



CYNTHIA VOIGT
TRIBUTE TO ROALD DAHL
GOLDEN RULES FOR CRITICS
THE BEST PAPERBACK
FICTION '90

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's book
magazine

January 1991 No. 66 UK Price £1.70

MEMO: To all Books for Keeps readers...
COMING IN APRIL 1991



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 Introduction by Jonathon Porritt Price £6.50

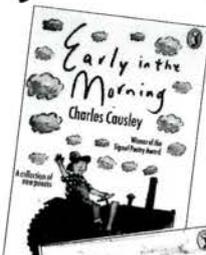
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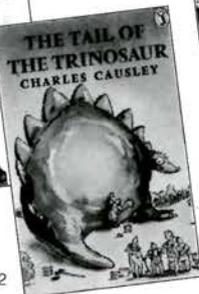
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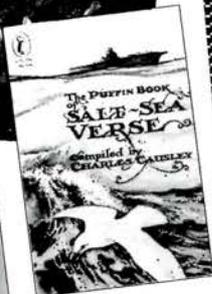
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Cover story

The illustration on the front of **BfK** this month is the cover of **Seventeen Against the Dealer** by Cynthia Voigt (see Authorgraph on page 12 for details).

The book is published by Collins and we thank them for their help in using this illustration.

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's book magazine
JANUARY 1991 No. 66

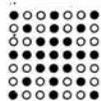
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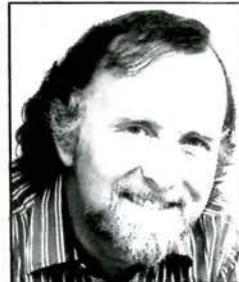


The British Council



Books for Keeps, the independent children's book magazine, incorporating **British Book News** **Children's Books** is published in association with **The British Council** six times a year. **BfK** is sponsored by **BFC**.

EDITOR'S PAGE



The backbone of **BfK**, as every regular reader knows, is reviewing – paperbacks mostly, but with an increasing coverage of hardbacks, too. In our last issue alone we mentioned over 170 works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry which suggests assessment of more than a thousand titles during the course of a typical **BfK** year. Divide this into our current subscription rate and it works out at less than a penny a review . . . with our thirty or forty feature articles, plus news items, thrown in for free.

Good value?

That depends, of course, on the quality of the reviewing. In this issue we take a look at what, and who, is involved. On pages 18-21 our fiction reviewing-team is given a rare treat: a chance to pick their overall favourite from the books they encountered last year and to write it up again at three times the length of their original notice. Also we give details of the team itself – every member being actively engaged with children as well as books. Many of them have been committed **BfK** contributors for years, sometimes taking on feature – writing as well – as does Adrian Jackson in this issue with his article about the Australian novelist, Gillian Rubinstein, on page 17, and David Bennett on our centre-pages with his Authorgraph of Cynthia Voigt. Altogether, we think they're a seasoned and shrewd bunch who are well-attuned to the needs and interests of our readership.

Their job isn't easy, though. Broadly, in **BfK**, we review *positively* – that is, we focus attention on the more successful books that come our way since the vast bulk of the 5,000 or so books for children published annually are bound to be not much better than all right. Even a mention by us should be something of a recommendation, we feel, a reinforcement of the reading habit. This said, hard words can't be dispensed with entirely nor do we shrink from them. See page 16, for example, where our non-fiction editor Eleanor von Schweinitz takes a beady-eyed look at some of the temptations of series publishing. And see our review pages generally for glinty reminders that even the best books on offer are seldom a total triumph. Nonetheless, what we do reject is the notion that the only way to Uphold Standards is to write a knocking-piece or the sort of sniffy notice that's designed mainly to communicate the superiority of reviewer over reviewed. The former, after all, have one big advantage

over the latter: the page they start with isn't *blank*.

Which is not to say, alas, that **BfK** always gets it right. Who could possibly claim this? When we asked Bob Leeson for his Ten Golden Rules for critics, and Jean Ure to respond to them in terms of her own experience as a writer (pages 4-5), we were uneasily aware that some of the bad practice they identified might apply to us as well. But not too often, we hope.

Roald Dahl

About one children's writer, though, our conscience is pretty clear. No author this century has got more critical knickers in a twist than Roald Dahl. Has anyone exposed more completely the sheer *narrowness* of so much children's book reviewing? His refusal to restrict himself to the sort of children's fiction that *adults* tend to prefer – 'permanently updating *The Wind in the Willows*' as he once sardonically put it – helped incorporate farce, satire and knockabout comedy into writing for youngsters and, of course, they loved it. With a few honourable exceptions, the grown-ups took much longer to cotton on. As a farewell tribute to this storytelling magician, we're reprinting an article from November 1981's **BfK** which was one of the first to suggest the children's estimate might have been right all along.

Bookquest

November also saw the last of **Bookquest**, the reviewing journal based at Brighton Polytechnic. Founded in 1976 and edited successively by Ron Hardie, Trevor Harvey and, for the last two years, by Brian Moses, **Bookquest** at its height had a circulation of more than 2,500 and promoted five national conferences along with a number of imaginative competitions all in pursuit of 'a positive attitude towards children's enjoyment in reading'. Volume 13, Number 3 was the final issue, though, as a result of the uncertainty brought about by LMS funding. It's a sad end to a publication which deserves the thanks and congratulations of everyone in the children's book world.

Nonsense Song-writing

Illustrations from **Okki-Tokki-Unga**.



. . . speaking of imaginative competitions, A & C Black have teamed up with **Books for Keeps** to launch the perfect antidote to new-year classroom blues. What about devising a nonsense title along the lines of 'Apusskidu' and 'Okki-Tokki-Unga', writing the song to go with it, designing the nonsense-book cover and offering all three to Michael Rosen who's compiling A & C Black's latest book of silly songs? For full details, see the flyer that comes with this issue . . . but with a first prize of £350 (or the same value of A & C Black poetry and songbooks) plus two years' free subscription to **BfK**, not to mention generous runners-up prizes, who can resist? Think of the bullseyes to be scored on all those National Curriculum Attainment Targets!

Entries by 29th March 1991 please to: A & C Black Songbook Competition, 35 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4JH. Michael Rosen is standing by for the avalanche.

We hope to print the winning entries in **BfK**'s May issue.

Have a wonderful, readerly '91.

TEN GOLDEN RULES

for Critics of Children's Books Robert Leeson

I was a critic before I was a published writer and can say truthfully that one reason why I began to write children's books was a critical dissatisfaction with existing output.

So I know the game from both sides and, in 25 years as a literary editor, I often acted as umpire. During those years I worked out Ten Golden Rules for reviewers . . . because it turns out that what annoys the author often bothers the editor. And a well-made review ought to help and please the author, too.

Here they are:

1. Don't skim read – a critic's vice. Read to enjoy.
2. Know the publishing history of author and book, or try to find out.
3. Do not say 'I could do better', or worse 'anyone can write this stuff', unless you have tried.
4. Beware of using your review to show you know more than the author.
5. Beware of taking against a book, then rationalising a personal dislike into objective criticism by nit-picking.
6. Beware of making statements about what is in the book which you cannot back up if challenged.
7. Don't review too many titles at a time, even if round about Christmas time the Literary Editor becomes desperate.
8. If reviewing several books, you may look for a common theme. This makes for an interesting review. But recognise when the theme wears thin and don't fit books into an argumentative framework where they don't belong.
9. Don't make gratuitous attacks on the style of the book when what you dislike is its content.
10. Write usefully first and foremost – to inform is the first function of a review. Let wit follow wisdom.

And, I might add an eleventh rule – if you aren't ready to sign the review, don't attack the book.

Follow all these rules and you'll be at peace with yourself. It won't guarantee that all the authors will love you. Some of them are quite unreasonable . . .



Robert Leeson has written many books for children of all ages. Among them are **Slambash Wangs of a Compo Gormer**, **It's My Life** and its sequel **Jan Alone** for older readers. Among those for younger readers are **Wheel of Danger** and **The Reversible Giant**. His latest publication, **A Right Royal Kidnap**, is at this younger level and was published in October by A & C Black.



Details of Jean Ure's two books mentioned in this piece are **A Proper Little Nooryeff** (Penguin Plus, 0 14 03.2656 1, £2.50) and **You Win Some, You Lose Some** (Corgi, 0 552 524662, £1.95).

Her two latest titles are **Jo in the Middle** from Hutchinson (0 09 173600 5, £7.95) and **Cool Simon** from Orchard (1 85213 186 1, £8.95; 1 85213 213 2, £4.95 pbk).

Some More Golden Rules

Are these notes enough? And how do they work out in practice? For a personal comment **BfK** went to a children's author who's had more experience than most of being on the receiving end:

Jean Ure

I heartily endorse all ten of Bob Leeson's Golden Rules, but would like to amplify one or two and add a couple more to the list. If I use reviews of my own books to illustrate my points, this is simply because I tend to read my own reviews with a more jaundiced attention than I do other people's. I don't think I can be alone in this . . .

Golden Rule No. 10: 'Write usefully first and foremost'. Yes, most certainly – but that doesn't mean do a re-write of the blurb and call it a review! This is a particularly annoying habit. Expound the plot by all means, but unless there's a critical summing up or expression of opinion this doesn't qualify as a review.

Golden Rule No. 6: Not only 'beware of making statements about what is in the book which you cannot back up if challenged' but *don't make authoritative pronouncements if you're not prepared (or haven't the space) to back them up at the time.*

Here I speak from recent experience: the wound is still raw! I had a review which was truly excellent (in other words, *favourable*), fulfilling all the reviewing criteria that even the most demanding of authors could lay down – until it came to the punchline. The punchline was:

'If only Ms Ure had a literary style to match her insight she would be right up in the first ranks of writers for the YA.'

Now, I accept that it's any reviewer's right to find fault. What I do not accept is that it's a reviewer's right to cast a slur on a writer's style (by which very largely hangs or falls a writer's reputation) without giving at least some examples by way of justification. Reviewers are not there to play God. We all *know* opinions are only personal opinions, but personal opinions can be devastating, and I take it as no part of a reviewer's brief to devastate, certainly not without good and demonstrated cause.

Golden Rule No. 3: Under the heading of reviewers' claims to being able to do better than the author under review, I'd instance the following: *'a brilliant and powerful book in many ways – but I'm glad it's not my name on it.'* This, by implication, is saying that the reviewer is every bit as capable as the author of writing a brilliant and powerful book – and so indeed he may be, but is it seemly so to puff himself up whilst reviewing another writer's work?

Two other Golden Rules which I find difficult to encapsulate but feel I must attempt . . .

Extra Golden Rule (i): Don't be dogmatic. By this I mean, don't put forward what is essentially your own reading of the work as if it's a statement of fact, e.g. *'Comprehensive school teachers might like to read this book, because it has been carefully thought out with their needs in mind.'*

Oh? Who says so? The reviewer says so! But what right has a reviewer to make any such assertion? Reviewers should stick to reviewing and not make unwarranted assumptions.

Finally, Extra Golden Rule (ii): Don't review a book solely in terms of your own ideology. This is perhaps a refinement of Bob's Golden Rule No. 5. I include it as a separate issue only because I've noticed a growing tendency for people with axes to grind, albeit perfectly good and respectable axes, to lose all sense of perspective.

When writing books I do not consciously consider that I must take care not to offend any of the currently accepted canons. I am, after all, writing novels, not polemics. My own philosophy of life will inescapably come across, and this, I believe, is as it should be.

I recently learnt, however, from the US **Interracial Bulletin**, that my philosophy as perceived in a light-hearted book called **A Proper Little Nooryeff**, is shot through with 'subtle bigotry' . . . *'For instance, Jamie is convinced to help with the ballet show not because of the artistic value of ballet (oh, boy!) nor even because of the exercise he would get (But, Jamie, think of the exercise!) but because the show's proceeds will go to persons with disabilities. (Bad, bad, bad!) More specifically, the money will go to Fairfield, a segregated (no, they don't mean racially) institution where his cousin resides . . . it is never mentioned that the money would be more appropriately raised for a program which encourages mainstreaming, employment, accessible recreation or independent living.'*

Along the way, with almost total disregard for any other qualities the book may have, I'm also taken to task for classism, sexism, remedialism and sissyism . . . *'The greatest failure of the book is its finale. The fact that Jamie has survived the ridicule of ruffians doesn't convince him to pursue his talent openly and with pride. In the end, he worries only about how he will face his sex-polluted slob of a best-friend, Doug. Does Jamie fear that Doug will think him a sissy, or perhaps worse, gay?'*

Yes! Yes! Yes! He does! *Imagine . . . the horror of it!*

We come here to the age-old question . . . is one delivering political messages or is one writing books about people living in the real world? The standard retort, of course, is that OK, in the real world people *might* be classist, sexist, racist, genderist, sissyist, homophobe, but we, the right-minded ones, are trying to change all that. Should we therefore be including such wrong-thinking characters in our books?

My answer is a very firm yes, we should – but not without making it very clear where we personally stand on such issues, which is precisely what I did in **Nooryeff**. Unfortunately, the most well-meaning and high-minded of people, such as I'd suppose the reviewer for **Interracial Bulletin** to be, can be as raddled with prejudice as any blimp. If I had space I could refute every one of the charges made against **Nooryeff** save for the handicapism, to which I plead guilty. But let us think . . . how could I have handled it?

Anita: But, Jamie, it's for charity! It's for *Fairfield*.

Jamie: Sod *Fairfield*. The money would be more appropriately raised for a program to encourage mainstreaming, employment, accessible recreation or independent living.

Anita: Oh, Jamie, you're so right! We should not be supporting these segregated institutions for people suffering from cerebral palsy.

Jamie: Now that you've seen the light, I will dance for you.

Anita: Oh, *Jamie!*

See what I mean?

The question inevitably arises: how much notice should a writer take of reviews?

I don't feel inclined to lay down rules about this. There are writers who claim – indeed, I know one personally – to be totally incurious about their reviews and pretty well impervious to either praise or criticism. I find this difficult to comprehend, but who shall doubt that this is their right? For myself I readily confess to being made of weaker stuff. After twenty-odd years as a professional writer I still remain naively eager to hear other people's opinions of my work. I *care* what my readers think – and my readers include my reviewers. I am made happy by good reviews, cast down by bad ones; not, after all these years, to any incapacitating degree, but sufficient for me to take note of what reviewers say . . . usually.

For instance, I largely (largely but not *entirely*) dismissed the above-mentioned **Nooryeff** review on the grounds that it came from the standpoint of ideology rather than literature.

