than 10,000 copies. The new Guide, in a condensed format of 52 pages, incorporates the most successful features of its predecessor while taking account of the wealth of new verse for children published in the intervening eight years.

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to place your order

The perfect Christmas gifts

from Random House Children's Books

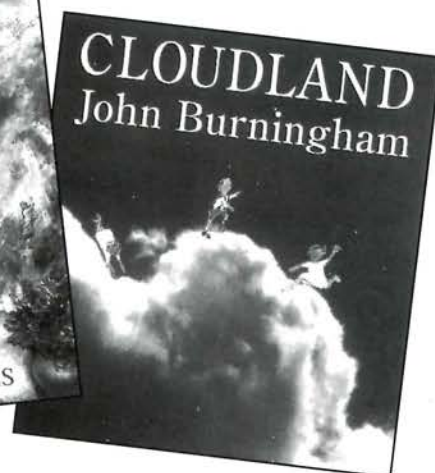
ENCHANTMENT IN THE GARDEN

Best-selling author **SHIRLEY HUGHES'** latest book blends sweeping illustrations, inspired by summers spent painting in Italy, with a marvellous text to make this one of her most outstanding works. Published by Bodley Head £9.99 h/b ISBN: 0370323327

CLOUDLAND

JOHN BURNINGHAM, one of our most distinguished children's book illustrators, creates another winner with this unique combination of photography and his own superb illustrations. This story of a little boy's stay with the cloud children is sure to enchant readers of all ages.

Published by Jonathan Cape £9.99 h/b ISBN: 0224045814



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Contents

3

Editor's Page

News and comment from the Editor

4

Master Allan the Ahlberg

Jeff Hynds and Liz Waterland look at two additions to the 'Happy Family' series

8

Reviews

Fiction 6 / Non Fiction 14

12

Authorgraph No. 101

Lesley Howarth interviewed by Stephanie Nettell

16

Unfinished Stories

George Hunt explores unappreciated treasures that lie in the classroom

18

Godhanger

Julia Eccleshare investigates a powerful new novel from Dick King-Smith

19

A Christmas Round Up

Fiona Waters looks at new titles for the season

23

News

24

Poetry for Christmas

Jack Ousbey makes a selection



The cover illustration for this issue is by Tony Ross for Allan Ahlberg's latest addition to the 'Happy Family' series, *Miss Dirt the Dustman's Daughter* (see pages 4-5). We are grateful to Puffin Books for their help in producing the cover of this November issue.

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's book magazine

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Editor's PAGE

The bedrock of *Books for Keeps*, the part which most serves the needs of our readers, must be the review pages. With around 7,000 books published each year, it is impossible to review every title. No one would want us to – some of them shouldn't have been published in the first place.

The role of a magazine like BfK is to attempt to pick out the best. And even then we don't have sufficient pages to do them all justice, leaving aside the debate about what is meant by 'best'.

Up until now, we have deliberately focused on books just out in paperback. But the publishing environment has shifted perceptibly. Simultaneous hardback/paperback publishing is increasingly the norm and the old division of hardback publication for libraries followed, 18 months later, by the paperback for classroom and home use is no longer so applicable. Our selection criteria must now change to reflect current publishing realities. In publishers' jargon, 'format' will now be only one factor in our decision whether to review or not. From January on, readers will encounter new hardbacks in the body of our review pages.

Altering a reviewing policy that has stood since our launch in March 1980 is not the only change we are contemplating. The recession in children's book publishing has been the worst ever, with its repercussions still, perhaps, not fully revealed. One obvious and lamentable victim has been new talent – the first book from a new author or illustrator. At BfK we believe one of our roles is to support and nurture the emergence of that fresh talent. So, next year we plan to highlight a first book in each issue – if, of course, we can find one.

Some books are ground breaking or simply unmissable. From January, BfK's new editor, will choose one particularly special title to focus on in our new 'star review' slot.

New editor? Yes. After seven years Chris Powling is stepping down. Chris has taken us from BfK 58 through to our centenary issue last month. Producing over 40 issues is an impressive achievement. His dedica-

tion and commitment have helped to make *Books for Keeps* the essential reading it now is for everyone concerned with children and books. Jan Powling, who so ably assisted him, has also decided to move on. Our warmest thanks and good wishes go to them both.

Our new editor, Rosemary Stones, will already be known to many BfK readers as the editor of the best-selling *A Multicultural Guide to Children's Books 0-12* published in 1995. Rosemary is well known for her pioneering work in the 1970s and 80s as a co-founder and co-director of the organization, *Children's Rights Workshop*. Amongst many other campaigns, CRW successfully argued the case for the importance of a non-stereotypical presentation of gender, race and class in children's books. For the last ten years Rosemary has worked in children's publishing as an editorial director, first at HarperCollins and latterly at Penguin where she was Associate Publisher for Children's Books.

In addition, Rosemary started a school bookshop, has been a bookseller, was a

judge of the Mother Goose Award for illustration, chaired the Literature and Media Panels of Greater London Arts and is the author of a number of innovative books for younger teenagers on such topics as divorce and bullying.

A new editor invariably brings a new voice and fresh perspectives.

Over future issues of this magazine there will be changes to the balance, diversity and critical tone of the editorial content. This is not only to be welcomed but is indeed essential. All of us working with children's books must meet the huge challenges now facing schools and education, libraries, bookselling and publishing due to a decline in public expenditure and the gathering impact of new technology.

Books for Keeps will continue to play its part in the way it always has done with a wide range of information and practical help at one end through to literary and critical comment at the other. It will continue to address, as it was originally founded to do, the many constituencies that make up the world of children's books in its familiar accessible, independently minded, stimulating and enjoyable fashion.

Richard Hill



'The Christmas Play' from *Star of Wonder: Christmas Stories and Poems for Children* (see page 19).



Allan Ahlberg.

I've just read all eighteen titles in the 'Happy Families' series. Even though I'd read most of them before, I nevertheless had a good laugh and really enjoyed myself. Such a variety of characters and ingenious situations! One moment I found myself chortling at the hilarious Brick family, builders for generations, with famous ancestors like Archimedes Brick and Isambard Kingdom Brick. The next minute I savoured the elaborate subterfuge played on the visiting inspector by the Tick family, thereby saving their school. (OFSTED foiled again!) As I read on I continued to be diverted by extended jokes and unlikely tales about bee-keeping, kidnapping and sailing the seven seas.

But something else was running through my head. There was a strange familiarity about these unnaturally short lines of print, this rather stilted and repetitive style, the sparseness of the language. What did it remind me of? Something I'd recently read, was it? Then I realised. Not long ago I had been going through a reading scheme. (I will not name it but it was one of the six or seven new schemes which have lately hit the market.) This too had short lines of print, and was similarly stilted, repetitive and sparse, not to say denuded. But in this case I hadn't enjoyed it at all. I hadn't felt a bit like laughing. In fact, tears would have been more appropriate as I thought of the children who might be unfortunate enough to meet this pathetic stuff.

I was really quite surprised at my different reactions. How was it that Allan Ahlberg could write books like those in reading schemes and yet, unlike the schemes, be so entertaining? The answer, of course, is not far to seek and I expect has been obvious to everyone (except me) for years. For this is Ahlberg in satiric vein – Ahlberg the arch-parodist. You have only to recall his poems, years ago, in *Please Mrs Butler* ('Slow Reader', 'Reading Test') to realise that he regards, quite rightly, the flummery surrounding 'the teaching of reading' as a suitable case for treatment. 'Happy Families' is not a reading scheme but a wonderful parody of one.

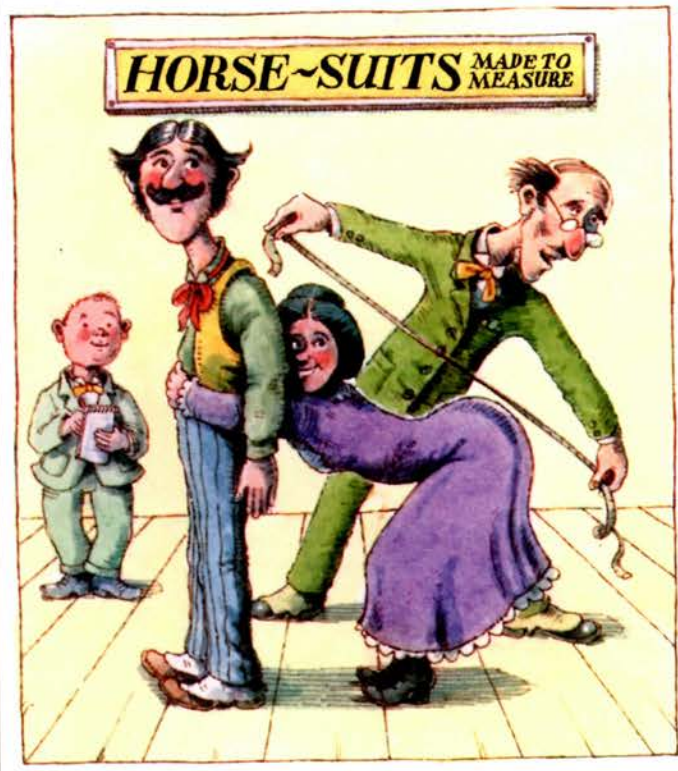
The first batch of eleven titles, inspired originally by the characters in the well-known card game, appeared in 1980-81. A further five were brought out in 1988. Now, eight years later, a further two titles have been published, and two more are projected for next year, thus making twenty in total. In all these books, as is the way with parodists, Ahlberg caricatures by means of exaggeration. He is, for example, adept at using the jerky language of reading schemes for comic effect:

*Now Mr and Mrs Hay
had not always been a horse.
When they first met,
Mr Hay was a tree,
and Mrs Hay a chicken.
But soon they fell in love,
got married –
and bought a horse-suit.*

It is eight years since the last title appeared in the staggering 2½ million copies sold in the UK since worthy of further investigation. We

Master Allan

But soon they fell in love,
got married –
and bought a horse-suit.

From *Mr and Mrs Hay the Horse*.

He pokes fun, equally amusingly, at the over-use of repetition so common in schemes. When a ransom is paid for Master Money's safe return, the kidnapper Mr Creep crept out, crept up and crept off with it!

But of course the books have other, even stronger qualities than these. Not least is the consistently excellent interplay, as in all true picture books, between text and illustration, notwithstanding the fact that the series has already had eight different, though first rate, illustrators. Quite often, as in *Mrs Jolly's Joke Shop*, the illustrations carry much of the narrative. At other times they cleverly act as a commentary on the text as in *Mr Biff the Boxer*.

There are puns and bad jokes galore. Strange how we groan but enjoy them. After years of acting as delivery boy at the bakery, Master Bun finds himself 'browned off with bread'. Later, his father is pleased to find him 'using his loaf'. Mrs Lather, irritated by the demands made on her by socks, vests, shirts and the like, feels compelled to put up a notice: WE WASH ANYTHING EXCEPT LAUNDRY. All in all, considering the way these books work, it is evident that they require a particular kind of sophistication, even adult sophistication, to appreciate them fully. To the uninitiated they might seem like simple stories in simple language, but those who think like this are missing the parody and underestimating the linguistic tricks that Ahlberg plays continuously on his readers. To some extent, this sophistication has increased with each wave of the stories. One of his latest, *Mrs Vole the Vet*, is a quite complex interweaving of the themes of divorce, work and family responsibility. But it still retains the verbal ironies. As Mrs Vole laboriously climbs the stairs to visit her new lighthouse-keeper boyfriend, she thinks 'What's a few steps between friends'. *Miss Dirt the Dustman's Daughter*, another recent addition, is reminiscent of the classic poor little rich girl. Just to complicate matters, however, she is also a rich little poor girl! Her life is, as she observes, in a whirl. Rushing from mother to father and back again, she never knows if 'she's coming or going'. With all the 'Happy

hugely successful 'Happy Families' series. With a 1980, the series is therefore a piece of publishing asked **Jeff Hynds** to take a look at

the Ahlberg

A few days later, Mrs Vole meets Mr Field the farmer.



Mr Field has a nice smile, a nice truck,



a very nice cheque book and a poorly pig.

From *Mrs Vole the Vet.*

Families' series, it's a bit like this for readers too! Like Miss Dirt, you need your wits about you all the time.

A reviewer has called these books 'miniature masterpieces'. I agree. However, there is something with which I cannot agree on page 21 of the current Puffin (1996) catalogue. Here the 'Happy Families' series is judged to be suitable for five-year-olds, and described as 'perfect for bridging the gap between picture books and early reading books' (sic!). Apart from the fact that this begs so many questions about reading that I would hardly know where to begin (e.g. what 'gap' are we talking about?), this well and truly underestimates the creative talents of Allan Ahlberg and the illustrators he worked with. I hope Puffin will not mind if I suggest an alternative description:

While five-year-olds, and perhaps even younger children, will enjoy some aspects of these stories, they are particularly appropriate for older, more sophisticated readers who enjoy double meanings, innuendoes, and wry commentary on the ups and downs of life. Or, to put it another way, nudge, nudge, wink wink, say no more.■

Jeff Hynds has run Reading and Writing Roadshows for some years. They've now been attended by over 20,000 teachers. More recently he's formed a book-supplying organization known as Jeff Hynds Books, which aims to select and categorise only the very best children's books that help with the teaching of reading and writing. If you'd like to organise a Roadshow in your area, or would like to know more about Jeff Hynds Books, write to 6 Alexandra Road, Biggin Hill, Kent TN16 3NY or fax 01959 540162.



From *Mrs Jolly's Joke Shop.*

For a classroom perspective, we asked **Liz Waterland** for a view on how 'Happy Families' work with children

Despite the short lines, simple vocabulary, many pictures and clear print, the stories in 'Happy Families' require sophisticated and mature readership skills. It is not just that the humour is often sly to the point of incomprehensibility to many young children (although rewarding to the adults involved!), nor that the language is frequently difficult for a young reader to predict but that the stories require a mature knowledge of relationships and the way they work.

Take one of the latest, *Mrs Vole the Vet.* Mrs Vole is divorced, although this is never said; and she and her children are on the look-out for a new husband for her. A variety of candidates are suggested but there is something wrong with each. Mr Moo, the milkman, for instance, is perfect. 'The only trouble is . . . Mrs Moo!' Small children simply don't understand that it is her existence that is the trouble with Mrs Moo – many of my children are still convinced that one can marry one's daddy and many don't know what marriage is – having no personal knowledge of it.

None of this is to suggest that the 'Happy Families' books are anything other than a delight. Everyone has their favourites although there are some which, I think, creak a bit. Despite this, they remain little gems of entertainment. But do not make the mistake of offering them to children too soon. The children will be puzzled and confused, they may even fail with them, and you will be disappointed. Instead, look on them as treats for able readers, ways for fluent readers to learn to laugh with the peculiarities of character and relations that we are all heirs to, ways for them to use their love of jokes, puns and the absurd to realise what fun reading can be.

Not for beginning readers – but well worth beginning to read.■

Liz Waterland, a regular BfK reviewer, is Head of an infant school in Peterborough.

The 'Happy Families' series by Allan Ahlberg is published by Viking in hardback at £6.99 each and by Puffin in paperback at £3.25 each (recent titles £3.50 each).

