

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

March 1997 No.103

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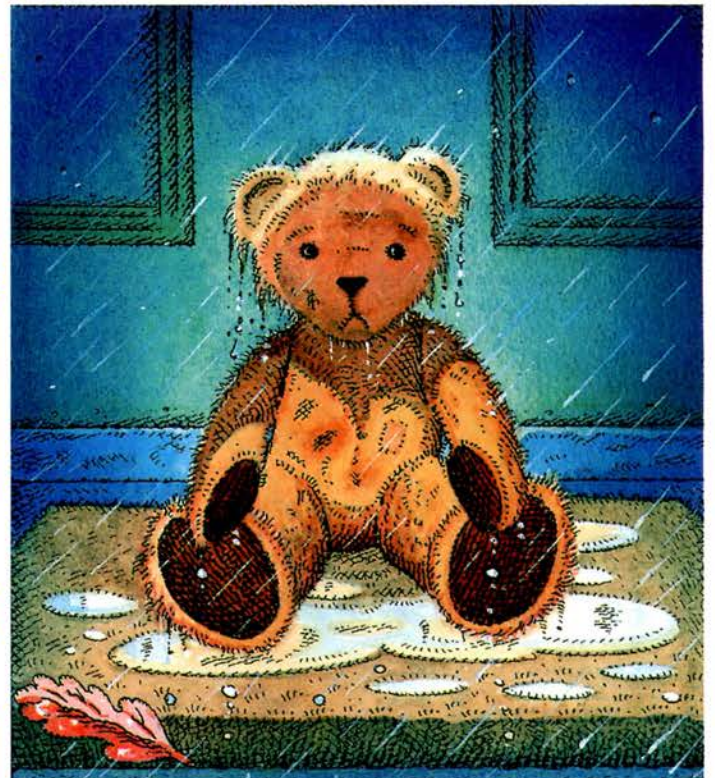
*the children's book magazine*



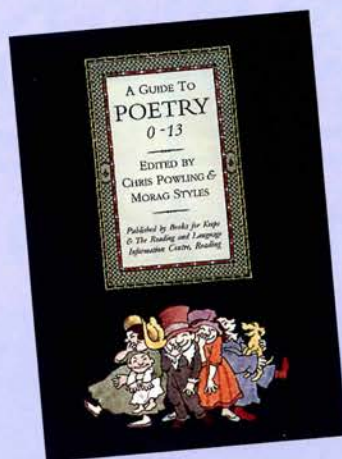
Mother duck said, "Quack, quack, quack, quack."  
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"Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling







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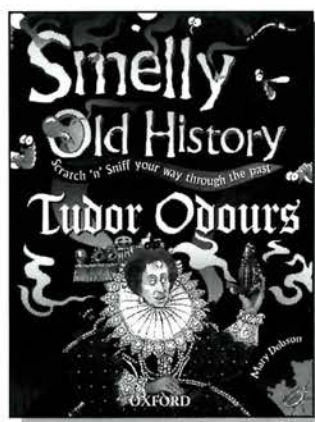
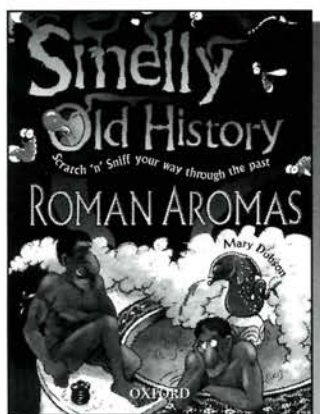
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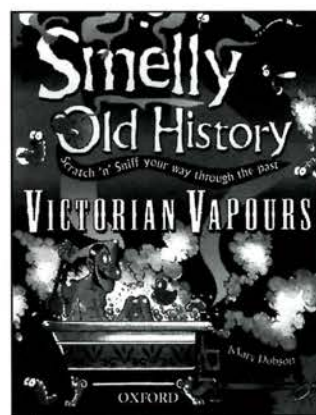
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## CoverStory

The cover of this issue is a design incorporating illustrations from four books illustrated by the subject of our Authorgraph, Ian Beck. The top left illustration is from *Five Little Ducks* (Orchard), the top right from *Poppy and Pip's Picnic* (to be published Autumn '97 by HarperCollins), the bottom left from *The Owl and the Pussy-cat* (Transworld) and the bottom right from *Home Before Dark* (to be published September '97 by Scholastic). Ian Beck's Picture Book (Hippo) is reviewed on page 17.



Beck talks to BfK's interviewer, Julia Eccleshare, on page 12. His distinctive decorative style with its sensitive pen line and cross hatching has a nostalgic but sometimes also a surreal quality – he describes it as 'a look that is floating, strong and wistful all at the same time'.

Thanks to Orchard, HarperCollins, Transworld and Scholastic for their help in producing this composite cover.

# EDITORIAL

## A climate for books

Scholastic's acquisition of Red House Books which went to the Monopolies & Mergers Commission has been cleared by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The great amalgamation now comprises Red House Book Club, Party Plan, Scholastic Book Fairs, Scholastic Children's Books (series include Point Horror, Babysitters Club and Horrible Histories) and Scholastic Educational Books and Magazines. Scholastic now becomes a major player in the £343 million UK children's book market with a share of around 12%.

Scholastic's new muscle in the book club and direct selling into schools markets may be keeping some other children's publishers and other suppliers awake at night. But is it also a matter of concern for consumers? In a surprise move, David Teale, founder of Red House, elected to stay on as managing director of Red House and Scholastic Book Clubs and Party Plan and with responsibility for the overall selection of books. Red House maintained an open editorial policy, representing titles from a range of publishers in making selections. Will this continue and even in those areas where the Scholastic list is strong? Time will tell.

The range of titles available at Book Fairs – often the only way for hard pressed teachers to make books easily available to the children in their schools – is already circumscribed and with a strong emphasis on mass market series publishing. Adele Geras reports (see Letters page) on 'the exclusion of much mainstream fiction' in favour of Point Horror and other series at Scholastic Book Fairs as well as their inflexibility; 'they will not even stock books by a writer visiting the school on a one-off basis, where the children are eager to buy the books and have them signed.' Geras continues: 'I think children make the connection: this writer who's chatting to us is not in our Book Fair – how good can she really be? This defeats the work being done by a writer visiting a school in the first place . . .'

However, Book Fairs should only be a part of current book provision to children and young people in our schools; they cannot be



Rosemary Stones

held to blame for not being able to meet expectations that they were not set up to fulfil. They are a way of making books available in schools and they play their part in 'encouraging children to develop a lifelong love of books' as Virginia Bottomley's new and rather bizarre National Reading Initiative has it. The problem is rather that book provision overall has become so deprofessionalised that it is now to some large extent dependent on suppliers whose criteria are essentially profit orientated rather than educationally motivated.

Attitudes to reading, including the provision of books, cannot be considered separately from education policies and provision. Loughborough University's library and information statistics unit in their latest report, *A Survey of Library Services to Schools and Children in the UK 1995-96*, reveals a library service in decline; there has been a four per cent cut in real terms in public library spending on children's books since 1990/91 and a 28% real cut in Schools Library Service materials funds over the same period.



Prue Theobalds' *Cinderella* with its 'nostalgic nursery setting' was 'thoroughly enjoyed' by infants and can also be put to good National Curriculum use 'to encourage children to enact stories using toys . . .' See review, page 18.

Investment in both public and school libraries and adequate funding for the training of those librarians and teachers who

mediate books to young readers are fundamental if we are to create a cultural climate in which it can be taken for granted that reading is valued and that a wide range of books should be made readily available to our children.

*Rosemary*

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's book magazine

MARCH 1997 No. 103

ISSN 0143-909X © School Bookshop Assoc. Ltd. 1997  
Editor: Rosemary Stones  
Managing Director: Richard Hill  
Design and Typeset: Rondale Ltd., Lydney, Glos.  
Printed: The Friary Press, Dorchester

Books for Keeps can be obtained on subscription by sending a cheque or postal order to Books for Keeps, 6 Brightfield Road, Lee, London SE12 8QF. You can also pay by credit card (Access, Visa, Eurocard or Mastercard) or use the telephone order service on –

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Annual subscription for six issues: £16.80 (UK), £21.00 (Europe including Ireland), £24.00 (airmail)

Single copies: £2.80 (UK), £3.50 (Europe including Ireland), £4.00 (airmail)



# At Mother's (or Father's) Knee

When Preschoolers want to learn to read, should parents teach them or should they wait and leave it to the experts? Do teachers still know best? **Deborah Maby** reports.



**F**or Roy Blatchford, there is one thing that stands out in his memories of his first day at school in the 1950s. His mother, who had herself left school at 13, mentioned to his teacher that Roy could read. 'Oh, another clever clogs comes along,' she replied, wearily. Understandably, this woman thereby fell somewhat in Roy's mother's estimation and the possibility of a good parent-teacher relationship in that first year at school was irretrievably lost.

But could such a thing happen today? Blatchford, who now spearheads an organisation called Reading Is Fundamental, based at The Literacy Trust, believes that the vestiges of such attitudes still, sadly, remain. 'I was recently astonished to come across a Collins guide for parents published last year in which the question was posed, "Should I try to teach my child to read before he or she starts school?" and the answer given was, "... no. It isn't necessary for parents to teach their children to read. That's what your child's teacher is trained to do." And, unbelievably, there is still a school of thought that says you shouldn't even read to your child until they can do so for

themselves.'

Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that an early interest in books and reading would be frowned upon by schools today. Indeed there is now a vast body of opinion that recognises that the majority of learning opportunities actually take place *outside* formal schooling and that the years between birth and three or four are the time of maximum educational opportunity for a child.

Rosie Roberts of PEEP, an early years project based in Oxford, firmly believes that 'parents are their children's first and most important educators' and that 'all parents *want* to help their children and are the first people to notice when they make progress.'

This attitude is mirrored in other early years centres across the country, such as The Help Project in Leeds, which provides guidance for parents of children aged 0 to 3. Simon Cusworth, an educational psychologist who became involved at the beginning, stresses that, 'An essential part of the process of acquiring reading skills is to stimulate a child's interest and enjoyment in communicating – and language and com-

munication develop within the relationship between children and their parents.' Roy Blatchford could not agree more: 'The thing to remember,' he says, 'is that the die is cast very young. The early work you do on the knee, counting cups into the sink or whatever, is the key cornerstone to the beginning of reading.'

For Roberts and others, therefore, the reading process cannot start early enough. So what can we as parents do to set the process in train? 'The whole ethos of PEEP,' says Roberts, 'is based on the idea that talking and listening lie at the heart of the development of literacy. There is a direct link between the voice in your head and the voice coming to you off the page.'

'Reading,' agrees Cusworth, 'is all about communication – a story, or information, being communicated to you through language, which has been transcribed on to a page. So it stands to reason that if children don't enjoy communicating, they won't enjoy reading and if they don't enjoy reading they won't be able to do it.'

This communication, it is widely accepted, lies at the heart of the parent-child



relationship from birth onwards. 'If you think about how a baby responds to sounds made by an adult with facial expressions, which then prompt the adult to make more sounds,' Cusworth goes on, 'then you see that what you are doing is stimulating a child's natural need to communicate.'

The crucial thing, therefore, is to talk to and listen to your child, as much as possible from the moment they are born. This may seem axiomatic to many of us, even if the link between language and communication and reading has not been fully appreciated.

There are other areas, however, of which we may not be already so aware. 'We all recognise,' says Roberts, 'that when babies babble, this is an early form of speech. What we are less able to recognise is that when a baby spills yoghurt all over the tray of its high-chair and then traces through it with his fingers, this is the beginning of mark-making – a very early form of writing, if you like. So to say, "Tut-tut, what a mess," and wipe it quickly away is not hugely helpful. Much better to say something like, "Oh, look what you've drawn, what a lovely pattern," – and then wipe it away.'

Language and communication, therefore, are fundamental to reading but at what point do we introduce books? PEEP operates in



'The crucial thing, therefore, is to talk to and listen to your child, as much as possible from the moment they are born.' Illustration from *Chatting* by Shirley Hughes (see page 7).

four age groups, starting with Baby PEEP for those aged 0 to 12 months. 'Babies who joined PEEP soon after they were born 16 months ago are now showing remarkable interest and competence in relation to books,' says Roberts, and PEEP four-year-olds are becoming accustomed to discussing the relative merits of books they have borrowed. For Blatchford, the important thing is to 'use books with children as an integral part of contented living.'

**'The first time I realised that Rebecca could follow instructions was when I said, "Turn the page over" and she did so. That was when she was about nine months old,' says Nicolette Jones, 37, mother of Rebecca, 4, and Laura, 18 months.**

'I've always been very inconsistent and read to the children whatever came into my hands, really.

'But I have always read to them, right from the beginning and from very early on I would follow the words with my finger. I talk to Rebecca a lot but then she has always been very verbal so I was running with the ball a bit. Laura is less so and of course she doesn't get my undivided attention as Rebecca did.

'The first time I realised that Rebecca could follow instructions was when I said, "Turn the page over" and she did so. That was when she was about nine months old. About the same time she learned to anticipate things. We had two books called *Let's Go* and *Let's Pretend* and she would start to laugh when she knew we were getting to the page with "Let's go tickle, tickle," on it.

'I've played I-Spy with her a lot since she was about three and she cottoned on quite quickly. What she has now grasped is rhymes. I'll say to her, "What rhymes with speak?" and she'll make something up like "neak".

'When she was three she joined a playgroup where the children had name cards over their coat pegs and I noticed that they could all find their own pegs within a couple of days. At toast time they would put chairs out with their names on them so the children got to recognise other people's names, too, because they wanted to know who they were sitting next to. And as a result of that I noticed Rebecca could read book dedications – "For Felix" or "For Laura" or whatever. When Rebecca was about two I remember being in the doctor's surgery and she started picking out the letters on the spine of an encyclopedia on his shelf. She could recognise O and S very early on because they were like pictures for her – she had, basically, a name for a circle and a name for a snake.

'I read with her from before she was one and by 18 months she could definitely follow quite a complicated story. I concentrate on it because reading and language are the one thing I know I can do. I mean I couldn't teach her to play the violin or how to hold a tennis racquet but with language I can give her the backup.'

'Share a book with your child every day,' is what the PEEP leaflet says and Roberts stresses that 'sharing high-quality books with children regularly from birth onwards is one of the most powerful strategies for parents'. Blatchford believes that any material is OK, so long as it is not actually offensive – even bath books, rag books and those very tactile board books without any words at all. 'It is also important,' says Roberts, 'to remember that what we do is far more important than what we say. It's all very well to say, "That's a very interesting book," and then put it aside; but if you then go on to read it from cover to cover that is what drives the message home.'

For Blatchford, nine-tenths of it all is about possession – hence the primary aim of Reading Is Fundamental, which is to give books to children – and encourage them to choose them for themselves. Reading Is Fundamental was started 30 years ago in the US where it now has a turnover of \$18 million, all of it ploughed into providing books for children – completely free. PEEP places great emphasis on doing things together with your young child, rather than them simply tagging along as you go about your daily chores. Talk to them constantly about what you are doing and draw their attention to the written word in everyday life in the form of shopping lists, labels on packaging, signs, television listings – even football results.

So, you talk to your child, you listen to your child, you share books with your child but should you actually try to *teach* your child to read, using those well-thumbed schemes such as the Oxford Reading Tree or, heaven forbid, the Janet and John books or the Ladybird Peter and Jane series? Many parents I spoke to said they did indeed try to do so in the belief that in state schools nowadays teachers simply do not have the time to systematically teach every child to read. The policy pack from my own children's primary school in north London is unequivocal on the subject. 'We have learnt,' it says firmly, 'that strategies like hearing children read a few sentences from a reading-scheme book even on a daily basis DO NOT encourage children to become fluent, lifelong readers and may indeed have an adverse effect on their developing writing skills. In general we do not invest your child's valuable learning time in deciphering text in this rather limited way . . . – and presumably they would discourage parents from doing so too. Somewhat crushed, I canvassed Simon Cusworth on his opinion and he agreed. 'Parents who push their children to learn how to read in a structured, decoding sort of way are really missing the point and end up producing children who can read but for whom it has little real meaning or enjoyment,' he said.

This view was backed up by Rosie Roberts. 'One of the crucial things about early literacy is that it is not so much about the mechanics of reading and writing – these can come relatively late in the day and are



more the icing on the cake, so to speak. What matters is wanting to read and it stands to reason that you will only want to read if you have found books exciting and enjoyable. It is all very well being able to read and write but if you get no enjoyment from it, you will not continue to read in later life.' To support this theory, Roberts points to a study conducted in Oxfordshire in the 1980s among children in middle to early-upper schools that showed that a staggering 80 per cent of them fell into the category 'Can read but don't want to'. 'The important thing,' says Roberts, 'and this was the whole purpose for which PEEP came into being in

the first place, is to trigger off a new generation of children who both can read and want to read.'

Reading Is Fundamental, proclaims Roy Blatchford, has 'long-term designs on the UK as a reading – not just a viewing – nation'. Schools, he believes, can only do so much – authors, publishers, booksellers and, not least, parents have a crucial role to play. During the recent press panic about the nation's morals it was for him the words of the award-winning author Philip Pullman which stood out. 'He observed simply that while "Thou shalt not" may reach the head,

it takes "Once upon a time" to reach the heart. What better way could there be to put it?'

**Deborah Maby** is a mother of two, a journalist and a children's book reviewer.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION:

Reading Is Fundamental, Swire House, 59 Buckingham Gate, London SW1E 6AJ

PEEP Centre, Peers School, Sandy Lane West, Littlemore, Oxford OX4 5JY

Photographs by Richard Newton.

**'My children can't tell the difference between being loved and cuddled and being read a story,' says Amandla Smith, 35, mother of Nompi, 9, Ashar, 6, Themba, 4.**

'I strongly believe that talking and listening is the first stage of literacy, so I've always spent a lot of time on that. I've learned this skill of reflective listening, where you repeat what the child says without making a judgement. If, for example, a child says a giraffe is a dog you don't contradict them, you say, "You think that's a dog," and the child will say something like, "Yes, look, it's got four legs and a tail," and you continue the conversation, waiting for the right moment before saying, "I think it's a giraffe."

'It's a way of respecting children. Once they feel listened to and respected they'll want to read. A lot of people can't get down to a child's level and I think problems occur when a child has been simply instructed, rather than listened to.

'I always did whatever worked and tried lots of different things out. I make sure it's a pleasure – we've always had a bedtime reading routine and we've always done things like make books together about our lives and our holidays and kept diaries with the children. My children can't tell the difference between being loved and cuddled and being read a story. There are times when we say, sorry it's too late, there's no time for a story tonight, and for them it's like saying, sorry, there isn't time to love you. And we've always had a Saturday morning library routine, and I've always taken them to the one o'clock and two o'clock clubs, where they always have lots of books.

'I really believe that it's between the ages of 0 and 4 that your subconscious is made. You're absolutely open during those years. If someone says, "You're wonderful," you believe it. From the start I always told my children how good



All the Smith family read together.

they were at reading, even if they couldn't, technically speaking, read. But as soon as you can pick up a book and look through it, you can read, I think. And if they're reading from memory or guessing what the words say by looking at the pictures it doesn't matter, you should tell them how brilliantly they read.

'The other thing is that you have to work on their interests. Ashar's passion when he was younger was dinosaurs and he was incredibly articulate in this one particular area. There's a dinosaur called a hypsilophodon which fascinated him because it was only the size of a chicken but it could run away from a tyrannosaurus. So he learned how to spell its name and loved doing it. If I'd got him to spell "orange" or something instead he wouldn't have been remotely interested.

'I also think you can't underestimate the effect of songs, poems and rhymes, which exploit the hypnotic effect of words, in the reading process. Nompi used to jump on her bed when she was little making up poems that synchronised with her jumps, like "I love my granny, she makes me happy," and Themba now is always coming out with silly rhymes like, "I'm Themba the Bemba and I come from

Semba". I think poetry comes out of children naturally because they don't know how else to express things. The other thing we've always done is go to plays and poetry readings.

'Because I come from Africa I've always been aware of how crucial literacy is and how it accesses you. For example, I've learned a lot about being a mother through reading about it. People in countries like Ireland or Zimbabwe realise that literacy is, basically, about survival, which is why on independence in Zimbabwe you had women demonstrating in the streets with banners saying "Give us Books" and "Let's Get Literate".

