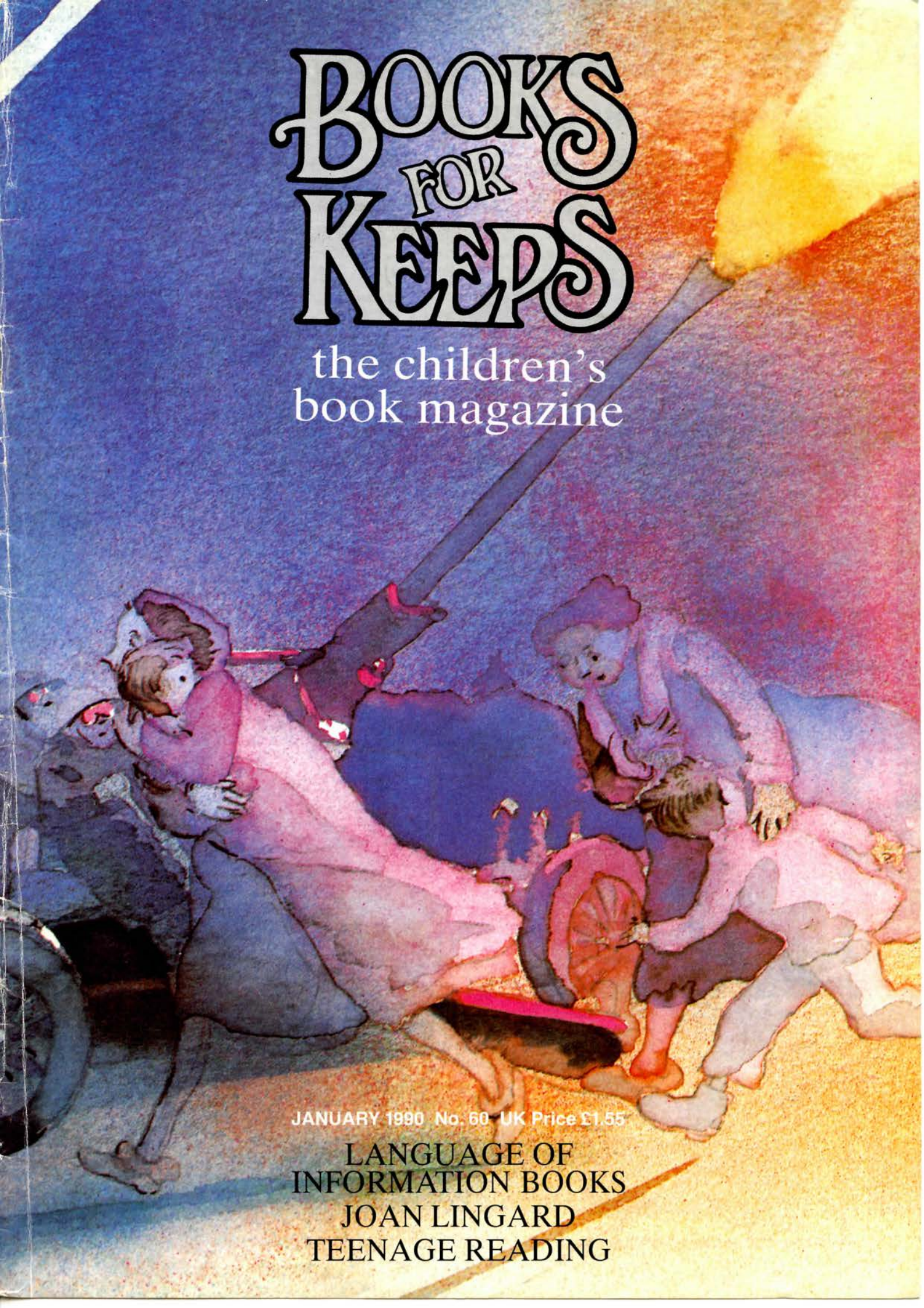


BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's
book magazine



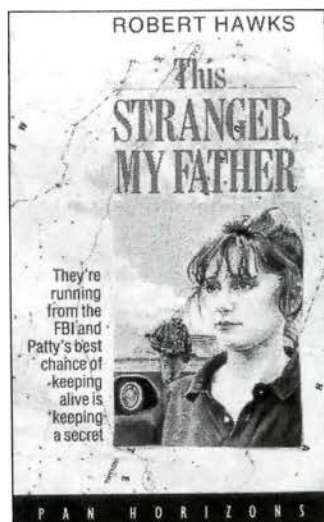
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LANGUAGE OF
INFORMATION BOOKS
JOAN LINGARD
TEENAGE READING

H O R I Z O N S

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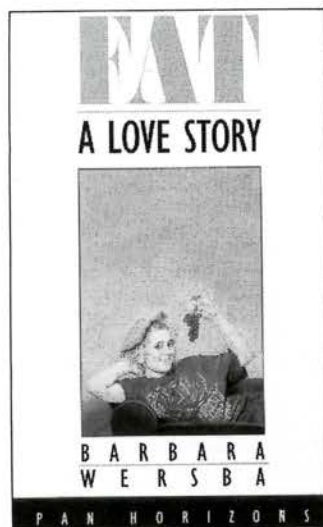
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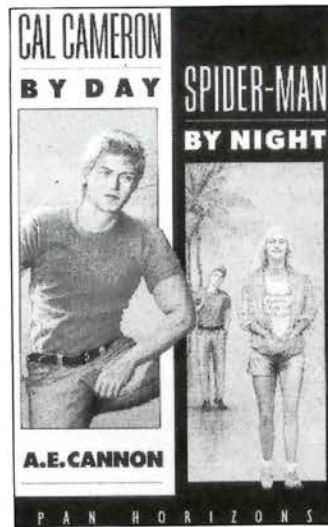
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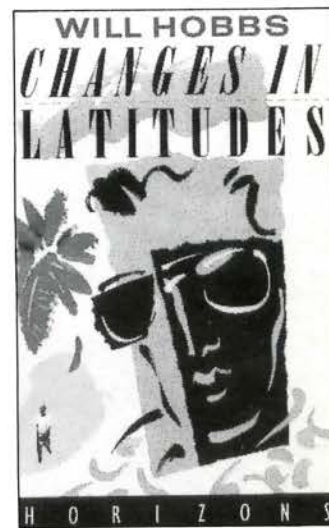
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H O R I Z O N S

Tell it like it is!

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Cover Story



The illustration on our cover is taken from **War Boy: A Country Childhood**, written and illustrated by Michael Foreman and published in October 1989 by Pavilion Books (1 85145 353 9, £9.99).

We are grateful to Pavilion for help in using this illustration.

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EDITOR'S PAGE



One of the weird, recurring dreams I used to have as a child was of a Messerschmidt 109 – clearly identifiable from the Battle of Britain comics I later read – dive-bombing the laundry at the back of our house. Since my only direct observation of World War II was from one end of a pram, I've always assumed the dream was a made-up job. Now I'm not so sure:

One afternoon we children were mucking about with a football on the recreation ground or 'Rec' as we called it. Jack, the oldest of the Botwright brothers, shouted 'Fokkers!'. We ran like rabbits for the slip trenches under the trees. Twelve Fokker Wulfes swooped out of the sky without warning and flew the whole length of the town spraying cannon shells. They dropped their bombs at the north end. The back of our house was riddled with cannon fire.

The extract comes from Michael Foreman's new book **War Boy** (Pavilion, £9.99) featured on our cover. Part memoir, part reconstructed notebook, part album of oddments, it succeeds both as a period piece and – thanks to Michael Foreman's brilliant colour-work and line-drawing – as an up-to-the-minute example of what illustration at its best can achieve. Anyone from 8 to 80 will respond to his account of a childhood so extraordinary he assumed for years that the bulk of grown-up males wore uniform and it was natural for every beach to be cut off by a barbed wire fence. Not that there weren't softer moments. Christmas 1942, for instance:

I remember looking back into the room as Mother carried me to the stairs. A sea of faces in the smoke. They were dressed as soldiers and sailors but wearing paper hats. Other boys' fathers, sitting round our table wishing it was their little boy they had just kissed goodnight.

According to Robert Hull, **War Boy** is a fine example of the way information for children should be mediated. Alas, it's also comparatively rare – an oasis of genuine narrative in what, despite the splendours of the graphics, often turns out to be a desert of inert, nondescript wordage. Is it that matters of fact, being stringent and non-negotiable, demand a draining away of all personality from the text? Must the 'objectivity' of the known always take priority over the enthusiasm of the knower? See Robert's article 'Some Fictions of Non-fiction' on page 16 for an alternative view. His argument will be of vital interest to parents, teachers, librarians and – most of all perhaps – everyone involved in the production of information books.

The Teen Non-Scene

The 11-16 age-group especially tends to be ill-served by non-fiction. This is ironic given the struggle adults have to maintain even a minimal book presence in many adolescent lives. On the other hand we

must also beware too specific a targeting, says Adèle Geras in 'Who Reads Teenage Fiction?' on page 22, where she explores a genre currently much in vogue in children's books... and much in question, too. Adèle's own recipe is simply for books and writers that are *good* enough – not least, as she's quick to point out, because readers of teenage fiction are so often aspiring rather than actual teenagers. For the latest series on offer to these youngsters refer to Jessica Yates's special review on page 11... and to our Authorgraph on page 12 for Val Bierman's account of Scotland's most distinguished author for teenagers, Joan Lingard.

Picture Books and Rough Books

Finding books their secondary pupils were willing to read at all was the problem Margaret Lowman and Georghia Elinas-Lewis confronted. Their solution certainly chimes with Adèle's – books of high quality but not produced with teenagers specifically in mind. On page 4 you'll find their report on 'Picture Books with Older Readers'.

Perhaps this issue's most surprising and thought-provoking article, though, comes from Toby Forward who in 'Rough Books', page 20, examines the reading of inmates at Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution, Aylesbury. 'Their cells are so small and walls so thick,' writes Toby, 'that they can only be penetrated by the imagination... when you sit on your bed, under the giant poster of the Porsche, what do you read, where do you disappear to?' The answer he came away with left him perplexed and marvelling.

Background Reading

The best part of being Editor of **BfK** is the reading I have to do strictly in the line of duty. For instance, my tireless research for the present issue included Douglas Martin's **The Telling Line** (Julia MacRae, 0 86203 333 0, £35). I came away from it not just knowing more about the art of Quentin Blake or Anthony Browne or Raymond Briggs or John Burningham (those are just the Bs), but also more appreciative than ever of the fifteen illustrators he discusses – documented throughout with full-colour plates from their work. Douglas Martin is that most agreeable of companions, someone who infects you utterly with his own enthusiasm. Don't miss this splendid book.

And don't miss the recent mini-avalanche of Beatrix Potter books from – who else? – Frederick Warne. **The Complete Tales** are offered in one volume, unabridged and with all the original illustrations reproduced from the latest reoriginated printing plates; **Beatrix Potter's Letters**, selected by Judy Taylor, include the famous picture-letters sent to young friends as well as her technical correspondence as a researcher in fungi; **The Journal of Beatrix Potter**, transcribed from her personal secret code by Leslie Linder, is a complete revision and updating of the 1966 edition. The Potter appeal seems to me to be as fresh today as it ever was – for teachers in particular, perhaps. They of all people should be able to identify with Peter Rabbit's exclusion from a certain garden by a gentleman called... er... McGregor.

Have a wonderful, book-ish 1990.

What can you do for the less-able secondary-age child who is a poor reader and is intimidated by books? In the English Department of Romsey Community School, Hampshire, two teachers, disappointed with some of the material available for less-able pupils, decided to take a fresh look at the problem.

Margaret Lowman and Georghia Elinas-Lewis present their experiences as the account of one teacher.

PICTURE BOOKS WITH OLDER READERS

At the beginning of the 1988-89 school year I was given a timetable which included a class of sixteen 4th year (14-year-old) pupils. I had heard of one or two of the pupils, usually in the context of some behaviour problem, but had actually taught only one of them before.

The class consisted of fourteen boys and two girls; one of the boys was statemented and all of the class had learning difficulties. The first few lessons with the group were used to gauge their level of abilities in reading, writing and understanding. In all cases the level was poor. As part of some research for a course I was attending I used the Gapadol test to assess their reading ages. Although I felt that this was not completely reliable, it did give results from 8.2 years to 12.6 years and this confirmed my sense of the group's level. The mechanics of their writing were poor. All of them had spent some of their time in the past three years in the Special Needs Department.

One of the main problems I faced was that they seemed completely 'switched off' from reading. I realised that they could not sustain concentration for very long and certainly reading a book over a number of weeks would present difficulties as they would be unable to remember the plot from one lesson to the next. I had, at this stage, some success with *Gregory's Girl* read as a play, and with some short stories, e.g. Roald Dahl's *Danny, Champion of the World*. The class enjoyed being read to for short periods of time, but I wondered whether this was largely because they didn't have to do anything.

Finding the Material

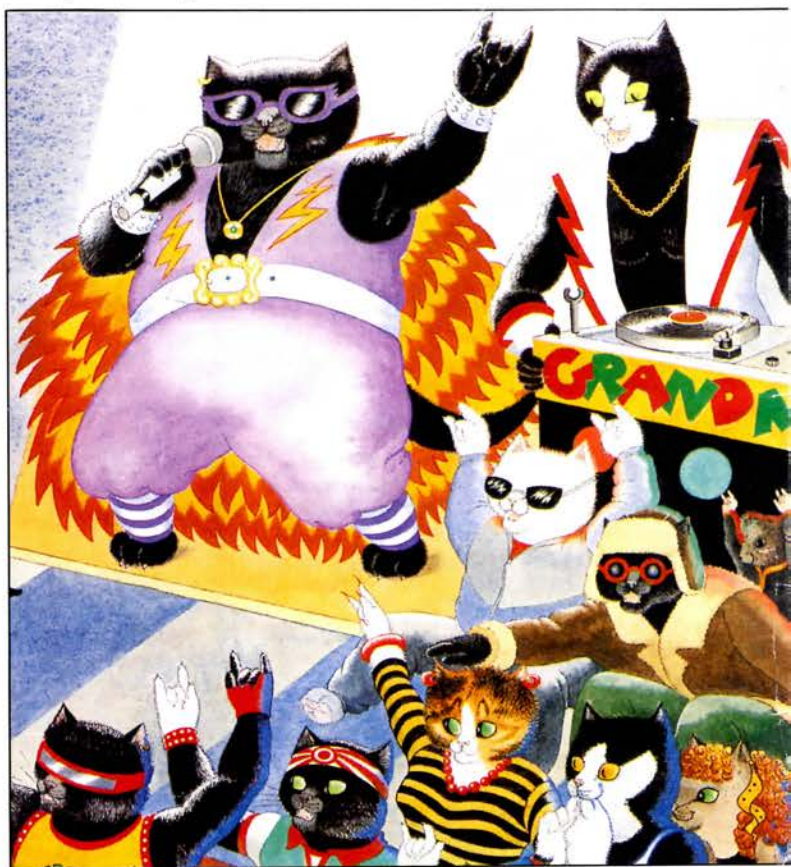
What I wanted was reading material which would stimulate their interest, be accessible and above all not seem patronising. They had been through years of repeated failure and now felt that books were not for them. It was unusual in the school to have so many poor readers concentrated together and it became imperative to find something attractive to them. The Special Needs Department had a few of the *Spirals* series in stock, but these were all of the same formula and had in some cases been rejected by the pupils.