PUBLISHED IN 1980:

- Mr Biff the Boxer**, ill. Janet Ahlberg, 0 670 80574 2 hbk, 0 14 031236 6 pbk
- Mr Cosmo the Conjuror**, ill. Joe Wright, 0 670 80575 0 hbk, 0 14 031237 4 pbk
- Mrs Plug the Plumber**, ill. Joe Wright, 0 670 80576 9 hbk, 0 14 031238 2 pbk
- Master Salt the Sailors' Son**, ill. André Amstutz, 0 670 80578 5 hbk, 0 14 031240 4 pbk
- Miss Jump the Jockey**, ill. André Amstutz, 0 670 80579 3 hbk, 0 14 031241 2 pbk
- Mr Tick the Teacher**, ill. Faith Jaques, 0 670 80583 1 hbk, 0 14 031245 5 pbk

PUBLISHED IN 1981:

- Miss Brick the Builders' Baby**, ill. Colin McNaughton, 0 670 80580 7 hbk, 0 14 031242 0 pbk
- Mrs Lather's Laundry**, ill. André Amstutz, 0 670 80581 5 hbk, 0 14 031243 9 pbk
- Mr Buzz the Beeman**, ill. Faith Jaques, 0 670 80582 3 hbk, 0 14 031244 7 pbk
- Master Money the Millionaire**, ill. André Amstutz, 0 670 80584 X hbk, 0 14 031246 3 pbk

- Mr and Mrs Hay the Horse**, ill. Colin McNaughton, 0 670 80573 4 hbk, 0 14 031247 1 pbk

PUBLISHED IN 1988:

- Mrs Wobble the Waitress**, ill. Janet Ahlberg, 0 670 80577 7 hbk, 0 14 031239 0 pbk
- Master Bun the Bakers' Boy**, ill. Fritz Wegner, 0 670 81690 6 hbk, 0 14 032344 9 pbk
- Mr Creep the Crook**, ill. André Amstutz, 0 670 81691 4 hbk, 0 14 032345 7 pbk
- Miss Dose the Doctors' Daughter**, ill. Faith Jaques, 0 670 81692 2 hbk, 0 14 032346 5 pbk
- Mrs Jolly's Joke Shop**, ill. Colin McNaughton, 0 670 81693 0 hbk, 0 14 032347 3 pbk

PUBLISHED IN 1996:

- Mrs Vole the Vet**, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, 0 670 86592 3 hbk, 0 14 037880 4 pbk
- Miss Dirt the Dustman's Daughter**, ill. Tony Ross, 0 670 86594 X hbk, 0 14 037882 0 pbk

FORTHCOMING 1997:

- Master Track's Train**
- Ms Cliff the Climber**

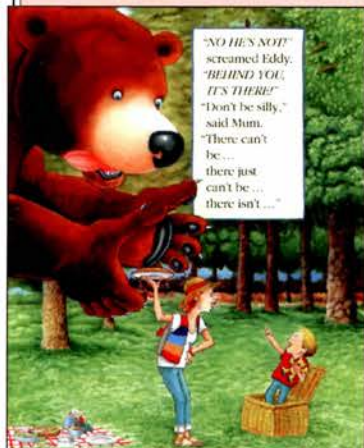
REVIEWS

Reviews of paperback fiction are grouped for convenience under teaching range. Books and children being varied and adaptable, we suggest you look either side of your area. More detailed recommendation for use can be found within the review.

Nursery/Infant REVIEWS

It's the Bear!

Jez Alborough, Walker,
0 7445 4385 1, £4.99



Action sequences followed by big, bold pictures and a cheery text in excruciating rhyme make this picture book fun. A small boy and his mum go for a picnic in the woods. The boy is convinced there is a bear in there somewhere – and, of course, so there is. The bear is particularly jolly; large enough to be faintly alarming but, with a teddy bear clutched in his paws and a goofy expression, obviously harmless and easily frightened himself. Alborough's people are rather less well realised than the bear.

Small children will enjoy feeling safely superior as the suspense mounts (will the boy/won't the boy be eaten?) and adults will enjoy the sly fun of the portrayal of the confident mum who knows there are no bears. If only she had *listened*. **LW**

Lazy Jack

Vivian French, ill. Russell Ayto, Walker,
0 7445 4721 0, £4.99

A picture book retelling of the well-known folktale about the silly young man who goes to work each day and, each evening, fails to bring home his rewards since he always takes his mother's instructions on how to how to carry them literally. Thus, he is told that he should carry money in his pocket. But next day he is paid in kind with a jug of milk. When he tries to carry that home in his pocket, the results are predictably unfortunate.

Retellings of this tale are many and various. I first heard it at Infant school in a version called 'Epominandos' which featured a black hero. In some versions of the story the young man makes a rich man's daughter laugh for the first time ever and is rewarded with a bag of gold and, sometimes, the daughter's hand in marriage. In this new version, the young man is promised work for life by his employers because he makes them laugh so much. Why not try it if you are

threatened with downsizing in *your* job! **LW**

Moon Frog

Richard Edwards, ill. Sarah Fox-Davies, Walker,
0 7445 3161 6, £5.99

POETRY

An attractively illustrated 48-page picture book collection of Richard Edwards' poems about animals which will add richness to the literary life of any young child. The poems are largely humorous and imaginative and play with words and ideas in a way that will extend the listener's language and thinking. There is plenty of word play, lots of interesting rhyme and the poems read aloud very well. The pictures complement the words without overwhelming them. **LW**

The Big Red Bus

Judy Hindley, ill. William Benedict, Walker,
0 7445 4758 X, £5.99

Bold illustrations with speech balloons and a dramatic double gatefold give an extra-special dimension to this entertaining cumulative story about a traffic jam caused by a hole in the road. A succession of brightly coloured vehicles and their exasperated drivers pile up one by one behind the big red bus in a clearly told, lively story. Finally, a tractor arrives to clear the jam and road menders arrive to fill in the hole (nice to see a female road mender!). Now the road is clear for cyclists and rabbits to take advantage of the newly smooth, empty highway. Ideal for storytelling time. **LW**

Nothing

Mick Inkpen, Hodder,
0 340 65674 3, £5.99

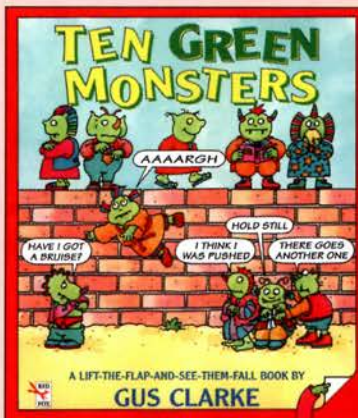


I don't think Mick Inkpen has written anything I like better than this lovely book. 'Nothing', a soft toy so battered and worn as to be unidentifiable, is left behind in the attic when the family move round the corner, not knowing who or what he is, or even his name. The story is told with such care and sensitivity that it is genuinely moving, as well as engaging. **Nothing** offers a real insight into the

feelings of loss and loneliness experienced by every child at some point in their life. This book is a must as its poignant story will speak volumes to the sad and lonely child, offering hope for a happier future as well as empathy for present hurt. **LW**

Ten Green Monsters

Gus Clarke, Red Fox,
0 09 936721 1, £4.99



'Ten green monsters standing on the wall, Ten green monsters standing on the wall and if one green monster should accidentally fall' . . . wait a minute, 'accidentally'? By about the seventh time it happens you will have children clamouring that 'it wasn't an accident, look it is that one who is doing it!' Gus Clarke takes the well-known song that is chanted so often that the children no longer really hear the words and then cleverly changes it. This book challenges children to be observant and to think about what they are saying and hearing – simple, neat but just brilliant! **JS**

Topsy and Tim Have Itchy Heads

0 14 055922 1

Topsy and Tim Meet the Ambulance Crew

0 14 055921 3

Jean and Gareth Adamson, Puffin, £2.50 each

Where would we be without the redoubtable Topsy and Tim? Between them they have covered almost every activity known to humanity and a few that are only known to children. There are now an amazing 36 series books in print dealing with everyday events and issues from learning to swim to having a babysitter, from buying new shoes to going to the doctor. Many schools probably still have some battered copies of the very first titles that appeared in the 1960s – did you use the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday etc., books . . . ? Remember the children who would only read them on the appropriate day of the week?

These two new additions tell us more than we may want to know about the inside of an ambulance and what happens when the twins get head lice and yet, what a homely, safe and downright good way for small children to learn about the things they will need confidence to deal with one day. It is easy to laugh at gentle, old fashioned Topsy and Tim but one day, if an accident should happen, it will help to be able to say, 'Hey, you're going in the ambulance just like Topsy and Tim did, so don't worry.' **LW**

Sophie and the New Baby

Laurence Anholt, ill. Catherine Anholt, Orchard,
1 86039 080 3, £3.99

Sophie spends Spring, Summer and Autumn looking forward to the arrival of her new baby brother but once he arrives, being able to accept him takes a great deal of growing up. Sophie's fury is superbly captured in the double spread where she rails at the elements that she doesn't want that baby any more! With gentle wisdom the Anholts do not present a quick solution; the resolution of Sophie's problems takes time but is satisfyingly portrayed. **JS**

As Quiet as a Mouse

Hilda Offen, Red Fox,
0 09 916531 7, £3.99

In the eyes of the reception class children I tried it with, *As Quiet as a Mouse* is a worthy successor to Hilda Offen's popular *The Sheep Gave a Leap*. They clamoured for more, but, be prepared – if you use the book with a large group, it is even harder on the ears than its predecessor! This title focuses more on sound than on movement, building gradually from tiptoeing as quietly as a mouse and giving a giggle with a worm with a wriggle, through to roaring with a dinosaur and a crescendo when all the animals join in together. With an aplomb a lot of teachers would envy, the toddler narrator then quells the noise and organises all the creatures to join in a calm and ordered finale! The illustrations are immediately appealing and the rhyming text reinforces the accelerating pace. This book will appeal to one child or a group of children – all it needs is an energetic adult to make the reading of it a truly active and participatory experience! **JS**

Bella's Big Adventure

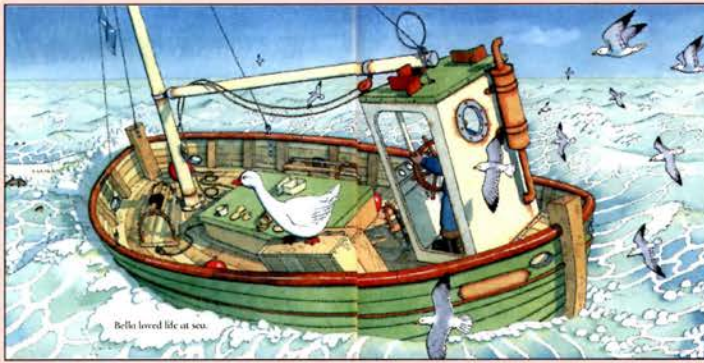
0 09 968181 1

Bella Goes to Sea

0 09 968191 9

Benedict Blathwayt, Random House,
£2.99 each

Bella the goose escapes from a bleak existence in a cage at the bottom of

From *Bella Goes to Sea*.

an untidy city garden and goes in search of a good home. Her adventures as she leaves the city and makes her way through the countryside not only make good reading but are also a wonderful support to Geography at Key Stage One. Following her route on the panorama spread at the end of the book is not easy and presents the challenge of trying to draw a map!

It feels just right that Bella should be rescued in the nick of time by William the fisherman who offers her a home. (My class remembered William and his tumbledown house from the much loved book *The Little House by the Sea* and were delighted to meet him again.)

In *Bella Goes to Sea*, it is Bella's turn to rescue William when he is shipwrecked. 'These books are just good' – a real accolade from a young Year One reviewer which was echoed by all! JS

Buster Gets Dressed

0 333 65370 X

Henry's Ball

0 333 61205 1

Rod Campbell, Campbell Books, £3.99 each

Rod Campbell's strength lies in his ability to pinpoint precisely what the young child wants to know and put it into a form which matches exactly the stage of interest, of development and of humour. *Henry's Ball* works partly because it is helping children grasp the concept of positional language, something they like to have confirmed again and again, and partly because Campbell's tongue is firmly in his cheek and the unexpected often happens – in this case a lift-the-flap surprise at the end of the book.

Buster Gets Dressed focuses on a favourite topic, uses split pages to good effect and charms the children into reading and rereading. JS

Toyin Fay

Verna Allette Wilkins, ill.

Paul Hunt, Tamarind,

1 870516 33 8, £4.99

Toyin Fay is a spirited and adventurous Afro-Caribbean girl who, when seeking a new job, is recruited to the tooth fairy service. This glowing picture book accompanies Toyin through one week of her adventures.

The text is short, simple and suitably whimsical, recounting the night by night chores and trials of a tooth fairy's working week. The illustrations are strikingly beautiful and intensely appealing to young children. The realism of Paul Hunt's almost photographic paintings presents startling visions of nocturnal flights, both bat-guided and owl-assisted.

This is very highly recommended for Nursery and Infant children, but browsers of any age will probably find it enchanting. GH

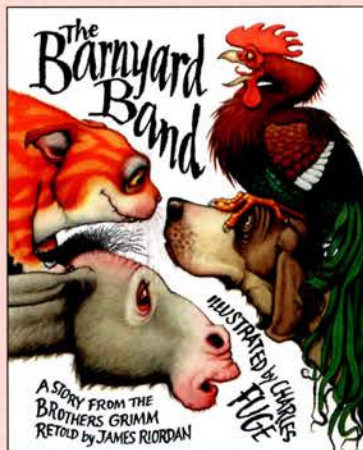
The Barnyard Band

Retold by James Riordan,

ill. Charles Fuge,

Macmillan,

0 333 64758 0, £4.99



A quartet of decrepit animals – a donkey, a dog, a cat and a cock – abandoned or condemned to death by their owners, sets off together to seek their post-retirement fortunes as musicians in the city. Before they reach their destination, they find a farmhouse in which a band of robbers are stashing their loot. An impromptu jam session at the farmhouse window soon wins the animals a nice new home. This retelling of the Grimms' simple, but touching and hilarious story, 'The Musicians of Bremen' has been done with winning gusto by Riordan, while Fuge's big, bold and brilliant paintings, combining both traditional and modern imagery, depict the quaintness and grotesquerie of the tale very stridently.

A thoroughly enjoyable book. GH

Jack the Dog

John Rowe, North-South,

1 55858 609 1, £4.99

Jack the dog gets lost in the fog, wanders aboard a boat, and ends up in old Japan. In seeking advice on the whereabouts of a cup of tea, he is confronted by an ever lengthening list of dress code rules that he must obey. Just as he's completed his kit and is about to have his first sip of green tea, he hears somebody calling him.

John Rowe's attempt to get inside the head of a dreaming dog has created an idiosyncratic picture book, with full-page illustrations, done in luminous islands of bold acrylic on dark or uneasy pastel seas, which are as fey as the facing text. A very unusual book which will give its young readers something to puzzle over. GH

Time for Bed

Alexis Obi, Tamarind,

1 870516 35 4, £3.99

Bathtime and bedtime for Kieran, a small black boy, is an occasion for flights of the imagination and procrastination, aided and abetted by his profusion of toys. It is two-and-a-half hours before his patient but increasingly tired mum gets him off to sleep.

This is not as simple a story as it at first appears. The text is a dialogue between mother and son; there is much to see in the realistically depicted scenes of domestic chaos and many gaps for the reader to fill. A clock emphasises the time Kieran takes to finally settle down. More experienced readers will probably cope but others may need help to appreciate all that is going on. JB

The Oxford Nursery Book

Ian Beck, Oxford,

0 19 272322 7, £5.99

Poems from such poets as Blake, Longfellow, Lear, Rossetti and Stevenson rub shoulders in this attractive 96-page anthology with nursery rhymes, riddles and lullabies, many of which one remembers from one's own childhood. The sounds and rhythms of the words are compelling and will be enjoyed by listeners still too young to fully comprehend their meanings. Ian Beck's decorative illustrations worked in pen and ink with colour washes and cross hatching have a charmingly nostalgic nursery feel. A collection to treasure. JB

A Present for Paul

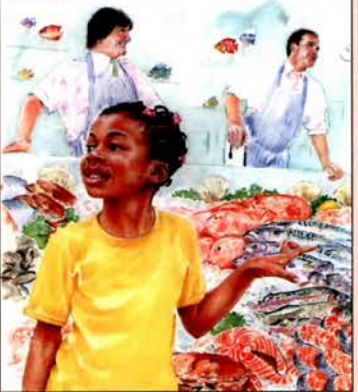
Bernard Ashley, ill. David

Mitchell, Collins Picture

Lions, 0 00 664160 1, £4.50

Pleasure, a small black girl, goes to the market with dad but, preoccupied with finding a suitable present for her teething baby brother, she forgets his warning to 'stay close' and suddenly finds herself adrift amidst a sea of coats, legs and bags. Suddenly Dad is nowhere to be seen.

"And I'm after fish while it's fresh," Dad said. He let Pleasure pick out their supper, but she didn't give it too much of a look. Paul wouldn't thank them for haddock, but he'd like a rattle to shake!



Confronted by unfamiliar staring faces, panic quickly sets in and Pleasure rushes frantically among the stalls till she finds her dad (in exactly the spot she'd left him seemingly ages ago). Quickly dad senses that it is not only baby Paul who needs a comforter.

A reassuring portrayal of a potentially frightening situation which many young children may face. David Mitchell's crowded market scenes are wonderfully bright and busy. JB

Courtney

John Burningham, Red Fox,

0 09 966681 2, £4.99

When the children choose a dog, their only criterion is that it should be one 'that nobody wants'. Their choice, Courtney, proves to have amazing talents – he's a chef, waiter, violinist, juggler, housekeeper extraordinaire, baby-entertainer and lifesaver. But Courtney is not the sort of dog to have an owner and when he vanishes one day, he remains untraceable. Yet, when a catastrophe is about to befall the family, who or what arrives to save them...