On the one occasion when I did take criticism to heart, it rather rebounded on me. This was when I allowed myself to be riled by a scathing review of **Nooryeff** in the then **Gay News** (ideology again) in which it was somewhat irritably suggested that the book would have been far more interesting had I made my *'butch, attractive, muscly, fantastically gifted, sexy ballet dancer'* gay. Now, I had originally toyed with this idea, but dismissed it as being too much of a stereotype: **Gay News** made me wonder whether perhaps a straight ballet dancer was a stereotype? Thus, in the original draft of the sequel, I did the next best thing and made my fantastic, etc., hero bi-sexual. Unfortunately, there was such an outcry at my publishers – 'Not *Jamie!*' they wailed – that I was forced to listen to editorial pleadings and have a re-think: my hero reverted to being madly butch.

Gay News had, I think, folded by this time, so I never got a second scathing review, which I should have enjoyed; instead I received a panic-stricken letter from my US editor saying that the ending of the book would have to be changed or they would be inundated with hate mail from the gay lobby. (The sequel, by the by, was rather aptly named **You Win Some, You Lose Some . . .**)

So have I learnt *nothing* from reviews during my ten years as a children's writer? I've learnt what sort of books win prizes, what sort of books reviewers wet their knickers over, what sort of books put their hackles up, what sort of subjects throw them into a state of uncritical swoon – but as regards my own personal writing, I'm afraid the answer has to be no; not a lot. Perhaps I'm asking more of reviewers than they feel able (for a whole variety of reasons, space and economics not least among them) to give. But then this entire article has been intended as a plea for both *more* reviewing and more *critically informed* reviewing, which must surely be in the best interests of us all . . . isn't it? ●

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



Ten in the Bed

Penny Dale, Walker (Sept 90), 0 7445 1340 5, £3.99

Penny Dale entices us into a twilight, timeless world with subtle illustrations and a charming version of the old song. A wonderful gift for any young child – my review copy is slightly crumpled, very dog-cared and has been read countless times, pored over and talked about, tearfully lost and joyfully found, slept with but, above all, treasured by my three-year-old! JS

Mr Nick's Knitting

Margaret Wild, ill. Dee Huxley, Picture Knight (Oct 90), 0 340 53234 3, £2.99

A really satisfying book, beautifully crafted with deceptively spare text and sumptuous illustrations



producing a dazzling description of the friendship between two elderly train commuters who share a love of knitting. JS

One Day, Janie!

Dee Shulman, Picture Puffin (Oct 90), 0 14 054.057 1, £2.99

One day disaster-prone Janie will be able to do all the things her big sister can do, but it doesn't happen on her third birthday! Great fun – perfect for any child of around this age! JS

Just Like Jasper

Nick Butterworth and Mick Inkpen, Picture Knight (Nov 90), 0 340 52582 7, £2.99

A lovely, shiny, square book with very good one-page pictures and large clear text about Jasper the cat who visits a toy shop to spend his pocket money. The possibilities include a ball, a clockwork mouse, a noisy drum, some bubbles, a car or a doll – but the satisfactory choice is a cat 'just like Jasper'. Very much recommended for its clarity and boldness. MS

Jonah and the Whale

Marcia Williams, Walker (Sept 90), 0 7445 1735 4, £2.99

The same author/artist has

recently produced *The Amazing Story of Noah's Ark* in very similar format. Sticking closely to the Bible story, but in modernised language, the tale is told on pages decorated and filled with colourful pictures which work in a similar way to comic strips.

Entertaining, attractive and having integrity, this will be a welcome addition to the infant collection of folk tales. LW

Bears in Pairs

Niki Yektai, ill. Diane de Groat, Picture Puffin (Oct 90), 0 14 050.864 3, £2.99

Finding out about words and their meanings, categorising and enjoying books are necessary skills for young children if their language and communication are to progress, and here's a book to help with all that. It's a fast-moving parade of bears in every shape and form . . . 'Black bear, brown bear, up bear, down bear, white bear, green bear, King Bear, Queen Bear' . . . and so on. A delightful addition to any library and Picture Puffin at its best. MS

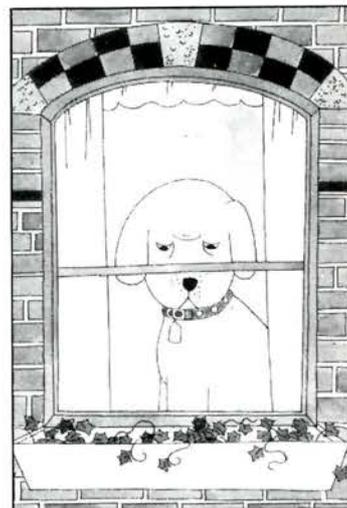
Play Rhymes

Collected by Marc Brown, Picture Lions (Sept 90), 0 00 663754 X, £2.99

A generous collection of rhymes, with actions, for use at home or school. A pleasant reminder of old favourites like 'Do Your Ears Hang Low?' and 'The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round', plus some less familiar like the action song that invites us to hop like a frog or rabbit and walk like a duck. Included also is 'The Noble Duke of York' – who's usually 'Grand' where I come from, but I don't suppose that will spoil the enjoyment! A worthwhile book for 3-6 year-olds and their grown-ups. MS

Hugo at the Window

Anne Rockwell, Picture Knight (Oct 90), 0 340 52578 9, £2.99



A pleasing story about Hugo, the dog, and what he sees from his window while waiting all day for his friend to come back. The listening child is drawn into the anticipation of this and so looks carefully at every page to see if the person is there. A good book for finding new words and topics for conversation. MS

The Lady with the Alligator Purse

Adapted and illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott, Little Mammoth (Jul 90), 0 7497 0274 5, £2.50

A nonsense poem familiar to most of us . . . 'Miss Lucy had a baby, his name was Tiny Tim. She put him in the bath tub to see if he could swim . . .' The pictures help the words speed along and many children will find this a book to laugh over as they master their reading skills. Great fun. MS

Infant/Junior



Kitten Day

Jan Ormerod, Walker (Aug 90), 0 7445 1718 4, £2.99

A warm, attractive and pleasing story told in pictures about a girl and her new kitten. Probably meant for small children, this book might be best used on a one-to-one basis as the

storyline could need explanation to those not yet aware of the reading order – the number of pictures per page could, possibly, cause confusion. MS

I Don't Like It!

Ruth Brown, Red Fox (Oct 90), 0 09 970240 1, £2.99

Any book by Ruth Brown is a visual treat and this is undoubtedly that. Beautiful, richly-coloured toys adorn the pages and the story, told in rhyme, is about a doll's anxiety and jealousy when a puppy comes to stay and seems to take over the affection of her owner. All ends satisfactorily, though, for after a gambol with the puppy she's finally

tucked up in bed with the little girl. A delightful book and one which might, indirectly, help some bruised feelings at the arrival of a new baby. MS

Princess Beatrice and the Rotten Robber

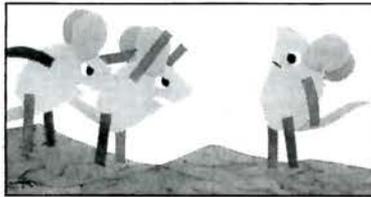
Elizabeth Honey, Picture Puffin (Oct 90), 0 14 054.149 7, £2.99

A jolly, romp of a book and a must for any aspiring young princess. Princess Beatrice loves dressing up – especially in her mother's jewels, but she's far from a pea-brain as she proves most ably when she's kidnapped for her 'glittering goodies'. JS

Over the Steamy Swamp

Paul Geraghty, Red Fox (Oct 90), 0 09 962830 9, £3.99

An old theme – a mosquito is too tired to notice a predatory dragonfly who is too hungry to notice a nearby frog and so on . . . There's a luminous quality to the illustrations and a lovely twist to the ending which left us all with very satisfied smiles. JS



Nicolas, Where Have You Been?

Leo Lionni, Picture Knight (Oct 90), 0 340 50414 5, £2.99

This fable focuses on the age-old rivalry between the mice and the birds. It illustrates the need to make an effort to understand others and the dangers of leaping to conclusions based on misconceptions. Leo Lionni has created a very special niche in children's literature. Once again the keystones of this book are his gentle wisdom, superb artistry and the way he never pulls his punches but challenges us, whatever our age or experience, to think and question. JS



To find a collection of stories to read aloud of such a uniform high quality yet still representing a good mix of type and style is rare. This will surely become every teacher's standby and deserves a special place as one of those books that enriches us all and will later bring back cosy memories of childhood to a new generation. JS

Herbert and Harry

Pamela Allen, Picture Puffin (Aug 90), 0 14 050.970 4, £2.50

Powerful illustrations hammer home a strong message about values. Two brothers who live and work happily together discover a treasure chest. Herbert runs away with it determined to keep it for himself and goes to ever greater lengths to protect the treasure from all comers. At the end of their lives we look back to see who discovered the true 'treasure'. JS

The Tin Dog

Alexander McCall Smith, Young Corgi (Sept 90), 0 552 52607 X, £1.99

Tim lives with his neat and tidy Aunt May, but it's at his Uncle George's anything but tidy house that he likes to spend his time. Then, when Uncle George makes him a tin dog all of his own, it's the start of some interesting situations and adventures culminating in joining up with a circus. An unusual story for readers who are just beyond the first stages of independence. JB

Junior/Middle

The Secret in Miranda's Wardrobe

Sheila Greenwall, ill. Maureen Bradley, Puffin (Aug 90), 0 14 03.2856 4, £2.50

Superficially Miranda and her mother appear to be opposites. Mum is popular, extrovert and rather selfish; daughter is vulnerable, unpopular and unhappy. They both share an inner strength, however, and it's this that Miranda draws upon.



A lovely antique doll with a steamer trunk full of clothes comes Miranda's way and she's instantly enraptured, caught and lost forever in a secret world of fantasy. A sensitive, yet funny book tracing lightly the delicately balanced rapport between mother and daughter. Miranda, finding her confidence and growing emotionally, succeeds in being herself against powerful opposition! PH

When Hippo was Hairy and other Tales from Africa

Nick Greaves, ill. Rod Clement, Lutterworth (Oct 90), 0 7188 2822 4, £7.95

More expensive than the usual titles we review in these pages, but worth every penny of the price.

A handsome book presenting 37 short, vivid stories about the animals of Africa based on traditional folk tales. There are also fact pages about many of the animals, including maps of Africa and information about threats to the species' survival. These inserts are attractively presented and compelling and they do not in any way detract from the fascination of the stories. A wealth of beautiful illustration adds to the charm of a book which my class finds irresistible. GH

The White Horse is Running

Fay Sampson, Lion Publishing (Aug 90), 0 7459 1915 4, £2.50

This is the sixth of Fay Sampson's Celtic series. The newly-crowned young queen Finnglas returns to the Summer Isle to find war imminent; her uncle Manach has released the white colt, and wherever the colt sets hoof must be claimed for the kingdom. A struggle ensues between good and evil – but it's not always clear which is

which. Strong descriptive writing, fast-paced action and traditional Celtic elements combine to produce evocative magic. LN

Alexander and the Tooth of Zaza

Dick Cate, ill. Scoular Anderson, Firefly (Oct 90), 0 333 49272 2, £2.99

There's a super sense of over-the-top fun and silliness in this witty tale. I'd love to have a junior class to read it aloud to and show-off a bit!

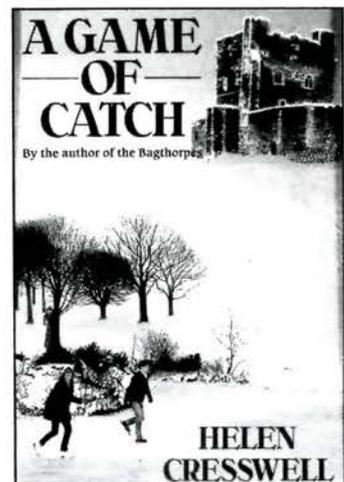
Our hero, Alex, is confronted with two main dilemmas: Eric Polecat – '... seven feet fall. He has the arms of a gorilla and the mind of a demented elephant', and Archie Poulton, who bursts through doors – 'like a bull looking for something to gore'. For the love of Zaza, Alex hits on a solution to end both dilemmas in one tooth-jarring climax. DB

British and Irish Folk Tales

Kevin Crossley-Holland, Orchard (Oct 90), 1 85213 265 5, £2.99

Twenty-two stories of varying length are included in this quality production. 'The Lambton Worm', 'The Wise Men of Gotham' and 'The Frog Prince' make an expected appearance, but there are some unexpected gems like 'King of the Cats' and 'Monday, Tuesday'.

Crossley-Holland's direct approach to story-telling makes the collection very accessible to youngsters, but they might need a bit of a prod to get them going. Folklore material of this quality deserves a higher profile in the classroom. DB



A Game of Catch

Helen Cresswell, Red Fox (Oct 90), 0 09 975260 3, £2.50

Are the two late eighteenth-century children who play ball in the picture leaving their gilt frame to enter into the games of catch played by modern-day Kate and Hugh? On the other hand, it might be a figment of Kate's vivid imagination . . .

A short, gentle, very English read, which coaxes the reader along to the twist at the end. DB

Middle/Secondary

Jean Van Leeuwen

*Dear Mum,
You're Ruining
My Life*



Dear Mum, You're Ruining My Life

Jean Van Leeuwen, Firefly (Sept 90), 0 333 53347 X, £4.50

Samantha Slayton's teenage angst makes this a tale with which youngsters should easily identify. Not much happens except everyday life. However, from her point of view, her height, her clothes, her friendships, her parents, her brother, her elevation to the gifted children group and just about all else is the cause for worry. The useful lesson at the end of this hugely readable tale is that things usually come out well in the end, even for the girl the boys call 'The Empire State Building'. DB

Goggle-eyes

Anne Fine, Puffin (Aug 90), 0 14 03.4071 8, £2.50



Anne Fine's delightful story of a pair of schoolgirls, each coming to terms with their mother's new boyfriend, won the 1990 Guardian and Carnegie Awards. Goggle-eyes is at first seen as a dull, unimaginative bigot, but

gradually Kitty, the main character, realises that he too has qualities to be valued. The book's engaging, humorous first-person narrative will endear it to young readers, while the focus on the adult relationship and the difficulties of standing up for firmly-held beliefs give it wider appeal. LN

The Mad Parrot's Countdown

John Mole, ill. Mary Norman, Peterloo Poets (May 90), 1 871471 13 3, £4.95

A varied collection of poems both in subject matter and difficulty, ranging from the roll-around-on-the-floor hilarity kind to those that provoked thought and were more serious. I loved 'A Painting Lesson' where young Benjamin Mole offers a few hints to Toulouse Lautrec. The 'Pig Songs' were more difficult with their nursery rhyme rhythm, but having 'tuned in' they were clever and funny. My favourite was 'A Ghost Story' - a brilliantly unnerving description of coming home to an empty house. Really finger-tingling reading. PH

Kick-off

Hannah Cole, ill. Iain McCraig, Walker (Sept 90), 0 7445 1749 4, £2.99

Shazia and Paula love football and play whenever they have the time. However, to get into the school team the girls know their biggest problem will be to convince Mr Crendon, the PE teacher, that they can play as well as the boys.