I decided that these pupils needed to start from the beginning; to learn to appreciate books and hopefully see them not as a hard and futile academic exercise, but as an enjoyable pastime. I began by thinking of books my own children had enjoyed, books I had enjoyed reading to them and new books that I recognised as being accessible and yet still stretching.

From my own experience and through knowledge of current research, I understood the vital link between text and pictures. Instead of presenting children with books whose pages were crammed with text, I looked for illustrated books that subtly explored the relationship between the story told through words, and the other layers of meaning embodied in the pictures. If the pupils struggled over the words, they could rely on the pictures to help them understand the story. The pictures would reassure the anxious readers; they could talk about the pictures without hesitation and would be able to make constructive comments about the artist's intentions. The story would be

absorbed without struggle and in many cases without the pupils consciously recognising that they were 'reading'.

Armed with a long list of titles and £100 I spent a wonderful afternoon mulling over the selection of picture books at Wessex Book Supplies in Winchester. I overspent my budget by £20 and came away with forty colourful, exciting and attractive books. I couldn't wait to pore over them myself and try them out in the classroom.



From *Curtis, the Hip-Hop Cat* (Picturemac).

Introducing the Books

by Gini Wade

When I first introduced the picture-book box to the fourth year, I selected *Curtis, the Hip-Hop Cat*. I read it to the class holding the pictures to the front (the text was short and easy to read upside down). Although I made no comment, it was obvious to the class that I found it amusing. They were not sure what their reaction should be, so smiled as well. I then put the books out on the desks and invited them to take one to look at (not to read). One girl and two boys (the least confident) quickly picked up the Allan Ahlberg's *Happy Families* books and said they had read them in the primary school. They took them off to a corner and read silently. The others milled around the books, but within ten minutes they had all settled and were reading silently – but not for long.



From *The Visitors Who Came to Stay* (Hamish Hamilton).

There was a shriek as someone found the more uninhibited pictures in *Unlucky Wally*, followed by many cries of 'After you!'. *Changing Places* by Graham Oakley seemed to defy being looked at alone. The images created by the split pages just had to be shared and soon three boys had gathered round the books and were turning the pages very slowly and discussing the possibilities of the pictures.

I had planned to use the books for half-an-hour before going on to some other work, but the class asked if they could carry on reading and this they did. Most unusually, in that hour there was little chat which was not about the books. I had not realised how successful the books would be in engaging them, but they were enthusiastic and obviously did not think of their activity as 'reading', but as enjoyment. At the end of the lesson there was disappointment from some of the pupils because they had not been able to read the book which they had wanted; *Unlucky Wally* was at this stage the most popular book.

Following Up

After the initial lesson I continued to use the books at intervals. Together we read *The Piggy Book* and *The Visitors Who Came to Stay*, both by Anthony Browne, and admired the illustrations. We found amusing details and there was a real sense of discovery when someone pointed out another joke. The pupils began unselfconsciously to talk about various books – why they had or had not enjoyed it, why the words didn't tell the whole story and what made them laugh.

I tried the picture-book box with one pupil who has specific problems. He is a statemented child, is a partial spastic and in spite of tremendous determination and motivation has never conquered reading. In extra sessions after school he would read to me and I would try to build up his confidence. He struggled bravely with the books he had chosen from various libraries: school, public, special needs and my classroom library. Using the box was like opening up Aladdin's cave to the boy. He began with the *Happy Families* series; he whipped through the several Anthony Browne books and swiftly moved through the remaining selection.

Books had become FUN. They were easy and no longer frightening. He had become a successful reader, not only in my eyes, but most importantly, in his. The confidence that he gained has encouraged him to write – something he dreaded in the past, because he was so weak at it. On the wall of his English classroom are now proudly displayed four A4 sheets of writing and drawings on his hobby – trains.



Picture Books with Abler Pupils

I was interested to find out the reactions of my very able 3rd years to the same books, and allowed them to relax with the book box at the end of a project. To my surprise they did not merely flick through the individual texts until the bell went, but clustered together to explore them. They laughed, talked, examined, compared, analysed and engaged with all aspects of the books. They did not feel patronised, but pampered. The picture-book box began to acquire a cachet value we had never anticipated. It became special and something pupils at all levels welcomed. Telling them to choose a book was the equivalent of letting them off homework.

Where do I go from here? I think we in the Department need to extend the range of books in the book box. We'd like to have several boxes, each of which would make different demands on the readers. Ultimately we'd like to see the pupils reading texts that are less dependent on pictures for meaning. For some, that is already happening; for others, however, it may be a slower process or may never happen at all. What we are convinced about is the value of picture books. They have opened doors of reading for pupils who had previously thought they were locked and bolted out. And for all of us involved they have been FUN. ■

REVIEWS

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

Nursery/Infant



Eat Up, Gemma

Sarah Hayes, ill. Jan Ormerod, Walker, 0 7445 1328 6, £1.99

A delightfully warm and funny book about a family trying to get baby Gemma to eat. Nothing seems to work. However, one day they all go to church and everyone is dressed in their best clothes. The lady sitting in front has a beautiful hat on and baby Gemma makes a grab at it and tries to eat the fruit that is sewn round the band! This gives big brother a very good idea which he whispers to Grandma. When they get home, he arranges a bowl upside down on the table with fruit carefully placed round it to look just like the hat in church. Happily Gemma falls for it and eats up the bananas and grapes. Big brother is a hero and Gemma says 'Gemma eat up!'

A charming story, highly recommended for 3-5 year olds, not least for portraying a black family, and even more so for Jan Ormerod's vivid pictures. MS

Superbabe

Deborah van der Beek, Little Mammoth, 0 7497 0027 0, £2.50

Superbabe is one of those books that are destined to drive parents crazy through having to be read again and again and again and again... Deborah van der Beek captures some of the most ghastly things that a one-year-old is likely to get up to and puts them into comic strip format that heightens the suspense, allowing older brothers and sisters to gasp smugly yet appreciatively as the horror story unfolds a step at a time! JS

Tom and Pippo and the Dog

Helen Oxenbury, Walker, 0 7445 1264 6, £1.99

Tom and his toy monkey Pippo go out for a walk with Mummy and meet a dog in the park. The dog runs away with Pippo. Happily Pippo is quickly restored to his owner and the bad dog suitably chastised.

Just right for small children battling with the problems of their world and it is beautifully drawn... as are the others in the series of ten. I particularly like **Tom and Pippo Make a Friend** (0 7445 1270 0) which deals with the issue of sharing, and again in this simple story the sharing is happily resolved. **Tom and Pippo in the Snow** (0 7445 1263 8) is fun too. It's about going sledging with Daddy and tells about that frightening feeling of being all by yourself on the sledge for the first time. **Pippo Gets Lost** (0 7445 1265 4) deals with the homey everyday happening when a special toy is lost and



the whole family is involved in looking for it everywhere. Eventually when it is found there is great relief all round.

These books are entirely suitable for small children (2-4s) I think and should be a most welcome addition to the Nursery shelves. MS

I Can't Find It!

Bel Mooney, Mammoth, 0 7497 0030 0, £1.99

I Can't Find It! sees the return of the self-willed Kitty of **I Don't Want To!** Here, as well as losing a whole host of important possessions thanks to her self-imposed state of chaos, the young heroine learns an important lesson or two and, thanks to her highly individual logic, saves the situation when mum's car keys go missing.

Eight well-observed, amusing stories, just right for reading aloud to those around Kitty's age (5) and for their slightly older brothers and sisters to enjoy for themselves. JB

Heffalump? and the Toy Hospital

Eleanor Nilsson, Young Puffin, 0 14 03.4138 2, £1.75

Heffalump? is a toy elephant who lives with a little girl, Anne, and a whole host of other stuffed toys, especially Bengal Tiger, his only real friend. "If only something would happen," sighs Heffalump? one day... "Today seems so like yesterday and the day before."

And something does happen: Tiger is lost, trapped in the Toy Hospital unbeknown to Anne. Heffalump? is determined to rescue his friend, resorting to somewhat desperate means to do so. But all ends happily with the two friends safely returned home to the toy cupboard. A warm, reassuring story for sharing with under-sevens and for the most confident among them to enjoy for themselves. JB

Emily's Paintbox

Riana Duncan, Picture Knight, 0 340 50186 3, £2.50

The story of Emily who paints all the things in her world... her house, the grass, the flowers, the trees and even the sky... different colours. Then she paints the sun brown and everything goes dark. Only when the rain comes and washes away her new colours and a rainbow appears, does she realise maybe the colours are better left alone. A pleasant little book with plenty to discuss and fun to have around for 3-5s on rainy days. MS

Infant/Junior

Jacob's Little Giant

Barbara Smucker, 0 14 03.2326 0

The Little Lighthouse Keeper

Margaret Joy, 0 14 03.2439 9

Hild at Allotment Lane School

Margaret Joy, 0 14 03.2743 6

Ragdolly Anna's Treasure Hunt

Jean Kenward,

0 14 03.2794 0

Young Puffin, £1.99 each

I have listed all four of these books together because they seem to me to provide perfect examples of the current publishers' obsession with labelling books as for this or that 'level' of reading and to demonstrate the absurdity of this trend.

These are excellent books; I, and the children, thoroughly enjoyed all four. 'Allotment Lane' has long been a favourite

school with us, the adventures of the 'Little Lighthouse Keeper' were full of excitement, the gentle world of 'Ragdolly Anna' made a pleasant contrast to the other two books and **Jacob's Little Giant** took us to the unfamiliar and wild world of the Canada Geese and the boy who cares for them. All are highly recommended for children of five to eightish whether to listen to or to read, with or without help.

However, Puffin have decided to divide these books by labelling them with a flash on

the front cover. **Jacob's Little Giant** is a 'Story Book'; **The Little Lighthouse Keeper** is a 'Read Alone'; **Hild** and **Ragdolly Anna** are labelled 'Read Aloud'. What is the purpose of this and what criteria were used? As far as I can see, it all comes down to size of print, for there is no suggestion that vocabulary has been controlled in any way or that there has been any sort of readability check. Big print means 'Read Alone' (from what sort of age?). Medium print means 'Read Aloud' (presumably by an adult) although my young readers

found it much easier to read **Hild** for themselves than **The Little Lighthouse Keeper** because the setting was so familiar. Small print means a 'Story Book', although there is no reason why it should be labelled differently from 'Read Aloud' or 'Read Alone'. They are all story books and what the child is able to do with them will depend solely on the child. This sort of silliness does not help either reader or book to find their right relationship. I would advise using all of these books with your children but ignore the labels; they will give quite erroneous impressions. LW

The Cat with Two Tales

Alix Nathan, ill. Sarah Hedley, Macdonald, 0 356 16760 7, £2.50



We enjoyed this book very much. It tells of a delightfully smug and opportunist cat who has a very comfortable home with Albert at night and who is adopted as a pet by the children at the school in the day. She is Tiger at school and Lily to Albert, and is fed and petted in both homes. When she is lost, the truth is revealed and a true British compromise reached. Clear, interesting illustrations, a clever and realistic plot and an understanding of cat nature make this a real find. I haven't met this author and artist before but will look out for them again. LW

Chocolate Porridge and Other Stories

Margaret Mahy, ill. Shirley Hughes, Puffin, 0 14 03.2906 4, £1.99

Twenty-one well crafted miniatures depict a variety of enchanting incidents, some set in the real world, most in a mutable interzone between folk tale and whimsy. Though some of the stories quiver on the brink of mere tweezeness, this is a useful bag to dip into for an impromptu read-aloud, and has brought some happy moments to my class of seven-year-olds. GH

The Fisherman and his Wife

Mark Southgate, Picture Corgi, 0 552 52479 4, £2.50

The traditional tale (collected by the Brothers Grimm) of the ever escalating demands of the fisherman's wife upon the fish her husband saves, is given a humorous illustrative interpretation by a new illustrator whose work has a hint of Tony Ross about it.



The repetitive nature of this highly moral tale, which reads aloud well, makes it a good one to offer apprentice readers who will gain added satisfaction from reading a longish book. JB

Wings: A Tale of Two Chickens

James Marshall, Little Mammoth, 0 7497 0029 7, £2.50

The perils of not reading are graphically illustrated in this tale of two chickens – Harriet, an avid reader, and Winnie, her silly sister. Winnie is blissfully unaware that the nice Mr Johnson who invites her for a balloon ride is a fox and has every intention of eating her. Harriet's neighbours can't believe she could be so stupid. "Didn't she know it was a fox?" "She never reads," said Harriet.