With its realistic tone and humorous, strongly characterised illustrations, this book makes meeting Courtney a privileged and enjoyable encounter. This is classic Burningham, on a par with such titles as *Mr Gumpy's Outing* and *Avocado Baby*. GR

The Boy with Two Shadows

Margaret Mahy, ill. Jenny

Williams, Picture Puffin,

0 14 055720 2, £4.99

When a witch appoints an unsuspecting boy to be her shadow while she is away on holiday, his misgivings are justified for the shadow in question turns out to be 'fierce, crooked and thorny' looking. It also behaves wickedly, pursuing wild whims of its own and even bullying the boy's own shadow and driving it away. First published by Dent in 1987, this is a welcome reissue of a strongly imaginative picture book from an exceptional writer. GR

Infant/Junior REVIEWS

Jazeera in the Sun

Lisa Bruce, ill. Paul Howard, Mammoth, 0 7497 1988 5, £3.50

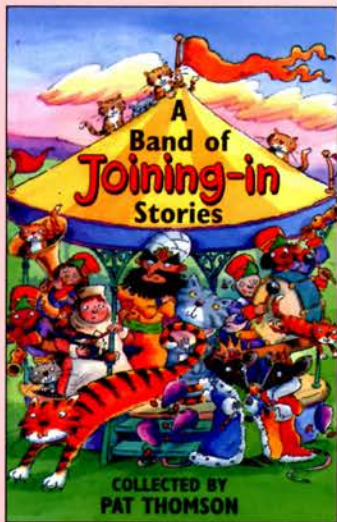
This is the third book about Jazeera, a little Indian girl who lives in England and her family. In this new story Jazeera returns to India for the

first time since she was a baby and she is reunited with her beloved Nani (grandmother) and other relatives in Delhi.

Jazeera's response to the experiences of Delhi, partly recorded in her own words in her diary, is perfectly captured with an honesty and humour

that is the mark of an accomplished writer. Heat, beggars, work, play and the ups and downs of a close family coming to terms with each other again are all seen through her eyes. The last chapter, which describes Nani's death and Jazeera's feelings of loss yet acceptance, is a small masterpiece. Paul Howard's deft and sensitive pencil illustrations enhance the story.

Any child would be enriched by this book. Do read it. **LW**



A Band of Joining-in Stories

Edited by Pat Thomson, Corgi, 0 552 52815 3, £3.50

Pat Thomson's story collections are always fresh, rich and entertaining and this one is no exception. It includes stories by Pat herself and some retellings all of which offer wonderful read-aloud material which has been specially chosen, as the title suggests, to encourage children to join in with refrains, phrases, rhymes or catch words. There are brief notes on how to tell the tales but most of them read so well that you may not need to refer to them. From the classic *Millions of Cats* with its chant, 'Cats, here, Cats there, Cats and kittens everywhere' to *The Rajah's Secret* with the musical noises of the Indian instruments to imitate, this collection should be in every school and home which still values the art of storytelling and the fun of joining in. **LW**

Dog's Journey:

A Goosey Farm Story

Gene Kemp, ill. Paul Howard, Collins, 0 00 675137 7, £3.50

For children who enjoy animal stories this story set on a Dartmoor farm will be a winner. Even children who don't think farm settings are for them will be able to identify with the feelings of the main character, Widget, and her brother, Tim, as they learn to love the freedom of the country and then have to realise, with the death of their dog, that freedom can be dangerous, too. Well written and with engaging characterisation, this sensitively illustrated novel makes an excellent read aloud. Also for fluent readers to enjoy for themselves. **LW**

Who Stole the Pie?

0 7445 4757 1

Put on a Show!

0 7445 4756 3

Allan Ahlberg, ill. Colin McNaughton, Walker 'Red Nose Collections', £5.99 each

These two bright and attractive large format, 48-page books are collections made up of the most popular of the zany Red Nose reading scheme first published ten years ago. My class fell on them, loved the stories in their enlarged format, liked the idea of the contents page and... wanted more. These books would be particularly useful to have in a home collection or in the book corner in a top infant or lower junior class. Much of the appeal was in revisiting stories that the children remembered from 'when we were little'. **JS**

Omnibombulator

Dick King-Smith, ill. Jim and Peter Kavanagh, Young Corgi, 0 552 52799 8, £2.99

Omnibombulator, yet another new character from Dick King-Smith, is a very little beetle with a very big name. Dick King-Smith (of *Babe*, the Sheep-Pig fame) is so prolific, one is almost afraid that the magic of his appeal can't be sustained but it seems he has an inexhaustible supply. The Kavanagh's drawings capture the humour and quirkiness of this story perfectly. What more can one say - except get hold of a copy right away! **JS**

The Ginger Ninja - The Dance of the Apple Dumplings

0 340 61957 0

The Ginger Ninja - St Felix for the Cup!

0 340 61958 9

Shoo Rayner, Hodder, £2.99 each

Two more Ginger Ninja stories aimed at children beginning to read by themselves. With funny, cartoon style illustrations featuring speech balloons and action sequences fully integrated with the text, these 64-page books have the dynamic of the highly successful 'Jets' series.

These books are good yarns - my class love them - but Shoo Rayner gives young readers much more than a light-hearted school story. Within the jokey framework, he grasps the nettle and develops the difficult themes of bullies and victims but, vitally, he does this in a way children can respond to.

These new stories are sequels to *The Ginger Ninja* and *The Ginger Ninja: The Return of Tiddles* in which Ginger first meets the bully Tiddles and, to be most effective, the books should be read in order (information in the books or on the covers about reading order would have been useful). These stories will help children to talk about bullying and possibly handle better this highly stressful part of growing up. Understanding that Tiddles, a bully, is terrified at the prospect of playing pawball against his previous school because he was himself systematically bullied there, will help give children an under-

standing of the ghastly cause and effect often at work in this issue. Deep themes these, but they are handled with ultra sensitive kid gloves by Shoo Rayner. **JS**

The Sad Story of Veronica who played the violin

David McKee, Red Fox, 0 09 954810 0, £4.50

A welcome reissue of a picture book which seeks to explain 'why the streets are not full of happy dancing people'. Veronica is such a virtuosa of the lachrymose that her most auspicious concert ends with a full scale flood. Literally flushed with success, she decides to take her violin into the deepest jungle in order to play to the animals. Here her playing evokes boundless joy in all the animals - except for one old lion who happens to be deaf. McKee's wry humour, and in particular the laconic ending to the story, provides dependable amusement for all ages. **GH**

The Hottest Boy Who Ever Lived

Anna Fienberg, ill. Kim Gamble, Allen & Unwin, 1 86373 475 9, £4.99

An intriguing picture book about a boy born of a volcano who lives at the edge of the world with only a salamander for a friend. He longs for human contact, and when a storm blows him into the sailing route of a friendly Viking girl, it looks as if his desire for hugs and companionship is going to be satisfied. But when things go wrong in her ice bound community, the fiery outsider is all too easy to blame. This is a very original treatment of themes like loneliness and prejudice. The story is thoughtful but humorous, and the delicate ice and fire illustrations are beautiful. **GH**

The Hunter

Paul Geraghty, Red Fox, 0 09 966631 6, £4.99

Jamina wants to be a hunter when she grows up. But when she becomes separated from her grandfather in the bush she learns what it's like to be hunted and much more besides through her encounter with an orphaned baby elephant.

A thoughtful and moving story. The illustrations are powerful and dramatic with stunningly beautiful scenes of the flora and fauna of the African landscape from sunrise to nightfall through which Jamina makes her journey of self-discovery. A book whose images - both visual and verbal - evoke awe and wonder at every turn of the page. **JB**

Emerald Blue

Anne Marie Linden, ill. Katherine Doyle, Mammoth, 0 7497 2833 7, £4.99

A beautiful picture book account told in the first person of a young girl's childhood on the coral Caribbean island where she lived with her brother and their beloved Grandma. That is until her mother came with stories of a new country with snow, 'tiny flakes of ice like syrup shavings, that fell from the sky in winter' and took her away over the sea. The story powerfully evokes the

sweetness of the child's memories - Grandma lovingly oiling and braiding her hair, starlit evenings on the verandah, and the wild hurricane experienced as an adventure thanks to Grandma's reassuring presence. We also share the pain of separation and loss: Grandma's as she bids them farewell and the narrator's, retrospectively.

The superb chalk pastel illustrations glow with the warmth and spirit of the Caribbean. I found this book deeply moving. **JB**

A Letter to Granny

Paul Rogers, ill. John Prater, Red Fox, 0 09 928881 8, £4.50

Lucy goes to sleep thinking about her Granny's visit but when she wakes up next morning she finds that 101 Acacia Road has turned into 101 Acacia Road Island. She has an exciting day playing on the beach, whale and dolphin spotting and sends a message to Granny in a bottle. Sure enough Granny arrives by boat and they have a wonderful seaside time.

Lucy's dream, portrayed in wide and wonderful seascapes, is mingled with the reality of the day which is seen in the small frames set within them. Throughout the whole, the obvious love that she and Granny share shines through. **JB**

The Last Train

Kim Lewis, Walker, 0 7445 4748 2, £4.99



In an old railway hut as the evening draws in 'very still and close' at the end of a hot summer's day, Sara and James listen to their parents recalling the days when steam trains ran across their farmland. Then Sara waves a red handkerchief and conjures a huge hissing steam train out of the thunderstorm which has broken the summer heat. That lazy summer heat and the sheer thrill and excitement that steam trains still engender, permeate the atmospheric illustrations. **JB**

The Big Big Sea

Martin Waddell, ill. Jennifer Eachus, Walker, 0 7445 4723 7, £4.99

Drawn by the mesmeric pull of the moonlit sea, a small girl and her mother share a wondrous, unforgettable time as they frolic in the waves, make footprints in the sand at the water's edge and sit together savouring the awesome natural beauty of the universe itself.

The restrained sparseness of the text contrasts perfectly with the magical, soft-focus, hauntingly beautiful yet dramatic illustrations. **JB**

You're Kidding Ms Wiz

Terence Blacker, ill. Tony Ross, Macmillan, 0 330 34529 X, £2.99

Ms Wiz, the school teacher with magic powers, has now 'dunwizzin' and become the mother of baby wiz kid William. She has also promised not to get involved in magic again much to the horror and disappointment of Podge, Jack and co. who fear that St Barnabus School will close without her intervention. Cleverly, Miz Wiz finds a way to help without breaking her promise. A wickedly hilarious text plus Tony Ross's illustrations make this a hugely entertaining addition to this popular series. More please! **GR**

Cows Moo, Cars Toot

June Crebbin, ill. Anthony Lewis, Puffin, 0 14 036959 7, £3.99

'There's a wagtail at the window
Tapping on the glass
Is he trying to tell us
He wants to join our class?' (p.68)

A wealth of subjects and moods with readability, understandability, chant-ability and tap-ability feature in this delightful collection. These poems must be the result of Crebbin's observation, wide interests, love of rhythm and knowledge of what children respond to natural-

POETRY

ly. Children want to remember them – and do so easily. They also serve as a very natural stimulus to children's own writing.

'It's time we taught them a lesson
Yes, but what can we do?
We could try giving voice to the way
that we feel
Ready, steady – MOO-OO-OO!' (p.4)

Among the very best of many 'best' poetry volumes around for primary children. **GR**

Dog Breath

Dav Pilkey, Picture Hippo, 0 590 13507 4, £3.99

'The horrible trouble with Hally

Tosis' is that as a dog she's fine but she has the most amazingly bad breath. The children in the Tosis family try every way known to humans (and dogs come to that) to save her from being given away. Who would want her I've no idea. Then after surviving some of the most awful doggy puns I've read in years, a miracle happens. Making C.S. gas smell like roses, Hally finds her true purpose in life.

I had to explain the joke about Hally's name to my class but after that the word spread and now everyone wants to read it. **PH**

Junior/Middle **REVIEWS**

The Camera Obscura

Hugh Scott, Walker, 0 7445 4794 6, £3.99

This book's cover proclaims Scott a 'Master of Menace' and he is indeed a seriously under-rated writer – yet this novel has as much in it about redemption as menace.

The Camera Obscura puts Spindletrim Tom centre-stage, constantly bullied by three boys, with his only oasis of peace his grandfather's antique shop. When the bullies invade this haven, Grandfather shows Tom the camera obscura – a way of seeing past, present and future – and so helps him discover the inner strength to defeat the boys.

Memorable prose, a faultlessly paced storyline and a moral dilemma solved by peaceful means, add up to a 'must have' for classroom and library. **VR**

Ring-a-Ring O'Roses: A Book of Nursery Rhymes

Alan Marks, North-South 1 55858 671 7, £7.99

Ring-a-Ring O'Roses is a large format, 96-page book with spirited full colour illustrations throughout accompanied by delicate black and white silhouettes. It will be enjoyed by every family and every classroom from nursery to sixth form and beyond as Alan Marks gives these rhymes the universal appeal they rightfully deserve. The organisation of the book is masterly with rhymes that take the reader forward and pace that keeps up that momentum. At the same time Marks lets you linger to wonder at the breathtaking variety of mood he creates with illustrations that haunt, amuse, challenge and move you but always, cleverly, lure you ever onwards. Alan Marks has taken the concept of the whole book as a single work of art. It is awe inspiring! **JS**

Harry the poisonous centipede

Lynne Reid Banks, ill. Tony Ross, Collins, 0 00 675197 0, £2.99

As an aficionado of Lynne Reid Banks I looked forward to reading 'Harry' enormously. I wasn't disappointed. Loathing creepy crawlies I could enjoy from a safe distance Harry and George's antics without the fear that



they might crawl up my sleeve or, perish the thought, into my mouth. Ugh!

I loved the way we were allowed to empathise with Harry whose adolescent activities tell us more about ourselves than perhaps we want to know. Superb, good quality material for newly confident readers. **PH**

Mr Knuckles

Mike Dumbleton, ill. Leigh Hobbs, Allen & Unwin, 1 86373 595 X, £4.99

'After an amazing day at school, Tracey was bursting with news for her parents.' Well don't we all feel like that after the first day of term? Tracey's news, however, is not mere gossip. Her new teacher is a gorilla! Well doesn't every school have one? This one teaches with real flair though; his story writing lesson from the school roof about flying has to be seen to be believed. Field trips, let's go to Africa! A good thing Tracey's parents are worldly wise and only believe half of what she says; an even better thing they don't believe her latest news about the supply! **PH**

The Amazing Mr Pleebus

1 86039 032 3

The Freaky Beastie of Hill Road School

1 86039 036 6

Nick Abadzis, Orchard, £3.50 each

Mr Pleebus is a vaguely humanoid, shapeshifting creature who emerges from a parallel universe into Joey and Pandora's world via a television set on which they have been playing computer games. He appears to be a benign creature, but his obvious distress is explained when he is followed by a hoard of demonic grooblies whose leader wants to take over the universe. The grooblies are defeated in the first book, but a resurgence of residual evil occurs in the second, when a wicked doppelganger of Mr Pleebus invades the children's school.

Both of these crowded little cartoon books are a lot of fun. The slapstick and surreal stories, whose texture is somewhat reminiscent of Pratchett's Discworld, bound along at an exhilarating pace. But I found it troubling that the evil forces in the books are depicted as jet black creatures who struggle against fairer skinned goodies. **GH**

The Survival of Arno Mostyn

Sarah Garland, Collins, 0 00 675085 0, £3.99

Arno Mostyn is a young would-be detective whose tranquil life with his divorced mum is disrupted by the arrival of the inevitable boyfriend, a hippie gardener working for an aged family friend. When Mostyn finds a valuable piece of stolen jewellery at the friend's house, he suspects the boyfriend immediately, though it is as plain as the rump on a chimpanzee that the real culprit is the friend's villainous nephew. Though the caricatural nasty and the obviousness of the outcome somewhat detract from the tension of this book, the story is packed with fascinating asides, intriguing little character sketches, and a lot of well observed dialogue. This is an unusual and highly readable adventure story with a reassuring subplot about the impact of family changes. **GH**

The Crazy Shoe Shuffle

Gillian Cross, ill. Nick Sharratt, Mammoth, 0 7497 2200 2, £3.50

Wouldn't it be wonderful if sarcastic, bullying and manipulative teachers had to spend a couple of days in the shoes of the children who have to put up with them? Maybe not. When Lee, a hard done by child at a very realistically depicted primary school, tries

to sort out a stack of sabotaged shoe bags, that is exactly what happens. The transformation of three teachers into eleven-year-olds, highly vulnerable to the savagery of their peers, is described in cruel and humorous detail, but with a wonderfully humane eye for the saving graces that dwell deep beneath case hardened adult exteriors. **GH**

The Paw Thing

0 14 037770 0

The Cabbage Patch Fib

0 14 037769 7

Paul Jennings, ill. Keith McEwan, Puffin, £3.50 each

Two brightly presented comic novels by the popular Australian fantasy writer (of *Uncanny!*, *Unreal!*, *Uncovered!* etc. fame).