'The other important thing is that what you do at home is backed up in the community. I don't think Nompi would be as literate as she is without the teachers she's had, who have always had high expectations of her. And we've read stories at home which they have then acted out at school or at the library. Themba is the one of my three who has been least interested in books but now he's started school and he sees what a high status reading is given there he's become really enthusiastic. In his first week, I think he memorised about six books.'



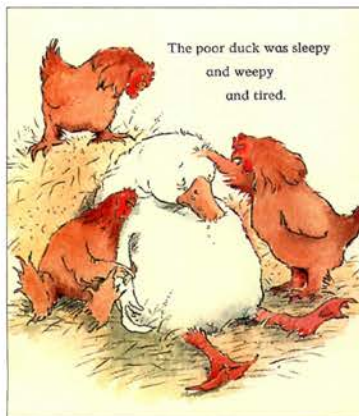
# Ten top picture books for parents to enjoy sharing with their preschoolers, chosen by Rosie Roberts, Roy Blatchford and Deborah Maby.

**Chatting** by Shirley Hughes, Walker, 0 7445 3654 5, £3.50 pbk  
Told in the first person, the young heroine of this delightful picture book explains how much she likes chatting – to the cat, to friends, to dad at bedtime and so on. Meanwhile the baby likes to chat on his toy telephone. An intimate observer of domestic life and childhood experience, Hughes' warm and distinctive illustrations are well integrated with her simple, large typeface, single line of text.

**The Very Hungry Caterpillar** by Eric Carle, Puffin, 0 14 050087 1, £4.99 pbk

A very small and very hungry caterpillar munches his way through the pages of this now classic picture book. With its emphasis on food and the days of the week and with its satisfying text full of repetition, humour and information, this bright, boldly illustrated book is not to be missed. Now also available as a board book (Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 00300 8, £4.99).

**Farmer Duck** by Martin Waddell, ill. Helen Oxenbury, Walker, 0 7445 3660 X, £4.50 pbk



Young readers will be outraged at the unfairness of the situation in this freshly and wittily illustrated picture book which tells of a lazy old farmer who stays in bed while the duck does all the work on the farm. How the tables are turned is amusingly told and there are plenty of opportunities for the young reader to interact with the confident, humorous text in large typeface.

**So Much** by Trish Cooke, ill. Helen Oxenbury, Walker, 0 7445 4396 7, £5.99 pbk

As one member of this Afro-Caribbean family arrives after another for daddy's surprise birthday party, the baby is squeezed and kissed and played with because everyone's loves him 'so much'. Tenderly and exuberantly illustrated, this large format picture book also has a beautiful written text with the cadences of Afro-Caribbean



English, a large typeface and a satisfyingly repetitive structure.

**Handa's Surprise** by Eileen Browne, Walker, 0 7445 3634 0, £4.99 pbk



Set in Kenya, this brightly illustrated picture book with its glowing colours tells how a little girl, Handa, sets off with seven delicious fruits as a surprise present for her friend. Along the way, various animals help themselves unbeknownst to Handa but when she arrives her basket is again mysteriously full. Young readers will enjoy the visual jokes and the clearly paced text.

**Noah's Ark** by Jane Ray, Orchard, 1 85213 947 1, £4.99 pbk

Children in the past often learnt to read by reading the only book available – the bible – and this dazzlingly beautiful large format picture book with its decorative illustrations uses extracts from the King James bible for its text to illustrate the story of Noah and the Ark. The beauty and power of the language ('The windows of heaven were opened; and the ark went upon the face of the waters') will communicate with and inspire young readers as poetry does with a special magic.



'Three Bears out hunting, I spy Baby Bunting' from *Each Peach Pear Plum*.

For a little while they all went along happily but then...  
The goat kicked  
The calf trampled  
The chickens flapped  
The sheep bleated  
The pig mucked about  
The dog teased the cat  
The cat chased the rabbit  
The rabbit hopped  
The children squabbled  
The boat tipped...



From *Mr Gumpy's Outing*.

**My Very First Mother Goose** edited by Iona Opie, ill. Rosemary Wells, Walker, 0 7445 4400 9, £14.99 hbk



Opie comments in her foreword to this stunning large format picture book Mother Goose collection that 'the words one first meets in nursery rhymes will always have a special magic; all the stronger for being mysterious and incomprehensible' and with its large typeface and wonderfully entertaining illustrative interpretations by Wells, this beautiful book is a great incentive to new young readers.

**Each Peach Pear Plum** by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Puffin, 0 14 050919 4, £4.99 pbk

A beautifully thought out, well executed picture book game of 'I spy' which wittily uses characters from nursery tales and keeps young readers turning the pages for the next surprise. Told in verse, with sunny illustrations and large, clear type.

**Mr Gumpy's Outing** by John Burningham, Puffin, 0 14 050254 8, £4.99 pbk

A cumulative picture book story illustrated with contrasting pale crayon tints and vivid colour washes in which Mr Gumpy is joined by more and more passengers on his boat trip with disastrous results. Large type-face and endearing characterisations of the animals make this an appealing book for new young readers.

**Through My Window** by Tony Bradman, ill. Eileen Browne, Mammoth, 0 7497 0161 7, £3.99 pbk

When Jo (from a mixed race family) is poorly, she stays at home with dad while mum goes off to work. A succession of people come to the door (the postman, the window cleaner, etc.) before mum's eventual return. A lively story with repetitive elements and a strong, simple line of text.



# Good? Good as? Good for..?

**Peter Hunt** looks at the perennial problem of deciding what we mean by a 'good' children's book.

**W**e are teachers, librarians, publishers, parents, writers, reviewers, booksellers. We are also male, female and, usually, adults. We all want books to do different things for different children of different ages from different cultures in different situations and for different reasons.

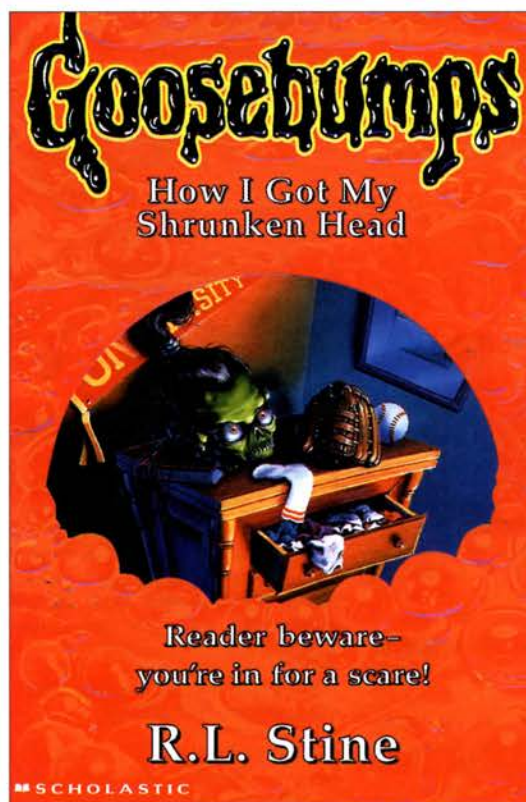
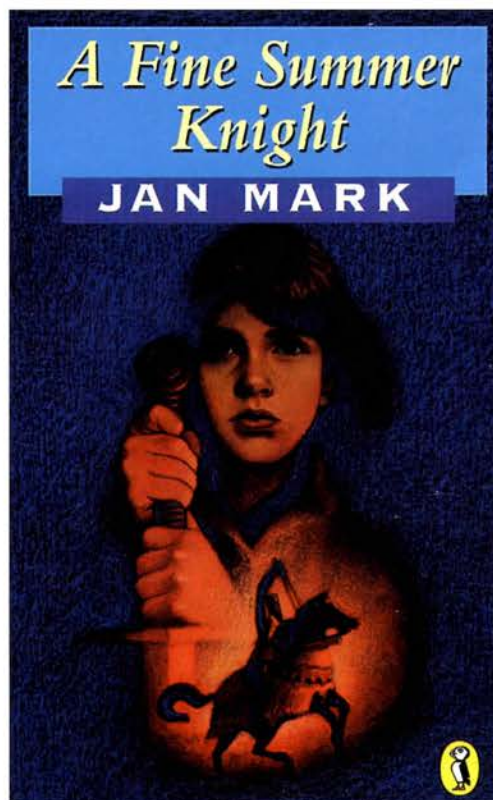
And yet we all want to know – as simply as possible – what is 'good'?

Confronted by an avalanche of around 7,000 new books a year, and a huge backlist to choose from, what criteria should we use in making our selections? After all, nobody really wants to accept anyone else's opinion about what is 'good'.

*Even if far more people enjoy Blume than Austen ... they shouldn't really, should they?*

How often have you bought a book on the strength of a rave review ('all children will love . . .') only to find that you do not like it, or, if you do, that the children you work with or live with perversely refuse to love it. The 'all children will love' approach is no use to us, even if it could ever be true, because most of us have the difficult task of bringing individual books to individual children in individual circumstances.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) there are no reliable short cuts. But we can clear the ground by each of us deciding what we think is good and *why*. 'Good' does not belong to somebody else – to the great 'they'. Arguments about what is good often collapse into a rather weary 'well, it's all a matter of taste' – but people are usually a little uneasy – or defiant – about that, as if somebody, somewhere knows better than they do about



what is good. After all, some things have to be better than others, don't they? Jane Austen is better than Judy Blume and that's that. Even if far more people enjoy Blume than Austen . . . they shouldn't really, should they?

The tricky truth is that what is 'good' is only a matter of taste, and the sooner we get rid of the myth that there is some absolute 'good' in these matters, the better. 'Good', after all, does not belong to a great 'they'.

Children's books are different from adults' books: they are written for a different audience, with different skills, different needs, and different ways of reading. Children experience texts in ways which, because they can rarely communicate them, are unknowable, but which must, because of the nature of language and the infinite variety of individual experiences,





be very rich and complex.

Let me emphasise: children and children's books are different, not lesser. Why, then, do we judge children's books by the same value systems we use for adult books – where they are bound by definition to emerge as lesser. To say that Judy Blume is not as good as Jane Austen is like saying that this apple is an unsuccessful orange because it is green, and that oranges are innately superior anyway.

In the November issue of BfK in a Poetry round-up, Jack Ousbey wrote: 'There are some poets writing for children whose work is of such quality that adults, too, find their poems engaging and challenging . . .' It is amazing how deeply ingrained the idea is that children's books are necessarily inferior – even in those who purport to support them.

Most of the problems about judging what is 'good' arise with discussion of what is seen as 'literature'. 'Literature' is a useful concept if we want to educate children into a particular kind of culture: but it is a pernicious one if it devalues any of the other million things teachers, librarians, parents do with children's books. What is valued as 'literature' in the adult world is the choice of a self-elected elite (usually male and adult); children's literature debate too often mirrors this approach which also implies that there is something called 'literariness' that you can detect on the page – 'good' writing. Reviewers and students sometimes try to indicate the 'goodness' of a book by referring, in a hopeful – and always vague – way to its 'literary style' (Alan Garner has it; R L Stine doesn't). This is a dangerous myth: you cannot tell if a piece of text is literature by looking at the words alone. One style cannot be abstractly 'better' than another. Some books may be more complex or more subtle than others – but that should not lead to an automatic placing of them on some 'literary' scale of 'goodness' running, perhaps from Jan Mark and Aidan Chambers, through Gillian Cross and Anne Fine down to 'manufactured' series, like 'Animal Ark' or 'Goosebumps'. Both ends of the scale lose out then, one end rejected as elitist, the other rejected as junk – and neither is seen for its own kind of 'goodness'. (The 'safe' middle ground may suffer from over-praise – as when one reviewer described Gillian Cross's *The Great Elephant Chase* as 'writing at its best'.)

Equally, we have to be careful that we do not give our prejudices the mantle of cosmic truth. Take tradition: are children who come to the images of Tony Ross or John Scieszka or Walt Disney before they come to Grimm or Perrault or Milne having a lesser experience than previous generations or merely a different one? What about originality? Just what, precisely, makes the 1911 *The Secret Garden* 'more original' than the 'novelisation' of the film? After all, the most derivative book is original if you read it first.

## ***'For' is the key word. What are books 'good' for?***

Away with absolutes, then! And away with judging all children's books against some adult books: books are for different purposes at different times. 'For' is the key word. What are books 'good' for?

They are good for readers – real, individual readers, us, not another constructed 'they'. Why do we think a certain book is 'good'? Because of those hundreds of things that made us: our sex, race, class, home town, TV, our own secret shelf of childhood reading and the rest. Let us start with our selves as the true bases of judgement.

Once we know where we are coming from, then we can go on to make judgements about whether a book might be 'good' for

the children we know. Reviewers who say – 'my class fell about laughing' are fine with me – as long as I know something about their class. Those who try to be universal ('six-year-olds will . . .') are not fine: lumping 'children' together may be convenient, but it is demeaning and ultimately pointless.

'Good for', then, but 'good for' in what way? Some children's books are 'good' time passers; others 'good' for acquiring literacy; others 'good' for expanding the imagination or 'good' for inculcating general social attitudes, or 'good' for dealing with issues or coping with problems, or 'good' for reading in that 'literary' way which is a small part of adult culture, or 'good' for dealing with racism . . . and most books do several things. This is not a scale where some purposes stand higher than others – it is a matrix where hundreds of subtle meanings are generated: what you think is good depends on you, the children, and on what you are using the book for – and every reading is different.

Having said all that, there is the disconcerting fact that any one reader may well read in total contradiction to another: it is not difficult to find someone who thinks that Anne Fine's *Madame Doubtfire* is a tragedy rather than a comedy.

## ***As Oscar Wilde said, 'All criticism is a mode of autobiography.'***

This whole approach to 'good' can be taken as refreshing freedom or bewildering anarchy. I would rather have a book judged in relation to every other book, than to a canon produced by other people! And as to anarchy: although we are individuals, we are all part of groups, with norms and responsibilities, and we understand general cultural values and local necessities value-judgements are never free-floating.

But, practically, we are left with that pile of 7,000 volumes and diminishing resources. Even if we are clear and confident about how we select, we still need help. The short cuts we have are dangerous: after all, pity the poor reviewers with 50 words to say something we can understand. To trust such reviews, we need to have confidence in the reviewer and/or the journal they are writing in. Can we join a community of like-minded souls, and rely on the fact that if a reviewer works for BfK, or if it is, say, Julia Eccleshare, then we can relate to their idea of 'good'? Perhaps that is the best we can do in an imperfect world; or should we ask for a declaration from each reviewer about who they are, what they value in books, what they stand for? As Oscar Wilde said, 'All criticism is a mode of autobiography.'

In the end, the search for 'good' should be a matter of delight rather than faction. My own personal 'good' in children's books involves, above all, expanding the mind: encountering the new, the different, the stretching. But I also believe that just as there is no such thing as a dull or insignificant person, so there is no such thing as a dull and insignificant book: good is what we make it. That may be idealistic – but doesn't it sum up the whole business of children's books? As I said, it is

**Peter Hunt** is the first British Professor of Children's Literature (at the University of Wales, Cardiff). Among his most recent books are *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford, Opus Paperbacks, 1994) and the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (Routledge, 1996).



# Publishing Profiles No.2: The Production Manager

Most people do not know that publishers have a Production Department, let alone what it does. **Liz Attenborough** investigates.

To find out what happens in a publisher's production department, I spoke to one of the twenty-eight members of the Penguin Books production team, Alison Davies. Alison is the Production Manager for Children's Hardbacks at Penguin, and with her team of five staff she handles around 400 titles a year – half will be new books, and half will be reprints of existing titles. The books are published under the imprints of Hamish Hamilton, Viking and Dutton, and most of the books will later become Puffin paperbacks.

## What does a Production Department do?

'The production department is here to supply the book to the agreed specification at the agreed price on the agreed date, and the specification will include getting the best possible quality for the price,' says Alison. So what does that mean in practice? 'At the basic level we are advising on the size of the book, the paper that can be used, the colour techniques we can employ, the timescale – all the advice necessary on the technical side of the business. And of course the details of what all this will cost.'

## Interaction with Other Departments

The department within the company that children's hardback production liaises with the most is the children's design department, and next in line would be the children's editors and the stock control managers.

'We have to understand what the editors want, and give it to them in the most cost-effective way. We also have to work closely with the designers, to help them achieve the end results they require without going over the budget.'

It is interesting to note that Alison talks about the requirements of the editors and designers – what about the authors and the illustrators? Alison is dealing with titles from such prestigious names as Allan Ahlberg, Quentin Blake, Jan Ormerod, Dick King-Smith, Jan Mark and Jill Murphy among many others. 'Yes, at a large place like Penguin, we are one step removed from the authors and illustrators. That has a plus side and a minus side – on the plus side we have to be pretty focused on our task with such a large flow of work, and the fewer people we have to deal with, the better. On the minus side, we do have to rely on those intermediaries to pass on all the information at the right time. Some illustrators do come in to the office to correct the colour proofs of their picture books, and it certainly makes it more interesting for us to deal with them directly, even though it probably takes more time.'



Alison Davies at Penguin Children's Books.

Photos by Richard Newton.

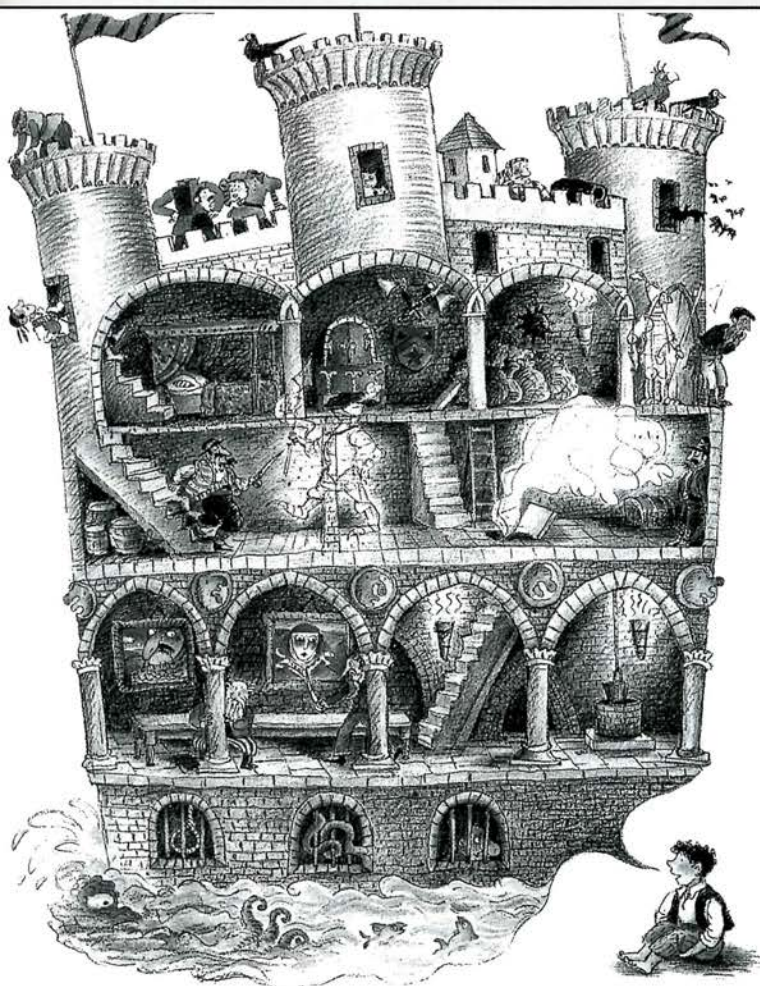
## Suppliers Out of House

Whilst editors are dealing with their authors, and designers dealing with their illustrators, Alison and her team are dealing with their stable of suppliers, who number around 20 key ones. These are typesetters, printers and repro houses – 'companies that turn artwork into film for printing'. 'Around half our key suppliers are UK or Europe based, with the others in the Far East. Dealing with the Far East printers is relatively straightforward as our main point of contact with them is through someone known as a Print Farmer, who is based in the UK. He knows which printer has the right capacity for a job, and will fix for the supply of paper, too.' In some companies the production manager would be responsible for buying the necessary paper for each job, but at Penguin all the paper for their massive UK printing needs is handled by one Paper Purchasing Manager. Alison makes her decision on where to place the printing of each book on the size of the intended print run. 'There are some large, juicy jobs that everyone wants to try and get from us, but there are plenty of small margin jobs that are harder to place.' If it is just a small number (2–5,000), the likely printing destination for colour books would be in the Far East. If the print run goes over 5,000, it is more likely the printing would be done in the UK (or Europe) so that a closer eye can be kept on the project. A large print run usually means it is a high profile book, often with several editions for a number of overseas publishers, and Alison is likely to visit the printer at the start of the main printing run to check that all is well with the colour just as it is beginning its large machine run.