Fortunately Harriet's cleverness, not to mention the timely reappearance of the balloon, ensure there is a happy ending. James Marshall knows his readers will know all about foxes, and chicken jokes, and it is this knowledge shared between author and reader, but not Winnie, that makes the book so hilarious. JB

Bonny's Big Day

James Herriot, ill. Ruth Brown, Picture Piper, 0 330 30900 5, £2.99

It has been said that the best of children's literature must have a universal appeal, touching chords of recognition in adults and children alike. Taken from *It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet*, the story of how Bonny, a retired carhorse, is entered and wins first prize at Darrowby Show has all the gentle appeal of the best of Herriot's writing. With Ruth Brown's evocative illustration, we have here one of those books that will remain with the reader as a trace of memory, giving a warm feeling long after the details of the story itself have been forgotten. JS

Katy's Kit Car

Robin Lawrie, Little Mammoth, 0 7497 0011 4, £2.50



It says a great deal for the feminist movement that this book, with its emphasis on the female members of the family putting together a kit car to surprise the unmechanically-minded father, should have raised no eyebrows but have been taken in quite a matter of fact manner by the children in my class as just a very good story. The transformation of the family's wreck of a car into a shining sports model was detailed enough to satisfy everyone's interest yet just as exciting and magical as Cinderella's ballgown! JS

The Queen Cat

Ann Turnbull, ill. Jan Lewis, Macdonald, 0 356 16786 0, £2.50

This is an interesting, thought-provoking book based on the legends of the ancient Egyptians. The Goddess Queen Cat of the temple has died and her successor must be found. The legend allows that even a child may be the one to find her and Mew-sheri is determined that she shall be the one. JS

Junior/Middle

The Lives of Christopher Chant

Diana Wynne Jones, Mammoth, 0 7497 0033 5, £2.50

The usual, stylish magic mixture from this acclaimed fantasy writer. Fast-moving and demanding much of its readers, this is the tale of the childhood of Chrestomanci, written to precede *A Charmed Life*. It is full of complex and very intriguing ideas which should appeal to any reader, who likes to have his imagination tickled. Magic cats, boys with nine lives, treachery in other worlds and wicked wizard uncles smuggling magic contraband, plus a dotty, social-climbing mother and a child goddess, all serve to make this a long satisfying read. DB

Simon's Challenge

Theresa Breslin, Canongate Kelpie, 0 86241 270 6, £1.95

This latest Kelpie continues a tradition of high-quality books with – thank heavens! – well-designed covers. Simon's father has been made redundant and has left home to search for work leaving his wife to cope with a baby and Simon to yearn for the computer he knows he will never get.

He unwittingly passes his favourite computer shop as a burglary is taking place but fails to realise this until police investigations begin and he is, unexpectedly, able to help. It is the skilful characterisation and the sharpness of observation (details like the trivia of boys' conversations and the affectionate insularity of family life) which elevate this above the conventional 'cops-and-robbers' yarn. VR



Tailor-made for boys: top juniors or 1st/2nd year secondary pupils with an ear for wit and a fast-moving read! VR

Birdy and the Ghosties

Jill Paton Walsh, ill. Alan Marks, Macdonald, 0 356 16780 1, £2.50

Birdy lives at the junction of a river, a road and the sea. Her father the ferryman has been told that she has second sight, and one day, when a trio of invisible phantoms ask to be rowed over to a non-existent island, Birdy's gift enables us to see both the horror and the pathos of these grisly passengers.

This short and powerful story is excellent for reading aloud. The accessible text also provides readers acquiring independence with a vivid adventure story, underlain by hinted complexities which will appeal to more meditative children. GH

Stan's Galactic Bug

John Emlyn Edwards, ill. Caroline Jayne Church, 0 590 76195 1

The Secret of Bone Island

Sam McBratney, ill. Hemesh Alles, 0 590 76170 6

As If by Magic

Jo Furringer, ill. Alice Englander, 0 590 76194 3

When I Lived Down Cuckoo Lane

Jean Wills, ill. Mary Rees, 0 590 76063 7
Hippo, £1.75 each

A mixed bunch of brief books gathered together under Hippo's 'Jugglers' label. The first three are based on familiar adventure motifs.

In *Stan's Galactic Bug* a supercilious alien trapped inside a perilous computer game demands assistance from a harassed schoolboy. But Stan already has to cope with a new home, his dad's teetering career, thugs at school, and criminal complications in his neighbour's love life. Mr Edwards juggles with far too many balls.

The Secret of Bone Island treads ominously familiar ground: three siblings unearth a treasure map and set off to explore a reputedly haunted island. The book conveys an atmosphere of Blyton with extra adjectives, but a couple of clever twists in the plot rescue the story from blandness.

As If by Magic presents the oft-told tale of a dowdy kid with magical powers showing up at school and unleashing

sundry forms of comical nemesis. The story is told by a black girl who befriends the witch, and the narrator's lively comments add a merry counterpoint to the rather predictable plot.

When I Lived Down Cuckoo Lane is of a different genre,



being the fond and fragmentary remembrances of a happy childhood. Pets and friendships, illnesses and adventures are recalled in a sequence of short, impressionistic chapters. A gentle, vivid and amusing book.

None of the titles breaks new ground in children's fiction, but all of them provide non-strenuous literary entertainment, and therefore earn their place on the Junior bookshelf. GH

The Hallowe'en Cat

Kenneth Lillington, ill. Gareth Floyd, Faber, 0 571 15463 8, £1.99

Mike Pilkington, wounded by his teacher's lacerating tongue,

harbours murderous fantasies about her. But he is horrified when the local fortune teller suggests that he has inadvertently set in motion a curse against his enemy. Miss Gratwick falls ill after an accident, and as she deteriorates, Mike is pursued by an eerie cat which plagues his attempts to mend matters. This enthralling tale touches lightly but deeply on the nature of coincidence, the mixed blessings of friendship, and the ambiguous bonds between teachers and children. At its heart is a salutary vision of the slow, suppurative power of thoughtless words. A book providing readers of all ages with plenty to talk about, think about, and enjoy. GH

Tough Luck

Berlie Doherty, Lions, 0 00 673219 4, £2.25

'... all I can see is kids being nasty to each other and parents hurting their kids and teachers shouting at kids.' Yes, racism and bullying, child abuse and neglect, plus disillusionment with the way schools are – they're all skilfully blended into this tale inspired by a writer's residency in Doncaster.

The grim lives of the main pupil characters ring many bells and it's refreshing to see teachers given a human face. As a realistically modern school story, it's a far cry from 'Chalet School' and maybe a more depressing read! DB

War with Old Mouldy

Jean Ure, Mammoth, 0 7497 0015 7, £1.99

Jody Walker, scourge of St Christopher's, and her battle of wills with Old Mouldy, Mr Moulder-Brown to his



colleagues, works as a riveting read-alone and a terrific read-aloud – lots of opportunity for different voices and plenty of s-s-s-stuttering. A pity about the smattering of non-standard spelling which makes it a near miss for the older, less able reader for whom this kind of school mahem is tantalising bait. Jody, ten and three-quarters and pretty tough, shows herself wonderfully vulnerable to the spectacular stories of dastardly torture and suffering that Old Mouldy threatens to inflict upon her and her friends. Believing everything and questioning nothing, she goes on to plot and scheme revenge. Among the shambles of best friend Vinegar's chicken-pox and the purple rash-ridden ears of Christopher, the squit from Class 2, there ensues a secret society with all the codes and secret signs you could wish for and the most malevolent of aims, to rid St Christopher's of Old Mouldy for ever.

All the tried and true elements of slapstick; confusion, misunderstanding, earthworms, kippers, foaming tablets and glue, all making for compulsive and hilarious reading. PH

Middle/Secondary

Geoffrey's First

Jon Blake, Walker Teens, 0 7445 1335 9, £1.99



Geoffrey Stratfield Farmer is an eccentric, snobbish know-it-all, who plays up to his many

detractors in his efforts to cope with his blatant inadequacies. When Kim McConnell takes a hand in his life, she unbalances him even more, this time for the better, so that realism replaces false bravado and shallow rhetoric.

This is a book to promote furtiveness amongst your classes and could enrage certain parents, so read it before recommending it. I must admit, I relished the humour and cynical wit and was sorry when old Geoff lost it towards the end. DB

Into the Dark

Nicholas Wilde, Lions, 0 00 673517 7, £2.50

Nicholas Wilde deftly combines a supernatural theme with sympathetic insights into the life of a blind twelve-year-old boy. Matt, on holiday in a Norfolk cottage with his protective mother, is delighted when he meets a boy of his own age with whom to explore the coast; we are given



a vivid sense of Matt's responsiveness to his new surroundings, and of his joy in his new-found freedom. Matt's happiness is mixed with doubts, however: he feels that his life and Roly's are somehow linked with tragic events at the nearby Hall a

hundred years previously.

The power and immediacy of the writing, the skilfully-drawn characters and the subtle supernatural elements make this a moving and absorbing read. I would recommend it highly to lower secondary pupils. LN

The Night Walkers

Otto Coontz, Mandarin Teens, 0 7497 0044 0, £2.25

Clues to the nature of this story proliferate – it is set in Covendale; the surname of one of the victims is Craven; one of the symptoms of the affliction is a sensitivity to light. A horror story, perhaps?

When their brothers are affected, their personalities submerged inside automatons wishing to claim others, Nora and Maxine decide to act by exposing the children to the very light which scars them. Nora is left alone when Maxine is caught and transformed but she – and an elderly

housekeeper – finally triumph. A fast, compelling potboiler – though lacking in subtlety, it achieves a degree of tension. I found the climax frenetic but I feel sure 2nd and 3rd year pupils – including reluctant readers – will demand more.

VR

Frankie's Run

Mary C Ryan,
Macmillan Limelight,
0 333 46291 2, £3.99

A gentle, light, young teenage novel in the world of Blume etc. but with a refreshing sense that getting up and doing things is greatly preferable to anxious passivity. Frankie organises a marathon to save funds for the local library to be able to continue showing Disney films – and wins her boy too.

AJ

The Devil's Diagonal

Margaret Shennan,
Swallow, 0 86267 258 9,
£2.25

An often tense fantasy which uses a solid rooting in geography to mix folklore and devilish powers with modern nuclear power. At times it is like Garner, harsh and real, with dark forces breaking powerfully into the everyday, as in the scene where we watch a helicopter crash. It will grip the imaginations of a range of 2nd and 3rd years and may be the bridge into a small treasure of good fantasy novels.

AJ



The Shaman's Stone

Hugh Scott, Faber,
0 571 14111 0, £1.99

Vivid word pictures burst from the pages as Hugh Scott's visual perception creates brilliantly atmospheric images that crackle with hand-tingling fear and drain us with despondency.

Martha struggles to adjust to her father's unexpected death while investigating the Rollright stones, but grieving is disturbed by strange events which, even with the support of Jeff, Mickey and their alsatian Angus, cannot be overcome and threatens to engulf them all.

I found the source of the

haunting disappointingly familiar but shortcomings here were more than compensated for in the imagery and the finely expressed stoicism of the family. For language teachers ever on the track of fresh material and ideas, this has a lot to offer: imagery, atmosphere, pace – it's all here frightening us to death and touching our compassion all on the same page.

PH

Nobody's Child

Anthony Masters,
Hippo 'Hauntings',
0 590 76119 6, £1.95

An evocative story of Jess who discovers his past while demolishing Holloway House Orphanage. Adopted from birth, Jess never worried about his real parents, his 'mum' and 'dad' loved him and that was real enough. His father's death however forces him to take a holiday job and discover surreal influences still working in the deserted house.

Coincidences strain credulity but this is amply countered by the wonderful floating feeling while drifting in and out of Jess's time. I too was a vulnerable victim in the interweaving of dream and reality and came so close to events that at odd moments my identification with Jess came into doubt. Yet another exciting contribution to the 'Hauntings' series; first-rate writing for 12s and upwards.

PH

Picking Up the Threads

Ian Strachan, Hippo,
0 590 76169 2, £1.95

This title in Hippo's 'Hauntings' series begins with the familiar theme of a child farmed out to a relative while her parents indulge themselves abroad. Nicky is sent to stay with an octogenarian recluse in a decaying house haunted by the cries of a drowned child. Her courageous investigations reveal a murder, and inspire her demoralised Aunt Sarah to assist in the righting of ancestral wrongs.



Several of the joints in the plot creak as loudly as the floorboards of the haunted house, but these faults are redeemed by the pace of the narrative and the vividness of the descriptive writing. The book should appeal to fluent readers with a highly developed ability to suspend disbelief.

GH

Older Readers

The Lost Boy

Paula Fox, Piper,
0 330 30775 4, £2.25

Set on a Greek island where we are continually aware of the differences with the main characters' American home. Paula Fox stresses the emotional and social richness of this sparsely 'modern' world, the richness of its past, where life seems stripped down to the clarity of essentials. Paul and Lily, brother and sister, are suddenly allowed to be closer, drawn to each other, until the exciting and enigmatic Jack appears and creates a triangle of tensions with Paul and Lily. And with an awful inevitability there is a new tragedy following hard upon the performance of an old one. Paula Fox goes out of her way to cut out the sugar and fizz of so much of the modern diet of storytelling. Readers will come to enjoy this for its subtlety and power.

AJ

Revolution!

Leon Garfield, Lions
Tracks, 0 00 673444 8,
£2.75

'In the streets of Paris, some fifteen hundred human beings had lain, hacked to pieces by hands unknown. The



Septemberers seemed to have come out of the bowels of the earth, and then vanished back there again.' English aristocrat, Richard Mortimer, was a Septemberer, 'a soul damned and cast out of mankind'. His revolutionary zeal drew him to play a vital, bloodied role in events in France, a stark contrast to his boyhood friend, Lewis Boston, who saved aristocrats rather than brutally butcher them.

Leon Garfield has woven a tightly-packed, evocative tale that makes no compromises as it confronts the emotions,

passions and issues involved in the horrific story of the French Revolution. I found it hard to put down but I fear that many youngsters mightn't stay the demanding, intricate course.

DB

Last Laugh

Rex Harley, Lions
Tracks, 0 00 673333 6,
£2.50

Five different stories which mostly share a slightly bitter view of the world, where basic injustice must be met by violence, getting your own back, having the last laugh. In some ways that last laugh is the author's as he plays with the readers' expectations creating some clever twists of endings. The final story is the cleverest in this way, upsetting our expectations several times before the end. This like others leaves us only with the sense that 'they' deserve all they get – and whether this is the concrete sculpture or a computer – a good thump makes the characters feel better.

AJ

An Ash-blond Witch

Kenneth Lillington,
Penguin Plus,
0 14 03.2742 8, £1.99
Sophie Margaret Oakroyd

timetravels from a twenty-second century technological society – where emotions are relegated to the status of biological functions – to the medieval village of Urstwie. She falls in love with Simon, a local farmer and so makes an enemy of Prudence, the tax-collector's daughter. Dorcas, the witch who is not really what she seems, provides an unlikely ally, drawn to Sophie by the 'miracles' she performs with aspirin and hypnosis. This comic novel is wryly told, full of deadpan humour and should stimulate the reader to consider the nature of romance and the durability of human emotion, even in the face of a high-powered technological age. The language is lighthearted and accessible but the sophistication and humour of the book remove it firmly from any shadow of condescension to the teenage reader. 3rd, 4th and 5th year girls will be amused, entertained and probably enlightened by this book; make it available in small sets or book boxes and then lead on with Alcock, Wynne Jones and Mahy.