In the first story, the owner of a fried chicken outlet tells his assistant to dispose of a neurotic and seemingly incompetent cat who has allowed the business to become infested with mice. The assistant rescues the cat, and when the rodent plague reaches Biblical proportions, the creature returns to demonstrate his true talents. In the second story, a child whose father is too shy to tell him the facts of life makes his own discovery about reproduction when he finds a new-born green baby in the cabbage patch. At first, the boy is delighted as the child bonds to him, but the novelty of being a pre-teen father soon evaporates in a miasma of nappy stench.

These are excellent stories for fluent and beginner readers alike. The layout of the books is bold and spacious, and the manic vigour of Keith McEwan's colour illustrations presents a perfect accompaniment to these zany stories. **GH**

Page to Jane Seymour

Geoffrey Trease, ill. Pauline Hazelwood, 0 7500 2113 6

Elizabeth Fry and the Forger's Daughter

Roy Apps, ill. Amy Burch, 0 7500 2085 7

Macdonald, £4.50 each

Two short (48 pages), clearly written, and well illustrated 'historical story-books', which attempt to convey the atmosphere of particular periods and places by presenting episodes

related by young participants. In the first, Francis Morland, a newly appointed page to Jane Seymour, describes feelings and events at the court of Henry VIII between the execution of Anne Boleyn and Jane's own death in the following year. The second book is set in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Liza Gunn, after witnessing a thief rotting in the dungeons of Newgate before being publicly hanged, fears the worst when her own mother is seized by the Bow Street Runners. Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker prison

reformer, comes to the rescue.

Inevitably, in such a condensed format, there is little room to develop complexities of character and social history. Henry's charm is perhaps exaggerated and his tyranny under-emphasised; Apps pulls few punches in his depiction of penal brutality, but maybe presents too rosy a vision of his heroine's achievements. These are cavils. The books are appealing enough to inspire interested readers into conducting their own further investigations. **GH**

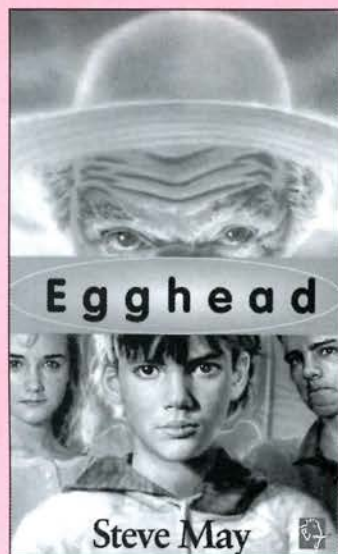
Way Home
Libby Hathorn, ill. Gregory Rogers, Red Fox,
0 09 948681 4, £4.99

Way Home is a large format picture book depicting in bold but hauntingly subfusc detail the adventures of a boy taking an adopted stray cat to his hideout in the depths of an urban wilderness. The story, printed in white on black, jagged edged page fragments, is told through the street-sharpened words of warning and reassurance that the boy offers to the

cat as they pass from danger to danger through the city's darkness and brightness.

This is a very unusual and thought-provoking book, the final image of the boy and his new companion reaching a safe but frail refuge in the threatening metropolis being particularly rich in ambiguity. Welcome to another of those wonderful picture books that can nurture the curiosity of any age group. This one was the 1995 winner of the Library Association's Kate Greenaway medal for illustration. **GH**

Middle/Secondary REVIEWS



Egghead
Steve May, Mammoth,
0 7497 2827 2, £3.99

ORIGINAL

Billy gets confusingly entangled in the struggle between what his religious beliefs tell him is right and the nastiness brought out by his need to suck up to his bullying, yobbo mates, whom he seeks both to appease and impress.

Steve May has tackled personal morality and aspects of bullying in a realistic, believable way which avoids being preachy and melodramatic. Billy's predicament should strike plenty of chords. **DB**

Shakespeare Stories II
Leon Garfield, ill. Michael Foreman, Gollancz,
0 575 06073 5, £10.99

A chunky mix of nine retellings of stories from Shakespeare including some difficult stuff such as 'The Winter's Tale', 'Cymbeline', Measure for Measure' and 'Richard III' alongside 'Julius Caesar', 'Much Ado About Nothing' and 'The Comedy of Errors'.

This collection is, of course, everything you'd expect from Leon Garfield with fine prose and the complications of plot well sorted. Impressive illustrations enhance the overall quality.

Any schools with new orders in mind and a commitment to the Bard ought to add this volume to their library. **DB**

Hero of Lesser Causes **ORIGINAL**
Julie Johnston, Orchard,
1 86039 204 0, £4.99

'You'll run ahead with some half-baked idea that'll end up being embarrassing for all concerned. Especially me.'

Patrick's exasperation with his sister, Keely, is born of experience, but also of deep depression. He lies inert and wasted after contracting polio at the local pool and Keely has desperate, romantic notions of reviving his taste for life and adventure.

This is a many-layered novel that engulfs you with its rightness and humanity. It is an award winner worth pursuing with serious readers. **DB**

The Fated Sky **ORIGINAL**
Henrietta Branford, Hodder, 0 340
66102 X, £3.99

An uninspiring cover and plodding blurb do scant justice to the excellence of this beautifully written novel about the eventful and often tragic life of Ran, a Viking girl.

Henrietta Branford conveys a sense of rawness and danger as part of Ran's life and succeeds in making an ancient and alien culture seem utterly believable. The book is skilfully paced, starkly setting Ran's life with the blind musician, Toki, and their children against the brutal slaughter of an entire community by Vignit, Ran's great enemy.

The author ensures that this story is not about a people lost in time from whom we feel distanced but about individuals with emotions, ambitions and tragedies similar to our own. **VR**

I can move the sea **POETRY ORIGINAL**

100 poems by children
Chosen by Gillian Clarke,
ill. Jenny Fell, Pont Books,
1 85902 279 0, £5.95

Wondercrump Poetry **POETRY**

Poems for children by children
Edited by Jennifer Curry,
Red Fox, 0 09 968291 5, £5.50

In the first of these rich and fascinating collections, Gillian Clarke has chosen 100 poems written by children in the schools of Wales and

northern England (three of the poems are presented in Welsh with English translations). The authors range in age from five to sixteen. Their writing is based mainly on observations and celebrations of the natural world, though at the heart of the book is a set of haunting poems inspired by Welsh mythology, including some particularly vivid reflections on Blodeuwedd, the lethally beautiful woman fashioned from flowers.

The second book contains 155 poems from the third Roald Dahl Foundation poetry competition. They come from a similar age range, but the variety of issues addressed and moods expressed is much wider. Many of the poems are troubled, ironic, angry; others are playful, quirkily observant, exultant. Mark Mulvihill (13) gives us a Whitmanesque litany of some of the delights and disasters occurring in one minute of the world's time; Katherine Byard (10) praises her violin's 'orange body tinted with bronze mist'; Lizzie Elliot (16) contemplates murder in a chilling schizoid soliloquy. The sheer scope and depth of the writing in this book puts to shame much of the jovial trivia that is offered by publishers as poetry for children.

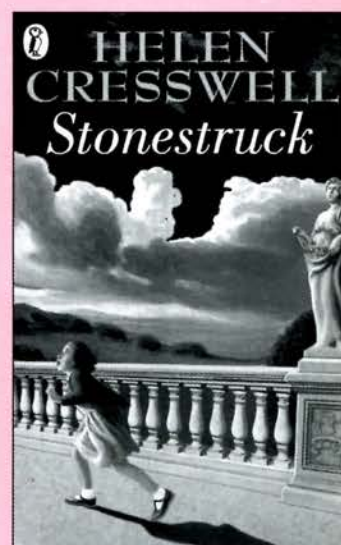
Somebody should send copies of these excellent anthologies to the Department for Education as a radiant illustration of the fascinating work in language and literacy that is going on in classrooms all over the country right now. **GH**

Cold Shoulder Road
Joan Aiken, Red Fox,
0 09 955851 3, £3.50

This novel has one of the most compelling opening chapters I've ever read, then it carries on to a spellbinding story that I had trouble putting down. We have come to expect the best from Joan Aiken but *Cold Shoulder Road*, part of her James III sequence that begins with *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* and *Black Hearts in Battersea*, is superb. Arun returns to his mother's house only to find it deserted and no one will tell him where she has gone. With the help of his indomitable cousin, Is Twite, Arun sets off to discover the truth, whatever that might be. Aiken makes us believe with ease that we are there experiencing the risks and the mysteries, enduring the hardships and the confusions. I loved every word picture and every twist in the tale right to the rather shocking ending. **PH**

My Brother is a Superhero
Dyan Sheldon, ill. Derek Brazell, Puffin,
0 14 036598 2, £3.50

If you read and loved *My Brother is a Visitor from Another Planet* as I did, you will adore this. Snappy American writer Dyan Sheldon has managed to confuse me again. The hero worship Adam has for his older brother is both profound and total to the extent that he doesn't recognise his own talents. Adam learns slowly that he can never be his brother no matter how much he wants to be. He has to be himself and that is quite something. I loved the last sentence but don't read it first now I've said that! Talk about understated brotherly love! **PH**



Stonestruck
Helen Cresswell, Puffin,
0 14 037367 5, £4.99

Utterly spellbinding. Read it at one sitting so the magic does not escape. Jessica is evacuated ahead of the rest of her school to Powis Castle near Welshpool. With her father away at the front and her mother off to Belgium to drive ambulances, she wishes that she was anywhere but there and thus comes under the spell of The Green Lady who has been stealing local children for centuries. There are any number of truly shivery moments as the peacock messenger screams and the ghostly children emerge from the mist playing their sinister game of Fish-in-the-net. The locals are frightened and evasive as Jessica tries to fathom out the mystery and it finally takes an alliance with some Cockney evac-

ues to defeat the supernatural forces. If anyone from the BBC is reading this, I advise you to buy the serial rights NOW. This could be a classic. **SR**

Flip-Flop Girl

Katherine Paterson, Puffin,
0 14 037591 0, £3.99

There are lots of books about youngsters coping with family problems but this one stands out by a mile. The protagonist is nine years old but the insights presented in the book demand an older reader of 11 to 13, I would say. Vinnie's father has died, the family has moved to a new town and she has no friends. As if this was not enough, her five-year-old brother Mason has not spoken or eaten properly since Dad died and all Mum and Grandma's attention is focused on him, leaving Vinnie to cope as best she can. Some comfort comes from a crush on Mr Clayton, her new teacher, and more from a tenuous relationship with Lupe, whom Vinnie thinks of as the flip-flop girl because of her footwear and who has family problems of her own. A tenderly told tale but you'll have to push it as a depressingly old-fashioned cover will not attract the readership who would enjoy it. **SR**

The Odyssey

Geraldine McCaughrean,
ill. Victor G Ambrus,
Oxford, 0 19 274153 5, £6.99

I have to confess that I've always had something of a blind spot for myths and legends so it took me quite a while to get around to looking at this large format, 96-page book. Once I did, I was hooked from the first paragraph:

'The war lasted so very, very long. Then suddenly it was over in a flash

of fire, a splash of blood and a trampling of horses. Men whose ships had rolled idly over a thousand tides in the bay of Troy mustered by the water's edge in groups.'

I can't compare this retelling with other versions for you but the text has a superb epic ring to it and there are powerful illustrations on each spread including a number in full colour. Odysseus is courageous, arrogant and pompous by turns and we even feel some sympathy for poor old Cyclops. I'm ashamed to say that I've still got my blind spot but I'll certainly find space on my shelves for this powerful retelling. **SR**

Why we got chunked out of the Inter-Schools Football Competition

David Ross, ill. Jacqui Thomas, Puffin,
0 14 037421 3, £3.50

I gave this one a warm welcome in **BfK 94** when it appeared in hardback as an Antelope so it is very pleasing to see it out now in paperback. Disaster strikes the Skimpole Street Primary Schools team at every turn in the match with Stapleton Road. The multi-narrator style is well handled and soccer fans will recognise many of the characters. **SR**

The Lost Mine **ORIGINAL**

Pamela Grant,
Oxford, 0 19 271659 X, £5.99

The Roman soldier who died, trapped in the Lost Mine, had tried to unite the warring factions of his time. Now, Iona, plagued by dreams of the soldier, wants to put his spirit to rest. She finds an ally in Jamie, haunted by his own dreams of being buried in the mines. Their own struggles linked with those of local families fighting against their harsh

employer finally find release with the rediscovery of the Mine. This is a tautly and neatly constructed novel, its vivid social realism heightened by dreams and fears and the conflict of the past cleverly enacted again in the present. **AJ**

Dresses of Red and Gold **ORIGINAL**

Klein, Puffin,
0 14 036285 1, £4.99

This is the sequel to **All in the Blue Unclouded Weather** and it continues the stories of the Melling sisters. It contains ten short stories linked by character and place which give the sense of the family's and the individual sisters' changing lives. Some of the incidents (dreadful Aunt Ivy coming to stay, getting out of a fictitious birthday party) are wonderfully funny and childish while others (recovering in hospital from having tonsils removed, older sister Gracie's return) although lightly told, deal with time passing, ageing and death. This is a tremendous book, beautifully and fondly written. **AJ**

For the Life of Laetitia

Merle Hodge, Dolphin,
1 85881 253 4, £3.99

Set in the Caribbean, this novel tells how Laetitia, who has won a scholarship to the secondary school, leaves her village to live for at least part of the time in the city with her father and his family. The detail of family, school and relationships allows us to feel the strong emotional pulls upon Laetitia as she struggles to make her determined, individual way with her father and the teachers at school whose values are contrary to the ones imbued in her by her country-dwelling grandparents. This book finishes at Laetitia's second term. I hope there's more to come. **AJ**

Well Dazzled

Sue Robinson, Red Fox,
0 09 955531 X, £2.99

This is a quirky reversal of the horror genre. Misery, living up to her nickname, manages to exude no joy until she is stalked by a mysterious stranger who seems bent on brightening up her life. He is stuck with the nickname 'Smiler' and is desperate for help from her – how does she manage to be so miserable all the time? Misery takes him under her wing and almost succeeds... only to find herself unfreezing and able at last to climb out of her unhappy frame of mind. A novel that is refreshing, funny and moving. **AJ**

The Ultimate Game

1 86039 332 2

Cyberspace Adventure

1 86039 333 0

Terrance Dicks, Orchard
'Computer Game Addict',
£3.99 each

These are short and very exciting stories, especially the first one, great fun especially for those who love computer games but who don't normally find much in books to keep them going. Zak has exhausted computer games and searches for the ultimate game. The Boffin lends it to him and in the course of the three levels over three days Zak learns how to deal with conflict – each day he puts his game knowledge into practice in real situations. By the end the Boffin has taught him that the ultimate game is actually all around him. The other book feeding off the formula is less satisfying but still effective. **AJ**

Older Readers **REVIEWS**

Make Lemonade

Virginia Euwer Wolff,
Faber, 0 571 17506 6, £4.99

The sheer originality of style, content, theme and language should ensure this exceptional and well crafted novel, first published in the US, a place on the shelves. This is one of those books that happens occasionally and you want to recommend it to everyone.

To escape from her grotty environment, 14-year-old LaVaughn must go to college. For that she needs money. Babysitting seems to be the answer, but her employer, 17-year-old single mother, Jolly, turns out to be even worse off than LaVaughn. The relationship between the two girls and the learning curve they embark on together, trying to cope with the bitter lemons that life bestows, and to make of them sweet lemonade, is a story that stays in the mind long after the last page is read. **DB**

Virtual Sexual Reality

Chloe Rayban, Red Fox,
0 09 947381 X, £3.50

This really is a load of contrived, old hokum, but it is addictively, racily funny and contributes imaginatively to an understanding of gender differences.

Due to a freak accident at a Virtual Reality Show at Olympia, Justine gets stuck as a male version of herself and through her (his?) many fixes and disasters acquires a crazy insight into how young males tick. The plus is that she (he?) also sees just how Justine comes across as a mate-seeking girl on full alert.

Harmless and witty fun that ought to be promoted. **DB**

After the Darkness **ORIGINAL**

Michael Smith,
Scholastic 'Ad Lib', 0 590
54260 5, £6.99

This is a ghost story, a war story – but most of all a story about the resilience of the human spirit. It is compellingly written: from the outset, the Cohn family's flight from Nazi-occupied Paris holds the reader in thrall.

As tragedy piles on tragedy, the family is destroyed, leaving the ghosts of the two children, Lucie and Jean-Pierre to gently haunt Oliver, whose family has bought the house in Le Bouton d'Or in which the two died. It is Oliver who eventually lays them to rest.

The real triumph of this novel is that it illustrates the plight of Jews in the

Second World War in an almost unbearably human and memorable way.