## Training?

It all sounds highly technical, so I asked where Alison had acquired her knowledge. Much of the technical training is on the job. 'Actually, I milk our suppliers for as much information as I can – they are the ones at the cutting edge of the new developments, and they have to tell me how they do things when they're trying to sell me new systems and new techniques.' Alison has been working in Penguin's production department for seven years now, and in that time the technology has changed dramatically. 'The old letterpress technology (where raised images impressed onto the paper) had all gone before I joined, and everything was already printed litho (where the printing plates are flat, and the images to be printed are treated chemically). But it's on the pre-press side where things have changed most dramatically. That is in the early stages of taking the artwork





The brigands in the castle from Janet and Allan Ahlberg's *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*. 'I had to pass this book on press at 3am in January in Beccles,' says Production Manager Alison Davies, 'but of course it was worth it to get the colour how I wanted it!'

and text through to the ready-to-print stage. The technology is changing all the time, and it's vital we keep up with it so that we can utilise the best of the new in our work.'

Alison has to help designers and editors to keep up, too. 'What can and can't be done can really only be demonstrated by being seen.'

## Busy Schedules

The production side needs to be considered at the earliest stage of any new project, particularly if it is out of the ordinary in any way, or going to be major. 'If there's a large multi-national co-edition to be planned, the schedule is affected just as much as the price.'

'The Frankfurt and Bologna Book Fairs loom large in our planning, as we need to get material early enough to get colour proofs or mock-up dummies prepared to gauge other publishers' interest.'

Like most children's publishers, Penguin Children's Books publishes new books monthly, but the heaviest period for new book publishing is the autumn which means that April and May are particularly busy months for production staff as they get the last of the checking done so that everything is finally ready to go to the printer for printing. Books need to be in the warehouse two months before their actual publication date to fulfil bookshop and overseas selling needs. 'Generally we need a year from receipt of the manuscript to get a finished book if it is just a straight novel, but fifteen to eighteen months from the delivery of the artwork if it's a picture book. It seems a long time, but with new and reprint publishing each month there are constant proofing and scheduling requirements to adhere to. It is very systematised but needs to be in order to put through such a high volume of books – if the bulk goes through smoothly on long schedules, we've got time to spend on the less standard books that need particular care.'

## Costings

I asked Alison if production people needed high numeracy skills, since so much of their work is involved in costing the books. She laughed. 'I don't think anyone here has anything more than maths to GCSE standard. It's really analytical skills that are needed more, so we can identify problems, and plan the best way to go for each book.'



## A Career in Production

So how do people get into this line of work? 'Most people don't know that a publisher's production department exists, so no one really knows they want to get into it. It wasn't something I particularly wanted to do, but after a number of different jobs (including being a temporary secretary at Hatchards bookshop and being a sales rep for a saddlery company) I joined Penguin as a secretary and it happened to be for the hardback production manager.' Since that start, in 1990, Alison has worked her way up through all the various stages to her position today, reporting into the Hardback Production Director, who in turn reports to the Group Production Director.

## Job Satisfaction?

The best part of the job is 'working within a creative environment but working in a very practical way. I find it very satisfying being the middle person operating between the editors and designers within the company and the print trade outside. Most people arrive in production departments by accident, but once they are here they get a lot of satisfaction from the job and don't want to move.'

Alison continues to get enormous satisfaction from seeing the advance copies of new books direct from the printer. 'The whole office swoons on the box of new books, and there's silence as everyone looks at the finished article. Yes, we do look anxiously to see if there are any mistakes, and we may be a little disappointed if the colour isn't quite as we had hoped it might be. But however long you are in this job, that moment of excitement seeing the finished book for the first time never goes away.'

The worst part of the job is perhaps 'wanting to be more lavish on something, but not being able to because of the constraints on the costing. And the schedule driven pace means that we sometimes feel we could perhaps have done better, done more, if we had been given more time.'

Alison thinks that Penguin is a fantastic company to work for, and says, 'Production suits me very well. I wouldn't want to be an Editor!'

## Future Trends

I asked Alison if the new technologies, and the arrival of Desk Top Publishing, meant that there might not be any need for a production department in the future? 'The job will continue to change, but I think there will always be the need for somebody to translate the creative ideas into practical reality – but who knows how things will develop?' ■



Liz Attenborough was formerly Children's Publisher at Penguin Books. She now works as a children's book consultant.

**Publishing Profiles No. 3**  
will go behind the scenes in the Design Department.



# Authorgraph No.103

## Ian Beck

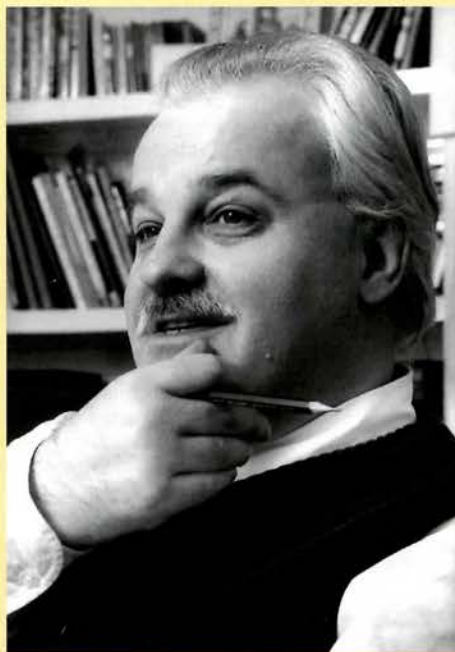
**Ian Beck**  
interviewed by  
Julia Eccleshare

**T**he recently refurbished main hall of the Art Workers' Guild in Queen's Square, London seems a natural home for Ian Beck. The newly painted scarlet walls are covered in portraits of the Masters of the Guild such as Arthur Rackham, Sir Edwin Lutyens and William Morris. Above the picture runs a frieze with the names of all the brothers, as they are called – though many are sisters – lettered with their admission dates. Dead members' names are gilded, those who let their membership lapse are left to fade into obscurity. There is a strong feeling both of brotherhood and of a celebration of art and craft skills. It is an atmosphere of culture and civilisation, overlaid with a good deal of manner.

Ian is a brother of the Guild. Brother Archie Beck. Not an alias to fit in with the spirit of the Guild, as it sounds, but genuinely his second name which he adopted at art school in order to distinguish himself from another Ian in the same group. He was elected in 1987 and is currently an honorary secretary. He clearly relishes the feel of the place with its cross fertilisation across the various arts disciplines. Not surprisingly since he is himself such a cultural polymath. His newest project takes him to the 1997 Edinburgh Fringe for two weeks where he and Glynn Boyd Harte, a friend from art school days, will perform in a show that they have created out of their pastiche performances as music hall entertainers.

Ian's attitude to his singing and song writing is much the same as his attitude to his other areas of expertise and extensive knowledge. He is self deprecating about them all, although it is evident that he cares deeply about them. He dismisses his widely gleaned store of information as 'magpie knowledge. I read voraciously and retain it,' as if that made it somehow less worthwhile.

Modesty is one of Ian's overriding characteristics. Self containment is another. He is unfailingly courteous, genial and agreeable. Not for him is the all too familiar catalogue of complaints against publishers, agents or booksellers. He likes to like other writers' and illustrators' work, rather than to criticise. He looks for the best in everything, though he is also quite discerning enough



to recognise degrees of quality. His cultivated manner suggests a smooth path of success but, though he would not see himself as someone who had to struggle unduly, he worked a long apprenticeship before he found success as an illustrator of picture books.

Not that he had been courting it and failing but that he had worked for nearly a decade before the chance to do a picture book came his way.

It was a natural step in many ways as his illustrations for the adult magazine world had always 'looked a bit like a children's thing. Lots of dappled light and nice settings. And I always could draw children.' It also fitted in with his long standing collector's interest in children's books by Rackham and his peers; and it had been the underlying inspiration of much of his art school training.

Ian went first to Brighton School of Art while still at school. An eleven plus failure, he went to a small secondary modern school with a caring headmaster who recognised Ian's ability and directed him towards the Saturday morning classes at the Art School. 'My father died

when I was thirteen and my mother was naturally worried about what would happen to me. I was very lucky that my headmaster stepped in to help.'

Later, as a student at Brighton School of Art Ian was taught by, among others, Raymond Briggs, Justin Todd, John Lawrence and Ferelith Eccles-Williams.

'Raymond Briggs was a great teacher. He taught me to notice unregarded things. One day he brought in a strip cartoon torn from a newspaper to show us because the detail of the head in one of the pictures was so excellent. But, the idea that you'd go out of college and do a picture book was unthinkable. Someone like John Burningham was the top of Mount Everest. Also, when you are at college you want to be more sophisticated. You are just at the stage when you want to leave everything to do with children far behind.' Ian did just that on leaving art school. He worked two days a week in Harrods to pay the rent and picked up drawing work where he could. Magazine work, record covers, work for the Conran design group – and fulfilling his long standing childhood ambition to draw for *Radio Times* (he even did a cover for it, later on) – all provided him with his basic training. 'Working for magazines, I learnt to draw and redraw to order. It gave me a good technical ability and it also made me realise that I was a tool.'

That ability to work to someone else's idea gave Ian his grounding but he quickly adapted to the possibilities of having his own ideas and fulfilling them.

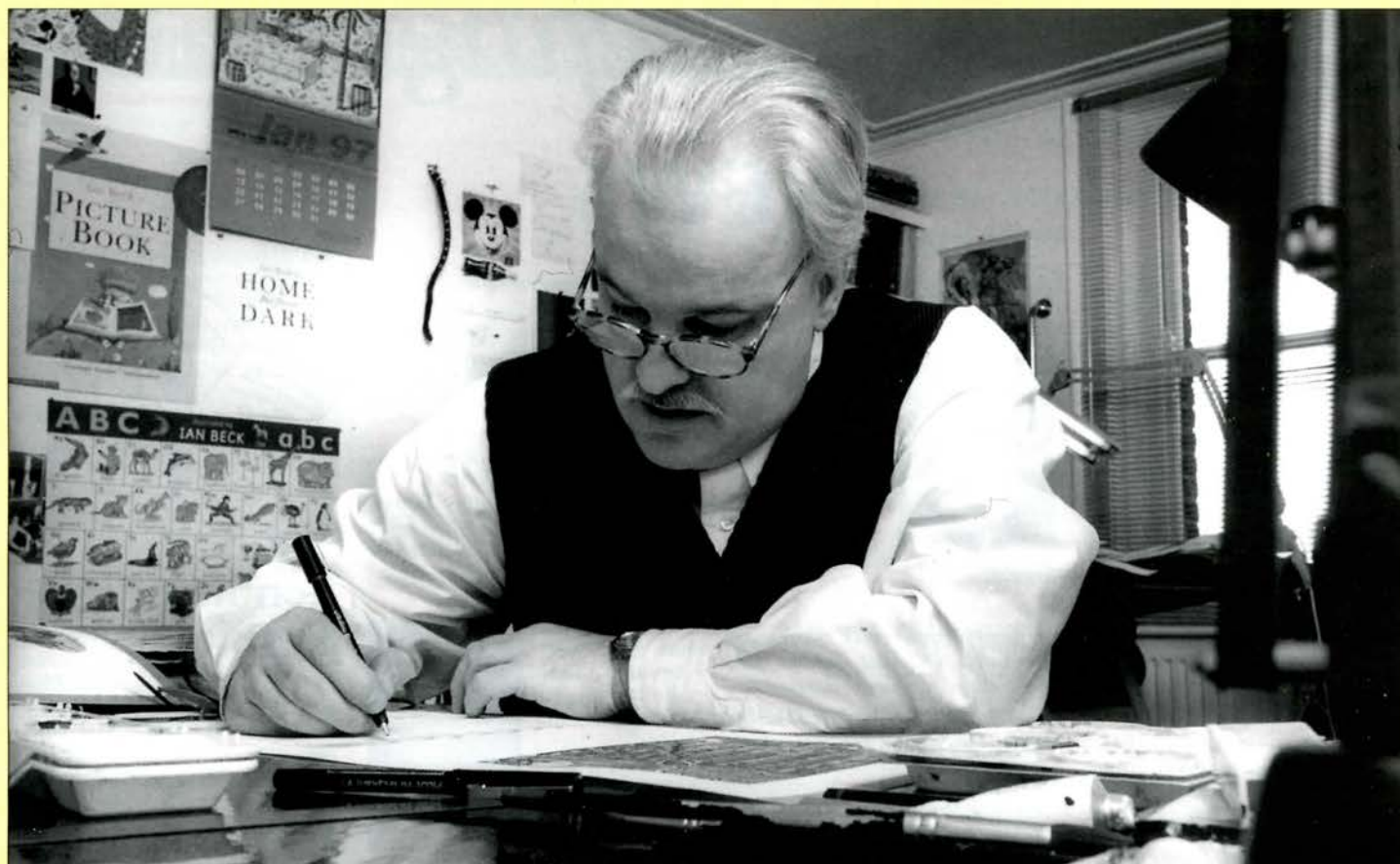
David Fickling, then newish at the Oxford University Press, invited Ian to do the illustrations for *Round and Round the Garden*, a collection of finger rhymes and games. He had seen Ian's work in *Radio Times* and recognised how well his style would fit the very specific brief of the book.

'What made doing my first book, *Round and Round the Garden*, so enjoyable was that I was escaping from the tyranny of other people's ideas.' Ian's beautiful watercolours and tidy diagrams were a perfect match for text. *Oranges and Lemons* and *Ride a Cock Horse*, books of the same kind, followed in fairly quick succession.

Ian works mostly in watercolours and

*'What made doing my first book, Round and Round the Garden, so enjoyable was that I was escaping from the tyranny of other people's ideas.'*





in his use of both colour and line he has an old fashioned quality, reminiscent of Harold Jones and Albert Rutherford, the English illustrators of the 1930s who drew simple, almost naive figures. 'I try to create a look that is floating, strong, and wistful all at the same time. Sometimes that doesn't work so well in print. It's partly to do with the qualities of white that you get.'

Unlike most illustrators, Ian is nostalgic about the old, four colour overlay method of illustration which he liked for the quality of colour that you could get from it.

But it is not just the use of colour that defines Ian's work. His line images are also very distinctive, though his technique has changed over the years. 'I used to work from photographs. Now I trust myself to make things up so I work from memory. It's quite good really because the invented figures act the way that you want them to. The best illustrators from photographs are the ones who are best at directing. For it to work, you have to get the right angles and the right costumes.'

I follow the other school of thought. I follow Ardizzone who believed in "the rightness of the pose". When you've done lots of lines you know if it's right or not. You have more freedom than if you are working from photographs but it's more work. It may take six or seven goes to get it right. You don't really know exactly what you are doing. Your hand and mind take over. When it works, people respond to the feeling of the picture. The emotion comes off the page.'

Once launched, Ian's picture books developed quickly. David Fickling moved to Transworld and Ian did his first independent picture book, *The Teddy Robber*. He is now published on many lists – Orchard, HarperCollins and Scholastic having been added to the OUP and Transworld – and now has a catalogue of deadlines to meet. 'I do a lot of roughs and am very painstaking so everything tends to get late.' He mostly works from the studio of a friend in which he has a corner but partly, when there is just too much on, at home. 'I don't like to be away from home seven days a week so I have a work place at home, as well. I've always involved the children in my work. When I did *The Teddy Robber* I planned it at the kitchen table and the boys, Edmund and Laurence, helped by thinking about how they would react to particular situations. Lily has also been an inspiration because she has a quite different outlook on books. She looks for different things and I have sometimes followed her guidance on that.'

Having children and becoming a children's book illustrator happened to coincide for Ian but though he discusses work with his children his real inspiration lies outside the family and mostly in the past. 'I have tried great bleeding chunks of prose now that the boys are older but I don't think it's really my thing.'

Somehow I don't either. Ian's work embodies nostalgia and make believe. It indulges a particular view of a very English idyll which delights the eye and engenders a sense of well being. Exactly the way that Ian himself sees the world and his part in it. ■

Photographs by Richard Mewton.

## A selection of Ian Beck's books

### From HarperCollins:

*Poppy and Pip's Bedtime*, 0 00 198150 1, £6.99 hbk, 0 00 664541 0, £3.99 pbk  
*Poppy and Pip's Walk*, 0 00 198149 8, £6.99 hbk, 0 00 664540 2, £3.99 pbk  
*Poppy and Pip's Picnic* (due Autumn 1997)

### From Orchard:

*Five Little Ducks*, 1 85213 338 4, £7.99 hbk, 1 85213 497 6, £3.99 pbk  
*Little Angel*, Geraldine McCaughrean, 1 85213 924 2, £8.99 hbk  
*The Orchard Book of Fairy Tales*, retold by Rose Impey, 1 85213 382 1, £12.99 hbk, 1 85213 810 6, £6.99 pbk

### From Oxford University Press:

*Oranges and Lemons*, compiled by Karen King, 0 19 272281 6, £3.50 pbk  
*Ride a Cock Horse*, compiled by Sarah Williams, 0 19 272284 0, £3.50 pbk  
*Round and Round the Garden*, compiled by Sarah Williams, 0 19 272282 4, £3.50 pbk

### From Scholastic:

*Home Before Dark*, 0 590 54277 X, £9.99 hbk (due September 1997)  
*Ian Beck's Picture Book*, 0 590 54088 2, £9.99 hbk, 0 590 13715 8, £5.99 pbk

### From Transworld:

*Hush-a-bye Baby*, chosen by Carolyn Fickling, 0 552 52656 8, £3.99 pbk  
*The Owl and the Pussy-cat*, Edward Lear, 0 385 40570 7, £8.99 hbk, 0 552 52819 6, £3.99 pbk  
*The Teddy Robber*, 0 552 52593 6, £3.99 pbk

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



## NEWS

## Conferences

## The Federation of Children's Book Groups

Plymouth Conference  
4th to 6th April 1997

The Federation of Children's Book Groups will be holding its annual conference at The University of Plymouth with the theme **Turning Tides and Hidden Depths**. Speakers include Michael Foreman, Philip Ridley, Theresa Breslin, Philip Pullman, Simon James and Frank Hodge (USA). There will be a wide choice of seminars led by special guests including Michael Morpurgo. Topics will range from 'Ideas for Stories', 'Organising a Book Event', 'The American Scene' and more. There will also be a publishers' exhibition and a book shop.

The cost of a full residential weekend is £110 for Federation members and £135 for non-members. Daily rates are also available. Information from: Ali Pedlar, 19 Dunraven Drive, Derriford, Plymouth, Devon PL6 6AR enclosing a 26p s.a.e.

## Children's Books Ireland

1997 Children's Literature Summer School: 'Letting in the Light'

23rd to 25th May 1997

The new Children's Books Ireland (incorporating CLAÍ & ICBT) is holding its 7th summer school in The Dublin Writers' Museum, 18 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Speakers include Benjamin Zephaniah, Aidan and Nancy Chambers, Janni Howker, Theresa Breslin, Melvyn Burgess and Don Conroy.

Information and full programme from: Clare Ranson, Children's Books Ireland, The Irish Writers' Centre, 19 Parnell Square, Dublin 1 (Phone/Fax: 00 353 1 872 5854) or Liz Morris (membership secretary) on 00 353 1 830 8348.

## Prizes

Anne Fine has won the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year prize with *The Tulip Touch* (Hamish Hamilton), reviewed in BfK 102. The judges were Elizabeth Hammill, Jacqueline Wilson, Joanna Carey and two fourteen-year-olds - Cameron Queen and Ela Stevenson, the winners of a book review competition run by Whitbread and *The Times*.

## People



Philippa Pearce



Roger McGough

Author **Philippa Pearce**, best known for *Tom's Midnight Garden*, and poet **Roger McGough** received the OBE in the new year's Honours Lists.

**Lesley Sim** is the 1997 Chair of the Youth Libraries Group, the section of the Library Association responsible for work with children and young people. Lesley, who is a children's librarian in Hampshire, has previously been YLG's Publications Officer. She will also chair the judging panel for the Library Association's Carnegie and Kate Greenaway awards.