VR

Fat: A Love Story

0 330 30640 5

Love is the Crooked Thing

0 330 30731 2

Beautiful Losers

0 330 30845 9



Barbara Wersba, Pan Horizons, £2.50 each

Rita Formica is fat and convinced she is unattractive to men. When she loses weight for a man, he disappears and she begins to binge again. Arnold Bromberg is different – he recognises her for the person she really is and when she is valued she values herself. Just as Rita realises that she's found in Arnold what she's been looking for all along, he declares himself unworthy and disappears to live in Zurich. Rita earns the money to follow him. When Rita returns home, Arnold follows her and they live together, then, after a short, troubled separation, eventually marry.

This trilogy is not important for the events contained in it, but the things which Rita and Arnold learn about themselves, each other – overwhelmingly the realisation that love means not just being committed to another person but also being committed to yourself.

Here is no weighty inner debate, no dull introspection but a lively catalogue of one person's growing awareness of herself and a valuable observation window for teenage girls on many familiar emotional problems which often appear insoluble. The reader is treated as an adult throughout and Wersba's confident style is entertaining and engaging – 3rd years upwards will find much truth and comfort here. VR

Where Nobody Sees

James Watson, Lions Tracks, 0 00 672786 X, £2.50

This is a highly recommended, challenging story, which remains exciting and contemporary throughout. When the fire of the controversial, gutsy Petra

quickens and stirs up the earthbound Luke, they produce between them fireworks of controversy when they discover the unthinkable; lead mines in Firmiston Forest are being secretly used to store plutonium waste. Furthermore the authorities that are responsible and benefitting from the huge sums of money involved are prepared to go to murderous lengths to keep their secrets.

This lengthy novel poses many questions of grave concern to the youth of today. Fortunately, as the chief baddy says of the young heroes, 'we make the cash, but they make the hope.' DB

A Goose on Your Grave: Stories of Horror, Suspense and Fantasy

Joan Aiken, Lions Tracks, 0 00 673055 8, £2.50

There's not much suspense or horror, but plenty of fantasy in this collection of eleven short stories. Some seem more like truncated novels – for example, the first one, 'Your Mind is a Mirror' – in that a supernatural element is introduced but not developed enough to arouse much interest, making the ending abrupt and disappointing. More successful are those stories with the flavour of folk- or fairy-tale, like 'The Snow Horse' in which a young stable-boy is rescued from his harsh employers. The last story, 'Aunt Susan', is a black comedy with a surprising twist. LN

Shadow of the Stone

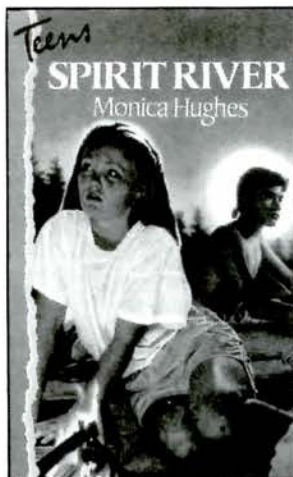
Catherine Lucy Czerkawska, Swallow, 0 86267 259 7, £2.25

Liz is obsessed by her desire to sail, and confused by her identification with a seventeenth-century local 'witch'. A visiting American yachtsman helps Liz to realise her ambition of learning to sail, but at the same time her emerging sexuality and her apparent re-enactment of events of the past cause her to behave in ways which neither she nor her family can understand. The writing is often clumsy – dense wedges of background details clutter up the beginning – but the sensitive characterisation and sense of drama will keep teenage readers hooked. LN

Spirit River

Monica Hughes, Teens, 0 7497 0019 X, £2.25

Set in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, **Spirit River** links the stories of Isaac Manyfeathers, a native escapee from a detention centre, and Lenora, a teenage girl on a camping trip with her mother and newly-acquired stepfather and brothers. The friction of the thrown-together family contrasts with Isaac's



isolation as he follows his spiritual promptings to join his grandmother. After a canoeing accident, Isaac rescues Lenora but then refuses to part with her, seeing her as a 'Sun Child' and good omen for his quest. Adventure-story elements combine with strong characterisation and sense of place to make this a moving and engrossing book. LN

Bad Company

Jenny Oldfield, Purnell Frontlines, 0 361 08711 X, £2.99

Maxine and her mother Viv are beaten by Viv's husband. Viv leaves with a sympathetic boyfriend but Maxine stays to protect her younger sister and her own developing love affair with Finn. Trouble courts them both and, after an idyllic reunion in the Lake District, the family return to a custody case – happily, won by Viv.

The detached but confidential tone, the familiar characters and situations – all too common but too often media-sensationalised – make this book a success and a worthy, if rather expensive, addition to a 4th/5th year bookbox. VR

Kiss

Linda Hoy, Walker Teens, 0 7445 1336 7, £1.99

Julian Christopher has been under surveillance since refusing his parents' wealth and joining the Radical Christian Fellowship – a group which allows him to examine his attitudes to his developing faith and sexuality.

His sexual vulnerability is exploited by Jamie, his surveillance officer, with whom Julian becomes unwittingly involved. There's a great need for books which allow teenage boys to explore their emotional responses and problems, and here Hoy excels. The climax – a riot of pseudo-symbolism – is almost comic in its clumsiness and devalues this sensitive and important book. VR

Blue Days

Donna Sharp, Swallow, 0 86267 257 0, £2.25

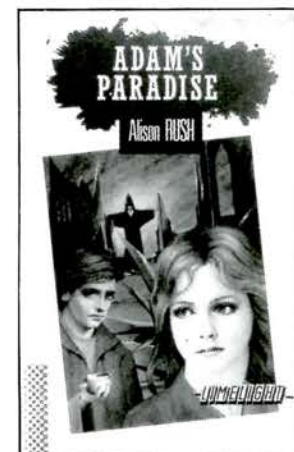
Marie's father has died, her mother is locked in her own grief, her peers think her weird. But it is her honesty and desire to see justice done which finally earn Marie the respect she deserves. She acquires a boyfriend, consolidates a friendship and extracts the emotional clutter from her life.

It's essential for teenagers to be able to recognise and confront their problems through books. This book helps – it's not outstanding literature itself but it is thoughtful and reassuring. 3rd years upwards might reap its rewards. VR

After the Rain

Norma Fox Mazer, Macmillan Limelight, 0 333 47204 7, £3.99

In the guise of a conventional American high school love story, this is a moving account of the growing relationship between a teenage girl and her grandfather during the last months of his life. Rachel comes, almost accidentally, to accompany him regularly on the daily walk he insists on continuing despite a fatal lung disease. Rachel is able to get closer to him without any loss of his dogged and often wilful character and the final scenes remain powerfully honest. AJ

**Adam's Paradise**

Alison Rush, Macmillan Limelight, 0 333 46268 8, £3.99

In a series apparently dominated by American teenage romances, this stands out in several ways. It's an English fantasy which works powerfully well at times with a richness of imaginative detail and a strong sense that all the strange, gobbledygook of its names and trickery actually matter. It's curious how well English writers can do this, how rain and cold seem to intrude so much. I hope that the packaging will hook readers if the cost hasn't deterred the book buyers. AJ

NEW SERIES FOR TEENAGERS

Jessica Yates considers Walker Teens,
Macdonald Frontlines and Orchard Originals.

Although these three teenage paperback lists launched in 1989 concentrate on contemporary, realistic fiction, nearly all the books under review have positive, if not completely happy, endings. Only two end with the tragic death of the hero, which the author signals beforehand to prepare the reader.

Walker Teens come in A-format, paperbacking novels already published by Walker and Julia MacRae; Macdonald Frontlines (also A-format) are paperback originals; and Orchard Originals, in trade size and simultaneous hardback, are a selection of British, American and Australian novels for older readers. All are quality fiction without any of the socialising, cheerleading stuff you find padding out some other teenage lists to entice reluctant readers.

Most Walker Teens are set in modern Britain, and are rite-of-passage novels about a crucial experience which launches a teenager into young adulthood. Judy Allen's *Awaiting Developments* (0 7445 1321 9) won the Children's Section of the Whitbread Award and the F.O.E. Earthworm Award; less intimidating than the accolades suggest, it is a very personal narrative by a shy girl from an educated, but not wealthy, background, who finds that the large garden around which a terrace of houses, including hers, had been built, has been sold to build luxury flats and houses.

Jo is afflicted by nervous conditions and allergies which make it hard for her to organise a residents' petition to save the garden and its wildlife, but nighttime bat-watching pays off, and even the developer congratulates her when conceding her partial victory.

Alison Leonard's *Tinker's Career* (0 7445 0844 4) also focusses on a teenage girl with, possibly, an inherited disorder. Does the overheard phrase 'Tinker's career' refer to Tina's nickname Tinker and her future, or to something more sinister? (Both, really.) Tina tracks down her dead mother's sister and learns the truth. A hectic narrative, told from Tina's point of view, and occasionally by the mysterious aunt herself.

Bernard Ashley's *Bad Blood* (0 7445 0848 7) is cleverly titled: it's both the leukaemia the hero's father suffers from, and the bad blood between him and his elder brother. Young Ritchie has to unearth his uncle and persuade him to be tested for a bone marrow transplant, and isn't prepared for a bitter refusal. He's also attracted to two girls of contrasting natures, one pretty but jealous, the other generous and undemanding. A pity the cover illustration shows Ritchie so prematurely-aged!

Now for Macdonald Frontlines and Orchard Originals. First a group of family stories with a lighthearted, sensible approach to typical teenage concerns. Rose Impey's *Instant Sisters* (1 85213 170 5) and Sue Limb's *Me Jane* (1 85213 172 1) have the best of the Orchard covers: social details are up-to-date and the authors do not patronise or stereotype working-class people and ethnic minorities, and successfully portray the boisterous vitality of inner-city teenagers.

Two sisters worry that their aunt isn't caring for Granny properly after Grandpa's death.



Is aunt driving her into senility, or is Granny senile? They kidnap Granny in *The Granny Heist* by Ann Ruffell (Frontlines, 0 361 08570 2) to see if she's really senile – and the author keeps you guessing.

Frontlines also publish some strong novels about today's underclass, at first sight

depressing, but winning me over by compelling narrative, truthful situations and fairly constructive conclusions building on the leading character's resilience. *January's Child* (0 361 08529 X) and *Bad Company* (0 361 08711 X) by Jenny Oldfield portray working-class teenage girls at risk from male exploitation by sexual abuse or battering. Adults fail them, but the love of steady boyfriends pulls them through.

Steven Saunders' *Blind Ally* (0 361 08495 1) adds new twists to the plot of a holiday romance between a 'nice' boy and a strange girl, in the delineation of neurotic, unpredictable Jo-jo, and shy, but tenacious Ally, who thinks he can save her from her criminal tendencies.

Paula Fox's *In a Place of Danger* (1 85213 166 7) and Maureen People's *The Other Side of the Family* (1 85213 144 6) are also worthwhile, even suspenseful stories about young girls discovering family secrets which adults have hushed up.

Finally, some genre fiction from all three imprints (especially for those reluctant boy readers!): David Skipper's *Runners* (Walker Teens, 0 7445 1312 X) is a fast-paced thriller about drug dealers in the north of England, and Redmond Wallis's *Starbloom* (Frontlines, 0 361 08503 6) and *The Mills of Space* (0 361 08537 0) are the first two parts of an exciting space trilogy about an alien threat to Earth, with strong female characters as well as the usual dashing heroic space pilot.

Michael Noonan's *McKenzie's Boots* (Orchard, 1 85213 145 4), an exceptional war novel set in Australia and New Guinea, tells of the life and death of Rod Murray, who enlisted under a false name because he was under-age and over-sized – hence the boots especially made for him, salvaged after his death. Battle-scenes are relatively few, as the story is also concerned with Rod's family and friends. The war is seen through modern eyes, with sympathy for 'good' Japanese and two homosexual characters, and in its combination of the practical and sentimental it reminds me of Nevil Shute's writing. This novel has much to offer teenage boys reluctant to yield to the power of narrative.

Hunter Davies, eat your heart out! ■

Walker Teens: £1.99 each.

Macdonald Frontlines: *January's Child*, *Blind Ally* and *Starbloom*, £1.99 each; *Bad Company*, *The Granny Heist* and *The Mills of Space*, £2.99 each.

Orchard Originals: Paperbacks R£4.95 each; hardbacks £7.95 each.

Jessica Yates has been an ILEA school librarian, and is now a mother and freelance reviewer. Her annotated bibliography of teenage fiction in paperback, *Teenager to Young Adult*, is available from the School Library Association and her anthology of heroic, feminist fantasy *Dragons and Warrior Daughters* (0 00 673179 1) was published in October by Lions Tracks at £2.50.

Authorgraph No.60

Joan Lingard



'I was born in a taxi cab in the Canongate of Edinburgh's Royal Mile' – Joan Lingard's entry into the world could have come straight off the pages of a novel! She remained in the city until she was two when her family went to live in Belfast where she was to spend the next sixteen years. 'It was where I learned to read and write and formed my first friendships and where I went to school. It formed the framework on which I look out on the world – my terms of reference.'

It was during this time in Belfast that she began to write – out of necessity. Here was a young girl crazy about *books* but whose local library resembled a shed and was full of grubby moth-eaten *books*. A fastidious little girl, she turned the food splattered pages over with a post-card and read – Pollyana, Katie, Dimsie, Enid Blyton and the Chalet books. 'Through all the splats I read and read!' When she found her supply of reading drying up, her mother suggested she should try writing her own, so at the age of eleven, she got hold of lined paper and a supply of green ink ('it seemed more artistic') and produced her first story. It was about a girl called Gail who had an adventure in Cornwall. The fact that Joan had never set foot in the place didn't worry her in the least. She followed this tale with others set in even more exotic locations from the Yorkshire Moors to Brazil.

At the age of sixteen, after the death of her mother, she left school and had an extraordinary time teaching fifty-four Primary Two children in a condemned building in Belfast due to a desperate shortage of teachers in the early fifties. She followed this with a spell in the Ulster Bank and then, following her father, returned to Edinburgh to work in the public library.

Someone suggested she train as a teacher and a quirk of fate brought her to the door in the Canongate outside which she'd been born and she enrolled as a student teacher at Moray House College. After her training, she taught for a while enjoying in particular the two-teacher school in the village where she lived outside Edinburgh. During this time she continued to write and one November day, sitting with her six-week-old daughter, a letter from London dropped through the letter-box. She still remembers the excitement of reading that Hodder & Stoughton were going to publish her first novel **Liam's Daughter**. This was the first of six adult novels and it was only when author and friend Honor Arundel suggested she write a story for young people that she seriously considered this genre.