Kick-off challenges our preconceptions, yet the sexist issues it confronts are well-integrated into an exciting, very readable and fast-moving story. An especially telling moment comes when the girls overhear what the boys really think of them. Not just for the football enthusiast - this is a splendid read for everyone. PH

You Can Be Spurs

Chris Ashley, ill. John Dillow, Walker (Sept 90), 0 7445 1748 6, £2.99

David and Mick Taylor play Subbuteo after school every Friday night. Happy to play together, they enjoy it all the more when Dad is there to give a 'real life' commentary. One Friday night Dad arrives late and things feel different. Although the boys are aware of the tension, they can't anticipate how it will disintegrate their lives or what it will take to bring them, unexpectedly, all together again.

Common everyday events are seen in a fresh light, reminding us again and again that it's the small things in our lives that are the most precious. PH

Truckers

Terry Pratchett, Corgi (Sept 90), 0 552 52595 2, £2.99

We meet the tiny nomes in this first of a trilogy which echoes **Watership Down** as they embark on an odyssey to find a new home. A group escape the harshness of the wild and find themselves in a department store inhabited by more worldly nomes. Their knowledge of human life is gleaned from signs: there's no 'outside' world because it says 'Everything Under One Roof'. When they leave ('Everything Must Go'), a whole team of them co-ordinating the steering of a lorry, they see a sign saying 'Road Works Ahead': "Why say it? I mean you could understand 'Road Doesn't Work Ahead'. Why tell us it works?" How's this for Knowledge about Language? Sets for groups at least. AJ

Ludie's Song

Dirlie Herlihy, Puffin (Aug 90), 0 14 03.4126 9, £2.50

Marty, on holiday in Georgia, learns difficult and unpalatable truths about the treatment of negroes when trying to maintain a friendship with a disfigured negro girl. Marty is kidnapped along with Ludie's brother whom she's seen being beaten - and all because white boys suspect him of being the object of Marty's affections. The viciousness of the attitudes and actions is powerfully detailed, but the historical setting of the story, in the America of the fifties, is only briefly suggested. Any book that has 'nigger' on its opening page may be difficult to sustain, despite working so hard to be on the side of the angels. AJ

Tales from the Early Days

Ted Hughes, Faber (Oct 90), 0 571 14478 0, £1.99

Hughes presents an engaging picture of God as a kind of talented hooligan, creating bizarre animals at will and attempting to control his wayward mother. This collection of short stories builds on the style and success of **How the Whale Became** and explains the existence of creatures as diverse as the peacock and the parrot.

Upper Junior/Lower Secondary pupils will love these poetic - often hilarious - stories. Buy a set and read them aloud! VR

Uncle Jack and Operation Green

Jim Eldridge, Red Fox (Oct 90), 0 09 979140 4, £2.50

This has all the ingredients of the daft spy adventure story plus some more modern ecological worthiness. With kidnappings, custard-pie fights and dirty goings-on at Gaschem, it may be popular light relief. Everything happens so fast that most readers will be carried along unless they stop to wonder what's funny. As a television series this may take on more life than the print alone manages. AJ

The Half Child

Kathleen Hersom, ill. Inga Moore, Simon & Schuster (Oct 90), 0 7500 0456 8, £2.99

Sarah is mentally handicapped, born in the seventeenth century when abnormalities were accredited to fairies or witches. When she suddenly disappears, most villagers assume she's been claimed by the fairies who brought her.



Lucy, her sister, narrates the story of Sarah's short and troubled life - written with quiet sincerity and convincing detail. The North of England setting affords a glimpse of Cromwell's Roundheads, but the majority of the book chronicles simple country life and the mixed blessings of Sarah's existence.

A brave book, with all proceeds to Mencap. Capable readers with compassionate hearts will enjoy this. VR

A Seal Upon My Heart

Pam Conrad, Penguin Plus (Aug), 0 14 03.4316 4, £2.99

Darcie, living with her aunt and uncle for the two months of her mother's honeymoon,

learns much about the nature of relationships.

The book's title is a pun, referring to her infatuation with Roman, the seal-man at

the zoo next to her uncle's restaurant. He charms her when she's depressed at the discovery of the truth about her real father. However

Roman, like her own history, is flawed and his desperation leads to his death and Darcie's realisation that love can be complex and wounding.

A book-box buy, perhaps, for third-year girls. VR

Older Readers



Make Your Move

James Watson, Lions (Sept 90), 0 00 673538 X, £2.75

An outstanding collection of nine short stories with immediate relevance for GCSE and a rich mine of gems for oral work. The title story is especially compelling, as are 'This Nothing Will Never End' and 'Choices'. All focus on the courage and strength of the individual in the face of a stubbornly blinkered authority and all are written with the grace and passion typical of Watson's work: the most obvious point of comparison is *Talking in Whispers*.

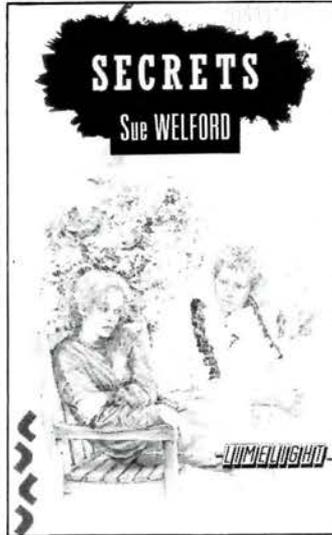
This would be an extremely rewarding acquisition as a class set for years 10 and 11. VR

The Dividing Sea

Ruth Elwin Harris, Walker (Sept 90), 0 7445 1757 5, £2.99

Julia Purcell takes centre stage in this third book of the Quantocks quartet, which spans 1910 to 1930. Her relationship with Geoffrey Mackenzie, son of her guardian, forms the core of the book, which is set largely in field hospitals in France where she volunteers to nurse. Harris's storytelling is low-key and the events in the book are important only for the perspective they give on the characters. Geoffrey's tragic death and Julia's subsequent marriage are soberly handled and Julia is given a level of introspection which wholly absorbs the reader.

Highly recommended for keen readers of 14 and above. VR



Secrets

Sue Welford, Macmillan Limelight (Aug 90), 0 333 53221 X, £4.50

It's worthy and readable without suggesting a great range of character or feeling. Jason's life is in full flight – he's passed exams, has a developing sex life and is about to buy his first car – when his younger sister starts behaving obsessively about food. The tensions of this and its effects on all the family are thoughtfully woven together, although the neatness of the 'solution' will disappoint those for whom anorexia is more frustratingly inexplicable. AJ

All About Jas

Millie Murray, Hodder & Stoughton Gold Books (Oct 90), 0 340 53489 3, £2.50

'Under the pressures of my mum being in hospital and living with these religious fanatics, what will keep me from the delicate line over into insanity?' Jasmine gets seriously muddled when, because she's black, she's fostered into a mixed-marriage family of Christians. Her own prejudices soon start to show and the situation becomes brittle to the point of total breakdown.

The sharp, contemporary language, romantic interest, rapping element and lively cover can't conceal that this is intended principally to be a Christian-orientated book, which might lead to instant rejection by some readers – another prejudice in itself! DB

Seventeen Against the Dealer

Cynthia Voigt, Collins (Jun 90), 0 00 184784 8, £5.95

Positively the last in the Tillerman sequence. Cynthia Voigt returns to Dicey, now a college drop-out, who's determined to make it on her own as a boat builder. It's her single-minded determination that causes the conflict; because of it, she can't see that she's neglecting her boyfriend, Jeff, and that Gram is on the verge of a near-fatal illness. Then she takes on board a wanderer named Cisco, who has much to teach her, but at a price!

Cynthia Voigt writes with as much insight as ever and, as is to be expected, this is a demanding novel for experienced readers. DB

The Arm of the Starfish

Madeleine L'Engle, Hodder & Stoughton Gold Books (Oct 90), 0 340 51750 6, £2.50

It's always a revelation to see how attitudes have changed as books from earlier times are reprinted (mid-sixties in this case). While the action and plotting don't fail, the

The Arm of The Starfish

Madeleine L'Engle



characterisation seems embarrassingly dated, like some repeated television favourite whose acting conventions now seem wooden and unrealistic. Stylised extremes of intellect, goodness and beauty merge with awful sexual stereotyping. Nevertheless, it meets National Curriculum requirements at the highest level to move pupils towards writing for adults – in this case Dick Francis and Jeffrey Archer. AJ



The Last Children

Gudrun Pausewang, Walker (Aug 90), 0 7445 1750 8, £2.99

The story of the Bennewitz family and the courage and tenacity they summon up in order to cling to life centres mostly around Roland, the son, who tells his tale honestly and with increasing objectivity.

This nuclear holocaust novel has been, deservedly, a prize-winning best-seller in Europe and comes to us translated by Norman Watt. There is no glossing-over the supposed long-term consequences of a nuclear war, which makes this a bleak but gripping read. Check who you give it to, though. DB

FAREWELL TO THE BIG FRIENDLY GIANT

Last November, almost all our national newspapers noted the death of the world's most famous children's author – many of them with full-dress obituaries. Roald Dahl's reputation with adult critics, though, was always problematic. Eight years ago, before the many awards Dahl later went on to win, **BfK 17** (November 1982) included an article by our present Editor which suggested the children had been right all along. We're reprinting it now, unchanged, as a tribute to the man whose unswerving belief that books should be *fun* did so much to promote the reading habit. He'll be sorely missed.

ROALD DAHL

13th September 1916 – 23rd November 1990

Viewed in terms of his sales figures, Dahl himself is the Big Friendly Giant. Take **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, for example. According to Puffin's Barry Cunningham, this still sells in excess of 100,000 copies a year – some eighteen years after it was first published. Other Dahl books on the Puffin list, Cunningham says, have a similar standing as 'permanent children's classics'. He expects the most recent, **The Twits**, to have sold 200,000 copies by the end of its first year in paperback. No other Puffin author can match this. Not merely is Dahl 'at the very top of Division One', there's what Cunningham calls 'a quantum difference' between him and his closest rivals. Dahl's hardback publisher sits just as pretty. Rupert Lancaster estimates that **Revolting Rhymes** has done 'a good twenty times better than any other Cape children's author published this year' and for a comparable bestseller to **The BFG** it's likely he'll have to look to the new John Fowles on Cape's adult list.

Which is quite enough to make the rest of us gangrenous with envy. Personally, I'd love to console myself with that handy standby for all impoverished writerly-types: a Big Sale must equal a Bad Book. Unfortunately, this formula has a couple of snags. Firstly, in the immortal words of Ira Gershwin, 'it ain't necessarily so'. Secondly, it implies a massive dim-wittedness on the part of Dahl's young readers – the sort of dim-wittedness normally to be found only amongst persons who are too clever by half, such as adult critics. Consider, for instance, Eleanor Cameron who some while ago wrote thus on the subject of **Charlie in Children's Literature in Education 21**:

'What I object to is the book's tastelessness, expressed through its phoniness, its hypocrisy, its getting laughs through violent punishment . . . Dahl caters to the streak of sadism in children which they don't realise is there because they are not fully self-aware and are not experienced enough to know what sadism is.'

Mind you, Ms Cameron can still recognise a lost cause when she sees one. Resignedly, she sums up:

'We all know that children are going to get to **Charlie** eventually; why need we make a special effort to bring it to their attention? For what purpose?'

Her own special efforts, she tells us, are made on behalf of books which bring 'enlargement and illumination', namely the works of Philippa Pearce, Alan Garner, C S Lewis, Joan Aiken, Lucy Boston, Mary Norton, Nina Bawden, John Rowe Townsend, K M Peyton, Mollie Hunter, William Mayne, Penelope Farmer, Leon Garfield and Penelope Lively.

Now all these authors, let it be said, have come up with good quality stuff in their time. Yet two facts about the list will be obvious at once to any practising primary teacher – that it's pitched at a discernibly older age group than **Charlie** and that it consists of writers who for the most part and for the great bulk of children *presuppose an established reading habit*. It will be news only to Ms Cameron that teachers direct children's attention to Dahl for the very good reason that better than anyone else they know *he establishes that habit*.

What, though, of Ms Cameron's claim that Dahl's unique ability to get kids hooked on books comes at too high a price – that it actually stunts a child's development? Can it really be true that **Charlie** represents a threat to civilization as we know it? 'A book that diminishes the human spirit', she insists, 'that emphasises all those Clockwork Orange qualities which are destroying the society that children are growing up in: callousness, lack of any emotion but the hyped-up one of getting kicks out of the pain and misfortune of others and depicting all this as funny and delightful', etcetera, etcetera. She's referring, would you believe, to Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt, Violet Beauregard and Mike Teavee . . . that is, to a greedy fat boy who becomes less so by way of a thin pipe; a spoiled little rich girl who ends up (along with her spoiling parents) amidst a load of old rubbish; a chewing gum vandal who goes permanently purple in the face; and a TV addict doomed to remain ten feet tall and 'sought after by every basketball team in the country'. All of which may well be a vast disappointment to seekers after enlargement and illumination but scarcely suggests the double-dyed Decadence Ms Cameron has led us to expect. So how come she's gone so plonkingly over the top?

There are two reasons, I think. Taken together they blind her not only to Dahl's exemplary success as a writer for children but also to why, by his own highest standards, this maestro can so suddenly and strikingly flop.

For a start, there's her curious assumption that the Best Fiction must have a built-in betterment factor – a sort of star-rating on some scale of moral hygiene. Why? What's wrong with literature that's pitched squarely at *celebrating* the human condition? An obvious and apposite example would be Chaucer's **Miller's Tale**. This story for adults is much akin to Dahl's stories for children in that it's gloriously riotous, rollicking, rude . . . and highly unlikely to set any readers on the path to a Duke of Edinburgh Award. It's her second assumption that clinches the Cameron crassness, however: that writing for adults and children can be assessed in terms of the same model of excellence. What Dahl is so good at is exploiting the tastes he has in common with his young readers – for farce, for pantomime, for the sort of slapstick normally associated with circus and stage and cinema screen. These are seldom catered for on the printed page, not because they can't be reproduced there but because doing so is usually regarded as being beneath writerly dignity. Hence the sheer daftness of wincing at the come-uppance dealt out to Gloop, Salt, Beauregard, Teavee and Company. These aren't fully-rounded human beings and were never intended as such. *They're 'bad' clowns*. To give vent to moral indignation on their behalf is about as sensible as blaming Tweety-Pie for duffing up Sylvester the Cat, or Stan Laurel for getting Oliver Hardy into yet another fine mess (and him supposed to be a friend, too). When Ms Cameron quotes with approval the critic who regards Charlie Bucket as 'a cipher . . . pushed right to the edge of mawkishness as he slowly starves', both she and the critics have missed the point by a mile. This is *melodrama*, lovely blood-and-thundering melodrama with a central character designed to touch us with two-dimensional pathos in the manner of that other infinitely greater and more varied Charlie with the cane and the bowler hat. To put it another way, once Charlie is seen as Cinderella, with Grandpa Joe as a senior-citizen Buttons and Mr Wonka as a Factory/Fairy-Godmother, the appeal of the story becomes clear. What's mawkish is the attempt to extort a tear on behalf of the Ugly Sisters.