**Catherine Blanchard**, head of children's services at Hertfordshire Libraries, is the only librarian on the government's National Reading Initiative advisory panel. The broad aim of the Initiative is to encourage more children to read. Other panel members include the TV personality and children's author, **Floella Benjamin**, and actor **Timothy West**.



Catherine Blanchard

**Barry Cunningham** and **Elinor Bagenal** are setting up a new children's company for Element Books. They were previously Editorial Director and Senior Editor respectively for Bloomsbury Children's Books.

**Sarah Odedina** has been appointed Editorial Director for Bloomsbury Children's Books. Joining her from Penguin Children's Books, **Emma Matthewson** has been appointed Commissioning Editor.

**Fiona Kenshole** has been appointed Publishing Director of Children's and Reference Books for Oxford University Press. She was previously Publishing Director for Hodder Children's Books.



Fiona Kenshole

**Andrea Reece** has been promoted to Deputy Managing Director at Hodder Children's Books.

**Susie Jenvy** has been appointed Editor for Faber Children's Books.

**Alex Strick** has been appointed Children's Literature Manager at Book Trust. She previously worked for the St John Ambulance managing the Youth Section.



Alex Strick

**Ian Spanton** has been appointed UK Sales manager for Walker Books.

## Obituary Edward Blishen (1920-1996)

The writer and literary journalist **Edward Blishen** died on 13th December. The 76-year-old writer began his career as a teacher and then progressed to being a freelance writer and broadcaster. His books include *Roaring Boys* (1955), a semi-fictional account of life in a London secondary modern school, and *The God Beneath the Sea* (1970), a retelling of Greek myths which won the Carnegie Medal, as well as anthologies such as *The Oxford Book of Poetry for Children*. He was the editor of the *Junior Pears Encyclopedia* and of the collection of essays on children's literature, *The Thorny Paradise*.



Anne Fine

**Jacqueline Wilson** was the overall winner of the Sheffield Children's Book Awards for *Double Act* (Doubleday), also the short novels category winner. **Jill Murphy** won the picture books category for *The Last Noo Noo* (Walker) and **Robert Swindells** won the longer novels category for *Unbeliever* (Hamish Hamilton).



## Public Lending Right Results

PLR is a system of payment to authors and illustrators based on the number of times their books are borrowed from public libraries. The data collected provides useful feedback on the popularity of particular books with library readers, including children. It can also sometimes provide encouraging evidence that even out of print titles continue to find an active readership in libraries.

PLR information just released for July '95- June '96 reveals that:

- Loans of children's fiction (including picture books) increased from 19.8% to 23% of all loans despite a steady decline in adult borrowing.
- Loans of children's non-fiction declined from 5.6% to 4.6% of all loans.
- The popularity of writers catering for older readers and teenagers continues to grow.
- Janet and Allan Ahlberg were the fifth most popular writers in the list, and the most popular children's writers.
- The ten most popular children's authors (in order of loans) were Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, Ann M Martin (*The Babsitters' Club*), R L Stine (*Point Horror*), Rene Goscinny (*Asterix*), Kate William (*Sweet Valley High*), Dick King-Smith, John Cunliffe (*Postman Pat* and *Rosie & Jim*) and Jamie Suzanne (*Sweet Valley Twins*).

## Competition: Win an Author and Get Published!

Children who enter A & C Black's writing competition could win their school a well known author for the day. All they have to do is write a review of about 200 words of their favourite book explaining what makes it so special. They can choose to review fiction or non-



## BRIEFING•BRIEFING•BRIEFING•BRIEFING•BRIEFING•BRI

fiction. The winning review will be published in BfK. The five runners-up will receive sets of ten 'Jets' titles for their school. The competition will be judged by BfK editor, Rosemary Stones. Entries should be submitted by 30th April 1997 to Charlotte Burrows, A & C Black, 35 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4JH.

## (More) Fame for Bilbo Baggins

J R R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has been voted Britain's most gladdening book of the century by Waterstone's customers and Channel 4 viewers. The sequel to *The Hobbit* (no. 19 in the listing) which was originally devised as a story for Tolkien's children, *The Lord of the Rings* achieved cult status with students in the 1960s. The other children's titles listed are *The Wind in the Willows* (no. 16), *Winnie the Pooh* (no. 17), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (no. 21), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (no. 26), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (no. 34), *Watership Down* (no. 40), *Sophie's World* (no. 41), *Gormenghast* (no. 55), *Matilda* (no. 76), *James and the Giant Peach* (no. 80) and *The BFG* (no. 97). Two of these titles are in translation; only one is by a female writer.

## Bfs POETRY BEST SELLER CHARTS TOP 10 LISTINGS INTO SCHOOL BOOKSHOPS JANUARY TO DECEMBER 1996

### 6-9 YEAR OLDS

- 1 **You Little Monkey and Other Poems for Young Children**, John Foster, OUP
- 2 **Playtime Poems**, collected by Jill Bennett, OUP
- 3 **A Purple Poetry Paintbox**, chosen by John Foster, OUP
- 4 **A Green Poetry Paintbox**, chosen by John Foster, OUP
- 5 **A Very First Poetry**, chosen by John Foster, OUP
- 6 **A First Poetry**, chosen by John Foster, OUP
- 7 **All Day Saturday and Other Poems**, Charles Causley, Macmillan
- 8 **Rhymes for Bedtime**, Ladybird
- 9 **Nuts about Nuts**, Michael Rosen, HarperCollins
- 10 **A Jumble of Clothes**, compiled by Jill Bennett, Transworld

### 9-12 YEAR OLDS

- 1 **Michael Rosen's Book of Very Silly Poems**, Michael Rosen, Puffin
- 2 **Please Mrs Butler**, Allan Ahlberg, Puffin
- 3 **The Secret Lives of Teachers**, Brian Moses, Macmillan
- 4 **You'll Never Walk Alone (More Football Poems)**, chosen by David Orme, Macmillan
- 5 **(joint placing)**  
**You Canny Shove Yer Grannie Off a Bus!**, Lindsay Macrae, Puffin  
**One of Your Legs is Both the Same**, compiled by Eunice McMullen, Macmillan
- 7 **It's Raining Cats and Dogs**, edited by Pie Corbett, Puffin
- 8 **Heard It in the Playground**, Allan Ahlberg, Puffin
- 9 **Revolting Rhymes**, Roald Dahl, Puffin
- 10 **'Ere We Go! (Football Poems)**, chosen by David Orme, Macmillan

This listing has been specially compiled for BfK by Books for Students from their sales data. Books for Students Ltd is a major specialist supply company to schools and libraries and the organiser of Readathon in schools.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Godhanger

Dear Editor

Much as I admire both Julia Eccleshare's judgement and Dick King-Smith's genius, I'm afraid I find Julia's exposition of *Godhanger* [BfK 102] implausible. It seems to me to be one of those books writers feel compelled to write from time to time because the book world considers writing of a comic or supposedly lighter kind to be of less worth than 'serious' writing. However, books of this type really should be consigned to a bottom drawer rather than published in such an attractive way as this. The major problem, I feel, is that King-Smith is striving to be poetic when in many of his books there is poetry in abundance. The type of poetry aimed for in *Godhanger* produces sentences like 'There were many creatures, he realized, less fortunate than himself, who must needs dwell in Godhanger to get their livelihood, but who would live there unless he must?' All these must needs-ing produces tortuous work like this whereas the simplicity of style in works like *The Sheep Pig* produces true and direct poetry. This lofty aiming for higher things also produces diminished characterisation: compare the character of the wild cat in *Godhanger* with the similar character in *The Mouse Butcher* while the character of the Skymaster himself (the Christ figure) is just too sanctimonious for his own good.

And who will read the book anyway? Why, adults, of course, who are easily impressed by pseudo-poetic tosh. Young people are less easily deceived which is why I imagine *Godhanger* is likely to remain firmly on library and bookshop shelves.

Keith Barker

Westhill College of Higher Education, Weoley Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6LL

### Judging a Book by its Cover

Dear Editor

Whilst I applaud the establishment of the Big Book Cover Award (anything that promotes an awareness of design is a good thing), I feel the general criticisms that you level at publishers' cover designs [BfK 102] are too simplistic.

Cover design is not simply a pictorial interpretation of the contents within. A cover has to appear attractive to a multitude of different people, and satisfy the diverse criteria that determine its success or failure. These people can include the author, the editorial/marketing/sales departments within the publishing house, the wholesaler, library supplier, librarian, retailer and reviewer. The book cover may have to clear some, or all, of these hurdles before it even arrives on the shelf to be judged by the child.

These are the 'politics' of design which we bear in mind with every design decision, along with the 'economics'. Arriving at a good design can be expensive, and increasingly our budgets are driven harder as profit margins are squeezed. Many publishers have even cut back their design departments.

Reality dictates that design decisions are so complex that it is easy to lose sight of the end user - the child. We all need to acknowledge the complexity of this process - it is unrealistic to judge it simply on the terms that you do in your article.

Having said all the above, I am delighted and encouraged by our success in this award [winner of the 6-9 category for Diz Wallis's cover for Dick King-Smith's *The Terrible Trins*]; we must be getting something right!

Ronnie Fairweather

Art Director, Penguin Children's Books, 27 Wrights Lane, Kensington, London W8 5TZ

LETTERS continue overleaf







# BfKREVIEWS

Reviews (of both hardback and paperback fiction and non-fiction) are grouped for convenience into both age categories and under teaching range. Within each section, you will find reviews for younger children at the beginning. Books and children being varied and adaptable, we suggest that you look either side of your area. More detailed recommendations for use can often be found within the review.

## TITLES REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE

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Bad Day ABC, The	★★★ 18
Belly Flop	★★★ 23
Broken Bridge	★★★★ 27
Bypass	★★★ 25
Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?	★★★ 25
Car, The	★★★★ 27
Chanting Rhymes	★★★ 18
Charlie's Choice	★★★ 18
Charlie the Champion Traveller	★★★ 22
Cheese and Tomato Spider, A	★★★ 19
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Daft Jack and the Bean Stack	★★★★★ 22
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Death or Glory Boys	★★★ 27
Dem Bones	★★ 19
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Escape	★★★★★ 27
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Frédéric Chopin	★★ 24
Freedom Child of the Sea	★★★ 20
Hogsel and Gruntel	★★★ 20
Hundred-Mile-An-Hour Dog, The	★★★★★ 23
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Little Elephant Thunderfoot	★★★ 19
Lottie's Letter	★★★ 18
Metropolis	★★★ 26
Michael's Monsters	★★★★★ 18
Minty	★★★★★ 20
Mr MacMurdo's Guide to Ghostkeeping	★★★★★ 20
Mrs Pig Gets Cross	★★★ 18
Orchard Book of Irish Fairy Tales and Legends, The	★★★★★ 22
Orchard Book of Stories from the Seven Seas, The	★★★★★ 21
Oxford Children's Encyclopedia	★★★★★ 24
Papa, please get the moon for me	★★★ 18
Pictures in the Dark	★★★★★ 26
Robert Burns	★★ 24
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Tales of Trotter Street	★★★★★ 19
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Treasure Hunt, The	★★★ 18
20th Century, The	★★★ 26
Vincent van Gogh	★★ 24
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Vision, The	★★★ 26
Wayland Atlas of Threatened Cultures	★★★★★ 26
We Animals Would Like a Word with You	★★★★★ 23
What Do We Know about Plains Indians?	★★★★★ 24
What Do We Know about Prehistoric People?	★ 24
What Newt Could Do for Turtle	★★★★★ 19
Wicked William	★★★ 18
Wings, Stings and Wiggly Things	★★★★★ 21
World of the Medieval Knight, The	★★★★★ 24

## RATING

Unmissable	★★★★★
Very Good	★★★★
Good	★★★
Fair	★★
Sad	★

## REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

**Clive Barnes** is Divisional Children's Librarian, Hampshire County Library, Southampton.

**David Bennett** is Senior Teacher and Head of the English Faculty at George Spencer School, Nottinghamshire.

**Jill Bennett** is the author of *Learning to Read with Picture Books*. She is Early Years Co-ordinator and teacher at Chatsworth Infant School in Hounslow, Middlesex.

**Valerie Coghlan** is joint editor of *The Big Guide to Irish Children's Books*, Irish Children's Book Trust, 1996.

**John Farndon** is a non-fiction author and consultant.

**Annabel Gibb** works as a supply teacher in primary schools in Leeds.

**Veronica Holliday** is North Regional Schools Librarian for Hampshire.

**George Hunt** is a lecturer in Language in Education at the University of Reading.

**Adrian Jackson** is Head of English and Creative Arts at Broadlands School, near Bristol.

**Andrew Kidd** is Deputy Headteacher at Burscough County Primary School in Lancashire.

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

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

**Steve Rosson** is Head of Library Resources at Moseley School, Birmingham.

**Judith Sharman** is Head of Hoole All Saints Infant School, Cheshire

**Rosemary Stones** is Editor of *Books for Keeps*.

**Morag Styles** is Language Co-ordinator at Homerton College, Cambridge.

**Liz Waterland** is Headteacher of Brewster Avenue Infant and Nursery School, Peterborough.

## REVIEWS Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant

### Ian Beck's Picture Book

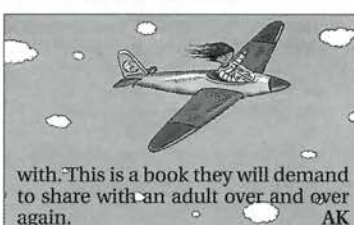
★★★★★

Ian Beck, *Picture Hippo*, 48pp, 0 590 13715 8, £5.99 pbk

As the strap line on the cover informs us, this is 'a first book of pictures for

very young children'. In single page or double page spread one is treated to a delightful succession of familiar objects, actions and animals painted in delicate yet striking watercolour with subtle hatching and cross-hatching for textural appearance. Each of the simply labelled pictures is effective on an individual basis but, by cleverly linking them through

the use of central characters (a little girl with wispy hair and her traditional jointed teddy), the book takes on an extra dimension. It is easy to feel the girl's exhilaration as she flies an aeroplane, jumps over the moon on a cow or gazes out across the open sea. The closeness and love shared with her teddy is one that very young children will identify



with. This is a book they will demand to share with an adult over and over again. AK



## Charlie's Choice

★★★

Nicola Smee, Orchard, 32pp,  
1 86039 090 0, £3.99 pbk

Charlie's dilemma is to choose just one of his soft toys to keep him company on an overnight visit to Grandpa's: each of his toys has an important job and thinks that it should be chosen, but in the end the small mouse who will sleep on his pillow all night is the one Charlie values most.

Smee's illustrations, in soft clear colours, give a good-humoured view of family life, with some lovely facial expressions on the part of both toys and people, and this story provides Nursery and Reception children with a good starting point for discussion of their own need for comforting objects when in unfamiliar situations. I found the text a bit cumbersome at times, and there is potential for confusion among the very youngest readers as the story slips out of chronological sequence rather unobtrusively, but many children will enjoy considering Charlie's options and will empathise with his final choice. AG

## Let's Look Inside the Yellow Truck

★★★

0 7445 4436 X

## Let's Look Inside the Red Car

★★★

0 7445 4927 2

Amanda Leslie, Walker, 12pp,  
£5.99 each hbk novelty

These two lift the flap books will appeal to most small children who are at the stage of being fascinated by vehicles. Boldly drawn pictures of the outside of the car or the truck can be explored by opening flaps to see the internals, not only of the engines but also of the glove boxes and tool kits. Clever fold over parts enable you to pretend to fill the petrol tank, empty the dumper or clean the windscreen and the bits of domestic detail, such as 'payday' being listed on the truck driver's Job List add a human touch! The labelling is rather arbitrary (the two way radio is named but not the socket set, the tailgate on the truck but not on the car) but both books will be much enjoyed – just be prepared to answer the supplementary questions, 'how does it work? what's it for?' LW

## Papa, please get the moon for me

★★★

Eric Carle, Hamish Hamilton,  
32pp + gatefolds, 0 241 13547 8,  
£12.99 hbk novelty

This is an old favourite reissued with novelty flaps and pop ups which work well, are robust enough not to up the anxiety levels of teachers or parents and are supportive of the text rather than a superficial gimmick. Carle's story of the little girl whose father *does* fetch her the moon is an interesting mix of fantasy and reality that appealed from Nursery to Year Two. (Note to teachers – with Year Two this book provided us with a copybook

'planned assessment' situation – where were the OFSTED Inspectors then?) JS

## Chanting Rhymes

POETRY

★★★

0 19 276143 9

## Action Rhymes

POETRY

★★★

0 19 276144 7

## Finger Rhymes

POETRY

★★★

0 19 276142 0

## Counting Rhymes

POETRY

★★★

0 19 276141 2

Compiled by John Foster,  
ill. Carol Thompson, Oxford  
University Press 'First Verses',  
32pp, £3.99 each pbk

This is a useful collection of themed picture book anthologies aimed at pre-schoolers and Reception classes. Foster seems to have specialised recently in these snippet anthologies that work especially well with Infant children, being short, varied in pace and making a spectrum of poetry styles accessible to those who blanch visibly at heavy tomes! Each of the books found its admirers which augurs well for anyone buying them individually as presents and any, or preferably all, would grace classroom collections. Carol Thompson's easily recognisable style of illustration attracted the children and the pace and clever balance of styles and theme did the rest – we were all hooked! JS

## Mrs Pig Gets Cross

★★★

0 333 63750 X

## Wicked William

★★★

0 333 63751 8

Mary Rayner, Macmillan,  
24pp, £6.99 each hbk

The strength and enduring charm of the Garth Pig stories lie in our ability to share vicariously in the antics of the naughty piglets in the safe context of the anthropomorphic pig family. We can 'tut tut' virtuously whilst all the time knowing that everything will indeed be 'all right in the end'. Mrs Pig Gets Cross drew some rather guilty looks from children across the whole infant school! A sorely tried Mrs Pig goes on strike when facing the mess and lack of response from her numerous offspring to her requests for tidying up. The resulting argument with Mr Pig sends both parents to bed supperless and most disgruntled – having forgotten to lock the doors and with the house still a mess. A burglar's attempt to steal Mrs Pig's jewellery and Mr Pig's wallet is foiled by an obstacle course of untidy toys. Rayner's firm cautionary note to children at the end led to quite a few thoughtful expressions – her tale should *not* lead children to think that leaving toys out is advocated as a means of deterring burglars but rather that they should be careful not to make their parents 'so cross that

they forget to bolt the doors'. Wicked William left even this reader rather nervous that he really would tie up his younger brothers and leave them bound and gagged on the top of a four storey bunkbed – pause here while the children listed the ghastly what might have happened scenarios.



However, William is distracted from his evil plans when one of his other brothers locks himself in the bathroom with an overflowing bath – the heroic rescue is good stirring stuff. JS

## The Treasure Hunt

★★★

Nick Butterworth, Collins,  
32pp plus gatefold,  
0 00 198131 5, £8.99 hbk  
novelty

This is another whimsical tale about Percy the Park Keeper and his animal friends. This time Percy sets up a treasure hunt but he absent-mindedly eats the treasure when he has laid the clues. Nick Butterworth's gentle illustrations and the reassuring predictability of the story line appealed most to Nursery and Reception children. JS

## Michael's Monsters

★★★★

Gus Clarke, Andersen, 32pp,  
0 86264 723 1, £8.99 hbk

Whilst there are a number of books that deal with the theme of imaginary monsters lurking around the house, this one stands out. It appeals on a variety of levels – the blind panic of the child weighing up which is lesser of two evils – wet underpants or going upstairs alone – and the irritation of family members appealed to, yet again, to stop everything and accompany him to the loo. All is resolved when Michael's father dispels the monsters one by one – or is it?



The quirky, friendly style of illustration provides a reassuring note for the child sharing the book who feels secure in their knowledge that the 'monsters' are really everyday domestic objects. The twist at the end is brilliant – Michael's father is suddenly terrified when he too sees a monster. Improbably, he repeats Michael's own words 'Quick!