After the Darkness is a trade paperback and therefore more expensive than a mass market paperback (which is more flimsily bound), but do find the funds to buy it as a class set for Years 9-11. **VR**

New World

Gillian Cross, Puffin,
0 14 037377 2, £3.99

A very exciting story, hard to put down, of the trials for a new virtual reality game. The plotting is intricate, with the two separate players and a third hacker all attempting to solve the mysteries of the game through its various genres and phases, confronting each other in virtual reality and gradually coming to work together outside the game to expose the dangers of this all too frightening play. The reader becomes deeply involved in solving the puzzle of the game and the plot, and the interweaving of the separate characters and phases along with the computer gaming make it a compulsive read. **AJ**



REVIEWERS in this issue:

David Bennett, Jill Bennett,
Pam Harwood, George Hunt,
Adrian Jackson, Val Randall,
Gill Roberts, Steve Rosson,
Judith Sharman and
Liz Waterland.

Authorgraph No.101

Lesley Howarth:

Lesley Howarth interviewed by Stephanie Nettel



Ever heard of the eye-in-the-sky technique? Lesley Howarth employs it at the end of *Weather Eye* and tends to get very excited by it, because it demonstrates perfectly how 'film and television techniques can be used to stimulate the pace of a story'. It sounds like the film world's version of a fractal – an analogy that might please her Internet-wise characters more than herself, since she delegates computer expertise to her husband Phil – until she brings in Dickens.

'Right back in *Bleak House* you come in from the sky, down zero in to part of London, then to a street in Chancery Lane, then to a man standing outside a particular shop, then into the shop – and you get to the scene. And that's what I did for the last scene in *Weather Eye*, coming in over the top of what's going on, and looking at different parts of it as if it were a painting.'

Journeying from London to meet her I had the feeling that I was an eye-in-the-sky, or had been sucked into a fractal. Three or so hours on the train to Plymouth in Devon, then 16 miles by taxi through rolling scenery adjoining the bleakness of Dartmoor, over the border to Cornwall, and into a car park in a small village called Callington, where Lesley (because she hates driving into the Plymouth traffic) was to pick me up and take me on through her local lanes, past engine houses of the long-gone silver lead mines now done up for prosperous new incomers, to a row of houses that ends with number 11, the house Lesley and husband Phil built 10 years ago. Literally. With their own hands.

The house and her writing career have led parallel lives. She can remember the precise moment she decided to write. The house was newly finished after an insane period that 'makes me tired to look back at and picture what we did', when, with three small children, they lived in a caravan on the site and she did the labouring jobs (like mixing concrete) for Phil and one other workman. It was an April night in 1987, and she was lying in the bath. 'The dust was settling after this terrific physical effort, when I had a burning urge to write all these rather quirky short stories.'

Four full-length novels and one conservatory extension later, it is the writing that takes precedence. 'I'm very protective about it, careful to organise an uninterrupted block of time in a daily routine. I click on my computer at nine, when the kids are gone, and work till two; I'll go for a walk and think of all the things that need changing and rush back to do them.'

There had been no hint of such an urge, far less commitment, in all the time since her earliest days. As an only child, she had indeed led a very interior life, fascinated by stories and reading eclectically. 'I'd live in a story, in its atmosphere, for days, and spent long hours plonking out stories on my Dad's typewriter.'

Lesley Howarth was born in Bournemouth (where her father, a precision engineer primarily in aviation, still lives), and the accent of those parts slyly pops up its head, turning I-sounds into soft Oys. She was moved from grammar school, where she didn't work at all, to spend her last year at Bournemouth School for Girls – where she didn't work at all. 'I can only put it down to a fierce strain of individualism: the more people told me to buckle down the less likely I was to do it. I've thought a lot about it, and come to the conclusion that It Wasn't All My Fault! But it was silly, I'd have liked to have gone to university.' And she is glowingly proud of Sadie, her eldest who, after a year as a language assistant in Germany, will be off to Cambridge University to read German and Italian.

Friends suggested art school, and Lesley did a foundation course at Bournemouth College of Art. By now she'd met Phil, who'd just graduated from Bristol as a civil engineer and got a job in London. 'In those days no parents were going to be happy if we'd just gone off to live in London together' so they married, and she began her three years at Croydon College of Art. She was 18. 'It worked out OK, but it's not a course of action I'd particularly recommend,' she says cheerfully, one day after their silver wedding anniversary.

Almost by accident she was funnelled into a vocational course to emerge as a fashion

designer ('ludicrous, because I hated sewing with a passion'), but, typically bolshie, she'd done her final show thesis on horror films, and it was her description of a day at the Hammer Studios with Joanna Lumley rather than her fashions which won plaudits from a visiting journalist. Neither equipped her for likely work when they returned to Phil's native village of Milton Abbot for his new job on the Launceston by-pass.

And so began her years of casual labour. 'That suited me, for I was sick of the pretensions of the fashion world,' a world certainly a long way from the local market garden. 'It was heaven – I was totally happy there. It was so beautiful, and the simplicity appealed to me: for two years I was learning all about shrubs, humping wheelbarrows full of plants around. I've never minded simple physical work, which seems to have been a thread all through my life: right to the moment of starting writing I was working in the local market garden, picking tomatoes and daffodils.'

Aha! Not hard to spot the clues now... and yes, it was in a Spring of picking daffodils just down the road that the glorious sight of their massed yellows, white and golds set her off on her first published novel, *The Flower King*. As for the tomato house, 'I often spent all day alone there, and it was like a world of its own. It was a huge great long greenhouse with tomatoes right up to there, pointing to the ceiling, and so nice and warm, with things to eat and drink, that I thought, "Well, you could just about live in here if you wanted to!" – which is exactly what Maphead and his father would discover in her next novel a year later. And, like her, they would also discover at the end of the season that 'clearing up was a horrible job'.

After two years the Howarths had saved enough to visit friends in America, buying a motorbike for a four-month ride across the country to arrive home exhilarated and penniless. A depressing phase followed, living in a caravan in the garden of a friend's mother, before managing to rent a cottage. Lesley took a job in a pottery, then in another market garden,

hoping but failing to recapture her earlier idyll. Then Sadie arrived; they moved to a terraced house; she had Georgia and Bonnie (now 13 and 12), and worked in the evenings in an old people's home. She worked for the money, not the cause – 'I've never had such a demanding job, I take my hat off to such people' – but some of the old characters she met eventually resurfaced in *The Flower King*.

The Howarths' success in extending their terraced house led them to wonder about building a whole house, so they bought their present site. Phil, meanwhile, had ranged through a post-graduate teaching course, been a Further Education Officer and lectured in soil mechanics before arriving at his present post with a Bristol civil engineering firm. Today everything seems neatly comfortable and thriving – the big family kitchen, the guinea-pig in his garden run, stolidly letting a blase robin pinch his food, and Lesley's own study. Its walls are bright with postcards by a local artist, whose originals of a dazzling sheet of daffodils and narcissi, rich tomatoes and her own straw hat, have become too successfully expensive to afford – though we meet someone like her in *The Flower King*.

There's a quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson on the wall, too, from which she quoted with rapt homage when we talked – 'I can't get through a conversation without mentioning Stevenson' – which expresses for her the job of creation, 'the mysterious deep process whereby all those early threads in a novel seem to know how to come together, and makes working with these figures in a landscape such fun. Something like: "Remark the author in his study, when matter crowds upon him and words are not wanting, and what a continual series of successes as time flows by, with what pleasure of the ear and eye he sees his airy structure grow upon the page."

'Stevenson absorbs and fascinates me – the way he gets not almost the right word but just the right word every time. Where I lived with my parents in Westbourne (a district of Bournemouth) was a stone's throw from where he lived: I used to sit in the garden of the house where he wrote *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Kidnapped*, and where Henry James visited him, thinking "This is where he wrote these things..."'



More unexpectedly, she also cites Australian children's writer, Paul Jennings, admiring his macabre/funny edge and originality – 'Nobody would ever think of doing the things Jennings does' – and Raymond Carver's short stories. 'What is it about such peerlessly gritty writing that defines it as adult rather than for children? This unhelpful laying down of boundaries today makes it very difficult for writers who want to play around.' She maintains she didn't read anything at all for years and years, and still avoids novels, preferring now to go away and soak herself in facts, 'then letting it all stew to see what happens'.

Lesley is drawn to scriptwriting for children's television, including dramatising her own stories which, she says, already 'rush from one bit of dialogue to the next'. Indeed, she toys with the notion of a whole novel told in dialogue, one full of action that is only guessed at through its dialogue. After all, it's how she began.

In 1987 (after that momentous bath) a friend who was a local video producer asked her to write some 15-minute two-handers, which he shot with members of a Plymouth acting workshop, to submit to Channel 4 Television's 'New directors and writers' initiative. They weren't placed, but the experience encouraged her to attend creative writing evening classes, which led her to longer stories. And always the voice that emerged was directed at children.

Three novels had been rejected before *The Flower King*, which had only made her more bloody-mindedly determined; she could tell she was improving, and getting closer to particular editors. 'I couldn't have submitted at a worst time, 1990-91, when publishers were really feeling the pinch.' (In fact, she could – it's even worse today.) She read an article about Walker Books and their encouragement of new writers – she only recently acquired an agent when film and TV rights began to turn up – and the eagle eye of Wendy Boase spotted her. A remarkable woman, Lesley says, in a smashing author-led firm, who's been a dream ever since: 'It's so important to have a lynch-pin you can trust.' A minor but vital lynch-pin has been her eldest daughter, on whose advice about dialogue she always relied, and she's only half-joking in her apprehension about the time when she will have no more youngsters in the house.

One solution, as with many writers, is the school visit, and she and her daughters have now devised an advance questionnaire: What do you like reading, watching, doing? 'It makes them feel involved, and it's essential to know how kids are thinking.' She tells rollicking tales of a trip with school kids to Hemsby Weather Station, near Great Yarmouth in Norfolk, to see them release a weather balloon. There was a fearful wind which immediately blasted the balloon back into the hapless releaser, damaging, it turned out, the signalling device, so that they had to release another.

When I wrote *Weather Eye* I hadn't known that there really was a severe-weather watchers' network on the Internet! In fact, at that time I didn't know much about the Internet at all, and just extrapolated that there must be something like this in the future. But now I can say – for instance to a 12-year-old who wrote to me this week – you can do it too at your school.

'I'd seen an article about near-death experiences and used it fairly cold-bloodedly as a plot engine, and it seemed to fit in with the apocalyptic feeling. I hoped to empower the kids but remain within the limits of credibility (you can't have children saving the world), while triggering a fast pace by making more and more things happen against a background of this



terrifically unsettling environmental event as it reached a crescendo. I feel the way to arrive at an original storyline that can affect children's lives is to weave in what's going on around them at the moment but with a resonance from a deeper storyline.'

More structurally ambitious, *The Pits* knits two concurrent stories, for although Lesley Howarth wanted the 'old' one to be dominant, she was anxious to avoid the turn-off that straight history seems to provoke. 'The angle would be, "Hey, I'm just like you – I hang out on the corner by the cave." There was some Ice Age research involved – the lake and its topography came from 'amazingly helpful' information sent to her from Star Carr, an ancient settlement in Yorkshire, the deformed handprints were her own blend of those found in a Pyrenean cave and an African tribe's grief rituals, and the birch culture (Stone Age Punks Get High on Gum) is true enough – but her basic attitude is that history is so speculative that one person's version is as likely as another's. 'What is reality? Do you decide for yourself, or take another's word? But at the same time it was done terribly tongue-in-cheek.'

Easily bored herself, Lesley Howarth sets out to have, and to provide, fun. 'Adult novelists could learn a tip or two about plotting and pace from children's fiction. It's a world of the imagination I particularly enjoy roaming about in, because you've got the scope to take young readers wherever you want to. It's a marvellous feeling, it really is, writing for that 11 to 14 bracket, older children and young adults – it's the best job ever!' What, even better than picking tomatoes and daffodils? ■

Lesley Howarth's books are all published by Walker:

Weather Eye, 0 7445 2488 1, £8.99;

0 7445 4305 3, £3.99 pbk

The Flower King, 0 7445 3190 X, £3.99 pbk

Maphead, 0 7445 2458 X, £8.99;

0 7445 3647 2, £3.99 pbk

The Pits, 0 7445 4108 5, £8.99; 0 7445 4767 9, £3.99 pbk (paperback available January 1997)

Non Fiction **REVIEWS**



Above: 'A breadseller in Cairo, Egypt, carries ring-shaped loaves, hung on posts round his basket.' From *Bread*.

Right: From *First Pony*.

Transport in Art

Lucy Micklethwait, Collins

(I Spy series),

0 00 198181 1, £9.99; 0 00 664580 1,

£6.99 pbk

INFANT/JUNIOR

This is the fourth title in the 'I Spy' series (already published are *An Alphabet in Art*, *Numbers in Art* and *Animals in Art*) in which the game is of course a subtle means to an end, effortlessly luring participants into exploring carefully chosen examples from the whole spectrum of fine art painting.

One reason why Lucy Micklethwait is so consistently successful in her approach to developing children's interest in art is that she never patronises her intended audience. Her wide-ranging selections are rarely predictable and frequently challenging, and the baker's dozen in her latest compilation is no exception.

Thus, an aeroplane is to be spied in Paolozzi's 'Wittgenstein at the Cinema Admires Betty Grable', a rowing boat in Kandinsky's 'Birds' and a camel in Dali's 'La Table Solitaire'.

Only the minimum of factual information is given since the author notes that 'the children who helped me choose this small selection of paintings showed little interest in the artists, but they know the paintings inside out, and will, I'm sure, remember them.' That sums up the essence of what this book is all about.

VH

Maps

Rachel Bowles and Peter Evans, BBC (Factfinder series),

0 563 37273 7, £7.99; 0 563 37274 5,

£4.99 pbk

JUNIOR/MIDDLE

There's no doubt that many children find map work extremely difficult, so a book which explains some of the concepts clearly, as this one does, is a godsend. A major strength is its early statement and constant repetition of the message 'No map can show you everything. You must choose the right one to tell you what you want.'

Maps begins strongly with the example of a primary school in Aberdeen, showing how each line of the school's address takes us to a different map – child's map, large-scale, street, OS, road atlas etc. – and we are told how long it would take to walk or drive across it. Later pages look at measuring distance, maps at sea, comparing map from different years and lots more.

SR

Bread

0 7502 1796 0

Pasta

0 7502 1794 4

Jillian Powell, Wayland (Food series), £8.99 each

JUNIOR/MIDDLE

Pasta must be the sports food of the 90s. Its slow release of energy makes it ideal for the long-distance performer: marathon runners, Tour de France cyclists and Wagnerian tenors all swear by it. Powell's delightful exploration of the spaghetti jungle shows us European and Asian pastas, their variety, manufacture and presentation, and how to make and cook pasta for yourself. The pictorial A-Z of shapes (Z for Ziti – long macaroni) is excellent. Why so little wholemeal pasta is made is not explained, even though it's 'twice as good for you', but nonetheless this is a nourishing read.

Variety and cultural differences are even more strongly stressed in *Bread* which looks at types and uses of the stuff of life worldwide and through history – from matzo (unleavened bread) to summer pudding (which includes bread) and maslin (grain which is a mix of wheat and rye) to schwarzbrot (black bread). Again wholemeal flour emerges as 'healthier' and, this time, does feature in the recipes.

The Incas had over 1000 different names for what we just call spuds and even used a potato clock to measure time. The potent social and historical roles of the humble tuber are compellingly documented in *Potatoes*.

Our fish diet is changing rapidly as wild fish stocks decline, a decline which Powell mentions only fleetingly in *Fish* when introducing the current growth in fish-farming, concentrating rather on nutritional advantage, variety, processing and cooking, with a specially interesting spread on curing methods worldwide.

Fish

0 7502 1799 5

Potatoes

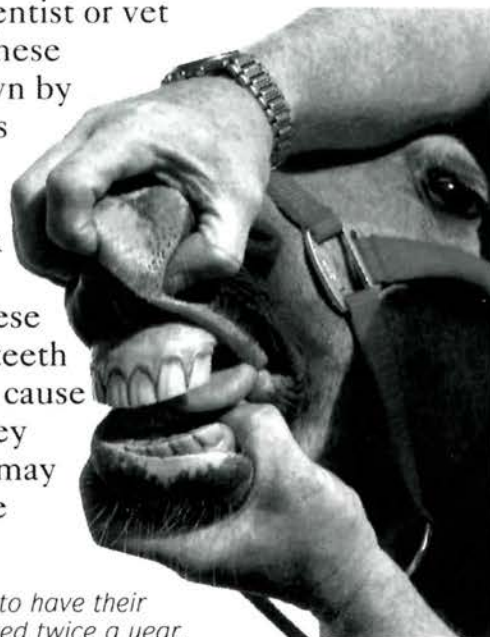
0 7502 1976 9

TEETH

Your pony needs to go to the dentist as often as you do, which is once every six months. His teeth are growing all the time and may get sharp edges which make his mouth sore.