'It was one of those situations where you realise that you have a book in your head and it's been waiting to come out – you need a stimulus to finally trigger it. I wanted to write a book about prejudice. I wanted to say to young people – you don't have to accept your parents' prejudices. You can think for yourself. It's only with the young that you can really break the mould.'

Joan Lingard's Kevin and Sadie books are now read throughout the world – **The Twelfth Day of July** was a landmark in fiction for young people when a controversial theme was turned into a novel. She followed the young Protestant and Catholic couple through seven years of their lives in five books. **Across the Barricades** is her most popular and best-selling novel which is also used extensively in schools. It says something of the book's appeal that even though children have to 'do' it in class, lines of them can be observed queuing up to buy it at book fairs. Surely the ultimate accolade for any author? Available world-wide, it also won Joan the prestigious Buxtehude Bulle prize chosen by a jury of young people and adults in West Germany. This meant an enormous amount to its author as did a post-card recently received from a group of blind children in London. 'They told me they had been on holiday in Bangor, Northern Ireland, and had just eaten ice-cream in the place where Kevin and Sadie sat, and made a pilgrimage up Cave Hill.' Another letter had come from a Japanese girl who, at twenty-three, still read the books which gave her 'fortitude and help' to cope with her chauvinistic family.

Joan returned to Belfast for the setting of **The File on Fraulein Berg**, a story of three schoolgirls during the War who suspect their German teacher of being a spy. They follow her on and off buses



making the poor woman's life a misery. The story was based on Joan's own antics with two friends at school who also suspected their German teacher. **Fraulein Berg**, she admitted, was written 'partly as an act of contrition'.

A sense of place is the crux of most of her novels, whether in Belfast, Glasgow or Edinburgh. Many characters are displaced – Kevin and Sadie, Maggie and her granny, and particularly the characters in her latest novel **Tug of War**. 'It matters greatly to me as my characters grow out of the background and are what they are because of it. If they leave that place, then this becomes a theme in itself. I have written about it in a quieter way in **The Gooseberry** and **Strangers in the**

House – both about families being displaced through remarriage.'

The strength of the family is also a major theme running through her books and her own one has provided the theme for two of her most important titles – **The Guilty Party** and **Tug of War**. The first was based on her younger daughter Jenny's experience in the anti-nuclear movement after she was arrested with a friend while putting up posters for a CND jumble sale. This was at the age of fifteen. Jenny went on the protest at Greenham Common against Cruise missiles and was eventually arrested for obstruction. Determined to plead not guilty in order that she could make a statement in court, she was sentenced to a fine and, on refusal to pay, went to Holloway Prison for eight days. Her sister, Bridget, camped outside with friends keeping a vigil and was supplied with food brought by sympathisers. Through her daughter's involvement in the anti-nuclear movement, Joan founded Scottish Writers Against the Bomb.

Did she feel that children's books should be a vehicle for personal views? 'Books always contain personal views of the authors. I write about what possesses me. I admit that **The Guilty Party** is the most polemical I've ever written, but I'm not trying to brainwash. I'm trying to stimulate readers into thinking for themselves. I think it's important to stretch the imagination.'

Tug of War had to wait many years before being written, but with the advent of perestroika the time had come to tackle her most difficult book. 'It's a strange thing about books and the time when they do gel – the idea can be mulling around in the subconscious for a long time, then there comes the moment when it suddenly clarifies and you can begin to write that book. So I wrote **Tug of War**, based on my husband's experiences as a refugee in Latvia in 1944 when he was eight and his brother was fourteen, taking both points of view. I talked on tape to both my husband and brother-in-law asking them to put their minds back to the days when they left their home in Latvia. The action covers four years until 1948 during which they travelled Europe.' The timing of the book was astonishing as the week it was published saw two million people linking hands through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The freedom movement

has seldom been out of the news and the book's appearance has been particularly timely, symbolising the people of Latvia's bid for freedom. The story of twins Astro and Hugo's separation and their appalling tribulations on their trek from place to place makes gripping reading. Seldom has the plight of displaced persons been so graphically expressed for young people. Why had she chosen to write this as a novel and not a biography?

'I believe that fiction has more impact. It can be more selective, highlighting the most dramatic incidents. Keeping a tight hold on the story line, you can create more rounded characters than in non-fiction. For a start, you can get inside their heads. I wouldn't have dared try to do that if I'd been writing about my actual husband.' This summer, Joan and her husband visited Latvia. A poignant return for Martin after all these years, and for her the opportunity to see for herself the background of her novel. It was a happy family reunion – one which might happen in a further novel?

Over the past few years, there have been books for younger children, too. **The Freedom Machine** is the story of a young boy setting out on a journey of discovery on his bike, Gulliver – his freedom machine – to escape the problems at home, and **Frying as Usual**, a tale of an Italian family who own a fish and chip shop. (Incidentally, notice how many times chip shops feature in Joan Lingard's writing! She says the chip shop was a great draw in her childhood.)

As she now has a four-year-old grandson, Russell, the idea of writing for an even younger age group appealed and this year should see the publication of a couple of picture books. There is also a sequel to **Rags and Riches** to come, following the fortunes of the two Edinburgh teenagers, Seb and Sam – humorous, lighthearted stories which Joan finds a contrast to her more serious writing.

1989 was an extraordinarily busy year, seeing not only the publication of **Tug of War**, but the appearance of an adult novel **The Women's House**. In spaces between there have been visits to Denmark, Dublin, Belfast, Latvia and Russia, with schools visits the length and breadth of the UK. But the writing itself remains more important than any travelling.

'I know that writers say they write for themselves and when I'm in my study, I feel as if I'm living in the places my characters are inhabiting, whether a refugee camp in Germany or the narrow streets round the corner where Sam and Seb live. At the end of the day writing is about communication. When I finish a book there has to be another stage. The novel that I've written has got to leave me to be printed and disseminated. Otherwise there would be a tremendous sense of incompleteness.'

Joan Lingard was interviewed by Valerie Bierman.

Some of Joan Lingard's many books

(published in hardback by Hamish Hamilton unless otherwise mentioned)

Across the Barricades, 0 241 02167 7, £6.50; Heinemann Educational, 0 435 12203 7, £3.25 non net; Penguin Plus, 0 14 03.2624 3, £2.25 pbk

The Clearance, 0 241 89021 7, £5.50; Heinemann Educational, 0 435 12228 2, £3.25 non net; Beaver, 0 09 947730 0, £1.99 pbk

The File on Fraulein Berg, Heinemann Educational, 0 435 12267 3, £3.25 non net; Beaver, 0 09 938290 3, £1.99 pbk

The Freedom Machine, 0 241 11882 4, £6.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.2369 4, £1.99 pbk

Frying as Usual, 0 241 11759 3, £6.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.2370 8, £1.99 pbk

The Gooseberry, 0 241 10023 2, £6.95; Beaver, 0 09 934090 9, £1.95 pbk

The Guilty Party, 0 241 12081 0, £7.50; Penguin Plus, 0 14 03.2502 6, £2.25 pbk

Rags and Riches, 0 241 12204 X, £6.95

Strangers in the House, 0 241 10671 0, £8.50; Beaver, 0 09 955020 2, £1.95 pbk

Tug of War, 0 241 12816 1, £8.50

The Twelfth Day of July, 0 241 01984 2, £6.95; Penguin Plus, 0 14 03.2506 9, £1.99 pbk

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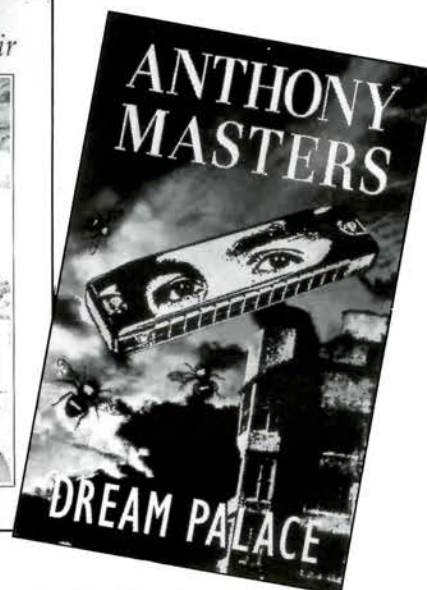
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REVIEWS — Non Fiction

Animal Noises

0 86313 841 1

Body Bits

0 86313 856 X

Ruth Thomson, Franklin Watts
(Match This series), £3.95 each pbk

What Goes with What?

0 86313 860 8

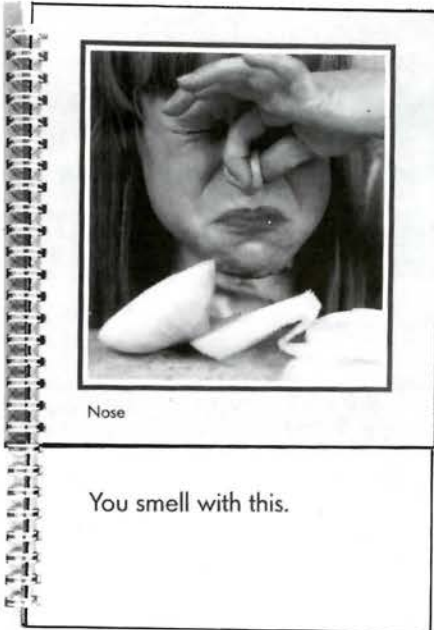
What is This?

0 86313 859 4

Chris Fairclough, Franklin Watts
(Look Again series), £3.95 each pbk

(NURSERY/INFANT)

'Look Again' and 'Match This' are attractive new photographic series aimed at young children. Based on the simple but effective idea of designing the book like a stable door, tops and bottoms of pages have to be matched up. Like Helen Oxenbury's **729 Curious Creatures** or **Is It a Tiger?** by Mark Burgess, the appeal might be greatest with a bad match! Young children will enjoy a lion with the 'eek' sounds of a mouse or a seagull going 'miaow'. The books do have more tangible educational benefits – testing children's powers of observation to identify familiar objects from unfamiliar angles, encouraging them to develop connections between related concepts and to think about the purposes of different 'Body Bits'.



The books are good value at £3.95 and would be useful additions to playgroup, nursery, infant and home collections. GB

Ant Cities Feel the Wind

0 7136 3196 1

0 7136 3195 3

Arthur Dorros

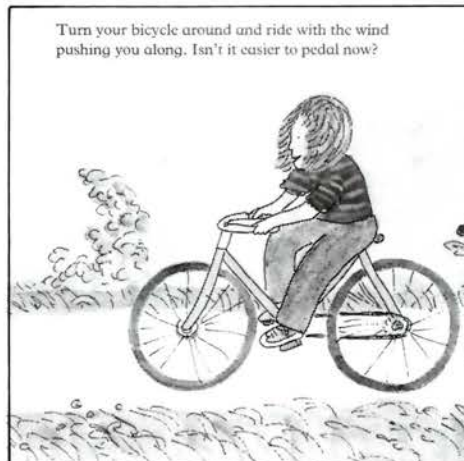
Evolution

0 7136 3194 5

Joanna Cole

A & C Black (First Sight series),
£4.50 each
(INFANT/JUNIOR)

Over twenty years ago the lucid prose and brilliantly individual illustrations of Black's 'Let's Read and Find Out' books assured

From *Feel the Wind*.

them a valued place in virtually every primary school. They're still a welcome sight there today as a new generation trots out of the same stable to join them. With so much non-fiction nowadays assembled to a formula to fill a series gap, it's a real treat to find books with their own voice and obvious authorial commitment, and which don't assume that every reader's mind is a complete tabula rasa.

'Each ant has work to do' is the repeated burden of *Ant Cities*; we observe the diversity of ant life united by a capacity for industry and strength – 'an ant can lift as much as fifty times its own weight – if people could do that, we could each lift a car'. A pity that if we want to start our own formicarium we're advised to get some 'garden pottery compost', because everywhere else the proofreading and anglicisation are competent.

'Wind is moving air' and harder to draw than ants but Dorros' affectionately naive pictures do far better than photographs as we run the gamut of hurricanes, wind resistance, windmills, sirocco and erosion.

Evolution starts from fossils and traces the origin of the species and the development of our knowledge of it, dealing with the extreme gradualness of it all – 'No one saw evolution happen, it happened over millions of years'. Some readers may question the assertion that 'Wild apes do not use language', but all will welcome Aliki's thoughtfully multi-racial illustrations, not least those who remember her contribution to the 'Let's Read...' books.

This is a series to hang your hat and reputation on!

TP

Medieval Britain Viking Britain

1 85210 578 X

1 85210 577 1

Robin Place

Tony D Triggs

Wayland (History in Evidence series), £6.50 each
(JUNIOR/MIDDLE)

How do we know that the Vikings suffered from stomach ache and diarrhoea and that housewives in the Middle Ages kept their floors well-swept? The answers are revealed in these informative new titles which aim to show how archaeological evidence can help provide an authentic portrait of the past.

Using examples of specific excavations in Britain, the authors explain what these sites have told us about how our ancestors lived and, in some cases, died. Readers will no doubt be intrigued to learn that in addition to the knowledge to be acquired from artefacts and the remains of buildings, some of the most fascinating clues are to be found in rubbish tips and cesspits.

A surprising amount of information is conveyed in a deceptively easy style, complemented by a selection of coloured photographs and artwork showing sites, artefacts and reconstructions. There is an imaginative list of places to visit, a useful glossary and a reading list (but no indication is given of the widely differing reading levels). VH

Blindness

0 7496 0043 8

Deafness

0 7496 0042 X

Heart Disease

0 7496 0045 4

Diabetes

0 7496 0044 6

Steve Parker

Barbara Taylor, Franklin Watts
(Living With series), £6.95 each
(MIDDLE/SECONDARY)

A simple formula of basic anatomy and physiology followed by what goes wrong, how it can be mended and how the sufferer manages, characterises this new series. Easy enough, you'd think, for an experienced team to knock out a consistent bunch, but in fact these titles have decided differences.

Blindness has many causes and remedies and Steve Parker lists lots of each. Careless explanations like 'each separate eye sees two slightly different views' to explain stereoscopy, clash with brilliantly succinct ones – 'we see with our eyes but not in our eyes' – and it's not until we reach the twenty-fourth of thirty-two sumptuously illustrated pages that we get any inkling of what the blind condition is like and how it's managed, let alone how the blurbs 'caring society' helps. So this is a fair book about causes and treatments but light on its professed subject, for which Peter Dickinson's *Annerton Pit* is much to be preferred.