Stand at the bottom of the stairs ... 'Help' or 'Aaaaarrrgh!' would have been our Year Two editors' preferred alternatives! JS

## Lottie's Letter

★★★

Gordon Snell, ill. Peter Bailey,  
Orion, 24pp, 1 85881 187 2,  
£9.99 hbk

Lottie's letter contains an appeal to us all to look after the world, signed by a progression of animals who have been damaged in some way by pollution. The pictures in this buoyant and appealing story are bold and plain. The cumulative rhyming commentary which accompanies the growth of the signature list provides an opportunity for choral participation, and the print is large enough for comfortable shared reading. A useful and enjoyable addition to story time resources. GH

## The Bad Day ABC

★★★

Hilda Offen, Hamish  
Hamilton, 32pp,  
0 241 13557 5, £10.99 hbk

Hilda Offen's latest zany, fantasy alliterative alphabet book full of monsters has proved popular with all the Infant classes – the children responded in different ways and at different levels but they all gave it a massive vote in the popularity stakes! They wanted to return to favourite pages and the book has hardly touched the shelf as the children argued about which page is the ghastliest! A critical pedantic note picked up by a number of our Year Two children was the use of 'kiss' as the only descriptor of 'x'. This led to some searching teaching as the children struggled to resolve the problem for themselves – the only way I could think of, as the teacher, to get over the one weakness of an otherwise excellent book! JS

## Cinderella

★★★★

Prue Theobalds, Dutton,  
32pp, 0 525 69050 6, £10.99  
hbk, 0 525 69051 4, £4.99 pbk



This title is a companion volume to Theobalds' delightful *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Dutton, 0 525 69043 3, £8.99 hbk, 0 525 69042 5, £3.99 pbk). Both books have a nostalgic nursery setting and the illustrations show the characters as toys – thus Cinderella is a china doll while Prince Charming becomes handsome Prince Teddy.



**Goldilocks and the Three Bears** has been well loved as a good rendition of a favourite tale, but it has also proved worth its weight in gold in helping infants to enact stories using toys as the characters. (Note to teachers – masses of National Curriculum English can be covered at one fell swoop using this idea!) A press-out-and-make book of the three bears' cottage is also available (telephone Prue Theobalds Ltd on 01424 422306 for details of local stockist) to support this title.

Theobalds' new title, **Cinderella**, consequently, was greeted with open arms by her young fans who thoroughly enjoyed the book in its own right! It can also, of course, be used to encourage children to enact stories using toys although it demands a lot more of children in terms of plot and of the teacher in terms of providing props and characters than **Goldilocks** does. Full marks to Prue Theobalds for the attention to detail in the illustrations and for sticking to a hand lettered text that, as well as being decorative, helps to reinforce the idea that a story originates from a writer's pen. It also suggests to children that they can write little books too. JS

### Sweetapple Farm

★

Wendy Smith, Hutchinson, 32pp, 0 09 176744 X, £8.99 hbk

I wish I could like this picture book. It is very pretty indeed – lots of jolly charming water colour pictures, interesting text with animal noises to make and a picture of a rural idyll which brings tears to the eyes. The laughing farmer and his family go through their jolly day and provide what the publisher, oddly, intends as, 'an excellent learning aid for parents and teachers'.

My problem is the dishonesty of it all. We really ought not to be telling children that this is what farms are like. They are no longer places where pigs, ducks, horses and hens roam in smiling freedom while the smiling farmer milks the cows by hand. If this is a picture of farms in the past, then get rid of the modern tractor; if it is intended as a fictional, idealized

farm, then let it begin, 'once upon a time' so that we know where we stand. It is the belief that farms are, really, still like this that enables the intensive farmer to get away with so much. Away with it, I say. If it is to be a learning aid, let it aid us to learn the truth. LW

### What Newt Could Do for Turtle

★★★★

Jonathan London, ill. Louise Voce, Walker, 40pp, 0 7445 3271 X, £9.99 hbk



Newt and Turtle are good friends and Turtle has often helped Newt out in a tight corner, pulling him out of the mud, saving him from snakes and alligators. Each time Newt wishes he could repay Turtle's kindness until, at last, he gets the chance to save Turtle's life and honour is satisfied.

This is a lovely picture book, boldly and entertainingly illustrated in Louise Voce's cartoony, cheerful style and with a simple but lively text. Like all the great partnerships, Pooh and Piglet, Frog and Toad, Laurel and Hardy, the two heroes are interdependent in a relationship of mutual need and affection which is touching as well as funny. The kindly message could be summed up by paraphrasing Kennedy, 'ask not only

what your friend can do for you, but also what you can do for your friend.' Good stuff for any young child. LW

### Little Elephant Thunderfoot

★★★

Sally Grindley, ill. John Butler, Orchard, 32pp, 1 86039 153 2, £9.99 hbk

A very attractive picture book about the life of a baby elephant with beautiful illustrations. The text has the fine line to tread between accuracy and anthropomorphism which semi-documentary stories of animals for children often struggle with (do elephants really give each other names?) but it succeeds as well as most, giving an on the whole straightforward picture of the life of an elephant calf. There is the almost obligatory death-by-wicked-human incident when the lead elephant is killed but this is fairly low key. There is a happy ending and the address of an elephant protection charity is given at the end of the book. LW

### A Cheese and Tomato Spider

★★★

Nick Sharratt, Deutsch, 24pp, 0 590 54261 3, £8.99 hbk novelty

Sharratt's distinctive bright and bold illustrations outlined in black will undoubtedly make this mix'n'match, split-page collection of unlikely and whacky mixtures a hit. It is a follow up to **Ketchup on Your Cornflakes** and will keep young children chuckling throughout. The more successful and humorous mix-ups are those involving people and creatures, less so are those containing inanimate objects.

The text on the left hand side of each double page varies from big to huge and from bold to ultra bold. Some people may prefer a more consistent approach to the size of print and its boldness, though this is all part of the book's originality. The typeface, with serifs and the use of ampersands, is perhaps a little too



'Yummy! A strawberry flavoured spider' from **A Cheese and Tomato Spider**.

fussy in a book intended for young children. AK

### Dem Bones

NON-FICTION

★★

Bob Barner, Viking, 32pp, 0 670 87293 8, £10.99 hbk

This is a highly original mixture – a well known African American spiritual, **Dem Bones**, used to convey non-fiction information targeted at the younger end of the primary age range. Each double page contains a line from the song ('Toe bone connected to da foot bone/Foot bone connected to da ankle bone') accompanied by facts about the human skeleton ('The twenty-two bones in your foot support the entire weight of your body'). The illustrations are vibrantly coloured and have been created by the increasingly popular use of torn and cut paper.

However, this book works better as a sing-a-long than as a piece of non-fiction. The illustrations are eye-catching but not clear enough to inform properly. It is only at the end of the book that the bones are labelled. I was left with a feeling that although it is possible to combine non-fiction and fiction for the very young, it does not always work. AK

## REVIEWS 5–8 Infant/Junior

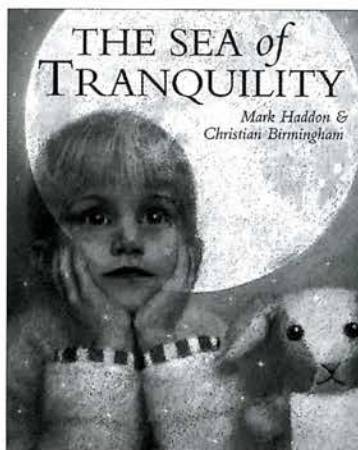
### Tales of Trotter Street

★★★★

Shirley Hughes, Walker Books, 64pp, 0 7445 4421 1, £9.99 hbk



This is a collection of favourite stories about the children and their families (white, black and Asian) who live in Trotter Street reissued in an omnibus edition that will serve any child, parent, class or teacher well. Shirley Hughes excels at making the ordinary special (new bikes, school play, building an extension, etc.). These stories are beautifully crafted to work on every level visually and through the story line. Sensitive use of characterisation and the sort of detail that encourages frequent revisiting are matched with stories of universal appeal. It is a tribute to Hughes' skill that even when fashions change her books do not appear dated or hackneyed. This will also be a favourite book that adults will not mind having to reread time and time again! JS



### The Sea of Tranquility

★★★★

Mark Haddon, ill. Christian Birmingham, Collins, 32pp, 0 00 198162 5, £9.99 hbk

This charming and unusual picture book combines autobiography with non-fiction. Haddon tells of his boyhood fascination with space which culminated with the first moon landing in 1969. The deliciously enchanting text is complemented by Christian Birmingham's exquisite pastel illustrations, which capture the awe and mystery that the moon had for this small boy. The reader relives the magical evenings when Mark borrowed his father's binoculars to get a closer look at the moon's empty deserts and rocky mountains and wished that one day people would find a way to set foot on its surface.

The soft-focused intimacy of the drawings enables us to eavesdrop on a significant period in the author's childhood and share his sense of wonder. At the same time the reader learns a good deal about Apollo 11's journey to the moon through his scrapbook and recollections of those famous television pictures from the early hours of 20th July 1969. Some



dramatic double page spreads without text focus on the actual landing and the walk to the Sea of Tranquility. My favourite is the one of the author's dream where he is walking in a space suit on the dusty surface of the moon between Neil Armstrong and Buz Aldrin with the lunar module in the distance. AK

## Too Much Talk

★★★★

Angela Shelf Medearis, ill. Stefano Vitale, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 4775 X, £4.99 pbk



Exuberant, stylised illustrations in glowing colours, painted in folk style on wood, cover the endpapers in this glorious re-telling of a traditional tale from Ghana. A farmer, startled by a talking yam, runs off 'uphill and downhill, downhill and uphill' in his fright. Each person he meets greets his tale with disbelief - 'That can't happen', but 'Oh, yes it can' say a dog, a fish, some cloth, and so on, in turn. And off they all run, uphill and downhill, until they find the chief.

The illustrations are very much part of the story here - heads crowding in to express their astonishment, flailing arms and legs as the people run, the calm impassiveness of each new character contrasted with their startled expressions as they, too, are contradicted. Images appear seemingly at random until you look more closely and recognize their relevance to the story.

A picture book that reads aloud well to Reception plus; a fine repetitive tale for beginning readers to have a go at themselves.

It is great to see folk tales like this from a wide range of cultures being published in such an attractive, accessible form. A winner! AG

## Cloudland

★★★★

John Burningham, Jonathan Cape, 48pp, 0 224 04581 4, £9.99 hbk

A child walking in the mountains with his parents gets lost and falls over a cliff. He is saved by a magic spell chanted by the magical cloud children, whose life in the sky he shares for a while before returning to his parents. That is all there is to the surface story but is there a vision here of a paradise glimpsed during a near death experience? Burningham offers a new departure in this large format picture book. The cheerfully painted people who inhabit his much loved earlier work (such as *Mr Gumpy's Outing*, *Would You Rather?*, *Aldo*) are here presented as foreground cut-outs against spectacular photographs of cloud formations. The large clear print is



embedded in the collages or stands amongst delicate pencil drawings on facing pages. A visually striking and entertaining book. GH

## Minty

★★★★

Alan Schroeder, ill. Jerry Pinkney, Hamish Hamilton, 40pp, 0 241 13690 3, £12.99 hbk

## Freedom Child of the Sea

★★★★

Richardo Keens-Douglas, ill. Julia Gukova, Tradewind, 24pp, 1 896580 10 6, £7.99 hbk

Two vivid and dramatic picture books which focus in very different ways on the issue of slavery.

Though the cover of *Minty* declares it to be 'the story of the young slave girl, Harriet Tubman', this is not a biography but a semifictional version of episodes in Tubman's childhood and of the kindling passion for freedom which would eventually help her to liberate herself and then hundreds of other slaves from the Southern States of America via the metaphorical Underground Railroad. The sumptuous, double spread paintings and the strong, straightforward text depict both the humiliations of plantation life and the solidarity which mollified them. An inspiring read in its own right, this book would also be an excellent history resource.

*Freedom Child of the Sea* is a brief but whimsically charming folk tale about an encounter with a scarred, underwater child who rescues a drowning boy before disappearing. The boy learns his rescuer is the spirit of a child who was born in the death throes of a woman flung from a slave ship; mother and child must dwell beneath the sea until his scars are healed and harmony reigns on Earth. The simple text is set out as a commentary on Gukova's haunting paintings: intricate, colourful juxtapositions of the arcadian and the stygian, reminiscent of Heironymus Bosch, and a promising source of wonder. GH

## Mr MacMurdo's Guide to Ghostkeeping

★★★★

Gerald Hawksley, Gollancz, 32pp, 0 575 06320 3, £3.99 pbk

This is a splendid book. The art of ghost keeping has been very neglected of late and far too many people decide to go in for ghost keeping just on a whim or because, since films such as *Ghostbusters*, it



is a craze among their friends. Without proper preparation and information about housing, feeding and training many of these ghosts, acquired unwisely, will end up abandoned in church yards or need to be rescued by the ghost protection organizations and have to be exorcised - homeless and unloved. It is to prevent such tragedies that MacMurdo has written this guide. From choosing the sort of ghost suitable for your home (headless horsemen should never be kept in built up areas, for instance) to entering your pet in the Ghost of the Year Show (for the serious fancier) every aspect of responsible ghost keeping is covered.

No ghost keeper should be without this book, for as MacMurdo reminds us, 'a ghost is for life, not just for Halloween.' LW

## The King of Ireland's Son

★★★★

Brendan Behan, ill. P J Lynch, Andersen, 32pp, 0 86264 693 6, £9.99 hbk

(published in Ireland by Children's Poolbeg, 1 85371 622 7)



There are many of the ingredients of the classic folk tale in this beautiful picture book: the king's son who outwits his scheming brothers, a beautiful princess, wise old men, a blustering giant. Combine these with an intelligent and resourceful stallion, lots of food, a series of trials to be undergone before prince Art wins fair maiden - all brought together by Brendan Behan's good-humoured retelling of an old Irish tale and we are in for a lively time. P J Lynch rises to the occasion with illustrations which show him at his most playful, involving the reader too in the goings-on: we are with the giant in his hide-out in the tree-top as Art scales the trunk from below. Then, we are behind Art as he

delivers a terrific kick to the giant's football and, like the wise-old men, we are invigorated enough to join the celebratory dance in the concluding wedding-scene. VC

## Hogsel and Gruntel

★★★★

Dick King-Smith, ill. Liz Graham-Yooll, Gollancz 'Read It Yourself', 32pp, 0 575 06376 9, £3.99 pbk

Dick King-Smith, well known for his own original animal stories including *The Sheep Pig* (now immortalised in celluloid as *Babe*) takes a pig's-eye view of some familiar fairy stories. *Goldpig* and the *Three Bears* and *Little Red Riding Pig* are just two of five short stories and a poem originally published as *Dick King-Smith's Triffic Pig Book* in 1991. This 1996 edition has new but rather rudimentary colour illustrations which comprise about 40% of the book.

Though the stories are humorous I have great reservations about it really serving as a 'Read It Yourself' book 'just right for reading alone'. There are few children at the read-it-yourself stage who will appreciate the rather adult humour in some of the tales. Sharing a book like this, however, with a child of seven years old or so could be fun. AK

## Sulky Suzy/Jittery Jack

★★★★

Joan Lingard, ill. Jacqui Thomas, Macmillan 'Flippers', 64pp, 0 330 34280 0, £2.99 pbk

These two stories in the 'Flipper' series are ideal for younger and less able readers in terms of content and their level of difficulty. The very topical 'Sulky Suzy' deals with a girl who dreams of a lottery jackpot so that the family will not have to move house and she will not have to leave her friends behind. Suzy's family never win a penny on the lottery. Will the magic pen that Suzy sends away for change their luck?



'Jittery Jack' is the story of a new boy at school who does not seem to be able to settle in and be accepted by his peers. Discovering a previously hidden talent for vaulting changes everything and Jack jumps up the popularity table.

Both stories have mainly three-quarter page black and white illustrations, some with additional speech bubbles. The intended reader is not, therefore, overfaced by the amount of text to read. I find the 'Flipper' format irritating (the reader has to flip the book upside down to read the second story). This gimmick works against everything young children are taught about how to turn the pages in a book from front to back. AK



# Editor's Choice

## Wings, Stings and Wiggly Things

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Martin Jenkins, ill. Sandra Doyle et al, 0 7445 2874 7

## Disguises and Surprises

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Claire Llewellyn, ill. Priscilla Barrett et al, 0 7445 2872 0

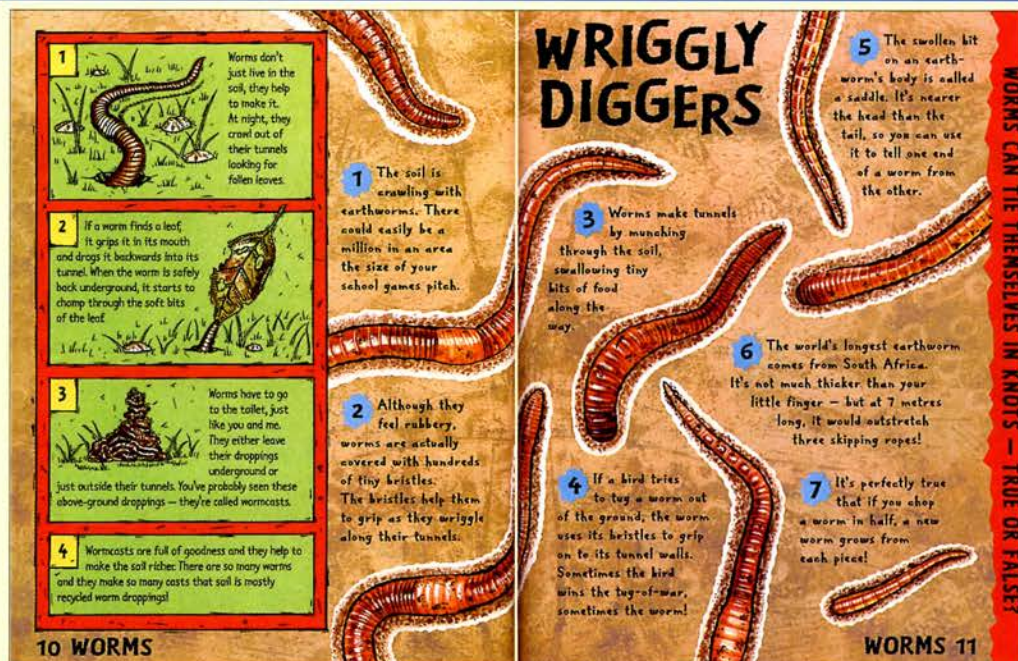
Walker 'Bright Sparks' series, 32pp plus gatefolds, £7.99 each hbk

*The soil is crawling with earthworms. There could easily be a million in an area the size of your school games pitch.*

*Although they feel rubbery, worms are actually covered with hundreds of tiny bristles. The bristles help them to grip as they wriggle along their tunnels.*

These are two of the information segments from the spread on worms in *Wings, Stings and Wiggly Things*, one of the two launch titles in a new and aptly named ('Bright Sparks') non-fiction series. Among the other minibeasts discussed are butterflies, bees, snails and ants. This title's companion volume, *Disguises and Surprises*, is an introduction to camouflage in the animal world (from stick insects to polar bears). Both are topics with strong appeal to seven- to nine-year-olds and topics that will come up in the classroom. Martin Jenkins, a biologist and conservationist, is the author of one title and the consultant on the other.

Aimed at children capable of reading the texts for themselves (although they also read aloud well), the approach taken is cognisant of the



need to provide clear signposts for young readers not yet familiar with the conventions of reading non-fiction. Thus the spread on worms contains simple information that is not only clearly explained but related back, where possible, to readers' first hand experience - 'the world's longest earthworm,' we are told, is 'not much thicker than your little finger - but at 7 metres long, it would outstretch three skipping ropes!'

There is some debate currently on the relative merits of narrative non-fiction versus picture-led non-fiction with information soundbites (the DK model). But narrative in non-fiction can be provided using a variety of devices including visual clues - here numbering guides the reader on the main part of the spread while additional information is provided by a boxed picture strip, again clearly numbered. The differing functions of

these components are further indicated by the larger and heavier typeface on the main spread which contains basic information compared with that used for the picture strip which goes into interesting detail.

The organisation of material on the worms spread discussed above is applied throughout both these titles, providing a clear overall structure and permitting young readers to read, reread or dip with confidence. A contents list, pagination and an index provide opportunities for retrieval skills to be tried out.

Excitement, enjoyment and friendliness must be associated with the need for knowledge and information if children are to become enthusiastic readers of non-fiction. These titles invite young readers in by addressing them directly ('You wouldn't want to play hide-and-seek with this gecko.' etc.).