A horse dentist or vet smooths these edges down by rasping his teeth.

He will also check for wolf teeth. These are small teeth that often cause pain as they grow and may need to be removed.



Ponies need to have their teeth inspected twice a year.

Fish and *Potatoes* lack the celebratory nature of *Bread* and *Pasta* but the four are worthy additions to a library's food section. Wipe-clean covers, too. TP

First Pony

Kate Needham,

0 7460 2437 1, 0 7460 2436 3 pbk

Grooming and Stable Management

Lucy Smith,

0 7460 2439 8, 0 7460 2438 X pbk

Usborne (Riding School series),

£5.99 each, £3.99 each pbk

JUNIOR/MIDDLE

Here are two well-conceived and skilfully delivered titles of an eventual four-book series on horse and pony care.

First Pony emphasises the importance of realising the responsibilities involved in the whole business before getting hock-deep in it, and of getting the right pony for the right owner. From initial selection and housing, through settling in to behaviour problems, the advice offered is clear and the message of 'don't go for it if you can't stick with it' ever recurrent.

Grooming and Stable Management amplifies in technical detail the messages about hard graft. Elementary grassland care and stable fire-prevention join the more predictable muck-management, feeding and farriery, grooming and housing in the list of subjects upon which good and fuss-free advice is given.

The responsibilities of proper horse-stewardship are great and many instructors will testify that they can influence other aspects of young people's lives to their benefit. A pity, then, that such responsibilities are all too often glossed over by the pulp pony fiction still treasured *faute de mieux* by many of today's young horse lovers. Here is better in good

UNFINISHED STORIES

In every classroom in every school, lies a wordhoard of unappreciated treasure.

Those shreds and patches of unfinished narrative that fill the workbooks and writing folders of so many children might, with a change of perspective, be valued for what they suggest rather than castigated for being incomplete. George Hunt explores.

One of my most precious possessions is the tattered wreck of a *Chatterbox* annual dating back to before the First World War. *Chatterbox* was an early children's journal, and the volume I have, bereft of covers and of several of its first and last pages, is a treasure chest of puzzles, anecdotes, illustrations and verse.

Running through the book is a story in instalments, 'The Secret Valley', by a Mrs Hobart-Hampden. The story is set in India during the Raj, and relates the adventures of two children who persuade a youth to flee the remote temple where he has been forced to act as an idol. The youth can communicate with the animals of the forest, and he enlists the help of Ganesh, an immensely powerful elephant named after the Hindu god, to assist in the escape. In the course of their flight, Ganesh is wounded by a poisoned dart.

Knowing that he is going to die, he begins to make his way towards the legendary elephant's graveyard, the Secret Valley of the title, carrying his hapless passengers with him. Before he can reach his destination, he is surrounded by a huge herd of the Rajah's elephants, intent on taking him prisoner. As Ganesh prepares himself for his final battle with their leader, the children brace themselves for the titanic collision which will hurl them into the path of the pounding hooves. The editor tells us that the story continues on page 391. My volume of *Chatterbox* ends in mid-sentence on page 382.

Another of my favourite books as a child, lost long ago, was a collection called *The Dark Blanket and Other Stories*. The title story ends with a heartbroken milkmaid asking a sorceress to turn her into a bird so that she can escape from a king who loves her, and has wronged her. Her wish is granted, and she flies away, but some time later a child brings a



MR. LINDEN'S LIBRARY

*He had warned her about the book.
Now it was too late.*

dying bird to the king. He looks into its eyes, recognises them, and weeps. What had the king done to bring about this tragedy? I don't know; the first chunk of the book was missing.

The house I was brought up in contained almost as many half books as whole ones. There were several reasons for this. My mother's family followed a tradition of treating the written word as common property, so letters, books and magazines were passed from hand to hand until they began to disintegrate. The enthusiasm for reading evident in this practice was passed on to her children, but as we were a possessive brood, the respect for books took longer to establish, and many a volume was torn apart as it was wrested from hand to hand. The resulting pieces were retained by whoever held them, and filed away jealously amongst other scrambled fragments. The fact that our stocks came largely from school jumble sales, and especially from the cardboard boxes containing the battered, jacketless and incomplete items, greatly assisted

these processes of fission and shuffling.

Had we been a co-operative bunch, we could have devised a game of storybook patience, laying out rows of scattered chapters, and steadily reconstructing texts by tracing adventures from signature to signature. But we settled for disintegration, and thus began my fascination with unfinished stories.

For most people, I suppose, the experience of having a good story dry up in mid-stream must be about as satisfying as having a good meal snatched from beneath your eagerly descending fork, but I began to find a taunting charm in these items of semi-precious scrap. They were like relics of imagery half recovered from dreams, or snatches of overheard adult conversation that carried little meaning in themselves, but by their strangeness evoked in the listener's

imagination whole sagas of speculation. '... so she sat there all night long,' I once overheard an elderly auntie saying, 'watching them squeeze in and out through the keyhole ...'

The fascination of these fragments is of a similar nature to that deployed by Scheherazade, only with a genuinely unfinished story, you do not have the assurance that someone will finish it off for you at a later date. When we read an intact story, we construct possibilities for what comes next. The unfolding narrative confirms or denies our expectations, and at the same time keeps us guessing. At the end there is a sense of closure, a final verdict on our predictions, though the possible worlds we generated while engrossed in the story will continue to resonate in the regrets or satisfactions the outcome produces in us. In an unfinished story, beyond the breakpoint our speculations are suddenly freed from the verdicts of the writer. The cliché about the reader being the real author becomes a felt reality, and we can elaborate the story as fantastically as we like. If a story with a beginning, middle and end is a metaphor for a completed life, then an unfinished story is like a life that is still being lived, with all its possibilities still ahead of us.

There is, of course, a tension between the desire for closure and the lure of these endless possibilities, best illustrated by stories which give us glimpses of both alternatives. Two masterpieces of unfinished literature are Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston* (1896), both incomplete because of their authors' sudden and unexpected death. The two novels were far enough advanced, with their plots brought to crucial turning points, for us to care greatly about their characters. However, because both Dickens and Stevenson left notes suggesting possible outcomes for the stories, we are left in a tantalising position where the authors' intentions are visible in outline, but remain as uncertain as our own speculations.

More fascinating still are stories in which the break is complete. My favourite amongst these is 'The Story of a Recluse', another of the many fragments left by Robert Louis Stevenson. This cautionary tale depicts a plight to be dreaded by any drunkard. A young man attempts to struggle home while inebriated and enters the wrong house. He wakes up in the early hours in a woman's bedroom, wearing her nightdress, just as she is about to enter the room ...

Some years ago, the Glaswegian author and artist Alasdair Grey wrote a TV drama which presented two conflicting endings to this story, a perfect example of the way in which these truncated tales breed offshoots like the stump of a sawn off tree. Suggested endings are, however, a fairly straightforward matter compared to what the Italian writer Italo Calvino does in his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* ... (1979). In this experimental narrative labyrinth, a slight but intriguing initial episode becomes the nucleus of wave upon wave of concentric complications.

We all know that 'Kubla Khan' will remain forever an unfinished story because Coleridge's work in transcribing his opium vision was disturbed by 'a person on some business from Porlock'. But what about the rumour that the person was none other than Fletcher Christian (of the mutiny of the *Bounty* in 1789), on the run from Pitcairn Island and in search of influential friends to protect him?

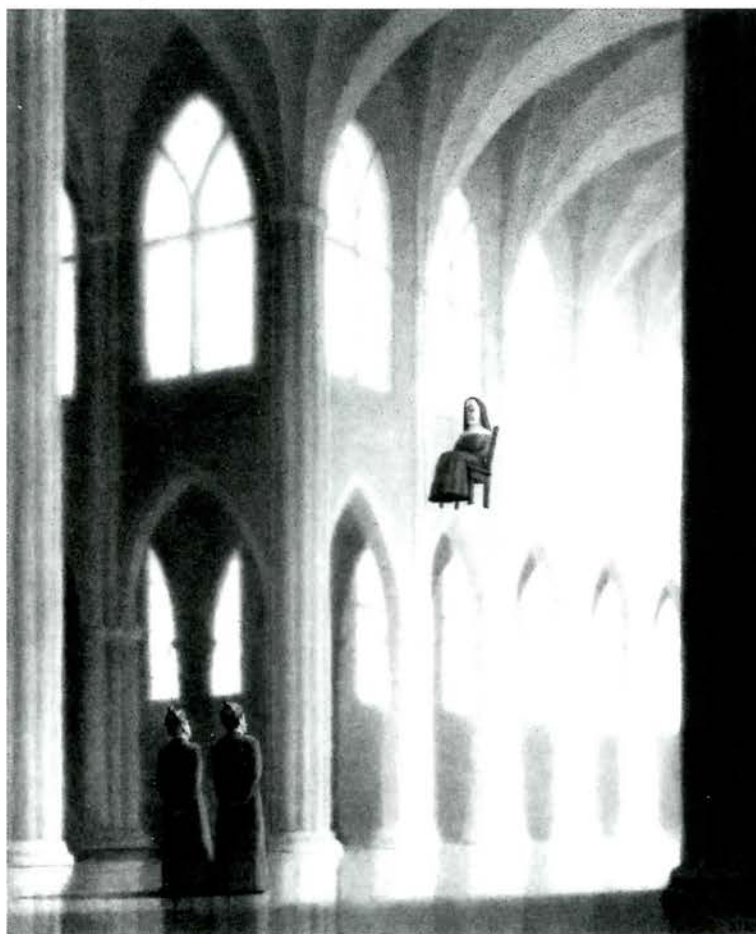
A more recent example of this phenomenon is in the events preceding the publication of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Chris van Allsburg, Andersen Press). In the foreword to the book we are told that it came about when an unknown artist came into a publishing house several years ago carrying a sheaf of illustrations from a book of children's stories he had written. The publisher was fascinated by the eerie charm of the pictures, each of which was accompanied by an intriguing little caption. He asked to see the stories that went with them and the artist said he would bring them in. The artist then walked out of the publisher's, leaving the drawings behind, and was never seen again. These unfinished

stories, each consisting of one line of evocative print and a poignantly haunting drawing, have proven to be a fertile source of inspiration in my classroom for children seeking ideas for their own writing.

The primary classroom is, of course, the great matrix and archive of the unfinished story, and most teachers are saturated in the genre. Over the last few years I've often given children a taste of the frustrations that they inflict on us by recounting a story told by Tony Aylwin at a 'Folklore in the Classroom' course almost 20 years ago. A princess defies her father by entering a forbidden room, and in consequence is forced to marry a pig. She discovers that the creature is really a man afflicted with a curse, so she decides to try to free him from it. She consults the wind, the moon and the sun, and is told that she must wander the world with a bag of chicken bones until she has worn out three pairs of iron shoes. Then ... That's where Tony ran out of time all those years ago. Not knowing the end of

the story has provided me with a perfect excuse for leading audiences up the garden path, and leaving them to find their own way home by either providing their own ending, or searching for the traditional tale on the folklore shelves. When I met Tony again recently I persuaded him to finish the story off, and was astonished at the spectacular turn of events. What happens is that ... (continued on page 391)

George Hunt is a lecturer in Language in Education at the University of Reading. Formerly a primary school teacher in south east London and Dominica, George is a regular reviewer for *Books for Keeps*.



THE SEVEN CHAIRS

The fifth one ended up in France.

Illustrations on these pages from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, sadly now out of print.

Babe, the movie version of that best-selling modern classic, *The Sheep-Pig*, endorsed Dick King-Smith's reputation as the best and the funniest writer of such anthropomorphic animal stories.

It would have been easy for Dick King-Smith to sit back and continue to mine that successful vein which also includes such hits as *Daggie Dogfoot* and *The Mouse Butcher*. But he has not stood still since the start of his prodigiously productive writing career. *Godhanger*, his new novel, marks a significant and weighty step forward and beyond the territory that he had so clearly marked out for himself.

How much Dick knew this when he wrote the book it is quite hard to tell as his modesty makes him prone to play down his belief in it. His surprise at the response it has received seems wholly genuine. 'When a new book comes out, of course I like to have nice reviews. I was sweating on this. I'm still enormously surprised at the reception it has received.'

So what is so special about *Godhanger* and why did Dick write it?

'Now his old familiar nesting-place beckoned, high on a sheltered ledge on the Atlantic cliffs, with his old familiar mate, mother in her time to his many children: the gruff-spoken, hairy-chinned, comfortable roosting partner at the end of so many thousands of days. He was just about to turn for home when he saw a solitary black and white bird flying silently along the wood's edge. As he watched, it perched for a moment in the top of a single outlying skeleton-elm, long tail dipping up and down, and then flew suddenly and rapidly away with loud calls of alarm.'

"Chakka-chakka-chakka-chaki!" cried Myles the magpie and Loftus circled higher still. He knew Myles for a thief and a double-dyed villain, but he also knew better than to doubt the pie's warning.

'And at that precise moment the evening's peace was shattered by the blast of a gunshot. After a heartbeat's pause came the noise of a second shot, followed by a thin agonized screaming that ceased as suddenly as it had arisen. Silence fell again on Godhanger Wood as the raven beat away towards the west.'

So ends the opening section of *Godhanger*, revealing the power of Dick's writing, the extent of his descriptive skills and a dark side to his storytelling that he has not previously explored. It is the combination of these which give *Godhanger* its strength and definition. It is a finely crafted book, carefully written, revelling in description and imagery. Death features large in *Godhanger* – not that that is new for Dick. Even in his comedies, such as *Magnus Powermouse*, the inherently dangerous nature of a mouse's life lies at the centre of the story. And *Babe*, after all, revolves around the need to save the piglet from the chop. The difference with *Godhanger* is that death lies at the very heart of the story giving it an overall air of foreboding, redeemed not by humour but by belief. For, in addition to changing audience by writing a longer book for older readers, Dick has also made a huge leap of subject matter by writing an allegory.

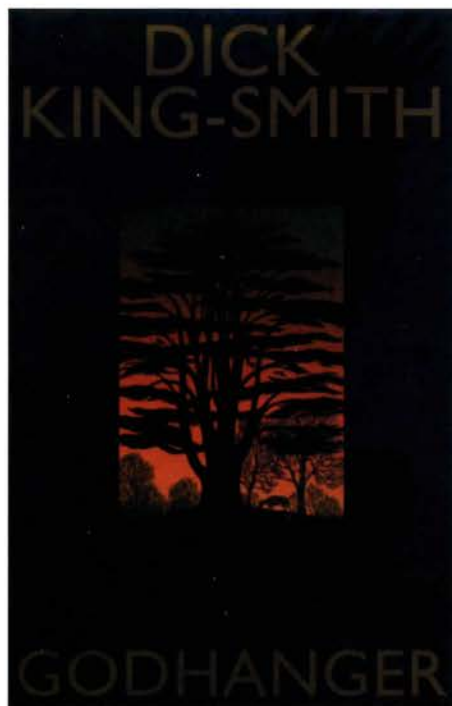
GODHANGER by Dick King-Smith

A powerful and unexpectedly different novel from a major writer that takes a new direction . . .

Julia Eccleshare investigates



Then the figure began to fly westwards towards him, with slow majestic wing-beats, and as it neared him, Loftus, head thrown back now to stare upwards, saw beyond any shadow of a doubt that it was the Skymaster, who had surely died, yet even now was rising up into the morning sky.



For someone who calls himself an agnostic this seems a surprising thing to do, especially as the allegory is no loose, tentative affair but a full-blown structure with the strange, powerful bird Skymaster as the Jesus figure and a full set of twelve disciples chosen from the birds of the wood.

'Some of the birds of the wood had come together as followers of the Skymaster, and all these carried different pictures of him in their minds. Because all found themselves unable to meet his gaze directly, each tended to think of him in the image of his own kind, as some sort of hawk or falcon or crow or owl. Only once in their lives were they able to look directly at him, and then it was too late.'

Just occasionally the allegory gets uncomfortable, as at the description of the Skymaster's birth, in my view, and at the end where he is nailed out – spread-eagled – in an imitation crucifix, in Dick's.

'I was worried that I had cut the allegory too close on that occasion,' says Dick.

Overall, however, he is pleased with the structure and happy with the way the story contains the message. 'I wrote *Godhanger* as an exploration of faith by someone who doesn't believe but would like to. It is my way of looking at death and the afterlife.' Against the charge that it is gloomy, he cites the lasting feeling of hope with which the reader is left.