Better is *Heart Disease*. Again the balance is technical – three cheers for the red, white and blue of the many diagrams of cardiovascular conditions and operations – but the influence of heart on lifestyle gets a bigger and earlier share of it. The health advice is familiar but helpful, though probably more so to adults ('giving up alcohol completely could cause additional stress') than to those whose nutrition and exercise routines are still prescribed for them.

Barbara Taylor's contributions are far more about 'living with' their conditions. Early on in *Deafness* we get familiar pictures of audiometric tests, drainage grommets, induction loops and radio aids, all involving children. Lip reading and signing are simply explained and examples of deaf children joining in all kinds of social situations are plentiful. Altogether the book generates an optimism which Parker's technicalities miss.

Best of the bunch is *Diabetes* whose effects on daily life are mentioned as early as page 8; somehow the whole tone here is more of constructive sympathy and there's valuable advice for those with the condition. It's nice, too, to see that the family cycling happily along in the middle distance for the good of its pancreas, survives long enough (dog and all) to reach the foreground for the benefit of its heart in Steve Parker's book.

Here's a useful series of formula-non-fiction where plentiful illustrations help the inevitable long words. If there are any more I hope Barbara Taylor writes them. TP

Geoff Brown is a Divisional Coordinator with Hertfordshire Schools Library Service. Veronica Holliday is North Regional Schools Librarian for Hampshire.

Ted Percy is a Divisional Children's Librarian with Buckinghamshire County Library.

SOME FICTIONS OF NON-FICTION

Robert Hull questions some standard beliefs about the Language of Information Books



The men decided this child needed discipline. I was drilled every morning. Dressed either as a soldier or sailor, depending on who was to be Drill Sergeant, I was inspected in the shop, then marched up and down the pavement while massed ranks of tea drinkers shouted, 'Left Right, Left Right, About Turn, Pick Them Feet Up!'

1. The library will have the books you want . . .

I've made several earnest forays to libraries recently, looking for non-fiction for children to read – the sort the reader picks up, gets hooked on, and goes through from end to end. And I've been left with some dismally clear impressions, puzzles for the teacher and parent in me.

- i) Why, even at first and junior school level, are there far more books that are good to look at than there are books which children can read? And why so often does quality of text lag behind quality of image?
- ii) Even more acutely, why, in the 11-16 age range, is there a desperate dearth not just of good non-fiction to read, but often of any non-fiction *at all* to read?
- iii) Why are some subjects so much lazier than others that they ought to be told to pull their socks up?

Have I been to the wrong libraries? Were the good books all out?

I wonder if part of the trouble isn't the words. It might be better if we had a less sombre lot of grey-suited terms than 'information', 'facts', 'non-fiction'. The other side has 'story', 'play', 'drama' – it's not fair.

To children, it really wouldn't be fair if, because we ourselves couldn't shake off a grey Gradgrindian legacy of stern-speaking about facts, it were to infiltrate books for children, and help deny them access to the intellectual worlds we say we want them to enter.

I wonder also, reading so many of these books, or rather wandering uncertainly about in them, whether our basic hang-up isn't still the feeling that reading is not what one does with a non-fiction book. Perhaps we really still think that a science book for 13-year-olds *has* to be arranged 'logically' in chapters which contain 'the' suitable subject-matter for that age, and that the essential function of such books is to 'transmit information'.

2. Non-fiction books are for conveying information . . .

The best books I've found – or been offered to read because as parent and teacher I couldn't find them for myself – say, in effect, that the essential job of their kind of non-fiction is not to 'transmit' and 'convey', and that 'facts' are not its defining concern.

The word 'fact' is a thorough nuisance, in fact. Take what sounds like a fully paid-up history fact: 'King Harold was hit in the eye by an arrow at the Battle of Hastings.' Definitely a fact; more so than this, perhaps: 'And after the battle were over, They found 'Arold so stately and grand, Sitting there with an eye-full of arrow, On 'is 'orse with 'is 'awk in 'is 'and.'

Yet surely neither is, in itself, a fact; both are statements, formulations. The facts are long gone, in 1066. The only thing these statements 'transmit' is themselves. The writer makes statements that refer to (distant) facts, and the statements put together make a world. Which is why I want to say that what the most potent, readable, necessary (and mainly non-existent) non-fiction does is create a world, the world of a writer, a human self.

The books that are a delight to read do exactly that. I found, for example, Fred Wilde's *The Clatter of Clogs in the Early Morning* in which each spread has a reproduction of one of his paintings opposite his text: *At the top of his stick there burned a small acetylene flame made by dripping water on to carbide of calcium. He would push his stick up through the hinged window in the bottom of the lamp, turning on the gas at the same time. The gas mantle would go 'plop', and immediately there was a lovely pool of soft, golden light on the pavement.*

'Information' in this book is not a marshalled battalion of 'facts', but a pattern in the intensely aware and informed vision of someone seeing and experiencing things. We meet not 'knowledge', the noun, but the man speaking knowingly, knowledge as adverb, as the accent or attribute of a writer's personality. Of itself, the encounter with such a book should settle an argument for us: we may say that the 'logical' or 'structured' text-book-like book is necessary, but we can never say that books in a particular subject must take that form.

I wish to pursue this fundamental point with reference to a recent picture-book from Michael Foreman, *War Boy*, published by Pavilion Books, which like Wilde's also shows how marvellously possible it is for history, at least, to be a compulsive read. It is an account of his life as a young boy in Lowestoft during the Second World War. This, underneath a drawing, is the first page: *I woke up when the bomb came through the roof. It came through at an angle, overflowed my bed by inches, bounced up over my mother's bed, hit the mirror, dropped into the grate and exploded up the chimney. It was an incendiary. A fire bomb.*



People gave up carrying masks after a few months. We were taught to spit on the inside of the mica window to prevent it misting up. Gas masks were good for rude noises and fogged up anyway.

This, and illustration on the opposite page, from *War Boy*.

There's history in the grip of the detail: *Ivan threw sand over the bomb but the dry sand kept sliding off. And in sharing the small boy's experience: My mother grabbed me from the bed . . . The sky bounced as my mother ran. And in local significances: The Germans were trying to set alight the thatched roof of the church to make a beacon for the following waves of bombers. And in the comedy: At the beginning of the Black Out there were many more casualties from road accidents than from enemy actions . . . Men were encouraged to leave their white shirt tails hanging out at night. A local farmer painted white stripes on his cows in case they strayed on the roads.* Foreman's book is what books of non-fiction could far more often be like. It is a young boy's war world, presented with an immediacy that you can't resist; the 'information' about the war is integral to that world, and indeed through this idiosyncratic character adds its uniqueness to our understanding of the war.

3. Narrative is a good dramatic way to convey information . . .

Foreman's text is narrative, and narrative – story-telling – is perhaps the best way to hold the reader's attention continuously. That is, provided it works. Narrative is difficult, and needs a writer to write it; it can't be taken up, as it often seems to be, in the expectation that it will somehow create interest of itself. There are many non-fiction narratives that do not convince, and some that do. The assumption that narrative is essentially a (painless) way of 'conveying information' may well be very unhelpful.

'Informative' but inadequate narrative is so widespread that examples can be found almost at random. This is the first paragraph of *Columbus and the Age of Exploration*, by Stewart Ross, published by Wayland in 1985: *In the crow's nest the look-out screwed his eyes up against the glare of the tropical sun. Beneath him the little forty-ton ship Nina rolled heavily in the Arctic swell. The sailor took a piece of*

dry biscuit from his pocket. It tasted foul, but there was no other food. They had been at sea for forty days now and supplies were getting perilously low. The problem here is the writer's reluctance to commit himself to narrative, and to the viewpoint of his narrator. He has half an eye on the fiction and one-and-a-half on the information; the look-out screws up his eyes to think about the food situation and the weight of the boat. There's no focus; we can't believe it as narrative.

Almost equally at random is some narrative text from a new book for lower juniors, called *The Tiny Seed*, by Eric Carle. *A strong wind is blowing. It blows flower seeds high in the air and carries them far across the land. One of the seeds is tiny, smaller than any of the others. Will it be able to keep up with the others? And where are they all going? On the next page: One seed drifts down to the desert. It is hot and dry, and the seed cannot grow. Now the tiny seed is flying very low, but the wind pushes it on with the others.*

At first it isn't easy to see anything greatly amiss here. The text is 'true', it's 'easy'. But there is a fatal absence of particularity about it – not restored by the non-committal illustrations, in which the seeds look not that different from leaves. We don't know what kind of seed it is; we know only that 'One of the seeds is tiny', the phrase 'far across the land' leaves us groping for a sharp picture of fields, a ditch, hedges. Then we turn over the page to the most token of deserts. The fate of the tiny seed leaves us deeply unmoved, because the narrative doesn't believe in its own story.

In other words, taking on narrative as a method, to remedy things, only works if the method is well handled. That seems obvious, but it is odd that we so often don't notice what's going wrong. Perhaps this is because we are bemused by the brilliance, often, of the visual component of non-fiction and the professional panache of glamorous packaging into not noticing the grotesque inertia of the text. We may even then also fail to notice that 'simple' text is also frequently difficult – not totally unapproachable, but sufficiently misty and gappy, in a low-key way, to keep the reader just missing the point.

Take for example – it could be many others – another new book in a nature series, *Earth*, written by Alfred Leutscher and brilliantly illustrated by John Butler. One spread has these bald sentences opposite a beautifully drawn squirrel: *When autumn leaves fall and decay they add more humus to the soil. In a forest of evergreens, however, there is little humus; the soil is poor and acid. The few pine needles that fall do not add much nourishment. The permanent gloom shelters deer and other shy animals . . .* And so on.

This is far less easy than it looks. How do children of eight or nine pick up from this context the significance of 'evergreens' – as meaning trees different from trees whose 'leaves fall', while their own 'needles' puzzlingly, fall too? Is 'however' a word familiar to them? How do they know what, or maybe who, the 'nourishment' nourishes (assuming they understand the word 'nourishment')? Will they make the inference that 'The permanent gloom' is produced by 'the evergreens' or treat it as a different entity of some sort, just introduced?

This awkward text cannot tell its story, because it cannot dwell on anything for long. There is too much to do – one spread on farming, one on earthquakes, and so on. For me, it is just not readable. And the reason for that, ultimately, is that it is committed to a notion of 'information' that is diffuse, dislocated, uprooted from the personal intellectual history of the writer. It offers satellite pictures of what we need to see much closer up, out of a human eye in a place.

Compare it with ostensibly more difficult text, intended for older readers, from Richard Adams' *Nature Day and Night* (Penguin 1976): *I see a grey wagtail bobbing and strutting on a flat stone under a little waterfall. He is bluish grey above and yellow below, very handsome; but it is his brisk, cocky walk (he never hops) and dipping flirting flight, and above all the long tail forever wagging like a clockwork toy, that make him so buoyant and attractive.*

4. Some subjects are not suited to non-fiction . . .

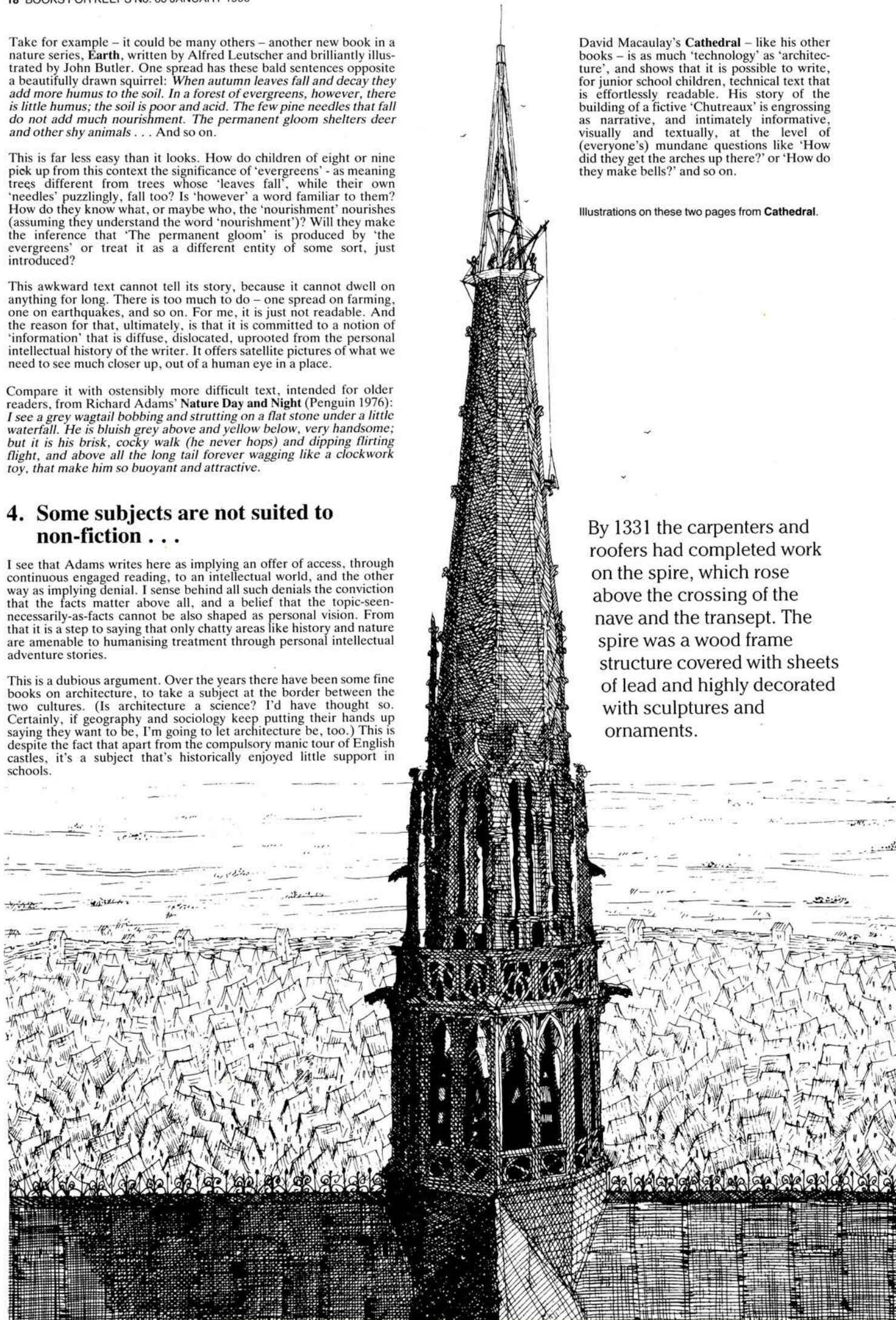
I see that Adams writes here as implying an offer of access, through continuous engaged reading, to an intellectual world, and the other way as implying denial. I sense behind all such denials the conviction that the facts matter above all, and a belief that the topic-seen-necessarily-as-facts cannot be also shaped as personal vision. From that it is a step to saying that only chatty areas like history and nature are amenable to humanising treatment through personal intellectual adventure stories.