New words are of course introduced (radula, antennae, chrysalis, etc.) but the informal and conversational syntactic structures used result in texts which are both informative and accessible.

Both these books are beautifully designed with toning mottled backgrounds to the artworks on which type in an attractive, handlettering face is placed. Informality and fun are reinforced with the inclusion of two gatefold spreads and a quiz that runs throughout the books, e.g. 'Worms can tie themselves in knots - true or false?' (The answer, amazingly, is true.)

Sympathetically organised, well pitched information titles such as these can play a key role in helping children to learn how to access and integrate information from books. When they are as sparky as these new 'Bright Sparks' are, children will also enjoy reading non-fiction. RS

## The Five Sisters

★★★

Margaret Mahy, ill. Patricia MacCarthy, Hamish Hamilton, 80pp, 0 241 13673 3, £9.99 hbk

The five sisters in question in this latest volume from the prolific pen of Margaret Mahy are five paper dolls joined at the hands. Through a series of misadventures, only one doll is given her face, and with it her ability to express her individual character, at a time, as they blow around the city landing with one person and another. This tale, is given characteristic depth by Mahy's exploration of a number of themes. The dolls each represent a different facet of human experience, and as each in turn is given her voice, we learn more about the complexity of their hopes and dreams. As the row of sisters changes, so too do the people drawing them, experiencing new feelings of confidence in themselves.

The story's ending is rather too neatly contrived - but I found myself able to forgive Mahy as the dolls are at last free to find the island of their dreams, vowing to separate and explore each in her own way, but always coming together again. A warm and ultimately satisfying book.

The 16 short chapters are illustrated with soft pencil drawings; this book is good read aloud, or could be tackled by confident readers of 8+. AG

## The Orchard Book of Stories from the Seven Seas

★★★★

Retold by Pomme Clayton, ill. Sheila Moxley, Orchard, 112pp, 1 85213 929 3, £12.99 hbk

A welcome addition to Orchard's beautifully-produced series of traditional stories. It is wonderful to find books like these, well-told and superbly illustrated collections that deserve to become classroom and family treasures.

This collection, ten tales with a salty theme from around the world, is lavishly and imaginatively illustrated by Sheila Moxley - I particularly enjoyed her St Ives School-style harbour in the Cornish tale! The stories are retold by an established storyteller and read aloud well. Brief notes at the end of the book provide more details about the tales, some of which are found in local variants throughout the world.



The Sea King from *The Orchard Book of Stories from the Seven Seas*.

The current availability of myths, legends and folk tales in attractive, high quality retellings is a joy - my six-year-old audience was spellbound by the sheer satisfaction of a well-resolved, timeless tale.

Read aloud to Year 2+; older children may enjoy reading the stories independently, but nothing beats hearing stories like these! AG

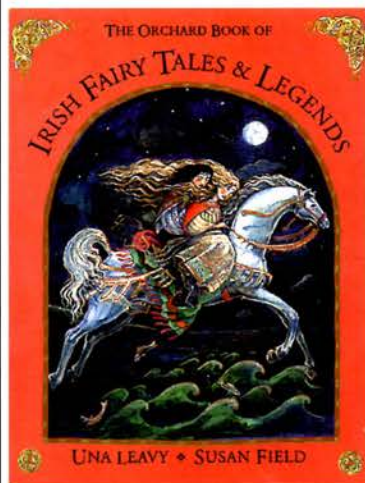
## The Animals of Paradise

★★

Noura Durkee, ill. Simon Trethewey, Hood Hood Books, 112pp, 1 900251 25 6, £12.95 hbk, 1 900251 09 4, £8.95 pbk

If the devil has all the best tunes, this handsomely illustrated, original, but ultimately disappointing book seems to suggest that he also has all the best yarns. The setting is heaven, and the book starts with the perfectly happy animals deciding to tell each other stories about their adventures on Earth. These stories are drawn from the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and include Noah's Ark, Jonah and the Whale, and Abrahah's attack on Mecca, all told from the point of view of the animals involved. This is quite interesting, but the tone of the narration is so drenched in celestial piety that reading each story is like downing a pint of maple syrup. GH





## The Orchard Book of Irish Fairy Tales and Legends

★★★★★

Una Leavy, ill. Susan Field, Orchard, 96pp, 1 85213 939 0, £12.99 hbk

(published in Ireland by The O'Brien Press, as *The O'Brien Book of Irish Fairy Tales and Legends*, 0 86278 482 4)

There are many retellings of old Irish tales, but Leavy and Field have combined to produce what must be the most stylish and accessible collection of recent times. The ten stories chosen span a range of sources, and include tales of Fionn Mac Cumhail and Cúchulainn. Included also is a pronunciation guide, and an introduction to each story indicating Leavy's source. Both narrative and illustration achieve a difficult task by imparting a freshness to well-known tales such as 'The Children of Lir'. Leavy's style is direct; she captures much of the rhythm appropriate to these stories, reminding us that they were

originally told orally, and rendering them excellent for reading aloud. Field's illustrations are jewel-like: literally glowing on the page, and figuratively capturing the richness of the tales. Her chapter headings and page decorations intertwine Celtic motifs with subtle references to the stories, adding extra lustre to a fine production. VC

### Food

NON-FICTION ★★★

0 7502 1545 3

### Clothes & Uniforms

NON-FICTION ★★★

0 7502 1544 5

Kath Cox and Pat Hughes, Wayland 'History from Photographs', 32pp, £8.99 each hbk

These photographic history books are illustrated with fascinating 'then and now' pictures based around popular subjects. The essential thing in assembling books such as these is to choose good pictures and Cox and Hughes have done this very well. For instance, in *Food* a colour photograph of an electrically transported, pasteurised-bottle-dispensing casually dressed milk-woman *de nos jours* is contrasted with a 1910 black-and-white photograph of a uniformed male employee of Welfords and Premier dishing out 'London's safest milk' by the doorstep jugful from handcart no. 269. He received cash in hand from a pinafores servant-gel.

Each spread has a 'Now' on the left and a 'Then' (with date) on the right, which pleasantly contrasts colour and monochrome. For fluent readers there is good background information tucked away at the back of the book, but the text around each photograph is minimal. This is fine as the pictures' real job is to initiate conversations, jerk memories and reward obser-

vation, and the books are as good for non-readers as they are for polymaths. But the more minimal the text the better what little writing there is needs to be, and statements like (in *Food*, p.24) 'This van sells take-away food. It is called take-away food because the people who buy it do not prepare or cook it' are inexcusably inaccurate and misleading. And why use 'advert' to mean 'advertisement' when 'ad' is shorter and easier (although neither contraction is legitimate in a formal text)?

So, great pictures but for the rest of the series the publishers should abandon words and instead provide a complimentary great-gran with each set. TP

### Take Care On Your Own

NON-FICTION ★★★

0 7502 1787 1

### Take Care Near Water

NON-FICTION ★

0 7502 1786 3

Carole Wale, Wayland, 32pp, £9.50 each hbk

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents has produced these two large format, glossy books, together with two others, *Take Care At Home* and *Take Care on the Road*, with the aim of encouraging children 'to think about accident prevention from an early age'. This is a worthy aim, but one that has to be done very well indeed if children are not to be made inordinately fearful.

Both books are very attractive; full colour, clearly printed and illustrated with bright photographs. The language is mostly straightforward – although at what age a child might be expected to use a glossary in order to find out what a shop supervisor is illustrates the first problem with the series – what age is it aimed at? The children in the

photographs vary from about three to about ten years old – which means that advice such as, 'an adult should always be with you when you are having a bath' works only for the younger end of the range, who probably have very little control over the actions of their adults anyway (what is the child to do if they are left alone?). There are other contradictions in the messages, too. The *On Your Own* book begins by suggesting, quite rightly, that there are times when we need and want to be alone, when we are upset, on the toilet or when we want to be quiet – and then goes on to state firmly, 'it is not good to be on your own at home'. The photograph on the page dealing with bullying shows two children apparently having good fun together. There is some good stuff in this book, however. I am pleased to see that strangers are dealt with positively as often being kind and helpful, and the message is that you should never go with anyone unless your adult knows about it. The perfidious 'stranger danger' campaign is finally laid to rest. I would use this book, carefully and selectively with children from about 5 to 10 or so.

However, I would be much more reluctant to use *Near Water*. This is simply a continuous collection of warnings and dangers, with no positive message that I can detect. There is enough fear and dread of the world in most young children without making them feel that they can do nothing in the outside world safely and happily. No child who took this depressing book to heart would ever be able to enjoy a day at the sea, or even feeding the ducks, again. Be careful, you might drown, is an important message but wet and muddy fields are not life threatening and most children do not need to be made frightened of their own paddling pools.

To sum up, use these books very carefully – never leave a child alone with them! IW

## REVIEWS 8–10 Junior/Middle

### Daft Jack and the Bean Stack

★★★★★

1 86039 323 3

### Cinderboy

★★★★★

1 86039 284 9

Laurence Anholt, ill. Arthur Robins, Orchard, 64pp, £3.99 each pbk

Many writers have used traditional stories as inspiration for their own alternative versions and Anholt gives a 'seriously silly' pantomime treatment to Cinderella and Jack and the Beanstalk. In *Cinderboy*, Cinders lives in a football crazy household with his wicked stepdad and two lazy stepbrothers who spend all their time watching Royal Palace on the box. Poor Cinderboy has to wait on them hand and foot and is never allowed to watch matches. But, thanks to his TV godmother, he does see a lot of the ball and helps his beloved team to victory in the cup final.

Daft Jack and his mother lived under a cow in a field: 'His mum slept at the

front end... and Jack slept at the udder end.' In this side-splitting tale we learn how Jack and his mother swap their exclusive milk diet for one of baked beans, how Jack builds his beanstack and weans the giant from his exclusive diet of children.

The liberties taken with the stories and their general silliness should seduce even the most reluctant readers over seven. The text is never overwhelming thanks to Arthur Robins' black and white cartoony illustrations which are adult in style with action and humour aplenty and were clearly executed with much enjoyment. This excellent production should run and run. JB

### Charlie the Champion Traveller

★★★★

Hazel Townson, ill. Philippe Dupasquier, Mammoth, 64pp, 0 7497 2590 7, £3.50 pbk

Charlie lands himself in deep mire by not admitting that he has never had a holiday. When his teacher calls for a talk on MY BEST HOLIDAY EVER he thinks he can rely on guile and cunning – not so! Then Uncle Chris

rescues him with a trip to a farm and so too, in a way, does a burglar.

Charlie is a likeable little rogue and deserves some sympathy; despite his failings his tale ends with virtue rewarded. Early readers will benefit from the assured delivery. The excellent illustrations should help them to achieve enjoyment and comprehension of the twists in the tale. DB

### Connie and the Water Babies

★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, ill. Georgien Overwater, Methuen, 64pp, 0 416 19267 X, £8.99 hbk

The sequel to *Twin Trouble* (not to be confused with Penelope Farmer's book with the same title), this new title also features eight-year-old Connie and her baby brother and sister, the twins Charles and Claire. *Twin Trouble* showed how Connie copes with the arrival of twins in the family. In this latest book we have a sympathetic account of how phobias and fears can be overcome.

Connie's fear of water is compounded by the fact that little Charles and Claire turn out to be real water babies at the parents and babies swimming session. The family's attempts to help Connie overcome her fear only make matters worse. Connie herself meanwhile manages to help various other members of her family overcome problems caused by their phobias – including Dad's dread of the Driller Dentist. Magic beads belonging to her friend Nurse Meade eventually enable Connie to take to the water with confidence.

Humorously and perceptively written, Connie and the Water Babies is a story with which many children and parents will be able to identify. The book is illustrated on alternative spreads with line drawings. AK

### Crocodile Tears

★★★★

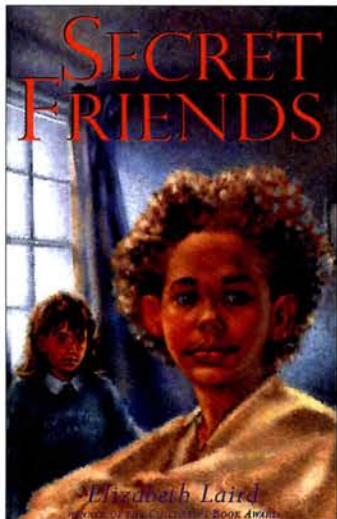
Marjorie-Ann Watts, ill. Joanna Walsh, Hodder 'Read Alone', 64pp, 0 340 65609 3, £2.99 pbk

This book contains three short stories about hospital life that will



help to allay children's fears about a stay in hospital. Mind you, the inmates in these stories include a severely chronic hypochondriac crocodile and his visitors Giraffe and Kangaroo, which might just lead to weird expectations!

This fantasy 'Read Alone' has large type and plenty of pictures to encourage early solo readers of either sex. It should prove a useful step on the road to reading enjoyment and explain a bit about hospitals at the same time. **DB**



## Secret Friends

★★★★★

Elizabeth Laird, ill. Jason Cockcroft, Hodder Story Book, 96pp, 0 340 66472 X, £9.99 hbk

This is a marvellous and moving short novel from the author of the award winning *Kiss the Dust* and the wonderful *Red Sky in the Morning*.

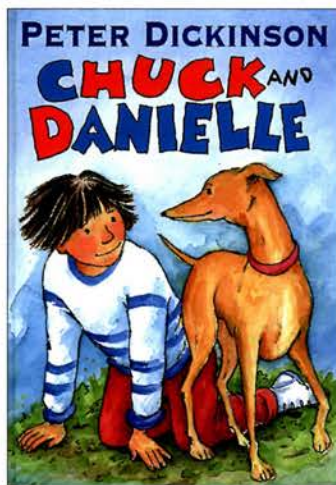
On their first day at secondary school, Lucy starts a nervous conversation with new classmate, Rafaella and, without meaning to be hurtful, calls her 'Earwig' because of her big ears. Rafaella then finds herself teased and cut out of social contact at school – not, interestingly, because she is 'foreign' as Lucy thinks of it, but because of her ears. Lucy guiltily joins in this ostracism but outside school she becomes Rafaella's secret friend, meeting her kind parents (so much warmer than her own) and sharing in her excitements. The ending is a shock, delicately and skilfully handled so that the reader is swept up in the drama in the most moving way. This short novel about, among other things, friendship, bullying and betrayal, is beautifully handled, a treat to be enjoyed by readers of all ages and a treat to read aloud – a box of tissues at the ready. It is illustrated with powerful and evocative pencil drawings. **AJ**

## Chuck and Danielle

★★★★★

Peter Dickinson, ill. Robin Lawrie, 136pp, Doubleday, 0 385 40752 1, £9.99 hbk

Anyone who has read Peter Dickinson's novels for older readers, *Eva and Bone from a Dry Sea*, will know his powers of empathy with animals. He now uses these gifts in this new book for younger readers about indulgent Danielle, her long suffering mum, and Chuck, the amazingly nervous whippet. Each



chapter is a separate story in itself. Switching between Chuck and Danielle's viewpoints and with knowing asides to his child readers, Dickinson produces great comedy, sometimes knockabout and sometimes sharply witty, but all relying on observation of doggy (and child) behaviour. Dickinson's style is gossipy – he is a friend telling funny stories, not bothering with details and piling on the fun. But, in the background, the adults are going about the stressful business of their lives, a process that impinges on even children and dogs.

This is an approachable book with a large typeface that will also read aloud well and provide a lot of amusement (and some food for thought). My only reservation is that the occasional line drawings, and the cover, do not make the most of the text. **CB**

## The Hundred-Mile-An-Hour Dog

★★★★

Jeremy Strong, ill. Nick Sharratt, Viking, 128pp, 0 670 87230 X, £10.99 hbk

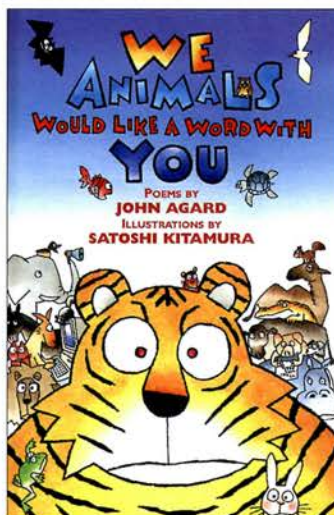
Even a £30 bribe does not seem much for taking on the responsibility of looking after a totally untrained, mad-head dog, aptly named Streaker. Add to this a hot-headed bet that Trevor will train the mutt before two weeks is out and you have an eventful tale that should prove a quick absorbing read for newly fledged readers. The details of the wager lend useful suspense and the narrator's amusing asides provide an identifiable dimension to the characters. **DB**

## We Animals Would Like a Word with You

POETRY ★★★★★

John Agard, ill. Satoshi Kitamura, Bodley Head, 64pp, 0 370 32333 5, £9.99 hbk

The endearing animal illustrations to this title are engagingly amusing, but there is much more than fun here. Kitamura captures Agard's questioning tone about how humans treat animals in the illustrations: there is the donkey whose back literally 'bears the Cross', the world in a goldfish bowl and the skunks' disgust at 'the smell of death/you bring to our rivers/from the fumes of your factories.' There is also the virtuosity of line and composition that Kitamura brings to those black and white drawings which echo the



enquiring perspectives of many of the poems. Both poet and artist are first rate at humour: for example, there are the affectionately portrayed hippos who write love poems to each other, 'Oh my lubby-dubby hubby-hippo/With your widely-winning lippo'; or the distinctive Kitamura pussy-cat with its enormous eyes staring out at the reader as it nestles on a book, while Agard asks 'How often can you take a poem/and stroke it on your lap?' But there is grit here too – the elephant reminds the hunter that it's 'a beautiful day for a stampede' and the hare accuses him of murdering 'the moon's ambassador'. Agard and Kitamura were made for each other and their work just gets better and better. This collection is a must for the junior classroom. **MS**

## The Complete Poetical Works of Phoebe Flood

POETRY ★

John Whitworth, ill. Lauren Child, Hodder, 128pp, 0 340 68134 9, £3.50 pbk

*Auntie Flick was so sick at the vicar's.  
She was sick in her best party knickers  
Which she'd just taken off  
To cover a cough –  
She's jolly polite, Auntie Flick is.*

Written in a pseudo-juvenile, naive style, I'm afraid Phoebe Flood often made me wince rather than smile. Some of the poems are well made and amusing and children may like them. Others seem too close to the distinctive voices of Milne, Rosen, Wright, et al. Whitworth has his thoughtful moments and there is an engaging haiku:

*two purry cats on  
my duvet this morning – dead  
mouse in my knickers*

but 'Phoebe's' commentaries which litter the collection felt contrived and often smirk at the adult above the head of the child, with references to Heaney, Shakespeare and 'found' poems.

I may be underestimating the verse equivalent of Adrian Mole but I am not convinced that a book like this respects young readers; nor does it offer Whitworth the best vehicle for his talents. **MS**

## Creep and Chase

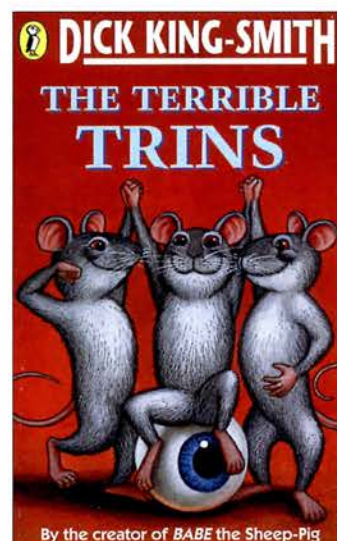
★★★

Ruth Dowley, Gollancz, 112pp, 0 575 06378 5, £10.99 hbk

This book's title refers to the elaborate game of Hide and Seek invented by two brothers, Peter and Ben, as they play on their neighbour Joseph's farm. It also refers to the tactics used by Joseph's brother Nick to persuade him to sell part of his farm in order to finance Nick's extravagant lifestyle.

There are contrasts everywhere; the competitive warmth between Ben and Peter; Nick's envy for Joseph's settled lifestyle; Ed Randall's factory farming and Joseph's organic approach.