Any critique of Dahl, then, must first take account of his superb talent for enlisting and combining non-literary and pre-literary idioms from a ragbag of sources. These he brings smack up-to-date in the service of stories that from the outset are accessible, intelligible and *fun*. Simple enough? Alas, no. If it were, we'd all be having a bash. There's so little of the literary show-off about Dahl that his skills and scope are revealed only when he's put alongside the one writer who can match him in popularity: Enid Blyton. What follows is a thumb-nail sketch only, but in three obvious ways, it seems to me, Dahl demonstrates that he's in a different class.

Storytelling. Only a fool would deny the turn-over-the-page impetus Blyton builds up – a healthy reminder to all writers for children that if you've got this you don't need anything else. But who can recall her books afterwards? They merge and blur interchangeably. Dahl's stories, even at their weakest, have a sharpness and quirkiness that sticks in the memory.

Style. There's no better writer for the voice than Roald Dahl. Nobody ever fell asleep reading him aloud whereas with our Enid it's impossible after a while to stay awake. When, in **George's Marvellous Medicine**, he describes Grandma as having 'a small puckered-up mouth like a dog's bottom' the description is at once hilarious, exact and quite beyond anything she could muster. Her prose is like gum that's lost its flavour though not quite enough to stop you chewing. In Dahl, children come across a prose and a verse that's as punchy and populist as a TV ad, and yet out to sell only itself. The refreshingly lowfalutin' quality of his fee-fi-fo-fum rhetoric gets it across to the widest possible audience that words actually *matter*.

Subversiveness. Asked how he can communicate so readily with eight-year-olds, Dahl once replied, 'I am eight years old.' Exactly! He makes almost every other writer for kids – not least Miss B – look as if they're dressing down for the part. In form, content and manner his are the kind of books children would write for each other if they had the necessary stamina and language experience. They recognise at once that he shares their ketchup-and-candyfloss relish for sharp contrasts, their preference for laughing out loud – at themselves, at grown-ups, at stuffiness in all its aspects. No wonder so many adults find Dahl such a threat. He's a perpetual underminer of their status.

He has to work at it, of course. And even for him it's a risky business. Once in a while he trips himself up (as with the first-version Oompa Loompas for which he's never been forgiven by commentators who want to make this the only sort of issue that counts). Sometimes, too, the exuberance and inventiveness fail to get airborne (**Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator**), or, after a promising take-off, only just stay aloft (**The Twits**). Worse still, it's easy enough for the whole joy-ride to nosedive out of control (**George's Marvellous Medicine**).

Even **The BFG**, in many respects a blessed return to vintage Dahl, smacks a little of one of those self-intoxicated drama improvisations that go on a fraction too long. In my opinion, that is. Dahl himself won't care a fig for my opinion. He's the complete antithesis of the kind of children's author who tells you 'I only write for myself', meaning, all too often, for the critics. For Dahl it's the kids who are kingpin. In a recent newspaper interview he remarked: 'I suppose I could knock at the door of any house where there was a child – whether in the US, Britain, Holland, West Germany, France – and say "My car's run out of petrol. Could you please give me a cup of tea?" And they'd know me. That *does* make me feel good.'

It should make us feel good, too. Also it should make us feel uneasy. Take another look at Ms Cameron's approved list of literary practitioners for the littlies. She includes several recipients of the industry's highest awards – deserving winners every one. But aren't they all just a little bit . . . well, *respectable*? Aren't these the very names you'd expect to conjure with if you wanted to win friends and influence people amongst those who like books a lot but aren't necessarily so keen on kids? Dahl, needless to say, hasn't won a Top Prize in his life. His situation reminds me of certain superstars in bygone Hollywood – the ones who could pack cinemas year after year but who watched the Oscars get handed out to classier performers thought to bring 'tone' to the movie business, to help it upgrade its own desperately insecure image of itself. A Children's Book World that was truly confident would have recognised and acknowledged Roald Dahl's achievement long ago.

For if the Big Friendly Giant didn't exist, then those of us who care about books *for their own sake* and about children *as they are* would've been forced to invent him. Thank God he invented himself. ●



Roald Dahl's books are published in hardback by Cape and in paperback by Puffin.

Chris Powling's **Roald Dahl** (Puffin, 0 14 03.1752 X, £1.95), first published in 1985, is a biographical and literary study for children of primary age.

Authorgraph No. 66

Cynthia Voigt

'I don't think of myself as a creative person and I really think that's true. You notice something and you wonder, "what if?". It's as simple as that.'

So, says Cynthia Voigt, highly successful author of the Tillerman series, who once saw a bunch of kids waiting in a station wagon and wondered what would happen if the person for whom they were waiting just never came back. How long would they wait? What would make a person not come back?

Her wonderings have culminated in an acclaimed series of books, one of which, *Dacey's Song*, was a Newbery Medal winner. There will be no more. Their creator feels that she stopped at the right time – 'series can go on too long and then you lose it . . . I felt that I stopped at the right time . . . I knew it was right.' Even so, this is not a series in the conventional sense. The reader should feel that each of the six is entirely different – 'they tasted, when I was writing them, entirely separate . . . I see them more like a mosaic that tessellates. I conceived of them in that fashion.'

Her own secure family life was not a bit like that of the troubled Tillermans. She is one of three girls, added to by twin boys when she was twelve. The family was raised in Connecticut, later moving to Pittsburg. Certainly her parents did well by their children, unlike some, especially fathers, who appear in the novels. Cynthia freely admits, 'If I were the parents of the person who wrote *Tree By Leaf* I'd be upset.' Frank Verricker, the absent father in *Sons from Afar*, is probably best remaining that way and poor Brann in *Building Blocks* is left feeling 'doomed to be the kind of kid who felt ashamed by his old man'. To be fair, not all of them are rotten enough to ruin the life of everyone, but many attract a fair amount of reader hostility.

For herself Cynthia professes to have strong maternal instincts and obviously admires her own son and daughter, who live with their parents in Maryland making them 'East Coast Middle-of-the-roaders'.

She was educated in the fifties in Massachusetts, first at a girl's boarding school and then at a women's college, which later proved source material for one of the early books, *Tell Me If the Lovers Are Losers*. Here Hildy, the tragic character from North Dakota, is



deliberately portrayed as alien to the world that she finds herself in and to that of most readers. Her puritan, moral, religious and social values, curiously highlighted by her appalling eyesight, contrast strikingly with those of Niki, the Californian girl, world-wise and steeped in more contemporary values.

These two characters have become the hallmark of Cynthia Voigt's work. Few other contemporary authors portray character with such insight. Individuals fascinate her. She claims she'd love to grow up like the remarkable Gram in the Tillerman series – 'I would like myself if I could be like her'. She also has an affection for Bullet from *The Runner*. When her editor asked, 'Who is this sullen creep?', his originator retorted, 'This is an heroic type . . . what do you mean sullen?' She confesses now, 'I think he's absolutely wonderful. I would've loved to have had him in class. I don't think he'd've liked me a bit. I would've loved to have hit my head up against his.' Like the editor, not everyone professes Bullet to be the most endearing character, but Ms Voigt likes difficult people. In her years of teaching she has always got along with the difficult students and now she tends to write about the kinds of people that she freely acknowledges she used automatically to write off when she was younger.

'Teaching taught me to recognise that everyone has his or her own life and they tend to try to do well by it, and to sit there and write them off is no way to see what is true.'

Her admiration of Bullet occasioned the only time so far that she has got into trouble with her characters. She liked him so much that she couldn't bring

herself to kill him off – 'I thought of a way to do it without belying anything I'd done before, and I thought "I can save his life"'. Then I realised that it just wasn't honest and he wouldn't have tolerated it and my reasons for not wanting to kill him off', so Bullet died in the Vietnam war.

'He almost made it, he was coming back, he was running and they – got him. We were covering him and at first we thought he was just – taking an obstacle, the way he did when he was moving fast, but –'

Such hard concentration on character has its traps of which Cynthia Voigt is well aware. Over the years she has become more interested in her characters at the expense of plot and she has gone further and further into their heads and away from what they're doing.

'The Tillermans seemed to be much more about character. I used to worry about that, then I thought these things have their own shape and your job is at most a little pruning, maybe. You can belie the shape and really do a bad job by the story.'

The Callender Papers, her traditional Gothic Novel, is the most revised for this very reason – she needed to attend to the plotting. Likewise, *Jackaroo*, which she sets in an imaginary place that she calls 'The Kingdom'. This is the same setting for an imminently due novel, *On Fortune's Wheel*, which she confesses was hard work to plot, but with which she is immensely pleased. The two are her 'Zorro Novels'.

As a teenager who longed to write, the young Cynthia was hugely enamoured of the heroic adventure story. Calling cards bore 'Zorro' as her middle name and the mat outside her dormitory door was a Zorro bathmat. The romantic notion of somebody galloping around putting Z's on things and leading an heroic, secret life translated itself into Gwyn, the innkeeper's daughter in *Jackaroo*, who was, she realised,

'More at ease when she wandered about the countryside as Jackaroo than at any other time. It was odd that dressed up as Jackaroo she felt much more like herself. And in the disguise, she was free to do what she really wanted to do, much freer than was Gwyn, the innkeeper's daughter.'

Real disguises, smokescreens, masks, tangible or otherwise, are a common motif and an often used image (which



Cynthia finds rewarding to explore) in many of the novels. Masks that her characters show on the outside belie what's going on inside, separating the public face from the private one. 'I like kids to recognise that they are wearing costumes, not to draw any moral conclusions, just to be able to say, "Yes this is a costume", it lightens everything up and they'll be freer to move in and out of roles.'

For her own part Cynthia confesses that she'd like a more unusual or glamorous persona, maybe like the blonde cheerleader Izzy in *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*, the type that as a girl she both envied and despised. Since Izzy ends up in a wheelchair, this book gets sold as an anti drink-driving book, but its author reveals, 'I think all of us look like Izzy. It's just that most of it is invisible. We're all tottering around at the end wondering whether we're going to fall down or not. We're all marked and that's why I think it works.'

Cynthia Voigt seldom comes close to revealing how much of herself goes into her novels. She doesn't like to contemplate that, because to do so might trigger too much self-control and 'I'd get stiff and start stumbling and trip. Like in the classroom, if you become too conscious of how much of yourself you are revealing to your students, that's not good.'

She has been out of the classroom for two years, but her lively conversation is often illustrated by teaching analogies. She loved the job, but admits that essentially she prefers to stay at home and write and is delighted to find herself doing it. Yet she doesn't consider herself a professional – 'a word that's not entirely clean in my vocabulary'.

'I write, I think, in a novel rhythm. I'd love to turn out good sonnets. That's like cutting a diamond just right . . . I write because I write and the way I write is because it's the way it interests me to write . . . You have an idea and the idea has its own natural size and

you can abort it or stretch it out, but the ideas I have been having are novel ideas . . . I will try anything in my closet with my typewriter, but I don't come out very often.'

On a good day a couple of hours of genuine work is considered profitable, a first draft often taking six to nine months. Cynthia is only happy when a couple of ideas are in the melting pot, but even then many end up in drawers because they haven't worked. 'I feel deeply about things and occasionally a professional thought occurs – The more successful I am, the less confident I am – which I think is probably good.'

She is sceptical about any strong political motivation in her work and then, on reflection, decides she is a humanist and, if there's any feminism, it's because she feels that women and girls need to be careful about believing what they are told about themselves. Dacey believes that she can make a success as a boat builder in *Seventeen Against the Dealer* despite the odds –

'Dacey Tillerman always had things planned out so she could get to where she wanted. Where she wanted to get to was being a boat builder . . . Just because nobody had done something didn't mean Dacey couldn't.'

Similarly with racism in the Tillerman books, where settings are meticulously authentic. Prejudice in these novels had to be met head on, especially in *Come a Stranger*. 'These are American books and it's part of American life. I raised a few questions about it. What do we really think? What would we really do?'

About future plans the author is cagey. She doesn't talk about her ideas in public because – 'I don't know until I'm through with them how I'm going to do them and they're so fragile. I want to make what I'm going to make out of them and then anything can happen and that's o.k. – but I want them left alone to do my part in them.'

Long may the author who professes to 'like hard thinking and daydreaming' ask 'what if?' and produce such excellent fiction enjoyed by an extraordinarily wide range of admiring readers. ●

Cynthia Voigt was interviewed during a visit to London by David Bennett.

Photographs by Richard Newton.

Cynthia Voigt's novels

Homecoming, 0 00 184306 0, £6.95;
0 00 672459 0, £2.99 pbk

Dacey's Song, 0 00 184147 5, £5.95;
0 00 672566X, £2.50 pbk

A Solitary Blue, 0 00 195664 7, £6.95;
0 00 672683 6, £2.50 pbk

The Runner, 0 00 672804 9, £2.25 pbk

Sons from Afar, 0 00 184295 1, £6.95;
0 00 673367 0, £2.50 pbk

Seventeen Against the Dealer, 0 00 184782 1,
£6.95; 0 00 184784 8, £5.95 pbk

Tree By Leaf, 0 00 184435 0, £6.95;
0 00 673769 2, £2.75 pbk

Building Blocks, 0 00 672929 0, £2.50 pbk

Tell Me If the Lovers Are Losers,
0 00 672927 4, £2.50 pbk

The Callender Papers, 0 00 672983 5,
£2.75 pbk

Jackaroo, 0 00 191112 0, £6.95;
0 00 673611 4, £2.75 pbk

Izzy, Willy-Nilly, 0 00 184423 7, £6.95;
0 00 673377 8, £2.50 pbk

Come a Stranger, 0 00 184126 2, £6.95;
0 00 672928 2, £2.50 pbk

All titles are published in hardback by Collins and in paperback by Lions.