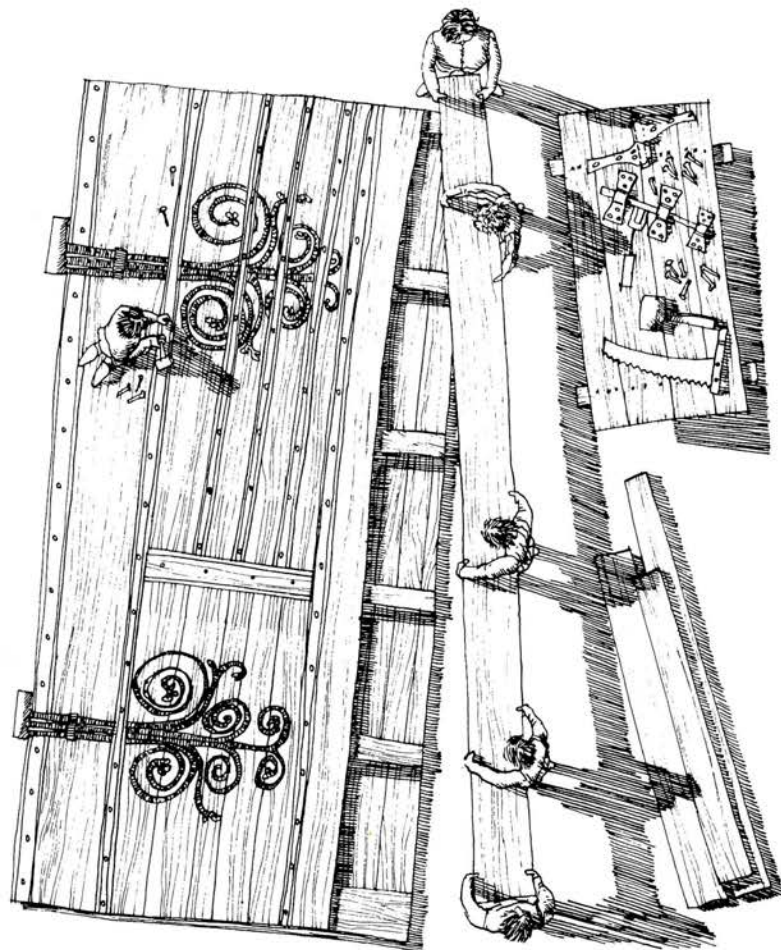
This is a dubious argument. Over the years there have been some fine books on architecture, to take a subject at the border between the two cultures. (Is architecture a science? I'd have thought so. Certainly, if geography and sociology keep putting their hands up saying they want to be, I'm going to let architecture be, too.) This is despite the fact that apart from the compulsory manic tour of English castles, it's a subject that's historically enjoyed little support in schools.

David Macaulay's *Cathedral* – like his other books – is as much 'technology' as 'architecture', and shows that it is possible to write, for junior school children, technical text that is effortlessly readable. His story of the building of a fictive 'Chutreaux' is engrossing as narrative, and intimately informative, visually and textually, at the level of (everyone's) mundane questions like 'How did they get the arches up there?' or 'How do they make bells?' and so on.

Illustrations on these two pages from *Cathedral*.

By 1331 the carpenters and roofers had completed work on the spire, which rose above the crossing of the nave and the transept. The spire was a wood frame structure covered with sheets of lead and highly decorated with sculptures and ornaments.





Meanwhile, in the carpenters' workshop the doors were being built. The centre door alone was almost twenty-five feet high, made of heavy planks of wood and joined with cross-ribs. A blacksmith made all the nails for the door and a master metal worker made the bolts and locks and hinges.

Perhaps, some might say, you can only do it in some subjects. With maths, chemistry and physics, especially, text had to be impersonal, objective, etc. This is surely nonsense. Here is some physics: *Go with some friends under the hatches of some big ship and see that you have some small birds with you, and also a small bucket with a hole in suspended high above another one, so that the water will drip slowly from the higher to the lower one. Observe very carefully, when the boat is standing still, the way the birds dart about to and fro in all directions, and the drops fall into the bucket underneath. Get the ship to move as fast as it can and so long as the movement is steady and uniform, you will not see the slightest alteration in the way the birds fly or water falls, and you will not be able to tell from them whether the ship is moving or not.* Physics to read . . . from Gallileo.

The largest puzzle of all therefore remains: why isn't there, twenty-odd years after the comprehensive idea threw open, at the level of ideology at least, academic subjects to all, more readable non-fiction? Why are books written for 7-9 year-olds and later for adults and A-level students, but not – so far as I can see – with anything like the same concern, skill, or commitment for children of 11-16? Do we perhaps not believe that books are the one most effective means of enabling children to enter academic worlds?

If we didn't, it would explain to some degree why – especially in subjects like chemistry, physics, maths, even (amazingly) geography – the dearth of non-fiction reading books continues to block access to those worlds. Is that continued denial a consequence of comprehensive school versions of subjects, in which universality of access was not perceived as a problem? No need for children to read their way into commitment; you were either 'good at physics' – our physics – or not. Perhaps it is this reactionary aspect of the work of comprehensives that has come to roost in the monumental apathies too visible in schools.

5. The textbook has the basic information needed for the course . . .

The contents list of Cotterrell and Russell's new **GCSE Social Science** (Heinemann Educational, 1988) makes, so to speak, interesting reading. This is Section 1 (nine to come):

Methods Used in Social Science

1.1 The Questionnaire

1.2 Asking Questions: Interviews

1.3 Participant Observation

1.4 Surveys and Sampling

1.5 Secondary Sources: Documentary Evidence

1.6 Presenting the Information

What is worrying is the sense that this all-too-complete course not only can be, but probably has to be, accomplished without independent reading. The subject is already by page 5 defined in such a way as to put pupils' own language resources under suspicion, technicalising words pupils will know, like 'interview' and 'observation': *The interview is a conversation between an interviewer and a respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information. Observation is a method in which the researcher becomes involved in some way with the person or group being studied.*

The 'Extension Activities' that follow the 'Question' section at the end of each chapter might imply here and there that reading is needed, but of what kind and at what pace is unclear. Nowhere is an actual request made to read a book, only to *Make a study of the upper class* (p.53), *Make a study of gender socialisation* (p.57) and so on. The iron insouciance of all this makes it likely that pupils will have their hands if not their minds only too full.

6. Exciting works of non-fiction can always be found . . .

Perhaps this close control over secondary school subjects, and the denial of reading it entails, explains why so many of the good works of non-fiction one finds – on subjects just right for 11-16 year-olds – seem to be written and packaged for the sixth form or tertiary level. It is tantalising to see a beautifully produced book, the concept of which is just right for 11-16, skew off towards that higher level.

One book that I found, for instance, seemed an ideal way in to aspects of (at least) maths and biology. Peter S Stevens' **Patterns in Nature**, published by Peregrine Books in 1976, has fascinating photographs and a very well-written text which one would love to see translated, or rather transposed for 12-year-olds: *The leaves that curl counterclockwise on the left side of the front of the sago palm shown in fig. 54, are opposed by clockwise curls on the right side. Storms spiral counterclockwise above the equator and clockwise below, just as in a more abstract realm, negative numbers camp to the left of zero and positive numbers to the right.*

Time and again, one finds that the fascinating topic is only done in the adults-only version. Whether it's computer graphics, clouds, geology, the working of the brain, the structure of the eye, or whatever, readable non-fiction seems to be far more available for the older student. There are exceptional writers – Asimov, Grigson – who seem to enjoy writing for 11-16s, despite the cultural pressure not to; but I've found it very difficult to discover any really good new through-read non-fiction for that older group.

That seems the most baffling of the puzzles. Not far behind is the puzzle of there still being so little really good text for 7-11 year-olds either. Considering the brilliance of the illustration in so much work nowadays, it begins to look like a mystery. Perhaps non-fiction is more mysterious than fiction. ■

Robert Hull taught for 25 years in state schools and is now a freelance writer and lecturer. He is the author of **The Language Gap** (0 416 39400 0, £7.95) and **Behind the Poem** (0 415 00701 1, £10.95) both published in paperback by Routledge.

I'd never heard of **Flowers in the Attic** until Martin told me about it. It's the story of a woman who keeps her four children locked up in the attic and pretends to the world that they just aren't there.

ROUGH BOOKS.

By Toby Forward.

Martin told me to read it. I'm trying; I haven't got round to it yet, but I will. I will, not just because I want to do what Martin told me to and because I promised him I would, but because Martin is himself one of the flowers in our attic, and by us I mean all of us, everyone who feels safer because there are people in prison.

Martin is one of the young men I met and talked with about books behind the thick Victorian walls of Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution, Aylesbury. It's a maximum security prison for people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two. The security has to be good because the crimes were often violent and the sentences are often long. When a young man of eighteen finds himself behind the walls with no limit on his sentence, no release date, detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure, then it's a fair bet that he'll try to escape if there's any chance. In fact, one of the men I spoke with talked about his own attempt which failed and placed him in category 'E', E for escaper. It was all a bit of a joke to the others, and he made light of it himself. We were talking about sentencing policy and justice. 'You do your offence and you serve your time,' he said. 'I'm not complaining. It's right.' The others fell about, some with laughter, others with indignation. 'You tried to escape,' they said. 'What you talking about? Course I did. Course I tried to escape. Who wouldn't? Who indeed? I tried to smoothe things over by pointing out that he lost his remission by trying to escape: he had played by the rules and lost. 'No,' he corrected me. 'No remission for what I done.' It was then that I realised he was there for the duration, no release date. I didn't know before because that was one of the first rules I learned years ago when I first went into a prison. Never ask what someone's in for. It's bad man-



ners. If they want you to know, they'll tell you when they're ready.

But in a way, they're all category 'E'; there has to be some sort of escape, an escape into a world made available through books. While we talked I grew more and more aware of the need they had for books and the benefits they got from them that I never could. This doesn't mean that the books they read are what we would classify as 'escapist', but that their cells are so small and walls so thick that they can only be penetrated by the imagination. The books don't need to take the prisoners away from the reality of life but to let them enter into a richer and wider life than prison offers, and that's an escape.

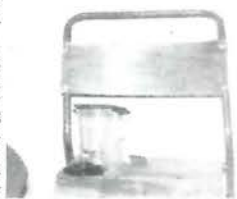
When you sit on your bed, under the giant poster of the Porsche, what do you read, where do you disappear to? And when you look around at the glossy pictures of impossible women, pouting at you and posturing for you and provoking you, except that it's not for you, not you at all, where do you escape to?

One thing that interested me was that they did not escape into fantasy. Only the week before I had been in a sixth form, asking them the same questions about what sort of books they read. There was a wide spread, but quite a lot of the books were fantasy of the Sci-fi, dungeons and dragons type. In Aylesbury they didn't go in for that at all.

I'll use different names for the people because they have already been too generous in giving me their time, and inviting me into their cells to take photographs.

Is it any surprise that Martin wanted to recommend **Flowers in the Attic**? Martin is 'lifted off', so he knows what it's like to be locked away. He reads voraciously, recommending **A Song in the Morning** by Gerald Seymour, a book about South Africa; and **Wild Justice** by Wilbur Smith, an intelligent, well-researched thriller; and **A Sense of Freedom**, Jimmy Boyle's autobiography telling of his time as a prisoner in Barlinnie.

There was no stopping Martin once you asked him what books he liked. Charles Kray, **Me and My Brothers**, and the autobiography of someone whose name was difficult to remember but came out as something like Joseph Bonnano, **A Man of Honour** – he was a Mafia boss. Okay, so there's something holding these books together for Martin, a common theme of violence and crime and punishment. But there's more to it than that, more than just a young man looking for support from others who have made it good after being in prison, people who have done something 'on the out'. Martin is a reader, a natural reader who, like most of us, starts by reading things that relate to his experience and then gets led on to other things through the simple love of books. And his reading is helping him to interpret





his present experience. I hope the prison library has got a copy of **Crime and Punishment** because that ought to be next on his list.

Heads were nodding as Martin called out the names of the books. Some of these were old favourites of the group, especially the Jimmy Boyle and Charles Kray books. 'Yeah,' agreed Earl, 'that's a rough book.' 'A rough book? It's no good?' I asked. Collapse of researcher. Learn the language first. A rough book is a stupendously good book. Like what else? Well, Earl suggested, like **To Kill a Mockingbird** by Harper Lee. 'Now that IS a rough book,' he assured me. I was only too happy to agree. I had met fourth and fifth form kids, doing the book for exams, who were bored to death by it. But Earl, strong and black and in prison, knows what is going on in it, knows far better than I do. And he went on to tell me about two books by Mildred D. Taylor, **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry** and **Let the Circle be Unbroken**, books about the period after the American Civil War. Also **Gone With the Wind** books, but written from the black point of view.

Bennie wanted me to read **Cathedral** by Jack Higgins. Martin came back (again! - he always had another book to suggest) with **Roots** by Alex Hailey. These were all getting the nods of approval. I had time to admire their English teacher who was sitting in on this group. They were not ashamed, as lots of

their friends on the out might be, to share their enthusiasms with me, although I was a stranger to them. More important, perhaps, they were not ashamed to share their enthusiasms with each other. I saw more love of books that morning, shared love, than I have often seen in A-level English groups or even amongst undergraduates reading for English degrees. It was a tribute to them and to the Governor and the Education Department.

In the end I came away with mixed feelings of respect and regret. Here was a group of young men who had committed crimes that made it safer for the rest of us if they were not free. But I was perplexed, *am* perplexed. Is there something in these young men that is bad and brutal and that means that we must lock them up? Or are they victims of a brutalising background who would be perfectly safe if only they could be helped? Certainly the regime at Aylesbury does everything it can to help them, and yet 60 to 65% of them re-offend within two years of being released. The average sentence is seven years, the minimum is three years, and fifty of them are in for life. Now, I want fewer people in prison. I want prisons to be more open, more relaxed places. And yet, and yet, these are brutal crimes and they frighten me.