Dowley is especially adept at conveying sibling rivalry but she also makes a bold, unsentimental stab at factory farming. This is a short book but it entertains and educates in equal measure. **VR**



## The Terrible Trins

★★★★★

Dick King-Smith, ill. Diz Wallis, Puffin, 128pp, 0 14 036915 5, £3.50 pbk

*'How sad the mother mouse must be  
Whose litter numbers only three.  
The gravest of all mously sins  
Is to produce a set of trins.'*

Mrs Gray, widowed for the third time, decides that her three new cubs will not be just any old Tom, Dick or Harry. No! They will be Thomas, Richard and Henry and she will devote the rest of her life to their education and upbringing and they will be the most remarkable mice ever to have lived at Orchard Farm. 'Future generations will speak of them with awe and wonder.'

More masterly stuff from the prolific pen of Dick King-Smith as the mice terrorise the farm cats into leaving and break down the amusingly handled class divisions in the mouse community by inventing five-a-side noseball using Farmer Budge's glass eye as the ball. Oh! and they find mum a new husband along the way. **SR**

## Belly Flop

★★★

Morris Gleitzman, Macmillan, 192pp, 0 333 65634 2, £9.99 hbk  
Mitch's father is the bank representative responsible for issuing



repossession orders to farmers ruined by the Australian drought. As a result, Mitch finds himself friendless and often threatened. He comes to rely on the support of his imaginary guardian angel, Doug, and his pet project to distract everyone from their anger – a diving competition.

When a cloudburst ends the drought and people need to be rescued from the floods which threaten their houses, Mitch is convinced that is Doug's way of giving the family an opportunity to make amends.

All works out in the end and the way is transparently paved for a sequel, 'Mitch's Water Wings'.

This is a quirky book which will probably appeal to Year 7 and 8 boys who are reluctant readers but familiar with Australian slang. VR

## Robert Burns: Maker of Rhymes

NON-FICTION ★★

Elisabeth Jane McNair, ill. Scoular Anderson, Viking, 96pp, 0 670 86838 8, £6.99 trade pbk

It was adventurous and, in his bicentenary year, fitting for Viking to publish a biography of Robert Burns for young readers. McNair has chosen to concentrate on some of the colourful events in Burns's life in a simplified form. But what will young readers make of his many dalliances, for example? How can the brilliance of 'The Twa Dogs', 'To a Mountain Daisy' and 'To a Mouse' be appreciated in half a dozen short paragraphs?

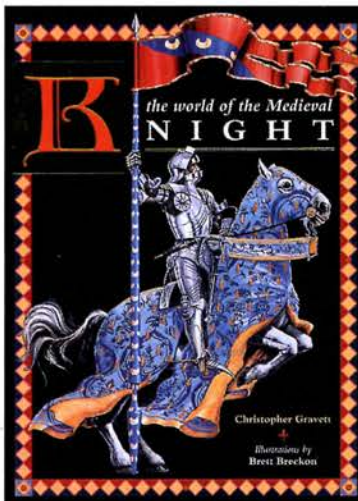
In terms of the poetry, McNair has chosen to provide very short extracts presuming, I suppose, that more than four lines in Scots dialect would be too difficult for young English readers. This is irritating for her audience as they do not get a chance to read even a short lyric in its entirety. In fact, Burns has been well represented in anthologies of children's poetry since the early nineteenth century, so it should not be assumed his poetry is too challenging in language, theme or form. He wrote many songs whose appeal lies in simple, melodious language; this, and a delightful sense of fun, is what endears him to many young readers, but they don't get a chance of a real encounter with the poet here. MS

## The World of the Medieval Knight

NON-FICTION ★★

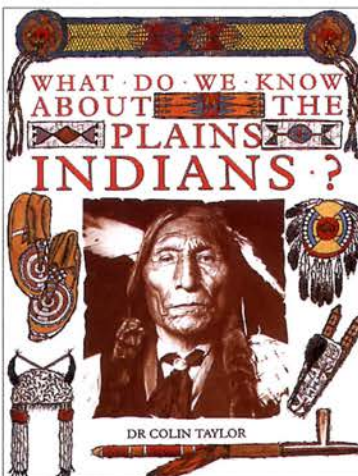
Christopher Gravett, ill. Brett Breckon, Macdonald, 64pp, 0 7500 1739 2, £12.99 hbk

Now come on. Admit it. You've been hunting high and low for an illustration of a late 13th-century gamboised cuisse (padded thigh-defence), poleyn (knee-defence) and schynbald (shin-defence), haven't you? Not to mention an exploded view of a vambrace (arm-defence) right down to the very last rivet. Seriously though, after a rather laboured start with spreads on The Castle, Castle Life, Manors and Towns, etc. all of which you can find just as well done in any number of other titles, this book leaps into a class of its own when it reaches the subject of armour and weapons – not surprisingly as the author works in



the Royal Armouries at the Tower of London.

The book appeals on any number of levels: browsers, younger pupils and less skilful readers will all find the illustrations wonderfully stimulating (my favourite was the gauntlet) whilst anyone wanting to make a more detailed study will find themselves suffering from information overload as the text is so detailed. Historians amongst you will warm to the fact that even an expert like this author has to admit to not knowing quite how some of the pieces worked. A gorgeous book that will give hours of pleasure to anyone remotely interested in the subject. SR



## What Do We Know about Plains Indians?

NON-FICTION ★★

Colin Taylor, 0 7500 1323 0 hbk, 0 7500 2154 3 pbk

## What Do We Know about Prehistoric People?

NON-FICTION ★

Mike Corbishley, 0 7500 1324 9 hbk, 0 7500 2153 5 pbk

Macdonald Young Books, 48pp, £9.50 each hbk, £4.99 each pbk

This series offers a large format, double page spread presentation of topic paragraphs around a mix of colour photographs, maps and illustrations. It is history from the viewpoint of a curious, practical junior school child who might very well ask, 'What did they eat?' and, 'Did they live in houses?'

The limited scope of *What Do We Know about Plains Indians?* helps to make it successful. Taylor is well informed and enthusiastic. He organises his material well, moving from food, clothes and shelter to the complexities of religion, trade and warfare. He sticks to his chosen period, 1820–1880, and sets it in the context of larger change. He uses an array of photographs of paintings and artefacts which are scrupulously dated and attributed. The glossary unerringly picks up unfamiliar terms from the text and his explanations are full of the details that fascinate children. He even takes the trouble to reassure his readers when it is necessary: the boy with the wild stare in the family group has probably just been startled by the photographer's flash. Taylor plainly cares about his subject and his audience.

Corbishley, however, has been given an impossible task in *What Do We Know about Prehistoric People?* – to provide an overview of diversity and development among prehistoric people from the Ice Ages to the present day. This begs much larger questions than this format or age group can cope with – something which the author should have realised. How useful is a definition of prehistoric that includes the Ancient Celts and modern Aborigines? Where does archaeology or history end and anthropology begin? The fractured layout only compounds the confusion in the text, and few clear points emerge from a bewildering mass of disparate cultural examples. Even the index fails to make the necessary connections. Here the simplest questions become impossible to answer. CB

## Claude Monet

NON-FICTION ★★

John Malam, 0 237 51638 1

## Emmeline Pankhurst

NON-FICTION ★★

Michael Pollard, 0 237 51641 1

## Frédéric Chopin

NON-FICTION ★★

Jacqueline Dineen, 0 237 51639 X

## Isambard Kingdom Brunel

NON-FICTION ★★

John Malam, 0 237 51640 3

## Vincent van Gogh

NON-FICTION ★★

John Malam, 0 237 51697 7

Evans 'Tell Me About' series, 24pp, £7.99 each hbk

These non-fiction books are extremely handsomely produced ones; the quality of illustration is quite superb. *Emmeline Pankhurst* includes many contemporary photographs which evoke the feeling of the age, whilst the two books on artists are graced by some gorgeous colour reproductions of the masterpieces.

The books are designed to be read as narrative although the underlying structure remains the double-page (but, thankfully, without headings). However, their texts are spare and lacking any atmosphere:

*'In 1825, Isambard's father began to make a tunnel under the River Thames, in London. The tunnel was called the Thames Tunnel. It was dug by miners. They knew about digging tunnels. There were many problems.'*

We are told the river burst into the tunnel, we are told that it took eighteen years to finish it but there is no attempt to engage the reader in considering the sheer size of the task, the ingenuity of the techniques used or the massive human effort that was needed. The print that runs across the bottom of the page begins to hint at it but surely the main text should get the reader to think. The author might argue shortage of space but do we need to know that Brunel's father was knighted by Queen Victoria, that she was the first British monarch to go on a train or that Brunel's wife 'liked to ride horses, dress in fine clothes and give parties for all her friends'?

Similarly in *Emmeline Pankhurst* we get little sense of the sheer passion of this woman. After visiting the slums of Manchester 'She decided there was only one way to change things for the better – and that was to give women the vote.' How this might effect change is not dealt with at all.

All these books suffer from this central failing. They don't get to the heart of the subjects. But if not fully satisfying, these titles do have enough strong points to make them worth buying selectively. Put them on the non-fiction shelves where they will serve for older readers with Special Needs as well as the target age group. SR

## Oxford Children's Encyclopedia

NON-FICTION ★★

Illustrated in full colour, 0 19 910173 6, £150.00 nine-volume boxed set (seven volumes A–Z, 192pp each; biography volume, 256pp; index volume, 112pp)

Also available on CD-Rom, 0 19 268340 3, £51.06 plus £8.93 VAT

When it was first published in 1991, the *Oxford Children's Encyclopedia* received some glowing reviews. 'I simply cannot fault it,' said the *Sunday Times's* critic. This praise was in many ways justified, for it was a highly usable, high quality set of books. And yet there were faults. In presenting this completely revised edition, Oxford have acknowledged this and gone a long way to correcting them.

This new edition is not simply a cosmetic job. It really is thoroughly revised. Two new volumes have been added. Scores of new entries have been injected, and one in every three articles has been rewritten. Moreover, it has been subtly but effectively redesigned throughout.

All these changes improve the *Encyclopedia* immensely. I was not particularly fond of the first edition which had an old-fashioned look with its rather stolid typefaces and preponderance of uninspiring squared-up agency pictures. It also suffered from the problems that dog many an alphabetic encyclopedia – a plethora of entries so short as to be hardly worth bothering with, and a tendency to cover major topics





rather scantily.

Oxford have at least partially addressed both these problems. They have sensibly cut many of the less valuable entries and given proper space instead to major topics which are now well covered. A rather meaningless two-page entry on Architects in the first edition, for example, is replaced by a fascinating four-pager on Architecture. The writing has also been sharpened up in many places.

The design is sharper too. The choice of typefaces, headings, and paragraph spaces and tints has been

subtly altered to produce a more elegant look, while the layout is much improved. They have even carefully coloured in some of the black and white artworks. The result, though still not visually exciting, is now at least clean, bright and pleasant to the eye.

More importantly, Oxford have clearly responded to criticism that their original selection was too staid and establishment. Articles on such topics as Aborigines have lost their patronising tone and gained a political awareness. 'American Indians' are now called Native Americans and the selection on the American colonies now looks at South America as well as the North. Gone are entries on mythical characters like Beowulf and Anansi. In are 'issue' entries like Animal Rights and Anorexia and longer entries on popular topics such as sport. In the Biography volume, figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Steve Biko, Bjorn Borg and the Beatles replace Graham Greene and the Venerable Bede. Jesse Jackson is replaced by Michael Jackson! In the field of science, meanwhile, many entries such as those on astronomy have been updated to take account of recent discoveries such as those made with the Hubble Space Telescope.

There are still a few problems and inaccuracies here and there. They

wrongly state, for instance, that Acid rain is caused by pollution. (Rain is turned *more* acid by pollution.) And there are still a number of trite entries. But on the whole this is now a very impressive piece of work.

Of course, the *Encyclopedia* still suffers from all the limitations of an A-Z format. The entry on Atoms is three volumes apart from the entry on Molecules. And if you don't know what the word is for the little bits that things are made up of you won't find the entry. The lack of visual excitement does not really encourage browsing. But overall it is now a bright, up-to-date, unstuffy but authoritative reference work for children. For most topics a child is likely to want to look up, there is an entry here – easy-to-find, short enough to be digestible and hold the interest and now, usually, also long enough to be genuinely informative. The vast majority of the entries are written in a clear, straightforward style that most ten-year-olds will understand easily.

At £150, the *Oxford Children's Encyclopedia* is by no means cheap and may well be out of reach for many schools and parents. But this new edition is far and away the best mid-range children's encyclopedia on the market. Only the massive *Britannicas* and *World Books* offer much more information in a single

package – and they are much less child friendly. **JF**

## Superstructures

NON-FICTION

★★★

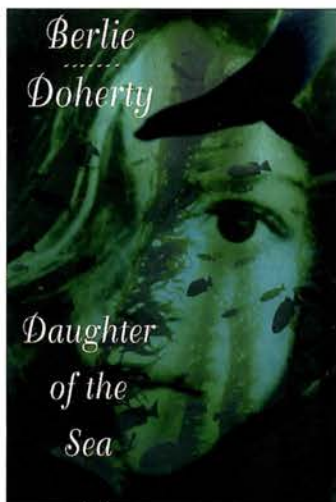
Mike Corbishley, Macdonald Young Books, 48pp, 0 7500 1735 X, £12.99 hbk

We could all probably hazard a guess at some of the likely candidates for a book about 'building the world's great monuments', and not surprisingly Stonehenge, the Pyramids of Giza, the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu and the Taj Mahal are amongst the fourteen featured here. Perhaps more of a surprise is that only one – the Hoover Dam – was erected within the last 350 years!

Succinct summaries provide explanations or hypotheses as to 'why' each of them was built, but coverage of the 'how' is often tantalisingly and sometimes disappointingly brief.

Only four are given more than a double-page spread each, so that text, photographs, diagrams and artists' drawings are all vying for space, albeit within a fairly generous format. As a result, the sheer scale and magnitude of the human

# REVIEWS 10–12 Middle/Secondary



## Daughter of the Sea

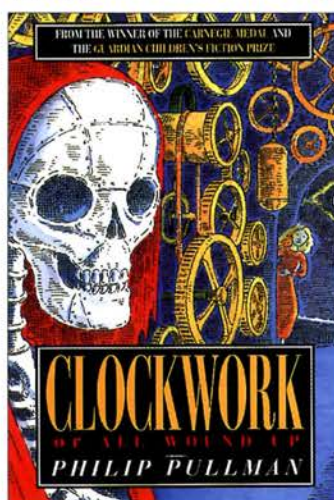
★★★★★

Berlie Doherty, Hamish Hamilton, 128pp, 0 241 13614 8, £10.99 hbk

A spare and elegant re-working of a number of Icelandic, Scottish and Irish tales framed within the story of the baby girl, Gioga, found in the water one stormy night by the fisherman Munroe. He and Jannet are middle-aged and childless and willingly take on the child as a gift from the sea. Only the strange old woman Eilean o da Freya seems intent on spoiling their joy.

Even though I am no great fan of myths and legends I was swept along by the power of the writing and there was sufficient detail of the daily hard grind of the fishing community for me, realist that I am, to feel that I had one foot firmly on the ground while the rest of me was caught up in the story. It moves inexorably to a wholly

fulfilling conclusion as the teenage Gioga recovers the silvery seal-skin blanket in which she was found, puts it on and returns to her own people – the seals. **SR**



## Clockwork or All Wound Up

★★★★★

Philip Pullman, ill. Peter Bailey, Doubleday, 96pp, 0 385 40755 6, £9.99 hbk

On a cold winter's night, an apprentice clockmaker, having failed his commission, scowls in a corner of the tavern as the local storyteller begins his tale, not knowing how it will end. Meanwhile, the master mechanic Dr Kalmenius, sinister genius of the story, strides towards the tavern, dragging an evil gift for the apprentice behind him. Elsewhere, a lost, fictional, clockwork child is also seeking the warmth of the tavern. As 'fiction' and 'fact' engage like cogs, the meta-

mechanic Philip Pullman looks on, making wise little notes in the margin.

Don't miss this book. It's a fascinating meditation on the intricate machinations of narrative, and at the same time a funny, frightening and very moving story. **GH**

## Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?

CASSETTE TAPE

★★★

Paula Danziger, read by the author, Reed Audio, two cassettes, 200 mins, 1 86021 095 3, £6.99 inc. VAT

Lauren certainly wishes she could, particularly when her father throws her older sister out and is continually mean. The Danziger world is one where teenagers talk through and work through their problems (a first bra, getting your ears pierced, boyfriends). While the background is school, the learning is mostly about relationships. The central issue in this novel is that Lauren begins to go out with an 8th grader, a year younger than her. Convention does not allow such things. Lauren has to decide what she wants, finally realising that 'suing my parents for malpractice is not as important as making sure that I don't do malpractice on myself.' This thoughtful, gentle wisdom is particularly cosy in this tape version read by the author herself. A touch of the Lauren Bacalls in Danziger's voice, especially when the tape dragged slightly, lulled me into the story in quite a new way. **AJ**

## Similon

★★★

Kathryn Cave, Hodder Fantasy, 240pp, 0 340 65354 X, £3.99 pbk

Thursday night and Alison's mother's lodger, Septimus Similon, completes his experiment to disprove the theorem, Logios 39. But despite being a qualified wizard (unknown to his landlady), Similon has made a mistake and suddenly their part of Middlesex is cut off from the present, confused with a parallel world. Alison and her school friend Kevin find themselves faced with the power struggles of this parallel world where they also have confusing parallel identities – Alison is the much feared desperado, Zelda. A funny, chaotic, wild novel in which the mix of comedy and fantasy is well done. **AJ**

## Bypass

★★★

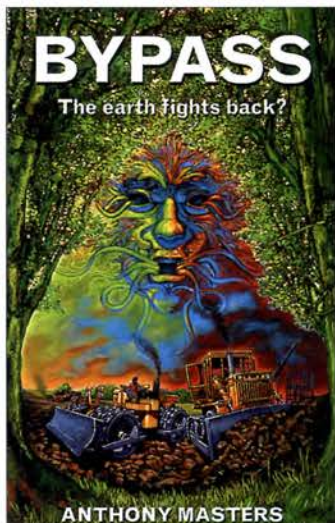
Anthony Masters, Bloomsbury, 160pp, 0 7475 2988 4, £3.99 pbk

Masters' work is always topical – *Roadkill* dealt with the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust and *Bypass*, despite its rather prosaic title, plunges eloquently into the very contemporary issues of motorway protests.

Masters' stance has the Earth itself as one of the most effective protesters. 'The Earth Fights Back' – a metaphorical slogan adopted by the eco-warriors – soon becomes literal as police and those persecuting the bypass protest movement are swallowed by the Earth's crust to vanish forever.

The narrative is typically warp-speed but never sacrifices effective





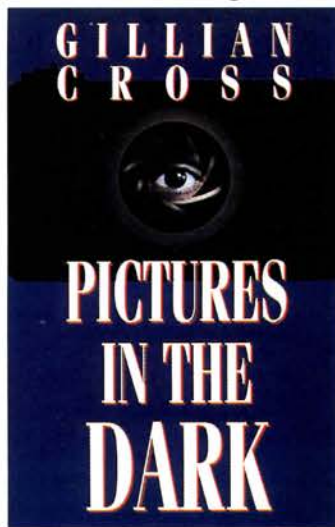
characterisation in its race towards a finale.

Perhaps some incidents are a little excessive: the early and feebly engineered death of Kathy's father - but Masters almost always succeeds in sweeping the reader along and communicating his views with considerable power. VR

### Pictures in the Dark

★★★★

Gillian Cross, Oxford, 208pp,  
0 19 271631 X, £9.99 hbk,  
0 19 271741 3, £5.99 pbk



Inside the disappointing cover to Cross's latest novel is a sombre tale about Peter, a persecuted boy, Charlie, a photography fanatic, and an otter.

The links between the protagonists are teasing; Charlie seeks more originality in his pictures and enlists Peter's help in getting to know the river. More strangely, Peter's spirit is freed from its torment when the otter swims.

The plot is packed with tension and drama; the denouement strong yet compassionate. Cross is on good form here and this edition is well worth buying for Year 9 readers needing liberation from the grind of SATS preparation. VR

### Virtual World

★★★★

Chris Westwood, Viking,  
192pp, 0 670 86287 8, £10.99  
hbk

In a slightly futuristic England, where rurality has all but vanished and reality is increasingly sought on the other side of the monitor screen, a group of friends explore the dazzling mysteries of Silicon Sphere, a computer game which draws them so deeply into the virtual world that some of them never return.