REVIEWS – Non Fiction

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| The Tree
1 85103 087 5 | The Ladybird
1 85103 089 1 |
| Weather
1 85103 085 9 | Fruit
1 85103 081 6 |
| The Egg
1 85103 082 4 | Vegetables
1 85103 086 7 |
| Cats
1 85103 084 0 | |
- Pascale de Bourgoing and
Gallimard Jeunesse, Moonlight
Publishing (First Discovery series),
£5.99 each
(INFANT)

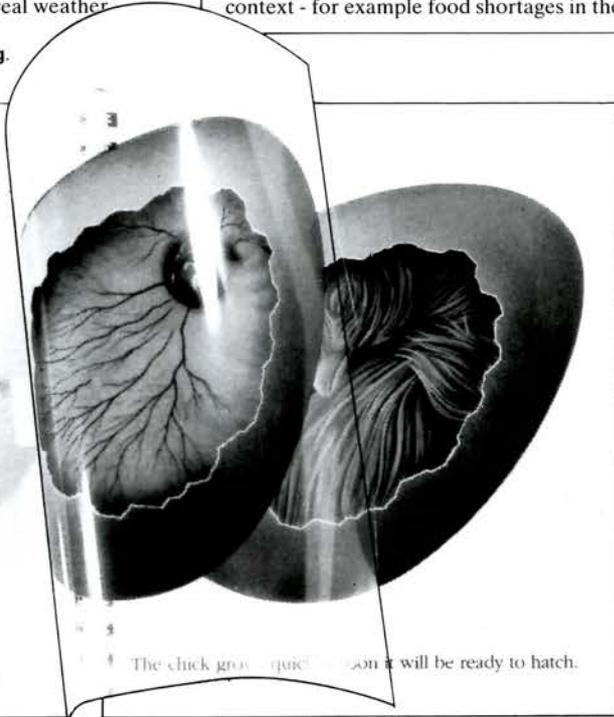
These books reveal their information in some unexpected and imaginative ways. Using the simple device of illustrated transparent sheets between the pages, they show much that would take many words to tell. Brief texts are combined with glowing illustration and subtle design to produce a deceptively simple result. The opening pages of **The Tree**, for example, show the inside and outside of a conker. This then falls to the ground and starts to grow. Lift the 'grass' and you will see not just the root and shoot developing but the way the conker shrinks into the ground as it nourishes the new growth.

Throughout the series, the text avoids technical terms and concentrates on an outline of each subject. It also provides clues to the information in the illustrations. These do much more than accompany the text – they bring facts to life. In **Weather**, by turning the transparent sheets, you can change the direction of the wind or move the raincloud to another place. The fog and snow move too – just like real weather.

A double spread from **The Egg**.



The hen sits on the eggs to keep them warm.



After only two days, the beginnings of a tiny chick.

The chick grows quickly and soon it will be ready to hatch.

The format is particularly well-suited to certain subjects. In **The Egg**, it is used successfully to show eggs inside a hen, eggs in the hen's nest, and the developing chicken inside an egg. **Cats** is a less obvious choice for this technique and the result is attractive but less relevant to the main facts.

The Ladybird shows the structure of the insect and its lifestyle. One page shows the number of greenfly a ladybird can eat in one day. Move the page, and you can feed another ladybird. Food of a different kind is

shown in **Fruit** which is mainly concerned with the inside and outside of popular fruits. The series was originally published in French. This is not apparent from the text but can occasionally be seen in tiny details such as the labels on products in **Vegetables** (e.g. 'carottes'). The books are well constructed with ring-bound pages covered by an outer spine. The ingenious presentation combines the discovery of new information with the pleasure of unusual but apt effects. FB

White stripes were painted on pavement kerbs and lampposts to make them more visible during the black-out. This cow is also being given white stripes. Many grazing areas were more open than they are today, and animals sometimes wandered on to the roads.



From **The Blitz**.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| The Blitz
1 85210 874 6 | Prisoners of War
1 85210 976 9. |
| Evacuation
1 85210 873 8 | Rationing
1 85210 975 0 |

Fiona Reynoldson, Wayland
(Home Front series), £6.50 each
(JUNIOR/MIDDLE)

Life in Britain in the Second World War is an increasingly well-documented period of history for young readers, but conjuring up the essence of that era is not always easy.

Few families remained unaffected by the conflict and these attractively presented titles, each focusing on a particular aspect of the Home Front, provide a very readable account of the hardships and emotional turmoil experienced by many of them.

Each book has a brief introduction which helpfully places the topic in its historical context - for example food shortages in the

First World War which led to detailed plans for rationing in the Second. This is followed by an objective, balanced narrative which not only mentions how Germany faced similar problems, but also tackles controversial issues – such as the internment of 'enemy aliens' by the British authorities.

Fiona Reynoldson's crisp, almost clinical, style is often chillingly effective – 'The bombers came the next night and the next. They came for fifty-seven nights in a row' (**The Blitz**). She also uses contemporary eye-witness accounts, personal recollections and extracts from reports to evoke a strong period flavour. The text is illustrated by a wealth of carefully chosen photographs together with government posters, cigarette cards and other memorabilia.

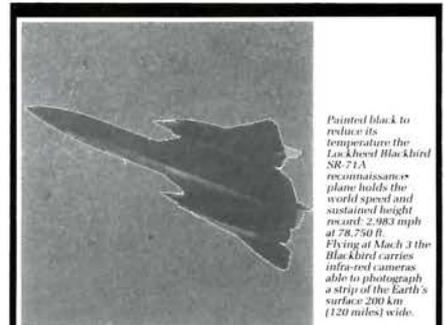
Appended is a glossary, ideas for projects and a further reading list which is divided into books for younger readers and older readers (including some adult titles). Disappointingly, there is no fiction amongst them. VH

How High is the Sky?

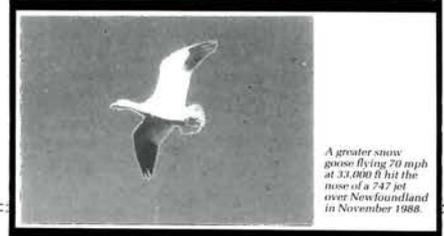
Meredith Hooper, Simon & Schuster (Discover series),
0 7500 0005 8, £7.99
(JUNIOR/MIDDLE)

'The air carries enough pollen to cover every square metre of the Earth's surface every year with 100 million grains' – a fact not to be sneezed at and just one of the many snippets the author has gathered for this entertaining look at our atmosphere.

'How high is the sky?' Countless crooners have asked the question expecting no answer, but thanks to Ms Hooper we can now tell them. 200 kilometres – that's where our atmosphere finally stops – an atmosphere which is an ocean of air with ourselves the bottom-feeders.



Painted black to reduce its temperature the Lockheed Blackbird SR-71A reconnaissance plane holds the world speed and sustained height record: 2,983 mph at 78,750 ft. Flying at Mach 3 the Blackbird carries infra-red cameras able to photograph a strip of the Earth's surface 200 km (120 miles) wide.



A greater snow goose flying 70 mph at 33,000 ft hit the nose of a 747 jet over Newfoundland in November 1988.

This book is about two things – the variety of creatures and substances that go to make up our air and the relative heights of natural and artificial features of the Earth. The author takes us on a succession of jumps to 36,000 km. away from the Earth's surface and shows us the sights on the way. The fresh approach that Meredith Hooper brings to this old idea is excellently sustained by her rich but uncomplicated prose style, the catholicity of her examples and her ability as an explainer. Difficult concepts like atmospheric pressure, the size of a gas molecule and the nature of thunder undergo complete clarification.

This is the start of a new series which, the publishers say, is of 'books about the real world... based on personal experience'. It's a very encouraging start and the rest should be well worth looking at. Straight up. TP

Resources Control

Alexander Peckham, Franklin Watts (Green Issues series), 0 7496 0245 7, £6.95 (MIDDLE/SECONDARY)

The main drawback to publishers' series is that they encourage the prospective reader/purchaser to predict more about their members' style and content than may be actually justified. So the appearance of yet another tall red-edged 'green' title from Franklin Watts looks, initially, nothing special. But this one stands on its own for originality and treatment of its subject, for it is the author's own book.

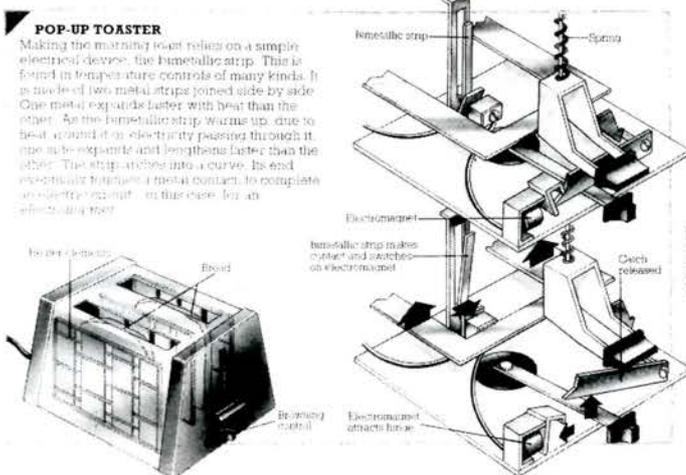
Competition for goods strains resources, promotes their abuse and widens inequalities between people and nations. Peckham's thoughtful, sometimes passionate, look at the way we over-exploit both fashionable (fossil fuels and fish) and less glamorous resources (clay and salt) is a persuasive argument for the urgent need to re-think the established relationship between people, material wealth and the environment.

The house style serves the author well, providing clear illustrative photographs and a straightforward layout which allows the clarity of the author's arguments to develop naturally, unfettered by the tyranny of the double-spread, and come to a natural conclusion. It is difficult to believe that a series like this will change the world, but a single volume like this makes that belief more sustainable. TP

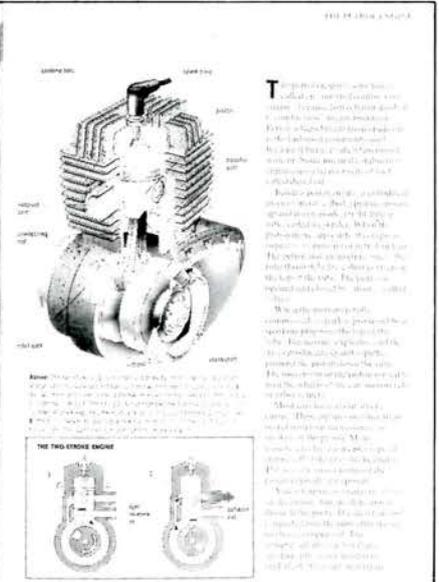
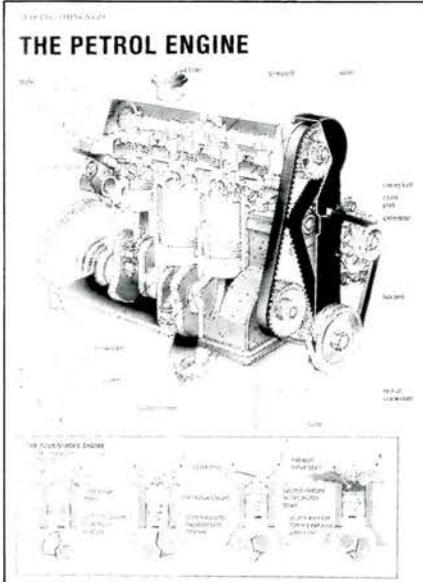
Forensic Detection

Lionel Bender, Franklin Watts (Through the Microscope series), 0 7496 0196 5, £6.95 (MIDDLE/SECONDARY)

What better reason for demonstrating the questing eye of the electron microscope than to show off its formidable forensic powers? An engaging succession of microphotographs of cut wires, spilt blood, forged pictures and the like provides conclusive and spectacular evidence that no guilty suspect is safe against the modern magnifier. This may be fine aversion-therapy for budding Ruxtons and Keatings but it's even better value as a wonder-book of close-ups. Grains of sea-salt x40 resemble wholemeal loaves, while table salt the same size looks like packets of sliced white. The book has a wide interest and enjoyment range and will provide great encouragement to young detectives, showing as it does that electronics are not everything and a surprising amount can be found out with an ordinary Sherlock-style hand lens. TP



From The Kingfisher Book of How Things Work.



From The Big Book of How Things Work.

The Kingfisher Book of How Things Work

Steve Parker, Kingfisher, 0 86272 573 9, £9.95

The Big Book of How Things Work

Peter Lafferty, Hamlyn, 0 600 56887 3, £5.95 (MIDDLE/SECONDARY)

Books which explain how things work are always useful, and the appearance of two new titles on the subject is good news. It also provides opportunities to compare their relative strengths and weaknesses and to see how they measure up to Neil Ardley and David Macaulay's *The Way Things Work*, published by Dorling Kindersley in 1988 and arguably the market leader. Neither of the new titles is designed to be read from cover to cover – they are books for looking things up in or dipping into. They differ widely in scope and coverage. The 'Big Book' examines less than forty subjects making no mention of fax machines, toasters, ballpoint pens, central heating systems, microwave ovens, or scales – all of which feature amongst the 200+ subjects covered by the Kingfisher book. The text of the Kingfisher title is generally

good with simple, well-explained, jargon-free paragraphs. Illustrations are colourful but not always clear; perspective can be an occasional problem, as when a light meter appears to go through someone's hand and a toaster switch appears to pass through the casing of the machine itself!

Accurate, clearer drawings with good use of cutaways are to be found in the 'Big Book'. The greater space allowed to develop the text in this volume leads to more satisfactory consideration of complicated subjects such as the nuclear power station or the petrol engine. (This particularly effective section in the 'Big Book' contrasts with a confusing one in the Kingfisher volume which portrays the two-stroke engine in four stages!) Both books have notable strengths and weaknesses. The Kingfisher title looks modern and attractive, it is clear, interesting and comprehensive, and will no doubt prompt dipping. The 'Big Book' is less immediately attractive but it does have excellent illustrations and it is much better at explaining complexities.

It would not be fair, though, to finish without a reminder of Ardley and Macaulay's book mentioned in the first paragraph. It is more comprehensive than either of the 'How it works' books in its subject coverage and has a great deal of humour and wit. Most importantly it explains how things work in a scientific/technological context. Thus, machines hugely different in scale or use are grouped together by the same mechanical principles which determine their design (car brakes and oil rigs, for example, appear together under 'friction'). Despite occasional flaws it is an exceptional book of high quality. The new titles don't match it but they do complement – buy all three if you can! ● GB

Frances Ball has been an infant teacher and currently works with pre-school children.
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.
Non-fiction Reviews Editor: **Eleanor von Schweinitz**



VALUE FOR MONEY?

Eleanor von Schweinitz, BfK's non-fiction editor, takes a hard look at an example of series publishing

In an age of shrinking book budgets it is important that we make sure that the information books we buy are good value for money. Judgement needs to be especially sharp when tempted by attractive books which appear to match the requirements of the National Curriculum.