But, though the allegory lies at the centre of the story, it does not provide the sole reason for Dick writing it.

'I was longing to write something for older children where I could expand the language and the description. And I wanted to give rein to my eternal admiration for Henry Williamson (the author of *Tarka the Otter*). He knew far more than me about animals, but I did check out all the details and I have got them right!'

Dick's vivid and detailed descriptions of the interactions within the animal and bird worlds revolve much around the food chains which means that everything is prey to something. Descriptions of one animal killing and eating another are clearly defined as an inevitable part of natural survival.

The role of humans is different. Dick wanted only one human character in this book and, as the gamekeeper is unrelentingly unpleasant, humans seem to come off very badly.

'Man is the supreme predator. He kills for killing, not just to eat. But I wasn't making a statement about all of mankind or all gamekeepers. This man is not evil because he is a gamekeeper but because he happens to be an evil man.'

For his insights into nature and his vivid descriptions of them, Dick King-Smith is an exceptional writer. In the new, more sober voice of *Godhanger*, he shows just what a good storyteller and writer he is. ■

Julia Eccleshare is a critic, author, broadcaster and the children's book correspondent for the Bookseller.

The beautiful woodcuts that adorn the interior of *Godhanger* are by award-winning Andrew Davidson who, amongst other things, illustrated Ted Hughes' *The Iron Man*.

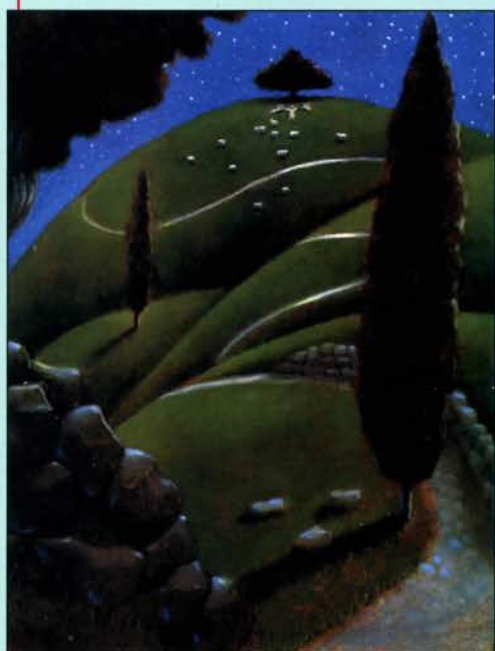
Godhanger is published by Doubleday (0 385 40778 5) at £9.99.

A Christmas Round Up

Fiona Waters looks at new titles for the festive season

For the jaded adult, the word 'Christmas' usually provokes at the very least a deep groan, but for children it is a time of the utmost magic. And looking at the piles of books surrounding me I can confirm that Christmas magic is alive and well there too! Just when it seemed impossible to produce a single book that had anything new to say or depict about the 25th December, a fresh wave of imaginative and innovative publishing appears. Lots of dross as well, of course, but why waste precious space talking about *that*?

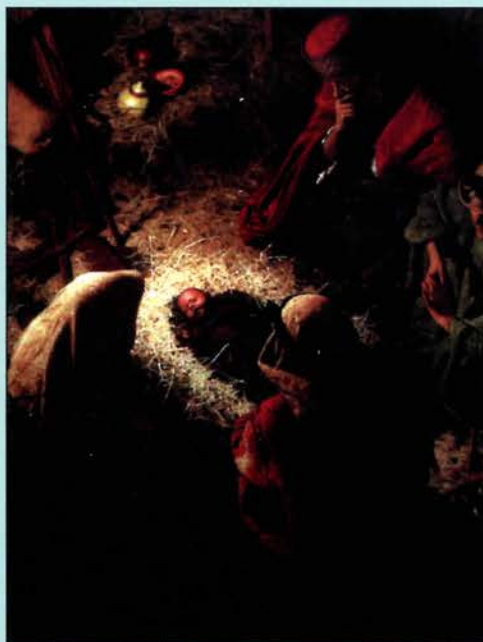
The Christmas Story Retold



'The shepherd, the shepherd's wife and the shepherd boy lay on their backs on top of the hill.' From *A Night the Stars Danced for Joy*.

Sometimes the Christmas story itself gets overlooked in the spate of commercialism, but here are four outstanding picture book re-tellings. *A Night the Stars Danced for Joy* by Bob Hartman and illustrated by Tim Jonke (Lion Publishing, 0 7459 3610 5, £7.99) is the shepherds' view. At the end of a long hard day they lie looking at the stars which seem to be shining more brightly than usual. Then, the shepherd boy makes a wish, which comes true almost instantaneously.

The First Christmas by Georgie Adams, illustrated by Anna C Leplar (Orion, 1 85881 276 3, £8.99) is a delightfully simple re-telling, beginning with the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. The text is just right for the youngest children and the illustrations warm and approachable. *A Medieval Christmas* with the Tyndale translation of the Gospels of St Matthew and St Luke, and illuminations from the collection of Books of Hours in The British Library (Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 1057 8, £9.99) is a slim but handsome book, with the jewel-like colours of the illuminations superbly well reproduced.



'This is the child that was born.' From *This is the Star*.

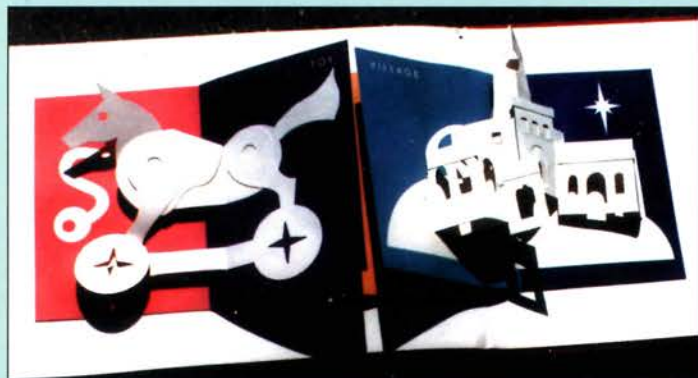
Most breathtaking of these four Christmas story re-tellings is *This is the Star* by Joyce Dunbar, illustrated by Gary Blythe (Doubleday,

0 385 40602 9, £9.99). Joyce Dunbar's text is intense but spare and dramatically complemented by Gary Blythe's mysterious and unearthly pictures, full of brooding chiaroscuro.

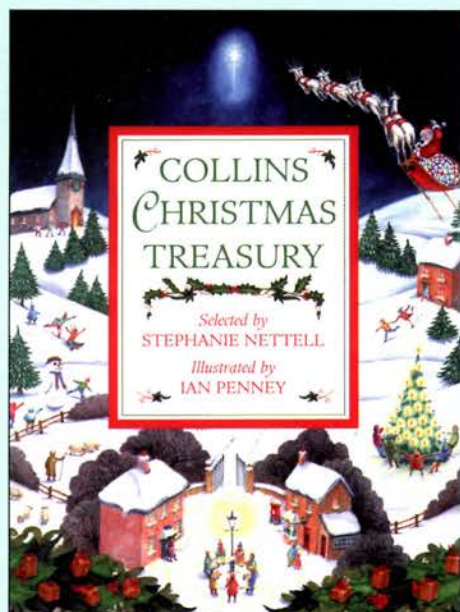
Christmas Treasures

Every family should have a Christmas collection, a compendium of stories, poems and traditions that they can return to annually, taking it off the bookshelf each 1st December. Here are some interesting and varied new candidates for this annual ritual. *The Little Book of Christmas*, selected by Caroline Walsh and illustrated by Sophie Allsopp (Kingfisher, 1 85697 498 7, £6.99) contains poetry, carols and prose extracts. There are lots of familiar friends here together with some surprising and less obvious choices. *Star of Wonder: Christmas Stories and Poems for Children*, compiled by Pat Alexander and illustrated with black and white line drawings by Robin Laurie (Lion Publishing, 0 7459 2264 3, £12.99) is a very satisfying collection, all 224 pages of it. With the emphasis on the real meaning of Christmas, the stories and poems, both traditional and modern, include a wide range of well-established and less well-known writers.

Pocket sized, *A Treasury of Christmas Stories*, chosen by Sian Hardy (Kingfisher, 1 85697 249 6, £4.50 pbk) is another attractive collection where stories such as 'Baboushka', 'The Little Fir Tree' and 'Brer Rabbit' sit alongside less familiar tales like 'The Christmas Roast' where a goose has an unexpectedly happy Christmas. Also from Kingfisher, *Christmas Stories for the Very Young*, selected by Sally Grindley and illustrated by Helen Cooper (1 85697 252 6, £4.99 pbk) is a collection of read-aloud stories by contemporary writers like Mary Rayner, Chris Powling and Martin Waddell. Stories which tell of the sheep deserted while the shepherds go to Bethlehem, or of a lonely dragon and a very rich spoilt king who



'Intricate and beautiful paper engineering of the highest quality,' from *The Christmas Alphabet* (see page 20).



wants a surprise for a present, all pick up various strands of the Christmas story.

No one could have better credentials for putting together a collection of festive writings than former *Guardian* children's book editor Stephanie Nettell and she does not disappoint with *Collins Christmas Treasury*, illustrated by Ian Penney in full colour (Collins, 0 00 198057 2, £14.99). In her introduction Stephanie Nettell wishes for an anthology that will cause people to exclaim, 'Do you remember that lovely bit when . . . ?' Just so, here it is, a real plum pudding of a book made up of an endless variety of ingredients with a superb range of the familiar and the totally unexpected.

Christmas Titles for Schools

Silent Night, illustrated with embroideries by Belinda Downes (Mammoth, 0 7497 2965 1, £5.99 pbk) is a selection of twelve of the most popular carols with music. The text is easy to read, and the illustrations are humorous and attractive. For the classroom, *Christmas* (in the Wayland 'Festivals' series, 0 7502 1846 0, £9.50) looks at how Christmas is celebrated in different parts of the world and within different cultures.

For much younger children, *Christmas and New Year* (Moonlight, 1 85103 247 9, £6.99) makes full use of the 'First Discovery' series trademark transparent overlays to reveal the magic of Christmas.

Teachers are always looking for Christmas plays so the Scripture Union must have a winner with *The Grumpy Shepherd and other Christmas Plays* (Scripture Union, 1 85999 085 1, £7.99 pbk). The plays are written by Heather Butler and Elspeth Jackman with plenty of supporting parts for angels and sheep to ensure the whole class can take part; there are also lots of songs arranged by Ken Harratt.

Christmas Novelties

Santa's Workshop by Paul Stickland (Ragged Bears, 1 85714 107 5, £12.99) has 'A magical three-dimensional tour' as its sub-title and the opening spread of Santa's workshop is pure magic. A hive of activity, the workshop is full of incredible detail and will keep children fascinated for ages – a Christmas decoration in itself.

The pop-ups in *The Christmas Alphabet* by Robert Sabuda (Barefoot, 1 898000 63 8, £15.99) are three-dimensional and startling for being pure, snowy white. There are no jolly red holly berries, no glittering tinsel, no flashing lights here, but intricate and beautiful paper engineering of the highest quality. This book doesn't shout, it sings a rich, low sustained note of joy. Don't dismiss it with a cursory glance, it is exceptional.

Not quite a pop-up, more a spread-out comes from Templar and Gallery. *Woodland Christmas* by Marie Angel (0 85692 197 1, £9.99) is a nature frieze, a story and an Advent calendar all in one. The illustrations are both beautiful and accurate with clear labelling giving the names of the animals and birds to be seen in this winter landscape as fact merges into fantasy in an entirely believable manner.

Jesus' Christmas Party by Nicholas Allan (Red Fox 'Mini Treasures', 0 09 972491 X, £3.99 pbk) is a witty version of the Christmas story from the viewpoint of the innkeeper. Not for the po-faced! This small format picture book is really excellent value: it has two double gatefolds with press outs which make a nativity playset. Wonderful fun.

Christmassy Fare

It is difficult to imagine yet another version of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, yet here one is and very stylish too (North-South, 1 55858 608 3, £4.99 pbk). Dorothee Duntze has created the most suave partridge in a pear tree ever and has filled the subsequent pages with intriguing hints at what has gone before.



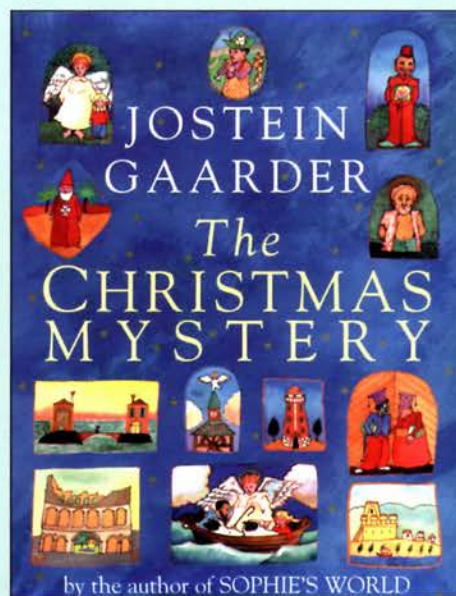
Scrooge meets Marley's ghost, from *A Christmas Carol*.

Two very different versions of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* come next. From Walker a most handsome edition, abridged by Vivian French and illustrated by Patrick Benson (0 7445 4999 X, £6.99) with wonderful ghosts and Scrooge scared out of his wits. *The Christmas Mouse* by Toby Forward and illustrated by Ruth Brown (Andersen, 0 86264 628 6, £10.99) is one of my absolute favourites this year. Toby Forward has re-jigged the Dickens' classic for the younger children. Ben the mouse doesn't believe in Christmas and spurns the present offered to him by his friend Tim. On Christmas Eve Ben is vis-



Parallel situations of man and mouse, from *The Christmas Mouse*.

ited by a strange mouse . . . Ruth Brown's atmospheric illustrations have haunting glimpses of another mean creature and his late night visitors as the mouse tale runs parallel to that of Scrooge. Feel your toes nipped by the cold and your heart chilled by the unknown as Ben edges through the night.



The Christmas Mystery by Jostein Gaarder and translated by Elizabeth Rokkan, illustrated by Rosemary Wells (Phoenix House, 1 86159 015 6, £14.99) is a story within a story, a magical tour that follows the wanderings of a lost girl, Elisabet, as she travels back in time to Bethlehem. Her journey is pieced together by Joachim as he opens the windows of his Advent calendar day by December day. This is a book for children of all ages up to ninety which will make the reader think again, and again about the Christmas story.

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without Santa Claus and very jolly he is too in *Sssh!* by Julie Sykes, illustrated by Tim Warnes (Magi, 1 85430 400 3, £8.99). Not only jolly but very noisy! Even the reindeer tries to persuade Santa not to wake the children, but he keeps bursting into song. All ends well, however, and there is a nice twist to the story at the end. Tim Warnes has an open and bright style, ideal for this very cheerful picture book for the very young.

It must be very confusing for younger children to



From *The Little Reindeer*.

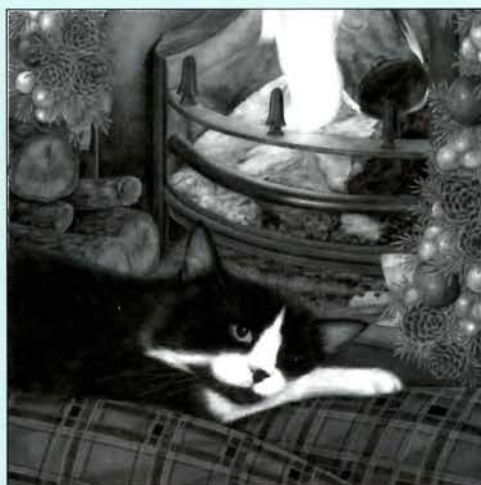
start seeing Santa as early as November and in Tesco's too; the magic of Father Christmas arriving on Christmas Night must seem very distant. **I'm the Real Santa Claus!** by Ingrid Ostherten, translated by Rosemary Lanning and illustrated by Christa Unzner (North-South, 1 55858 616 4, £4.99 pbk) deals with this contemporary worry in a witty and satisfying way when Santa arrives too early and is puzzled to see lots of men dressed just like him... **The Little Reindeer** by Michael Foreman (Andersen Press, 0 86264 692 8, £9.99) tells how a small boy living in New York finds a very strange present on Christmas Eve – a little reindeer who develops a taste for peanut butter sandwiches. This is a very warm and special story.



From *Snowy: The Christmas Dog*.