At the heart of the literally absorbing game is the predictable mad inventor, but one of the many entertaining aspects of the story is that the reader cannot really decide whether or not he is evil. This is a great adventure yarn for nerds and novices alike; the cyberspeak gets a little dense at times, but this is more than compensated for by the visual spectaculars that erupt from almost every chapter. GH

### Wayland Atlas of Threatened Cultures

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Wayland, 96pp, 0 7502 1519 4,  
£14.99 hbk

'Culture' in this title means 'the traditional way of life of indigenous people' and the purpose of the atlas is to describe groups of people whose way of life is based on the lands where they live but is threatened by unrelated pressures from neighbours and incomers. Faced with this enormous brief the atlas sensibly confines itself to outlining the basic principles of culture-threat and selecting illustrative examples for its global examination.

503 different threatened groups are identified and, continent by continent, the maps show where they live while the pictures show what they look like and some detail

about how they live. Traditional lifestyles and their evolutionary backgrounds are examined and current threat-trends analysed. This makes for depressing reading as throughout the threat-lists, the expected erosion of land-rights, timber and mineral extraction, military activity, environmental pollution, ranching and introduced disease keep recurring. Less expectedly (and more even-handedly) the atlas also brings to our notice the 'benign' threats posed by missionaries, tourism, environmental pressure groups and the 'sedentarization' of nomads.

Here is a book with the potential to open a lot of eyes to the nature and diversity of culture-threat, to which it acts as a highly picturesque primer. A perceptive and wide-ranging materiography further increases the value of this atlas, which should be regarded as an essential acquisition for school libraries and (where they still exist) their support services. TP

### Metropolis

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

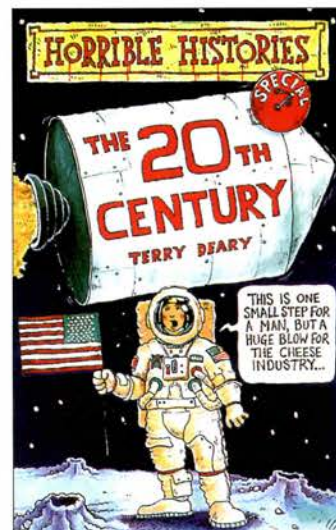
Albert Lorenz with Joy Schleh,  
Orion, 64pp, 1 85881 373 5,  
£12.99 hbk

Lorenz explores the past thousand years and highlights significant events in each century 'through the perspective of a city that helped to define an age' in this imaginative title. Beginning with 11th-century Jerusalem and ending with New York in the 20th century, he also interprets metropolitan life in its widest sense by including a 13th-century Mongol Tent City.

The technique employed by Lorenz, one of America's foremost architectural illustrators, is a highly individual blend of text and richly coloured artwork encompassing bird's-eye view panoramic maps and vistas and incredibly detailed interior and exterior scenes.

Sometimes, however, when the pages become too intricate, the outcome is decorative rather than informative, and this is not helped by the frequent page turning involved in order to decipher the key to all this meticulously executed activity.

All in all, this is a book which may well find more favour with young artists than young historians. VH



### The 20th Century

NON-FICTION ★★★★★

Terry Deary, ill. Philip Reeve,  
André Deutsch/Scholastic  
'Horrible Histories', 176pp,  
0 590 54266 4, £6.99 pbk

Deary's thesis is simple - if not original: history is not what happened - it is what you remember about what happened. He expresses this thesis by trawling the annals of white western human-kind and picking out bits which, by delivering them in ribtickling fashion, he can make memorable. Thus the sort of marginal commentary we all provided for ourselves when plugging through school history texts becomes a text in its own right and the result is a bran-tub of facts and ideas, some crucial, some trivial, delivered in giggle-a-minute rapid fire. Or should that be groan-a-minute - some of the jokes are dreadful. Anyway what this all means is that the facts and ideas selected lose much of their Relative Importance which, if you think of History as being that which Explains the Past and Excuses the Future, is relatively important.

That this is no 'real' history book is evident - no references, bibliography or index; but it has the capacity to be great entertainment and its potential as a warm-up to the class act is considerable. TP

## REVIEWS 12+ Secondary

### The Vision

★★★★

Pete Johnson, Mammoth,  
176pp, 0 7497 2663 6, £3.99 pbk

Pete Johnson has a strong and loyal following partly because of his novels' engagement with teenagers' lives so it is interesting to see him tackling the theme of being and becoming a Christian. The lodger at Tara's home is a new teacher at her school, an evangelical Christian who becomes a leader in the fight to try to keep the school open when it is threatened with closure. When Tara has a vision, most people scoff but

Paul is sensitive and attentive to her. Is Tara attracted to Christianity or to Paul? Tara is convinced that her prayers will result in the school being saved. When this does not happen and Paul has already left for another job, Tara feels cheated at first both by him and by her faith. The plot is not altogether convincing but readers may well find themselves challenged to think about religion in new ways. AJ

### The Spark Gap

★★★★

Julie Bertagna, Mammoth,  
192pp, 0 7497 2703 9, £3.99 pbk

Gran is dead and Kessie cannot face the prospect of going to live with her feckless mother and her even more feckless boyfriend. Initially the idea of living with the two drop-outs on the roof of the Glasgow tower-block seems ridiculous but Kessie can see no other option. Friendship develops with Mauve who makes a little money from her stunning skyscraper and rather more slowly with the emotionally battered Skip, who

does a little busking. The gritty first half of the novel gives way to a more idyllic second as a less-than-believable deal with a gallery owner allows them to travel north and see a different Scotland. The end is further complicated by some unnecessary supernatural shenanigans.

This is a first novel from a talented writer - but the three elements of this story do not quite come together. SR

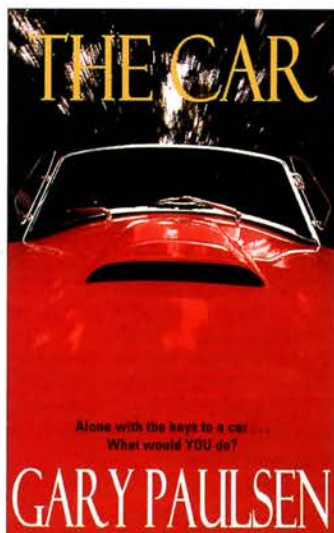


## Listen to the Dark

★★★★

Maeve Henry, Mammoth, 128pp, 0 7497 1784 X, £3.99 pbk

Mark has no friends and is bullied at school. Dad is unemployed and has retreated to silence and the comfort of the bottle. Mum is losing the battle and becoming more resentful. A depressing and realistic portrait of a dysfunctional family. Then Mark hears someone calling his name in a deserted park and the name 'Lucy' appears on the window of the pretty pink and white spare room; the room that seems to belong to a different, happier family. Mark gradually unfolds the secret that has been kept from him – the brain-damaged older sister who lies in a hospital bed visited once a month by Mum. It is her accident that has almost destroyed the family and it is through admitting the truth that the healing can begin. Some remarkably deft characterisation in this short yet moving book which asks us to understand why and how this dreadful situation was allowed to develop. **SR**

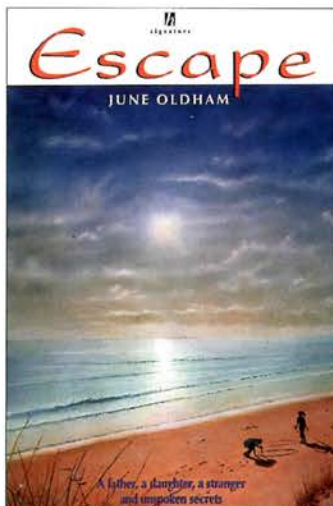


## The Car

★★★★

Gary Paulsen, Macmillan, 208pp, 0 330 34521 4, £3.99 pbk

In this new novel, Paulsen, the author of *Hatchet* amongst other powerful novels in the Hemingway tradition, again takes up the theme of boys confronting the wildness within and around them. The book starts comparatively quietly and quite wittily: Terry's parents have both walked out on each other, each assuming that the other is home. Terry is left on his own with a kit car in boxes. Building it and then heading out west is just the beginning. First he is befriended by a hobo, special forces veteran Waylon, whose Vietnam background is shown in intervening flashbacks. Then the journey begins, a journey of experience for Terry as he is tutored by Waylon and his buddy into understanding more about the American past and more about the nature of violence which, confusingly, is both to be admired and rejected. A boys' book (car engines are mended frequently and there are lots of fights) albeit in a right-on kind of way, this is also a powerful book about growing and developing. **AJ**



## Escape

★★★★

June Oldham, Hodder Signature, 224pp, 0 340 68724 X, £3.99 pbk

'The word dirty was always present; it lived on her skin.' With the reassurance of outstanding A-level grades and a place at Edinburgh University, Magdalen thinks she can now escape from her outwardly adoring and protective but secretly manipulative and abusive father. Surely in student accommodation she will finally be safe? Her father, though, has other ideas and plans to set her up in her own flat. This drives Magdalen to a suicide attempt and then, aided by a sympathetic young teacher who provides the car, the cash and the cover and her cousin Greg who provides the support and finally the love, a flight to Alnwick on the Northumbrian coast where she can attempt to cleanse herself in the sea and sand. Running through the book is Magdalen's attempt to try to explain it all to herself through the device of a fairy-tale with her as the princess and her father the king who becomes a monster at night.

An engrossing and deeply moving book which offers no easy answers. **SR**

## Death or Glory Boys

★★★★

Theresa Breslin, Methuen, 176pp, 0 416 19346 3, £11.99 hbk

## Broken Bridge

★★★★

Lynne Reid Banks, Puffin, 288pp, 0 14 036607 5, £4.99 pbk

These are two highly topical books, dealing with terrorist violence and both personal and establishment responses to it, which would reward shared reading and discussion.

In *Death or Glory Boys*, an army recruitment unit visits a school and a group of articulate teenagers decide to give the induction process a try. Sarah and Phil are becoming attracted to each other as the story starts, but their army experience deepens the conflict between Sarah's enthusiasm for a military life, and Phil's romantic pacifism. In the meantime, a maverick terrorist is prowling the vicinity, planting civilian targeted bombs without warning.

## NEW Talent

## Creepers

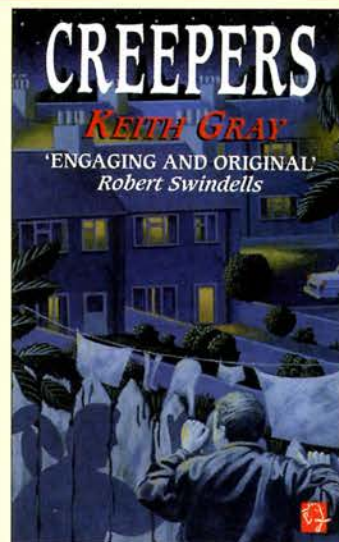
★★★★★

Keith Gray, Mammoth, 128pp, 0 7497 2651 2, £3.99 pbk

*I clenched and unclenched my fists, my heart was beating fast. I looked at my best friend and saw his freckles and characteristic grin riding high. If I could make the distance with anyone it was Jamie. I was glad he was here, I wouldn't have dared do this on my own.*

*I nodded. I think I gritted my teeth. 'Okay,' I hissed. 'Let's do it. All the way!'*

This extraordinarily assured and powerfully written first novel is told in the first person by its anonymous 14-year-old hero for whom the acquisition of a best friend, Jamie, is so precious that his loss is almost catastrophic. As the class swot who prefers reading to football and who is last to be chosen for a team in Games, the hero's masculine identity cannot be challenged so long as he is a good Creeper, a member of an exclusive brotherhood with its heroic mythical history, its Code of conduct and its special terminology: Snared, Blind, Resies, Pursuit. For this, he needs Jamie. The climax of the book comes when the hero attempts a record Creep which involves traversing secretly and without being caught (Snared) the back gardens of twenty-five consecutive houses.



Gray's intense and subtle psychological portrait of a troubled teenager with its convincing school and suburban neighbourhood setting recalls Robert Cormier's *We All Fall Down* and Michael Cadnum's *Breaking the Fall* but it is less showy, less histrionic and above all less bleakly pessimistic. Put to the test, the world is not as brutal and stratified (cool Ruth is revealed to be a Creeper of legend as well as a potential friend) as the hero in his isolation had assumed. A most original and impressive debut. **RS**

This is a serious book about difficult issues, and like Breslin's Carnegie medal winning *Whispers in the Graveyard*, it is skilfully paced and well researched. However, I felt that its implicit enthusiasm for martial paraphernalia, ranging from spit 'n' polish and square bashing to neatly clustered bullet holes and the chilling arcana of high tech slaying, stymies its attempts at debate. Phil is given some good lines about how language is corrupted by euphemisms for violence, but his pacifism flakes as his 'officer qualities' emerge. And to end a chapter with the unchallenged declaration '... in the army the training isn't totally about war. It is also about peace' is a cop out.

*Broken Bridge* is set in Israel and the occupied territories. A Jewish Canadian child accompanying his Israeli cousin to a kibbutz is stabbed to death by a Palestinian extremist in a suburb of Jerusalem. The event embroils the entire family in a seething Laocoonian turmoil of anguish and guilt. The younger Israelis struggle against, or succumb to, racist fury against the oppressed Palestinians. The Canadian family are dragged apart by conflicting national loyalties. The older idealists who pioneered the Jewish state see their dream foundering in blood. Meanwhile, one of the fugitive killers rediscovers his cryptic links to a member of his victim's family.

This is a complex and deeply moving book, and to appreciate it fully, you should first read *One More River*, published and set twenty-five years earlier, to which it is a sequel. However, the novel stands on its own as an heroic attempt to represent even-handedly the tensions and passions underlying events in Palestine, and to understand the

potential for violence which lurks in both the soldier and the civilian, the terrorist and the target. **GH**

## Sex Matters

## NON-FICTION

★★★★

Julian Cohen, Evans 'Life Files', 64pp, 0 237 51509 1, £10.99 hbk

This is a new addition to a series which aims to explore 'a wide range of social issues'. At the start of chapter eight we learn that 'Teenage magazines are now the most common way young people get information about sex'. Given books like this, one can understand why. Not that there is anything wrong with the way the author treats his subject – it is contemporary, objective, even-handed and preach-free; it is also full of snappy quotes and relevant fact-bites and some illustrative pictures as well. It is just that typography- and design-wise, this book is a total turn-off. The basic type face is serif-less, highly compressed and difficult to read; laterally distorted paragraph headlines which are eccentric to the rest of the text are difficult to read; questions are printed white on black – again difficult to read. Add to this a page design that varies from dull to messy and you get a book full of good – often helpful – ideas, refreshingly un-opinionated but obstructively presented. It seems a shame – explorers deserve guide books which are better designed than this. **TP**

Picture books reviewed this issue relevant to older readers:

Cloudland  
The Sea of Tranquility



# CLASSICS IN SHORT No.2

Helen Levene

*A gravel pit of golden guineas and a furry fairy to grant your every wish? No, it's not the national lottery but...*

## FIVE CHILDREN and IT

by E Nesbit

### First published?

1902. Various editions available.

### What five children?

Cyril, Anthea, Robert, Jane and their baby brother (the Lamb) who are left in the care of Martha the housekeeper, ergo they are left to their own devices, when their parents unexpectedly have to leave at the start of their family holiday. One day Cyril suggests that they go digging at the nearby gravel pit...

### Hold on! Who is 'It'?

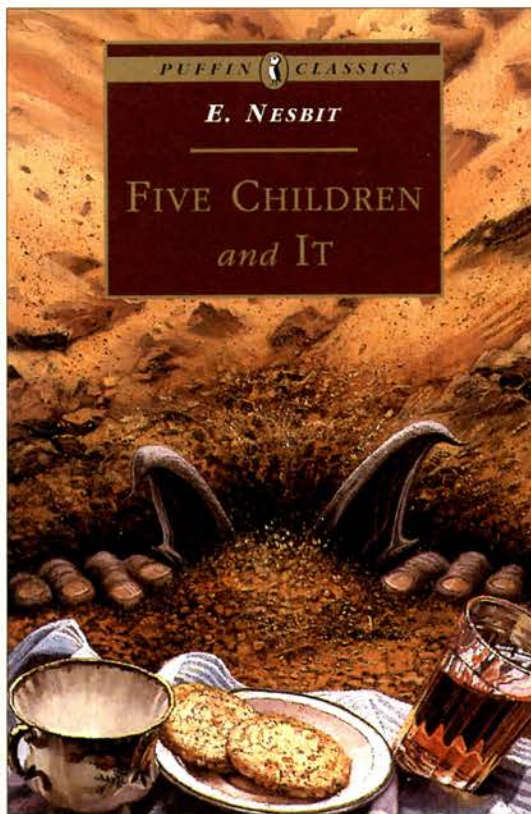
A Psammead or Sand-fairy who has remained hidden for thousands of years in the bottom of said gravel pit. With a round, furry body, bat-like ears, bulging eyes on long sticks and hands and feet like a monkey's, it is certainly not the usual wand-waving type of fairy but nonetheless an endearing creature with the ability to grant wishes to those who ask politely - this is quite an exhausting procedure for it must inflate itself to almost twice its size to perform the wish.

### Let me guess: the wishes backfire?

The Psammead grants the children one collective wish per day, lasting only until sunset. Although they try to be sensible, the wishes bring the children nothing but trouble. Wishing 'to be rich beyond the dreams of avarice' results in the children having a whole pit full of unexchangeable golden guineas, and only the timely wearing off of the wish saves them from the police. They almost lose the Lamb for ever when, stuck with looking after him for the day, they unintentionally wish him wanted by someone else, and wishing for wings leaves them stranded on top of a church tower at sunset.

### Classic qualities?

This is one of a whole genre of holiday stories which grew up towards the end of the Victorian age pioneered by writers such as F Anstey and Kenneth Grahame as well as E Nesbit which takes children away from their everyday environment (and often away from their parents too) and places them in traditional holiday places. E Nesbit's books are timeless because the lively, bantering children she creates ring true to children of any era. The novels have a recognizable framework in which there is a satisfying beginning, middle and end, and sufficient room within for character development. In *Five Children and It*, the children's growing self-awareness and their understanding of other people's feelings - including the bad-tempered Psammead - are as important to the story as anything else that happens to them. Above all, the characters are extremely



'Don't you know a Sand-fairy when you see one?' One of H R Millar's illustrations from the Puffin Classic.

likeable, individual, totally realistic and consequently, convincing.

### Who's it for?

If being read aloud, children of five or six will enjoy the comical escapades the wishes bring about, while older readers (8-11s) will also appreciate the emotional and moral dilemmas facing the characters.

### Who was E Nesbit?

Edith Nesbit was born in 1858 and grew up in a large family of one half sister, two older sisters and two brothers nearer to her in age and therefore her fellow-conspirators. Her childhood was a happy but unsettled one, due to her sister Mary's ill-health. In 1880 Edith married Hubert Bland and they became founder members of the Fabian Society (an association of British socialists who advocated the establishment of democratic socialism). As an Advanced Woman, Edith cut her hair short, wore all-wool 'aesthetic' clothes and smoked in public. Their Bohemian household was always open to their many socialist and literary friends, including Bernard Shaw and H G Wells. For over 20 years Edith wrote poems and short stories which were published in magazines, before turning her talents to novels for children, for which she drew upon her many happy childhood experiences.

Edith possessed great energy for life. Whilst coping with financial problems and with Hubert, a compulsive philanderer, she wrote many successful children's books, brought up her own and two adopted children and worked ceaselessly for charity and other good causes. She died in 1924.

### Politically correct then?

Of its time, I'd say. The five children are middle-class and looked after by housekeeper, Martha. Their wishes bring them into contact with many other types of people - servants, shopkeepers, farmers, gypsies and horse traders who are presented rather stereotypically, but then so are the aristocratic characters. E Nesbit is not overtly didactic but she recognises children's innate sense of morality, and has her characters discuss the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of some of their actions. But these dilemmas of childhood are treated with humour and she often adds her own narrator's judgement (usually on the children's side).

### Sequels?

*The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904) and *The Story of the Amulet* (1906). In 1992 Helen Cresswell also wrote one called *The Return of the Psammead*.

### Most memorable quotation:

"We found a Fairy," said Jane obediently. "No nonsense, please," said her mother sharply."

### Other books by E Nesbit?

Lots. The best known are *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), *The Woodbegoods* (1901) and *The Railway Children* (1906).

Helen Levene works in publishing.