At first glance the four titles in a recently published series, 'Seasonal Weather', would seem to tie in perfectly with Attainment Target 9 of the science curriculum covering a wide range of topics from levels 2 to 7. Furthermore, the division into **Spring**, **Summer**, **Autumn** and **Winter** seems ready-made for series packaging. It is only on closer examination that the inherent problems start to emerge – problems that largely arise because these books are concerned with more than pure description, attempting to explain underlying processes and phenomena.

This may well prompt the prospective purchaser to ask whether all four books must be bought as a linked package. At £6.50 each the total bill will be a hefty £26. If only one or two titles are acquired will there be difficulties for children using one book in isolation? The same question has clearly occurred to the publishers but they have failed to face up to the inescapable fact that it just isn't possible to produce four such books without the uneconomic repetition of the same basic information and/or the arbitrary allocation of common topics to only one or two titles in the series.

Each of the four titles includes five or six pages which in effect give identical information covering basic background topics: the seasons in different latitudes, the significance of the tilt in the Earth's axis as it travels round the sun, air pressure and the major wind systems, cloud formation and precipitation. This common material is somewhat disguised because diagrams are redrawn and the information is slightly differently expressed or ordered – even glossary definitions of the same term change from volume to volume.

Now this might be justified if the same information was presented in such a different fashion that the child who has difficulty understanding one explanation could turn to another volume and find a quite different approach, but the differences are generally cosmetic as the following examples demonstrate.

'During the year, the Earth moves round the Sun. The Earth also spins on its axis. This axis, which passes through the North and South Poles, is not upright, but leans over at an angle of 23.5°. This tilt causes the seasons.' (**Winter Weather**)

'The Earth travels round the Sun, going round it once every year. The Earth also spins on its axis. This axis is not upright but leans over at an angle of 23.5°. It is this tilt which causes the seasons.' (**Summer Weather**)

'As the Earth moves around the Sun, it spins like a top on its axis. This axis is not upright, but leans over at an angle of 23.5°. It is this tilt which causes the seasons.' (**Autumn Weather**)

'Every year the Earth moves round the Sun. The Earth spins on its axis which leans over at an angle of 23.5°. This tilt ...' (**Spring Weather**)

Although the differences between these examples are more complex than such brief extracts can illustrate, a close comparison of many such passages leads to the conclusion that the deliberate reshaping of the same information invariably results in an unhelpful dilution and that a telling image or phrase used in one book would be equally illuminating in the books where it does not appear.

The same problems arise in the glossary where, for example, we find Equator variously defined: 'A line that encircles the Earth midway between the North and South Poles' (**Autumn** and **Winter**). 'A line completely encircling the Earth midway between the North and South Poles' (**Summer**). 'An imaginary line encircling the Earth midway between the North and South Poles' (**Spring**). Or Tropics: 'The areas each side of the Equator that are always warm' (**Spring**). 'The very warm areas on the Earth's surface which stretch across the Equator' (**Summer**). 'A band on the Earth's surface stretching between 25° north and 25° south of the Equator' (**Winter**). 'A band on the Earth's surface stretching between about latitudes 25° north and 25° south of the Equator, where the weather is always warm' (**Autumn**).

The repetition of basic material in all four books can only be justified on the assumption that any one might be bought independently. But it is then impossible to justify the apparently random dispersal of common information through the four titles. If you want to learn about the main zones of the atmosphere or how rainbows are formed you must buy **Spring**. **Autumn** will tell you what makes the sky look blue and the sunset red. If measuring temperature is what you need, go for **Winter** – but it's **Spring** for measuring rainfall and **Autumn** for measuring wind. Buy **Summer** if you want advice on how to keep a cloud diary – but you'll need **Winter** for an introduction to the common cloud types. The ozone layer gets full treatment in **Spring**, global warming in **Summer** ... and so on.

The result of all this is that the reader could be confused as to just what the links are (if any) between particular seasons and such phenomena as the ice ages, famine, deserts or global warming and there is a danger that children will assume connections that don't exist just because information appears in a particular volume.

All of these problems could have been avoided if the publisher had not been so exclusively geared to the production of books in series. For there is the raw material here for an interesting and substantial single volume. Needless repetition would be saved and more extended explanations could be given; unhelpful fragmentation could be avoided and the relationships between associated concepts developed; and such excellent features as the splendid diagram of the passage of a depression (**Spring**) could be far more effectively integrated.

And we, the purchasers, would have an infinitely better 'information package' for perhaps half the price! ●

Spring Weather, 1 85210 941 6
Summer Weather, 1 85210 942 4
Autumn Weather, 1 85210 920 3
Winter Weather, 1 85210 921 1

John Mason, Wayland (Seasonal Weather series), £6.50 each

May We Recommend . . .
**Adrian Jackson looks at the work of
 GILLIAN RUBINSTEIN**



Gillian Rubinstein is a very successful and popular writer of children's books in Australia where she's lived for the last seventeen years. Revisiting England last summer to coincide with the publication of two of her books, she spent a day in Bristol . . . and BfK duly despatched me to meet her.

Space Demons, her first novel, was published in Britain in 1989 after winning a number of awards in Australia. It draws in its readers with the excitement and fascination of the computer game and, as so often happens, violence seems to be part of the solution with skill earning the players a gun to destroy the demons. But, by a clever twist, the violence comes to be understood as the problem: the game has snared them with their own hate, feeding and breeding on it, making them into demons, too. To 'win' the game the children have to acknowledge their own violence, give up the guns and rethink their behaviour. As Elaine, one of the main characters, puts it: 'It's what we think we are that makes us what we are. But changing the way you think is so painful.'

One reason for visiting Bristol was a first meeting with Diana Wynne Jones, whom Gillian called her 'unwitting mentor'. Gillian had actually been reading **A Charmed Life** (Puffin, 0 14 03.1075 4, £2.50) during the writing of **Space Demons** and it was interesting to hear that Diana Wynne Jones had picked up verbal echoes of her book. Her own powerful fantasy novels have several times drawn on the world of fantasy games and show how 'this shared language of the imagination', as Gillian called it, can be used in fantasy novels to take children out of and yet into themselves.

Gillian 'wants to entertain' and yet feels that 'you cannot write today without addressing the problem of violence'. Because 'you sound terribly preachy if you write about the real', she finds it 'very satisfying combining the two elements of very strong fantasy and very strong real worlds' so that, as in **Space Demons**, on one level, the children are 'just playing a game', but:

'Inside the game they had been forced to know each other at such an intense level that it was hard to adjust to the everyday world again. They had seen a little too much of themselves and each other.'

Gillian Rubinstein appreciated the power of the computer game partly through watching her own children. This world of fantasy, where so many children are, is where she starts from – but what she does with it, where she takes the reader, is likely to be new to them. The journey of the novel has been a journey into self-knowledge and the demons are finally ones of their own making. As the quotation from the frontispiece puts it: 'We have found the enemy and they are us.'

It isn't surprising to learn that the novel won a peace prize in Australia, but I was

intrigued to discover that fiction had become fact and Elaine's words at the end of the novel had been made real. She had wanted to create an 'all-star, live production of **Space Demons**' and the real one is now in its third season. Gillian now has plans for another of her novels to take to the stage.

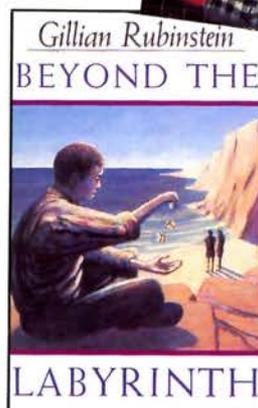
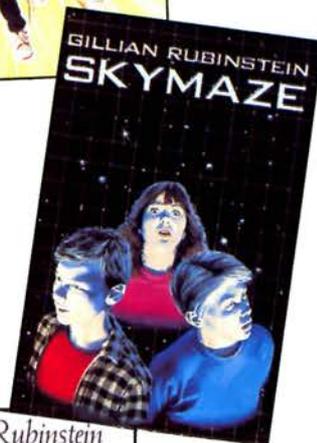
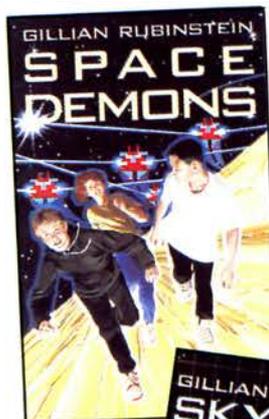
Skymaze is dedicated to 'everyone who asked for a sequel'. (The popularity of both is such that there will probably be a third, as yet unwritten, book in which the mysterious Professor Ito, the creator of the games, may be tracked down.) The main characters from the first novel reappear, but it's largely an undeveloped relationship from the first novel which is examined here. Once again the apparently weak grow stronger, partly through confidence, but also through 'skill co-operation and courage'.

Beyond the Labyrinth also won a major award, chosen as Australian Children's Book of the Year, but it's strikingly different in form. In part at least, it takes the style of a 'Choose Your Own Adventure', but is written a little disconcertingly in the present tense using a great deal of intercutting between what are often brief episodes. The central character, Brent, is an alienated teenager who throws a die to determine his responses to the people and events he watches. At the end, we are invited to acknowledge our own voyeurism and join in the die-throwing to decide on an ending.

It's a challenging read in other ways, too. There's violent language which shocks (the effect of this is lost in the bowdlerised English edition), and Brent's bleak perspective is alleviated only to the extent that, in Victoria's words of advice, he might live 'as if . . . You just have to get on with life, do what you can.'

Any 'message' is inextricably bound up with entertainment for Gillian Rubinstein however, and the show will go on. In this case in a stage version with the audience having to cope with dice-throwing for an ending. They'll have to come back if they want to see other possibilities, as long as the die allows it!

Gillian Rubinstein clearly enjoys her work and loves being a part of what is a small, but strong community of children's writers in Australia where, she says, the market for books is 'booming'. Her next book is to be 'an anti-science-fiction story about the way societies treat children – which is not good.' It's to be called **Galaxerina** . . . 'I've almost finished it . . . all I've got to do is write it!' I look forward to it and hope that it won't be long before children here catch up with her books. They're well worth seeking out. ●



All Gillian Rubinstein's titles are published in Mammoth paperback at £2.25 each:

Space Demons, 0 7497 0410 1

Skymaze, 0 7497 0397 0

Beyond the Labyrinth, 0 7497 0280 X

PICK OF THE PAPERBACKS '90

To help us mention as many books as possible, members of the **BfK** reviewing team are asked to restrict each piece to a length of 80-100 words. This isn't easy, as would-be critics soon discover. So what if we asked our reviewers to choose their best read from last year and allowed three times the usual space to say why? Here's the outcome.

The Abduction

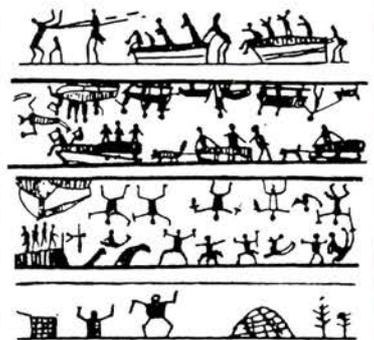
Mette Newth, Sprint, 0 671 69993 8, £3.95 (**BfK 61** – March)

I think that this book made an impression because it is so vividly and poetically written and seems imbued with tremendous integrity of purpose; all credit to the translators from the original Norwegian, Trina Nunnally and Steve Murray. It won the Norwegian State Prize for Literature for Young Adults when first published in 1987. Authentic Inuit vignettes decorate the breaks in the narrative and moments of the greatest emotion are often marked by deceptively simple poetic forms, reflecting Eskimo songs and the oral tradition. Added together this creates not just a story but a total cultural experience that cannot fail to leave its indelible mark on the reader.

The author has taken true events from the sixteenth century and presented them by mingling two different, clashing consciousnesses, which requires two distinct writing styles. The one is Osuqo, an Inuit maiden, snatched with her betrothed shaman, Poq, as they canoe off Greenland. There follows abuse, humiliation, degradation and the blackest fear as the two are treated as dangerous freaks, objects of hatred and the focus of the prejudices of their so-called civilized, superior captors. Osuqo's story is in a third-person narrative, economically and vividly written.

At the other level there is crippled Christine's first-person account. As a hard-working drudge, who was not rated worth much, she came close to the degraded Inuits and realised, 'we were in the same boat. The filthy cart was like a pitiful vessel on a huge sea. Just below the surface lurked powerful forces that could pull us under at any time.' But she is powerless to change what only she and her friend Henrik can understand. So-called civilization treats harshly those it judges inferior to itself, disregarding completely the cultural worth of conquests and wrapping it all up in professed beneficence, which somehow excuses all wrongdoing and dire cruelty.

This is a fathomless book that I've already passed around to several receptive colleagues and thoughtful sixth-formers. **DB**



Left, 17th-century painting of an Inuit woman from the book cover. Above, vignettes by Polar Inuits.

David Bennett has reviewed for **BfK** since No. 4 (September 1980). A teacher/librarian who became Head of English, he's now Senior Teacher responsible for the Communications Faculty in a Nottinghamshire comprehensive. He's married with three sons, is a compulsive gardener, a dabbling cook and a writer of all sorts of articles when he can find the time, mainly about children's literature and teaching English.



Moira Small taught in nursery schools in Edinburgh and Aberdeen before being married and having four sons. She now lectures to Nursery Nurse students at Jewel and Esk Valley College, Dalkeith. In her spare time, and with two friends, she runs a small publishing company which, in the five years of its existence, has produced 27 stories on cassette for children and one book, so far!

The Big Alfie and Annie Rose Storybook

Shirley Hughes, Red Fox, 0 09 975030 9, £4.50 (**BfK 65** – November)

By her close observation of people and her understanding of children, Shirley Hughes presents a fascinating collection of poems and stories accompanied by a strong visual experience so that the not-yet-reading child can be helped towards more understanding of our complicated world. Centring largely around domestic situations, the book is absolutely modern and the characters could quite easily be alive and well and living anywhere in the UK. The text is clear and to the point and the illustrations give the looking, listening child additional dimensions of humour, drama and characterisation.



Particularly significant, I think, is the story about Grandma's visit. We see her sitting with Alfie looking at photographs of all the family, right back to the time when Grandma herself was young. How pleasant for any child to identify with that and to gain the strong impression and reassurance of on-going life and his/her special place in the family.

Alfie finds his baby sister, who's grown into a mobile, bigger baby, hard to cope with at times. However, we're shown how he manages to handle strong emotions with a little help from his friends and the kindness and understanding of his own mum and dad.

Managing Annie Rose at a wedding makes a touching and amusing story and shows how grown-up Alfie can be. But then, in contrast, when his own birthday has become a bit too much, we see him hiding under the table.