Kittens and puppies often feature in Christmas picture books. Here are four very special picture books that will pull at the heart-strings. **Snowy: The Christmas Dog** by Sheila Lavelle, illustrated by Susan Scott (Oxford, 0 19 272271 9, £3.99 pbk) is found on the roof on Christmas Eve. He settles in with his new family but he doesn't like hot weather and he seems to be waiting for someone... **Come Back, Buster** by Linda Jennings, illustrated by

Catherine Walters (Magi, 1 85430 395 3, £8.99) tells how a little dog's world is turned upside down when his beloved master is taken into hospital. Will he see him on Christmas day? Catherine Walters has created the most endearing little dog in Buster, with his one black eye and lopsided ear – children everywhere will just want to give him a huge hug. **Cosy Christmas with Teddy Bear** by Jacqueline McQuade (David Bennett Books, 1 85602 253 6, £8.99) shares the mounting excitement of a teddy bear and his friend the cat as they get ready for Christmas. The illustrations are cosy and vibrant and full of festive detail. The text has two layers, big bold one-liners for the youngest reader and smaller more detailed descriptions for more advanced readers.



From *A Pussycat's Christmas*.

Christmas is not always fun for a cat when there is too much noise and too many big careless feet. **A Pussycat's Christmas** by Margaret Wise Brown with illustrations by Anne Mortimer (Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 0979 0, £4.99 pbk) presents Christmas from a cat's eye view. The lovely text, first written nearly fifty years ago, is given a new lease of life with Anne Mortimer's glowing, wonderfully detailed illustrations and irresistible cat.

One of the most famous puppies of them all is Mick Inkpen's Kipper. In **Kipper's Snowy Day** (Hodder, 0 340 65678 6, £9.99) our hero plays endless games in the deep snow leaving both paw prints and Kipper shapes all over the garden. Mick Inkpen has created a most endearing character in Kipper and here he captures perfectly the real magic and excitement of snow for very young children.



From *The Christmas Miracle* of Jonathan Toomey.

The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey by Susan Wojciechowski, illustrated by P J Lynch (Walker, 0 7445 4007 0, £9.99) was actually published last Christmas but as it has just won The Kate Greenaway Medal I make absolutely no apologies for including it here! This is a picture book full of the deepest emotion. The story is rich in warmth and gentle perseverance, and P J Lynch's illustrations heart-rendingly beautiful and emotive. This is a fine and classic book which should join the ranks of the Christmas books to be re-read every year – if you could ever bear to put it away in the first place.

And a few stocking fillers to round off with!

TIPS FOR QUICK TIDY.



From *The Teenage Worrier's Christmas Survival Guide*.

The Teenage Worrier's Christmas Survival Guide by Ros Asquith (Piccadilly, 1 85340 349 0, £3.99 pbk) is a wonderfully daft Christmas survival kit – how to cope with the dreaded relatives, plan now to avoid next Christmas and ensure you keep some of those awful New Year resolutions. Two activity books should guarantee some peace and quiet for busy parents. **The Little Fir Tree's Busy for Christmas Book**, text by Lois Rock and illustrations from Cathy Baxter (Lion Publishing, 0 7459 3426 9, £2.99 pbk) provides Christmas activities, games, decorations and a press-out crib to make, all with a Christian slant, while **Santa's Sackful of Best Christmas Ideas** by Deri Robins (Kingfisher, 1 85697 054 X, £4.99 pbk) has lots of very jolly ideas for cards, presents and foodie gifts. **Christmas Crackered** by Caroline Plaisted (Bloomsbury, 0 7475 2990 6, £3.99 pbk) helpfully includes multiple-choice thank-you letters, and guidance on present buying if you are broke. Top stocking filler this year must be the latest in the hugely successful series, 'Animal Ark'. **Kitten in the Cold** by Lucy Daniels (Hodder, 0 340 68147 0, £3.50 pbk) is a sure-fire winner for animal-dotty readers of about eight, with an abandoned kitten and a sick reindeer. ■

Fiona Waters was a children's bookseller for many years and a consultant for a number of radio and television book programmes. Her latest poetry anthology, *The Poetry Book*, has just been published by Orion.

BfK News

Children's Books in Translation: The Marsh Award



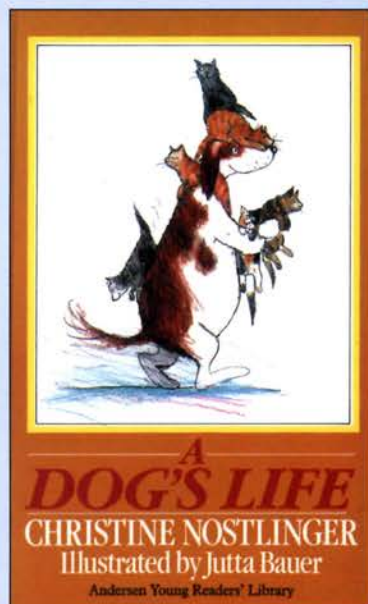
The *Arabian Nights*, *Pinocchio*, *Heidi*, *The Snow Queen* – these classics of children's literature are so much a part of our culture and our childhood that we forget that we know them in translation from the original Arabic, Italian, German and Danish respectively.

Why then do we have a problem with contemporary children's books in translation? Since the 1970s there has been a steady decline in the number published in Britain.

Yet, as adult readers, we know how books from other cultures can afford insights and perspectives that are crucially important to us as citizens of a European country, let alone of a global society.

The launch of the Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation which is to be awarded biennially is then, much to be welcomed. Sponsored by the Marsh Christian Trust, subsidised by the Arts Council and administered by the Children's Literature Research Centre at Roehampton University, the award is intended to bring attention to the quality and diversity of translated fiction, encourage more translations and help young readers to overcome their reluctance to read translated books.

These are worthy aims, but *Books for Keeps* wonders how they can be realised unless a more stringent analysis of the role of books for children in translation is applied by the judges. What is the point of publishing such books unless, in the words of the National Curriculum, they represent . . . 'distinctive voices and forms and offer varied perspectives and subject matter' – i.e. they could not have been written by a British author. If cultural otherness is not on offer, then surely something else must be? Perhaps the work is outstanding from a literary point of view? Perhaps it deals with significant issues not covered by British children's writers?

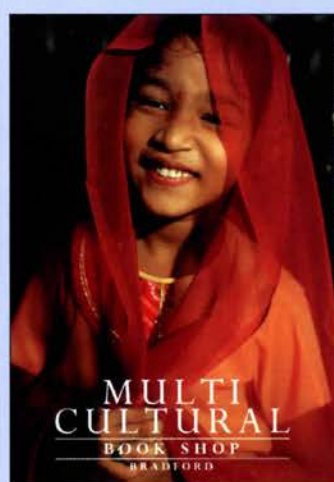


The winner of the first Marsh Award, *A Dog's Life*, by Austrian writer Christine Nostlinger and translated by Anthea Bell, does none of these things. This story of a dog past retirement age looking for a worthwhile job is not distinctively Austrian; it is well written but not greatly distinguished; there is no lack of anthropomorphic animal stories from British writers at this time. It is, then, difficult to see how this winning title will help young readers to overcome their reluctance to read translated fiction, let alone meet the Marsh Award's other criteria.

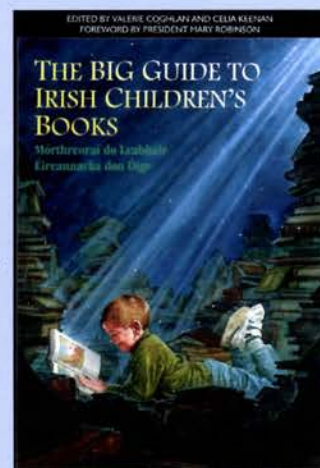
A Dog's Life was published by Andersen Press in 1990 but is now out of print.

News in Brief

- Malorie Blackman who was interviewed for the July BfK Authorgraph, has won the Young Telegraph 1996 Paperback of the Year Award with her book *Thief!* (Corgi, 0 552 52808 0, £3.50 pbk). The award was judged by children from 50 schools across the country.



- The Multi Cultural Bookshop has opened in Bradford at Rashid House, Westgate (tel: 01274 731908/726955). The shop will specialise in dual language and multi-faith books as well as picture books, fiction and poetry which reflect 'the diversity and vibrancy of cultural communities in Britain'.



- The Big Guide to Irish Children's Books is a collection of articles and reviews on books for young people published in Ireland. Edited by Valerie Coghlan and Celia Keenan, this is an excellent source of information on the range of books produced in Ireland from myths and legends to information books, from poetry to animal stories. £8.00 including postage from Gill & Macmillan Ltd, Goldenbridge, Inchicore, Dublin 8, Ireland.

- A snappy poster illustrated by Glasgow based illustrator Keith Brumpton which explains *How a Book is Made* is available from Book Trust Scotland, Scottish Book Centre, 137 Dundee Street, Edinburgh EH11 1BG for £2.50 (inc VAT and p&p).



A small portion of the poster . . .

Readers' Letters

From Linda Saunders, Chair, National Youth Libraries Group, and Chair of the 1996 Carnegie judging panel:

Nicholas Tucker's comments about the judging of this year's Carnegie Medal (B/K 99, July 1996) should not go unchallenged. The prestige the Medal now enjoys has not been gained by accident – one of the key reasons for it is the fact that the nominating and judging of titles are entirely done by librarians whose integrity, expertise and knowledge of both books and children are called upon daily in the course of their work. The librarians on the judging panel also represent the entire UK, both rural and urban areas. I believe this knowledge of the national readership for children's books (whatever the cultural background or family situation) to be unique to the Carnegie panel and another reason why the Medal has gained the reputation it has. Perhaps Nicholas Tucker's difficulty is that the Carnegie judges are practising librarians and not part of the fairly small circle who normally sit on judging panels.

The judges may all have been female this year but this is a true reflection of work with children and unlikely to change until more men see working with children as a genuine career option. I cannot see that we would have chosen a wider or different range of books for the shortlist if we had had a male judge on the panel. Incidentally, there were far more books on the shortlist this year by male writers than by female so men were well represented at this level! Surely the key requirements for Carnegie judges are that they have frequent contact with children today and are well read in current children's literature.

From Clive Barnes, Divisional Children's Librarian, Southampton

It is frustrating to be a mere observer at a Carnegie Medal judging session. Nicholas Tucker sounds off like a striker relegated to the bench for the crucial game, having to watch the team playing like a bunch of girlies (all fair, sensitive and no follow through). He'd like to get out there and show them how it's really done.

I don't have a problem with an all female judging panel or with an all librarian judging panel but I'd like to pursue Nicholas Tucker's arguments about boys and books which run off in a number of interesting directions without getting a clear shot at the goal.

There probably are gender preferences in reading fiction. There are certainly gender preferences for reading fiction. More women read fiction than men (does that make them better judges?). But the way that Nicholas Tucker hedges his argument shows how difficult it is to establish what is a girl's book and what is a boy's book, or what different pleasures they might get from reading the same book.

How much weight does gender have in determining reading choice beside other factors like social and cultural background and emotional development? Nicholas Tucker quotes feminist psychologist, Carol Gilligan, as suggesting that males tend to place most value on individual achievements in a world of clear rights and wrongs while females find feelings, sensitivity to others and maintaining wider emotional relationships important. This is a beguiling generalisation that would be sorely tested faced with real individual readers and books.

How do we revive boys' interest in fiction? Not by setting out to write boys' books, resurrecting dead genres or awarding medals for writing for boys. All of which strategies might be inferred from Nicholas Tucker's attempt to justify his appeal for male representation on the Carnegie panel. We have rather to find out what appeals to boys and promote it, a process which children's librarians are involved in day after day – and the majority of children's librarians are women.



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Poetry for Christmas

Winter nights, the school nativity play, carol singing, mince pies, hanging up stockings . . . for children Christmas is a time of magic. Jack Ousbey selects poetry that will enhance their wonder and enjoyment.

Poems for Christmas

Compiled by Jill Bennett, ill. Ian Beck, Scholastic, 0 590 54062 9, £8.99; 0 590 55332 1, £3.99 pbk



'Christmas Lullaby' from *Poems for Christmas*.

In the main, the poems in Jill Bennett's collection are about the delightful expectations and experiences of very young children at Christmas time – mixing puddings, keeping secrets, singing carols, listening to the Christmas story, and the long, long wait from Christmas Eve to the opening of presents. There are a couple of surprises: Richard Edwards' wish to be a pilot fetching a snow-cloud from the Arctic then tying it to a tree:

*'So snow would fall on Christmas Day
On all my friends and me.'*

and Adrian Mitchell's 'Mrs Christmas' who turns out to be a soccer-playing cat with kittens in a cardboard box.

Children in nursery and infant schools will enjoy these poems and the simple, but distinctive, pictures provided by Ian Beck.

Bring in the Holly

Charles Causley, ill. Lisa Kopper, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 0668 6, £8.99

There are some poets writing for children whose work is of such quality that adults, too, find their poems engaging and challenging. Charles Causley's work in *Bring in the Holly* is a perfect example, containing 12 poems, including five written especially for this collection.

Causley captures in a line or two the mysterious stillness of a winter's night:

*'Thick was the snow on field and hedge
And vanished was the river-sedge,
Here Winter skilfully had wound
A shining scarf without a sound.'*

and, as well as the Christmas story itself, presents



'Ballad of the Bread Man', from *Bring in the Holly*.

celebratory songs, carols and ballads, and explores Christmas rituals both at home and abroad. The rich, tuneful texts are lit up by the variety and colours of Lisa Kopper's illustrations.

Christmas Poetry

Selected by Robert Hull, ill. Annabel Spenceley, Wayland, 0 7502 0171 1, £8.50; 0 7502 0936 4, £4.99 pbk



'The robin would be a good Christmas poet if he could talk,' says Robert Hull in his introduction, although there is a lovely Ursula Fanthorpe poem featured in this collection, where the robin does indeed speak:

*'I'm the true token
Of Christ the Child-King:
I nest in man's stable,
I eat at man's table,
Through all his dark winters
I sing.'*

Amongst the 22 poems included are rhymes and riddles – and some fun entries – as well as more traditional Christmas fare, leaving the reader anxious for more. Perhaps the full-page colour photographs, redolent of boxed Christmas card collections, could have been sacrificed in favour of extra text. Nevertheless, junior age children will enjoy this handsome collection.

The Puffin Book of Christmas Poems

Compiled by Wes Magee, ill. Jill Bennett, Puffin, 0 14 032922 6, £4.99 pbk

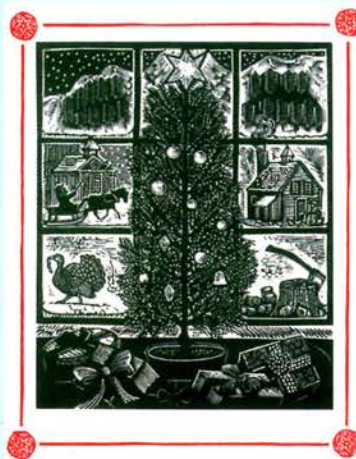
Snow begins to fall at the beginning of this book and then it is time for carol singing; sheep, bears and cats venture out in the winter wind. Christmas week approaches with its shopping and last minute preparations; there are birds to be fed, snowmen to be built and skates to be polished. After this, it's time for decorating trees, hanging up stockings and the problems of getting to sleep on Christmas Eve. Finally, the great day arrives with

presents and parties, toys and noise, uncles, aunts and entertainment.

This wide-ranging collection has been compiled by Wes Magee, a poet who has had years of close contact with young children and knows how to cater for their needs as well as their enthusiasms. Modestly, though attractively, illustrated with black and white line drawings, this is an excellent buy for all junior and middle school children.

Poems for Christmas

Selected by Neil Philip, ill. John Lawrence, Hodder, 0 340 65326 4, £9.99



'Little Tree' from *Poems for Christmas*.

In this wonderful collection of Christmas poems there are some which particularly touch the heart and stir the imagination. Ted Hughes' 'Christmas Card'; Patrick Kavanagh's 'My Father Played the Melodeon'; Pasternak's 'Now Is Falling'; 'Carol of the Brown King' by Langston Hughes; and Kipling's 'Eddi's Service'. Add to these some jewels by Causley and Coatsworth, by Mandlestam and Millay, by Blake and Mackay Brown and you begin to get the measure of this collection.

Then there are John Lawrence's marvellous, mysterious, medieval style woodcuts. They enhance the text perfectly, sometimes in miniature, sometimes full page. The combination of poem and picture is seen at its best in 'Christmas with King Arthur':

*'The most renowned knights acknowledging Christ,
The loveliest ladies to live in all time,
And the comeliest King ever to keep court.
For this goodly gathering was in its golden age
Far famed.'*

The designer, Emma Bradford and the co-ordinator, Elizabeth Wilkie, must take credit for helping to produce a book which is, in every sense, 'a goodly gathering'. ■

Jack Ousbey has taught in primary and secondary schools and a college of education and he was an inspector. He now writes, reviews, runs in-service events and works as a consultant for Ragdoll Children's TV Company.