When the prison was built in 1847, the men were marched up under guard from the old gaol house in

the town. The need was so great to prove that justice was for ever, they even dug up the corpses from the old gaol house grounds and re-buried them in the new. That was a time when punishment was more public than it is today. Crowds of up to five thousand used to collect outside to watch the public hangings at Aylesbury. The men were hanged right on top of the great gates, a superb act of theatre. In fact, it was not liberal sentiment that brought public executions to an end in England, it was public order. There was such enthusiasm for the events that crowds were uncontrollable; they were the football rioters of their day. It's all much more secret today. But the punishment goes on, and young men in Aylesbury and young men and women in prisons all over the country turn to their books to escape from the hard reality of imprisonment. I don't know what image to use, what to borrow from their list of books: these people are the flowers in our attic, they are the mockingbird that sings unheard, they are the thunder that rolls in silence, they are the pilgrims seeking their cathedral, in e.e. cummings' terms. Locked behind those huge gates, they are the cathedral itself. ■

Toby Forward retired recently from being a parish priest in Brighton to become a full-time writer. His latest novel, **Neverland**, was published in November 1989 by Simon & Schuster (0 671 65330 X, £8.95). Half of his royalties will be donated to Great Ormond Street Hospital.



WHO READS TEENAGE FICTION?

Adèle Geras reflects . . .

Here is the first sentence of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: 'As Gregor Samsa awoke from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.'

If his mother had brought him a cup of tea instead of calling to him through the bedroom door, she would have been mesmerised with horror. Just so do some people regard teenagers: as creatures who have undergone a ghastly transformation and are no longer quite of the human species.

I am not an expert on teenagers. I'm not going to discuss their clothes, habits, hairstyles, sexual mores, personal relationships or prospects. I'm going to talk about teenagers and books, and furthermore I'm going to confine myself to those young people who *do* still read. I know many children fall over a metaphorical cliff in adolescence into a reading-less abyss, and all I can say to parents of such children is: take them to as many good movies and plays as you can, and do not scoff at talking books on a cassette player. There's nothing immoral about being read to.

It's not enough, though, for a person to read just *anything*. Teachers, librarians, parents and publishers are quite rightly concerned to put good books in front of children, and an awful lot of good books do reach a huge number of people. If, however, your child is engrossed in what you consider to be dross, you should relax and read an article by Peter Dickinson (*Children's Literature in Education* No. 3, November 1970) called 'A Defence of Rubbish' which is brilliant, and probably the last word on the subject. Still, I shall add a few observations:

1. A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF WHAT PEOPLE CALL 'RUBBISH' IS ACTUALLY GENRE-FICTION.

There are loud voices raised in anger that say, 'Romance – rubbish', 'Horror – rubbish', 'Thriller – rubbish', 'Middle-brow women writers – rubbish', and (most Philistine of all) 'American – rubbish'. They are, quite simply, wrong. I speak as someone who read Stephen King, Ruth Rendell and Elmore Leonard before they became big names, and who loved Elizabeth Taylor (the novelist) in tatty library hardback before Virago decked her in their beautiful dark-green covers. These same voices probably also said, 'Humour – rubbish', but this kind of muttering faded to a whisper after the success of Adrian Mole and the Douglas Adams books. If, however, a teenager persists in reading real trash and *nothing but* real trash all the days of her life, she will eventually become a trash-reading adult and then everyone will wash their hands of her, and let her get on with it: strange double standards! You don't hear *Kaleidoscope* on BBC Radio 4 bemoaning the fact that Mills and Boon and Barbara Cartland sell in the millions, but a recent special on Teen Romance had a very tsk! tsk! attitude to *Sweet Valley High* books (which is o.k.) and failed to mention (which is definitely *not* o.k.) writers of good romantic books, let alone recommend any actual titles.

2. THE READERS OF THE BOOKS PUBLISHERS PUT ON YOUNG ADULT LISTS ARE BARELY INTO THEIR TEENS.

I practically live in libraries. In my local branch, all the primary schools come and choose books once a week. 3rd and 4th year Juniors STAMPEDE towards the Y.A. shelves, which are stripped of their juiciest books in seconds. 12/13-year-olds who are readers are already

mixing in a lot of books from the adult shelves. (Notice I don't say 'adult books'. See point 4.) 15-year-olds who are still readers would blush to be seen near a shelf called 'Teenage', 'Young Adult' or any other euphemism the librarians can think up.

3. GIRLS AND WOMEN READ MORE FICTION THAN BOYS AND MEN.

And whereas girls enjoy fantasy, horror, thrillers, etc., many boys wouldn't be seen dead holding any book which has a girl on the cover. Later on in their lives, alas, it is precisely girls on the cover that lure certain men into reading certain kinds of books.

4. MANY BOOKS FOR TEENAGERS ARE BOOKS FOR EVERYONE.

K M Peyton's *Flambards* was a hugely successful TV serial. Michelle Magorian's *Back Home* recently became a lovely TV film. Michael Morpurgo's *Why the Whales Came* is now a film starring Helen Mirren.

The Railway Children, *The Secret Garden*, *Little Women*: one can multiply examples. Hey presto, the magic of the movies . . . a book that was only a children's book has become fit for the grown-ups too! Amazing, but untrue. The truth is: the book was a fine read for adults all along, but hardly any of them bothered to pick it up and open it. When I first started to write children's books, I began to read: Gardam, Paton Walsh, Peyton, Lingard, Bawden, etc. and I loved them all. I didn't find them to read to my daughter (who was only two at the time) nor for any research purposes. I simply took them from the library and wallowed in them. Now, I am filled with a kind of missionary zeal. I go up to perfect strangers in bookshops and recommend things. I've even been known to take a book from the Y.A. shelf of a library (sorry, librarians!) and put it in the adult section in the hope that it might reach the wide audience it deserves. It's all a question of marketing, I know, but many potential adult readers of teenage books are put off by the labelling. A word of warning here, though, for uninitiated grown-ups: some of these books may be a lot harder and more demanding than the Jeffrey Archer, Ian Fleming or Agatha Christie you've been used to. Beware particularly novels by Alan Garner or Robert Cormier. You will not be able to skip through them on your journey to work.

5. GOOD WRITERS DO NOT WRITE 'FOR' TEENAGERS.

They simply happen to write books that teenagers enjoy. Some of them (J D Salinger, John Steinbeck, George Orwell) wrote their books for adults. Perhaps writers of books published on Y.A. lists write for the teenager they used to be, or perhaps (and this is more likely) *they still are* (give or take a few decades of experience) the same person they were when they were seventeen. The less-than-good teenage books happen, I think, when a writer sits down and says to herself: 'I'm going to write a book that'll go down a bomb with all the groovy dudes at the disco. I'd better go and chat to some real live kids.' That's writing a book *de haut en bas*, and it shows. Always. Good books, as Peter Dickinson said recently on the radio, 'come and knock and knock on the door and demand to be written'. I don't know what other writers feel, but when I write anything other than a book for very young children, I forget altogether about my audience and write entirely to please myself. The ghostly presences of my English teachers hover over me when I'm correcting, revising, going over

things, but the story, the feelings, the emotions: I'm the one that needs to be moved, enthralled, amused, involved first of all, or how can I possibly expect that anyone else will be? I have one word of warning for writers of stories for teenagers: *beware of being too trendy and up-to-date*. Nothing has less street-cred than yesterday's slang, and you may find yourself hoist with your own petard if you try and be up-to-the-minute in the matter of pop-groups and so on. I was. I described the hero of one story as looking like the lead singer of Curiosity Killed the Cat. Do you remember them? Do your children? Sic transit gloria, etc. The best bet is to do your own thing and hope someone other than you likes it. It's better than putting on a fancy-dress of grooviness which any teenager will see through instantly.

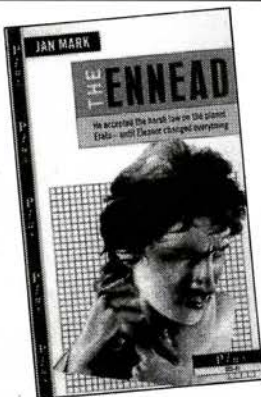
I'd love to start a correspondence. Perhaps BfK should allow a page for readers to send in their favourite 'rubbishy' reads. I'll start by nominating the **Whiteoak** books by Mazo de la Roche. There are volumes of them, and they are a saga and a soap opera and, in my memory, wonderful. I haven't dared to re-read these books in case the magic has faded, but I was spellbound at fourteen. Finally, here are twenty English-writing novelists in alphabetical order (leaving out the ones I've already mentioned) to

tempt adults, both young and old, and anyone who doubts the existence of the good book for teenagers: Vivien Alcock, Judy Blume (yes), Betsy Byars, Anne Fine, Paula Fox, S E Hinton, Janni Howker, Mollie Hunter, Diana Wynne Jones, Robert Leeson, Penelope Lively, Margaret Mahy, Jan Mark, Zibby O'Neal, Katherine Paterson, Alison Prince, Jean Ure, Cynthia Voight, Robert Westall, Jacqueline Wilson.

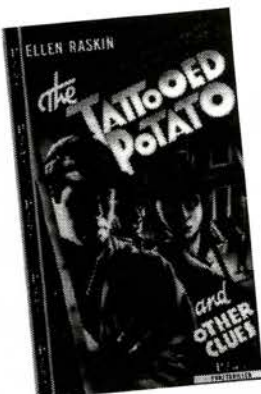
Lists are great fun to compile. They are also hell. Look at who I've had to leave out: Berlie Doherty, Dennis Hamley, Deborah Hautzig, Jan Needle, Paul Zindel . . . stop, stop! But do you see *how many* there are?



Adele Geras is herself a much-acclaimed author of . . . well, amongst other stories, fiction for teenagers (of all ages). Her latest publication is a collection of love stories called **Daydreams on Video** published under the Lightning imprint by Hodder & Stoughton (0 340 51255 5, £2.50 pbk).



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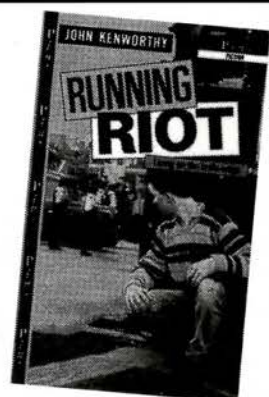
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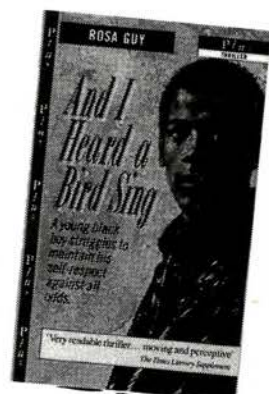
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BOOKS FOR KEEPS NEWS

FEDERATION OF CHILDREN'S BOOK GROUPS

STORY AID 1990

Trust the Federation of Children's Book Groups to come up with the year's major book-ish initiative – based on the premiss that 'Feed the mind' should be as important as 'Feed the body'. 1990 being International Literacy Year, the Federation has devised a number of enterprises:

February 1990

Launch of two competitions:

1. To name the Story Aid Bookworm (see logo).
2. To write a story.

Prizes include holidays to Asterix Parc in Paris and £3,000 of books.

April 1990

Publication of the third Federation Anthology, **Stories Round the World** (Hodder & Stoughton). All stories in the book have been tested internationally by more than 21,000 children.

21st June 1990

Story Aid Carnival Day . . . in Glasgow and London. School-children are invited to come in national costume or dressed as their favourite book/TV character to meet authors and TV personalities.

Throughout 1990 . . .

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

For details of all the above, along with suggestions for activities in *your* locality, contact (enclosing sae) Thelma Simpson, Project Director: Story Aid, 34 Hopetoun Place, Kirkcaldy, Scotland, KY2 6TY.

The ultimate goal of all this? Stunningly simple . . . literacy for all by the year 2000!

Books for Students Buy-out

Sometimes history repeats itself . . . and sometimes it comes full-circle. Books for Students, specialist supplier of paperback books to schools and libraries since the mid-sixties, are now independent again. Last November they parted company with W H Smith plc, who took them over in the early eighties, in a management buy-out which they say 'will enable us

to continue the development of our base interest while expanding into new markets, including children's hardbacks, both at home and abroad.' Well, let's hope so. In the conglomerating, and perhaps recession-bent, nineties, the success of independent companies in the children's book world is something we can all root for.

IN OUR MARCH ISSUE . . .

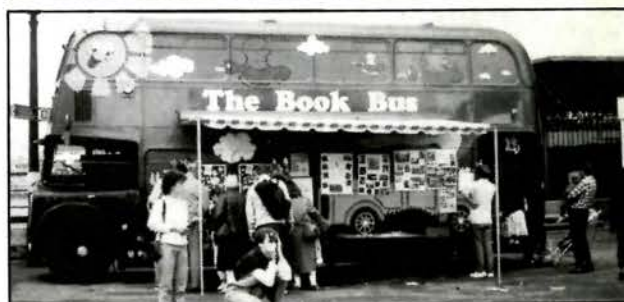
- Rose Impey on Fear in Children's Books
- Hazel Townson on enticing Reluctant Readers
- Geri Barnden on the Set Up and Follow Up to an Author Visit
- Jill Bennett on the latest in the Real Books debate
- The Best Information Books of 1989
- Kit Wright in Authorgraph

. . . plus reviews, reviews, reviews.



POSTER POINTS

Six full-colour posters, A2 size, showing children and books in a variety of surroundings . . . for £14 including VAT? Sounds like a good deal to us. It's a new venture by Youth Libraries Group Publications – beginning with infants, but extending eventually through the full age-range. The first set is now available from Remploy Ltd, London Road, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffs ST5 1RX. For details of what's to come, though, 'phone Keith Barker, YLG Publications Officer on 021-472-7245, Ext. 217.



Book Bus Re-routing

The Greenwich Book Bus is at the crossroads. And it's looking to take new people on board. The Book Bus has been on the road since 1981. And since then, apart from providing an endless supply of bad journalistic puns, it has made well over a thousand visits to schools and libraries, bringing some of the magic of books to an estimated quarter of a million children.

The formula is a simple one: bringing books into the playground on a double-decker with *highly qualified, enthusiastic staff in charge*. Extra ingredients are regularly added, including literally hundreds of author visits as well as writing projects and specially made videos.

But, after nine years, the directors of the charity which runs the bus are pressing for a change. 'We feel that the time has come for a new approach,' says Bob Cattell, who has been involved with the project from the outset. 'The Bookbus is more popular with schools than it has ever been, but we feel that we are beginning to generate fewer new ideas. To keep the bus on the road into the nineties, we need to open new routes and have fresh hands at the wheel.'

So, the current directors (including author, Bernard Ashley and local teachers) are planning to step down next year, once a new management team is in place. Those with ideas and enthusiasm should contact Bob Cattell, 63 Albion Road, London N16 9PP.