Take my advice and buy a copy today! It's a bargain at £4.50 and you're in for a treat, whatever your age. **MS**

Rabble Starkey

Lois Lowry, Lions, 0 00 673764 1, £2.50 (BfK 63 - July)

This was originally published in hardback two years ago under the title **The Road Ahead**, but the Lions edition uses instead the main character's unusual name (short for Parable). Rabble's father left when she was a baby and her young mother, Sweet-Ho, working as hired help for the Bigelow family, takes on a more important role when Mrs Bigelow suffers a nervous breakdown and is taken into hospital. Sweet-Ho and Rabble move into the house, and begin to think of themselves as part of the family.

Through Rabble's forceful and individual first-person narrative, the characters are brought vividly to life: Veronica Bigelow, Rabble's closest friend, who feels badly let down by her mother; Mrs Bigelow, with her empty smile and aimless time-passing; Millie Bellows, a grouchy old lady who remains unappreciative of the two girls' efforts to help her with domestic chores; the teacher who corrects Rabble's grammar 'in front of the whole sixth grade, though she don't - doesn't - mean to embarrass me, she just wants me to talk elegant.'

It's one of those books which allows the reader to see over the child's head, and we can predict sooner than Rabble that the warmth and security of the combined family can't last - Mrs Bigelow is due to come out of hospital, and the relationship between Sweet-Ho and Mr Bigelow has become too close to continue when his wife returns home. The book ends with Sweet-Ho and Rabble leaving, and although the parting is difficult, there's a sense of new beginnings for both.



Rabble, from the cover.



Linda Newbery

Linda Newbery teaches English in a comprehensive school in Oxfordshire, and spends much of her spare time writing. Her published books are **Run with the Hare** (about animal rights), **Hard and Fast and Some Other War** (published December 1990). This latest title is set during the First World War and she's just finishing its sequel, **The Kind Ghosts**, which will be published in 1991.

Lois Lowry writes with quiet assurance and wisdom. At one point Rabble, reading **The Yearling**, thinks of the main character's life as being 'not fancy or nothing, but so filled up with hard work and hopes and haves and haven'ts all tangled there together in ways that tugged and ached'. The portrayal of this in Rabble's own life is exactly what makes **Rabble Starkey** a memorable book. **LN**

Julian's Glorious Summer

Ann Cameron, ill. Ann Strugnell, Young Lions, 0 00 673539 8, £1.99 (BfK 63 - July)

There have been several books about Julian; the first, **The Julian Stories**, was published in 1982 and immediately interested me. The author's dedication offered 'my thanks to Julian De Wette for sharing with me the childhood memories that inspired this book' and, written in the first-person, it was indeed an atmosphere of reality, of truth that originally caught the attention. Julian, a child of about seven or eight, I think, lives with his dad and mum and little brother, Huey, in the sort of untidy, loving family that rings very true. All is not sweetness and light; things go wrong, people get cross, children try to lie their way out of trouble and misunderstand adult conversation, but mum and dad can usually sort it out by that special ability to read minds which small children find so amazing. Infants were entranced by Julian. Read aloud, the stories plainly spoke directly to them, many had similar stories of their own - the time they wrecked the cooking, the fear of a wobbly tooth - and remembered how a loving adult had made it all right. There's nothing cosy about Julian - but a great deal that's reassuring.

This latest Julian story, about his fear of riding a bicycle and his attempts to hide his fear by lies and evasions, the trouble this gets him into and the way he finally faces up to things, is just as full of truth as the previous books. And, like the earlier titles, the language in which the story is told is poetic and yet naturalistic - it reflects children's language, 'Well, okay, then. See you sometime. Goodbye.' Gloria said, and also extends and enhances it. 'Trees and houses floated by me, like green ships and like white ones.' We hear Julian's thoughts, but often by inference, by our ability to read between the lines, we know what the words *really* mean.

Funny, sad, demanding and simple. **Julian's Glorious Summer** is multi-layered writing which offers a real experience of literature in a very straightforward format. Highly recommended. **LW**



Julian and Gloria.

Liz Waterland wrote **Read With Me** six years ago following work on Apprenticeship Approaches to reading. Since then she's been involved in INSET work and lecturing all over the country. Last year she edited **Apprenticeship in Action**, a collection of experiences gathered from colleagues. She's now Headteacher of an Infant and Nursery school in Peterborough.



Annie Banannie

Leah Komaiko, ill. Laura Cornell, Little Mammoth, 0 7497 0089 0, £2.50 (BfK 65 - November)

I've made a personal choice and selected the book that was most *memorable*, maybe just because it evoked the greatest response in me!

In **Annie Banannie** we have a portrait of the friendship between two children. It's a beautifully crafted book - creating changes in pace and mood with stunning simplicity. It demands re-reading and at each sitting one discovers more within the friendship and recalls more about one's own experiences and wonders...

Often, as adults we're almost dismissive about children's friendships,



perhaps failing to recognise that children's sense of time is quite different from ours so that the apparently transitory nature of their relationships doesn't reflect the intense and powerful emotions involved. Leah Komaiko and Laura Cornell have clearly recognised this as they've sketched in the highlights of this friendship, funny, ghostly and just quietly special. The only jarring note is that the age of six is mentioned - it would've been far better not to specify any age as it seems inappropriate in some cases and far too limiting for such an important book.

The quick-fire, quirky text is perfectly matched by a snapshot, almost cartoon style of illustration, so that we race through the book to be brought up short, suddenly, by the prospect of imminent parting when we realise that Annie's family is about to move away. Again the momentum builds up, image after image, giving us a sense of the rebellious anger and impotence the children feel until the last few pages drift us slowly through the bleak misery of parting and the prospect of life apart. **JS**



Judith Sharman has taught in First, Primary and Middle schools and is currently Head of Infants at Tarvin Primary School in Cheshire. She lectures widely in the North-West and has made two study tours to Copenhagen. She lists among her interests, swimming, skiing, gardening, art and travel - as well as reading and writing, of course!



Blitzcat

Detail from cover, by Barry Jones.

Robert Westall, Macmillan Limelight, 0 333 47499 6, £3.99 (BfK 63 – July)

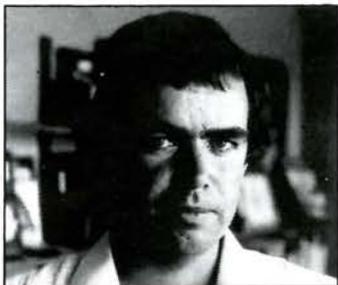
When asked to nominate my favourite children's book of the year, I immediately thought of **Just – William**, recalling the two or three happy evenings in the spring when I sat up reading those stories, laughing aloud at the immediacy of the humour and reflecting on the memories the book brought me. However, the book that impressed me most with its ability to evoke reaction at a variety of levels was Robert Westall's **Blitzcat**.

The story is set mainly in wartime Britain and concerns a cat who uses psi-trailing to pursue her lost master, an RAF pilot engaged in bombing raids. The heroine survives a series of catastrophes, including the firestorm of Coventry, the detonation of an unexploded bomb and a plunge from a blazer aeroplane. During the tortuous course of her journey, she inadvertently transforms the lives of the people who befriend her.

The scale of her odyssey, and the fundamental changes she effects, bestow an almost mythological status on the cat, though Westall never departs from an unflinchingly realistic treatment of the sheer nastiness of war. Sadly, his blunt depiction of the bereavement, devastation, shredded minds and shredded bodies brought about by combat, has recently acquired a more chilling relevance than it had when I first read the book.

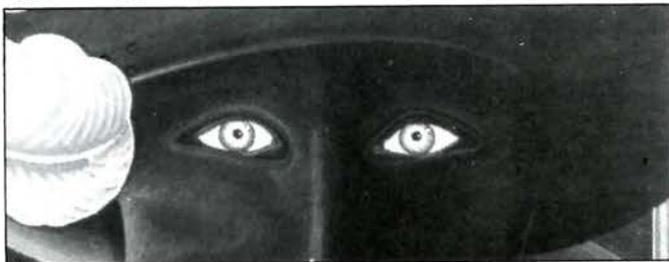
This isn't a book for younger or easily distressed children, but for other readers a fascinating combination of qualities offers the prospect of a very thought-provoking experience. **Blitzcat** is an animal story about human relationships; a rambling picaresque with a strong, simple, unifying theme; a book full of harrowing episodes which eventually leaves the readers with a feeling of hope and reconciliation. **GH**

George Hunt has been a primary school teacher for eight on thirteen years, working in South East London and in Dominica. His professional interests include storytelling and language-change.



Jackaroo

Cynthia Voigt, Lions, 0 00 673611 4, £2.75 (BfK 62 – May)



Cynthia Voigt's protagonists are individuals, on the edge of society. Gwyn, the innkeeper's daughter, fits the mould created by Dicey Tillerman in **Homecoming**, Bullet Tillerman in **The Runner** and Jean Wainwright in **The Callender Papers**.

The opening chapter makes clear the role of Gwyn's women contemporaries – it's Doling Day and the women must go to the Lord's castle to claim the food which will prevent winter starvation.

Within the rigid social hierarchy, women are the servants of all men; lords, husbands, brothers – their lives are beholden. Through Gwyn, Voigt offers an alternative, symbolically reinforcing the message with the image of her uncle, the hanged highwayman dangling on the castle walls, at the edge of her vision. She, like this criminal, has no place in society.

When Gwyn escorts Gaderian, the Lord's son, on his journey

When I Dance

James Berry, Puffin, 0 14 03.4200 1, £2.99 (BfK 64 – September)

I've had the luck to review a couple of outstanding novels this year, but the only poetry book I reviewed was a unique collection. It's the kind which goes out and gathers readers, disarming and charming – a poetry of verbs and voices, vibrant with the energy of expression. As the final lines of the title poem have it:

*I gather up all my senses
Well into hearing and feeling.
With body's flexible postures
Telling their poetry in movement
And I celebrate all rhythms.*

It's a poetry of inclusiveness, celebrating West Indian and English life and language, male and female voices, singly and together.

Poems take on the unspoken lives of pets and drums and bananas. Life is all around. To be 'Kept Home' is to surround yourself with the life outside the window, being missed. 'Getting Nowhere' is to feel that *terrible need took / nothing*.

Some of the poems catch the particular voices of the young and make you delight in the way that words can recreate what's common to us all and also what's unique:

*Only one of me / and nobody can get a second one /
from a photocopy machine . . . I am just this one. / Nobody else makes
the words / I shape with sound, when I talk.*

There's the marvellous exuberance of the first poem:

*Dave. Dear Dave. / I could write a letter / of only Dear Dave. /
My favourite words echo / and whizz me round the world and back.*

If we need it, James Berry puts on another voice for his introduction, patiently explaining what he's doing and easing those of us who say 'I-can't-read-black-poetry' into the idea that his rhythms might speak meaning. His poems show it, especially the extreme contrasts of rhythm and language (and culture) in the two 'versions' of 'Bye Now' and the 'Jamaican Caribbean Proverbs' which put Creole language into 'English' translations drained of life.

Even when the pages are closed you wonder how the print manages to be still. You think the book itself ought to move. **AJ**



Adrian Jackson has been teaching for thirteen years; five as Head of an English Department. He's now an Advisory Teacher for English with Avon LEA. This work covers Infant, Junior, Special and Secondary schools and includes a particular focus on 'Reading', so that when he's not reading fiction for the whole age-range or National Curriculum documents, he's reading about reading – an interesting time to be doing that!

through her land, they become trapped for several days by heavy snowfalls. This isolation device serves to offer Gwyn an opportunity to outstrip the hierarchy in which she's so firmly placed. Gaderian teaches her to write and she crosses the social divide to make a friend who provides the smallholding on which she eventually lives.

While marooned, she finds the clothes worn by Jackaroo – an avenger of wrongs perpetrated by the rich on the poor. She dons the clothes and the new persona frees her to do what she feels must be done. The mask which Jackaroo wears allows people to make him into what they will and condemns Gwyn to the life of an outlaw, excommunicated by the Lord's fear.

There's happiness for Gwyn – with her marriage to the equally independent Burl, she discovers that love isn't always a trap. She discovers, too, that she's 'broken the circle within which all turn, lords and commoners alike' – she's risked all and won a life on the outside. **VR**

Val Randall has been Head of English in a North-East Lancashire mixed comprehensive – Mansfield High School, Brierfield – for almost six years.

In addition to her reviewing for **BfK**, she reads for Heinemann, helping to recommend titles for inclusion in their New Windmill list. She also edits a magazine for Lancashire County Advisory Service and lectures on

children's literature for Avon Teachers of English, NATE and at conferences and training courses for Lancashire teachers.



Cover illustration by Sonia Boyce.



Cover illustration by Jez Alborough.

Pam Harwood has been teaching in First and Middle schools in Southampton for the past twenty-plus years. She says, 'I've looked after libraries, developed language and audio-visual resources, and am now implementing that many-tentacled creature in the yellow ring-binder.' The last mega-event she was involved with was Book Week when they had living, breathing poets in school, librarians, a sponsored read and book sales, the whole event reaching dizzy heights of fame by being reported in the local press.



Martin's Mice

Dick King-Smith, ill. Jez Alborough, Puffin, 0 14 03.4026 2, £1.99 (BfK 61 – March)

Life on a farm is a very treacherous business, especially when you're a lady mouse and particularly vulnerable because you expect babies any day. Drusilla, a mouse of great character and courage, is in this hazardous predicament when she's caught by the lightning paw of Martin, a tabby cat.

Martin is, however, no ordinary farm kitten. Although he's inherited all the mouse-hunting moggy instincts, Martin is horrified at the thought of eating Drusilla, preferring to be her minder and make her his pet in a well-furnished penthouse apartment bath in the attic of the barn. He soon discovers that keeping a pet is not as easy as he initially anticipated. Fetching and carrying mouse food and water lead to some of the most comical scenes I've ever read!

Every page in this very, very funny book is delightful – both for the adult reader and for the child listening. Dick King-Smith has skilfully blended a pacey story for the more fluent reader as a read-alone and enough sophisticated humour to keep the adult reader on their toes in a read-aloud situation. Here the adult voice never intrudes, but adds to a delicious blend of wit, comedy and frivolous farce.



Jez Alborough's black-and-white line illustrations are truly hilarious. The feline facial expressions raise a giggle even when reading alone in the early hours and happily they're big enough to be seen at a distance when sharing with a group audience. I've read the book several times for its sheer vitality. It's unforgettable and deserves to become a classic. **PH**

Shan Helps Rani

0 233 98523 9 (English only)
0 233 98524 7 (Bengali/English)
0 233 98525 5 (Gujarati/English)
0 233 98526 3 (Punjabi/English)
0 233 98527 1 (Urdu/English)

Mary Dickinson, ill. Meena Jamil, Deutsch, £3.99 each (BfK 65 – November)

Shan is upset that he's not allowed to do the shopping with his older sister. But shopping is much easier if you remember to take a bag as Rani discovers when she struggles home with her arms loaded: that's where Shan has his chance to help.

There are still all too few simple domestic stories featuring Asian families, so this one is especially welcome – and available in four dual-language editions as well as English only.

I've chosen this title not so much for its merits as an outstanding story but because in our increasingly multi-cultural society it seems to me that books like this should be in all primary schools, not just those with a multi-ethnic intake. They help increase all children's knowledge of cultural diversity and enhance their language awareness, both of which are vital concerns of anti-racist teaching.

However dual-language picture books like *Shan Helps Rani* – yes, I know we can argue about which of the two languages should be printed first – are particularly welcome in schools such as my own where there are many bilingual children, for teachers in such schools are constantly on the look-out for opportunities and materials which best serve the social development and cognitive growth of those pupils. Not merely do these texts help children build on their own existing heritage language whose development is vital alongside their learning of English, but they offer support for the children's self-esteem, and confidence and pride in their own ethnicity.

Also their importance in helping support relationships with the families of those children cannot be overstated. We, like many primary schools, operate a PACT (Parents And Children Together) home reading system: 'My mum really liked this book,' said one of my readers, 'she read me the Punjabi and I read her the English.' **JB**

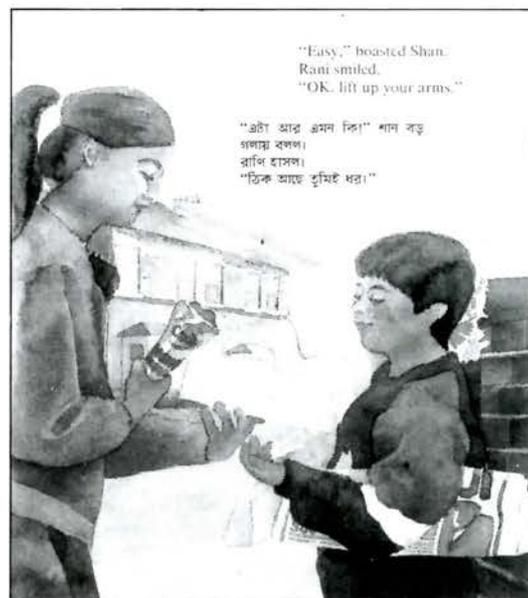


Illustration by Meena Jamil.

Jill Bennett is a pioneer of teaching reading without a scheme and probably best known for her *Learning to Read with Picture Books*. Currently Deputy Head of a Junior school in Hounslow, Middlesex, she also writes articles, edits poetry collections and anthologies, and acts in an advisory capacity for several publishers. She was the 1990 winner of the Eleanor Farjeon Award.



Audio Tapes

Rachel Redford reviews a selection of recent story tapes.

Reviews are listed in roughly ascending order of listening age. Prices include VAT unless otherwise stated.

Teddy Bear Tales

Four stories by Joan Robinson, A A Milne, Philippa Pearce and Michael Bond, read by Christopher Scott and Bernard Cribbins, Cover to Cover, 40 mins, £2.25

Cover to Cover's label is a guarantee of sensitively chosen material and narrators. These titles are quality listening for the around-5-year-olds. The stories will enchant over and over again – cosy, secure, warming and yet imaginative, from classic stories like 'Teddy Robinson' to the very first tale about Paddington Bear. The readers make mini dramatic productions of their stories, like Bernard Cribbins' great voice characterisation as Pooh gets stuck in the rabbit hole after eating too much bread and honey. The readings are word-for-word and publishers are given on the inlay card.

Round About 5

Five stories with various narrators, Cover to Cover, 35 mins, £1.99

This second title is another thoughtful selection of stories for the same age group with sympathetic narrators. Both presentation and material is varied: Johnny Morris reads 'The Elephant's Child' with his inimitable characterisation, Miriam Margolyes gives a warm, spirited reading of Alexei Tolstoy's retelling of the traditional 'The Great Big Enormous Turnip' and Nigel Anthony tells a funny primary school story every 5-year-old will identify with: 'Melanie Brown and the Pencil Sharpener' by Pamela Oldfield. Stephen Thorne characterises rural Mr Pig beautifully in Mary Rayner's delightful 'The Potato Patch' where the young pigs 'help' by planting a banana and a felt tip pen in the potato patch. Excellent value.

Cassette 1:

How Do You Weigh an Elephant?

Derek Farmer, read by David Yip

Never Mind!

Michael Rosen, read by Michael, Eddie and Jo Rosen

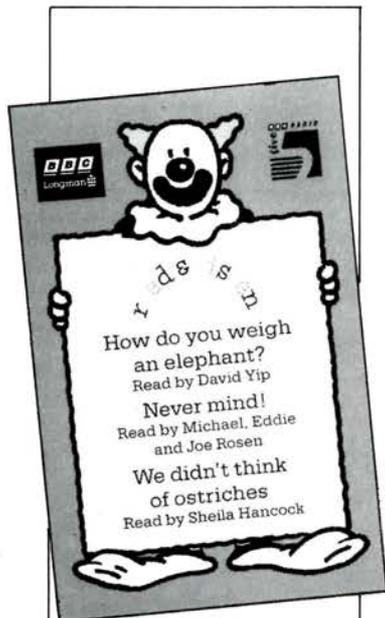
We Didn't Think of Ostriches

Catherine Storr, read by Sheila Hancock

Cassette 2:

The Magic Rattle

Hilda Offen, read by Phillip Schofield



The Four Friends

Jugnu Singh, read by Rani Singh

Listen All of You!

Kathleen Hersom, read by Craig Charles

Read and Listen, BBC & Longman, 90 mins, £3.50 each (32-page paperback for each story, £2.50)

All these stories are currently being broadcast on Radio 5's excellent 'Read and Listen' series produced by Joan Griffiths. The books and cassettes make an irresistibly attractive and educational sound collection. The books are lavishly and vivaciously illustrated and the print large and clear. The stories cover a wide cultural background: the children illustrated on the

school farm trip in **Listen All of You!** are multi-cultural; the children in **The Four Friends** are Indian and there's a Chinese Emperor in **How Do You Weigh an Elephant?** The narrators are chosen to complement and fully exploit the genre of the stories. The presentation is varied. Michael Rosen's own son plays a part in his effective drama about his lost football. Mum goes out and leaves Gran a list of all the things the children aren't allowed to do in **We Didn't Think of Ostriches**, which Sheila Hancock reads with great animation. All the stories are lively and entertaining; great at home or school for children to increase their reading confidence either by listening and following, or for listening before trying to read. With the National Curriculum's emphasis on Listening Skills, primary school teachers will find this a particularly useful series.

The Little Mermaid

Hans Christian Andersen, read by Cathleen Nesbitt, Collins Caedmon, 56 mins, £2.99

Cathleen Nesbitt reads the Hans Andersen story about Ariel, the Little Mermaid, who falls in love with the human Prince she saves from drowning. She sacrifices her beautiful voice to the sea witch in return for 3 days' human form – only to find herself dumb before the Prince and his new bride. This accomplished and lengthy narration captures the poignancy of the tale.

The Little Mermaid

Story and songs from the film, Pickwick, 20 mins, book and cassette, £3.49

The Disney version is narrated well by Roy Dotrice with a cutie American Ariel and some of the music from the box office hit film. The Disney stills illustrating the book show Ariel as a grotesque Barbie mermaid and the brief adapted story ends with Ariel and the Prince 'whose love was as deep as the sea' marrying on the wedding ship. ... Take your choice!

Tom's Midnight Garden

Philippa Pearce, read by Jan Francis, Chivers, unabridged, four cassettes, 5 hrs 45 mins, £16.95 + VAT

This now classic story deserves to be read in its entirety as it is here. To escape his brother's measles, Tom goes to stay with his aunt and uncle in their

cramped flat built on land which had once been a Victorian garden. It's to this idyll that Tom returns each night, making friends with the nineteenth-century children there. In her narration, Jan Francis conveys sensitively motherly Aunt Gwen's puzzlement and Uncle's growing scepticism as Tom prolongs his stay, hooked by his nocturnal mystical adventures. This is rewarding listening.

Mostly Timothy

Written and narrated by June Counsel, Craftsmen Cassettes, 1 hr 20 mins, £4.99

This leisurely-listening cassette has six stories on it all about Timothy and the adventures of his imagination. They are an original blend of fantasy and everyday little-boy reality with titles like 'The Gonk, the Witch and the Ninglepoise' and 'The Three Koalas and Goldilocks (who wasn't)'. June Counsel reads her own stories with warmth and cosiness without being patronising and with a gentle rhythm which makes the most of the oral tradition and which also makes them ideal bedtime stories. This new tapes company has further releases planned for January.

Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH

Robert O'Brien, read by Gwen Watford, Chivers, four cassettes, unabridged, 5 hrs 50 mins, £16.95 + VAT

Gwen Watford is an accomplished reader combining maternal appeal and drama in her voice which draws the young listener into the animal world of the story. To begin with, it seems like a mouse version of **Watership Down** with Mrs Frisby and her family of mice threatened by the farmer's plough, but when she turns to the rats for help, the story takes a different tougher direction. The rats had been imprisoned in NIMH, a laboratory, and the story presents a sophisticated topic in an accessible way for quite a wide age range. The reading is unabridged and without sound effects.

Rachel Redford is a well-known authority on audio tapes and compiler of Book Trust's **Hear to Read** (1986, 0 85353 403 9, £1.50 non-members, £1.00 members, inc. p&p), available from the Publication Dept, Book Trust, 45 East Hill, London SW18 2QZ.

BOOKS FOR KEEPS NEWS

A New Head for the CBF

Wendy Cooling has been appointed as the new Director of the Children's Book Foundation. Currently Deputy Head of Fulham Cross Comprehensive School in London, she took up her new appointment at Book House in January. Her previous involvement in book activities include advisory teaching on library skills and independent learning, compiling children's packs and guides for the National Trust together with titles for Puffin in conjunction with Madame Tussauds . . . and research into the role of the school library across the curriculum. All this, of course, in addition to the book-ish preoccupations expected from a teacher of English. She comments, 'I'm very happy indeed to join the CBF and look forward to using my experience and enthusiasm to extend its role, especially with the National Curriculum in mind.' BfK has already encountered Wendy's enthusiasm at the Puffin Bookshop in Covent Garden - and very encouraging it was. Good luck to her!

DODIE SMITH

3rd May 1896 - 24th November 1990

Best known for plays like *Autumn Crocus* (1930) and *Dear Octopus* (1938), along with her novel *I Capture the Castle* (1949), Dodie Smith was also the author of an authentic children's classic, *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1956), which was turned into a full-length animated cartoon by Walt Disney five years later. A sequel followed in 1967 called *The Starlight Barking*, though this was less successful than the earlier tale, inspiredly old-fashioned, of Pongo, Missus and their persecutor Cruella de Vil.



A former actress, Dodie Smith lived for many years in a multi-beamed seventeenth-century cottage in Finchingfield, Essex with her husband Alec Beesley who died in 1988. She was endlessly curious about changing times . . . but always very much her own person. Her first invitation to appear on *Desert Island Discs* was cancelled by Roy Plumbly when she insisted on a long and loud Beatles record. In her eighties, she produced four very popular volumes of autobiography. These, like her last children's book, *The Midnight Kittens* (1978), offered a combination of innocence, moral certainty and immense charm which was her hallmark.

Authorbank Directory

The Children's Book Foundation offers this new Guide - the Authors and Illustrators willing to visit schools or participate in book events, giving full details of the sessions they offer - including preferred age-range, group-size, what they have to offer and how to contact them. It's free to CBF members, £4.50 otherwise.

Details from Jean Egbunike, Children's Book Foundation, Book House, 45 East Hill, London SW18 2QZ (tel. 081-870 9055).

Tell Me Another One!

Ace storytellers Grace Hallworth and Liz Weir offer a video showing how it's done . . . or, in the case of Liz Weir (acting her socks off), how it's *not* done. Aimed at librarians and teachers, this twenty-minute video will help anyone improve their storytelling technique by following a few practical steps. The basis of your next INSET day asks BfK? Compared with the cost of hiring a visiting speaker, worth every penny of £25 - with repeat performances to order. There's no better way to demonstrate how stories can be shared through picture books. Highly recommended.

Available from: Remploy Limited, London Road, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire.

Bernard's DODGEM

Filming is now complete on the BBC's latest Bernard Ashley serial - dramatised by the author himself from his popular Julia MacRae/Puffin novel for young teens. The cast includes Trevor Peacock and a Grange Hill 'star' . . . transmission is in February and March 1991. Worth a note in your diary, says BfK.

AWARDS UPDATE . . .

Since the November BfK went to press, news has come in on the following:

Smarties Prize

Overall winner, and 9-11 Category: **Midnight Blue** by Pauline Fisk, Lion Publishing, 0 7459 1848 4, £7.95

6-8 Category: **Esio Trot** by Roald Dahl, ill. Quentin Blake, Cape, 0 224 02786 7, £6.95

0-5 Category: **Six Dinner Sid** by Inga Moore, Simon & Schuster, 0 7500 0297 2, £6.99; 0 7500 0304 9, £2.99 pbk

Whitbread Children's Novel

AK by Peter Dickinson, Gollancz, 0 575 04894 8, £10.95

Emil/Kurt Maschler Award

Winner: **All Join In** by Quentin Blake, Cape, 0 224 02770 0, £6.95

Irish Guide to Children's Books 1980-90



With a preface by Clodagh Corcoran introducing the Irish Children's Book Trust, this compilation by Lesley Reece and Gabriel Rosenstock covers the full age-range from beginning readers to school-leavers, discusses traditional Irish Legends, Folk and Fairy tales, includes non-fiction, books in Irish, a section on illustration . . . and contributions from a variety of Irish writers such as Tony Hickey, Carolyn Swift and Martin Waddell/Catherine Sefton. What more could be asked for? Not to be missed - and, at £2.00 a copy for more than 170 pages, excellent value.

Enquiries to Clodagh Corcoran, Chairwoman, Irish Children's Book Trust, Bookhouse Ireland, 65 Middle Abbey Street, Dublin 1. ●

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Nightingale Hall, University of Nottingham

Conference Organisers:

Jan Sanderson
31 The Green, Radcliffe-on-Trent
Nottingham NG12 2LA
Tel. (0602) 333003

Dinah Wilcox
33 Trent View Gardens
Radcliffe-on-Trent, Nottingham NG12 1AY
Tel. (0602) 333165

NEW VERSE '90

We asked Morag Styles, well-known anthologist and co-editor of the BfK Guide, Poetry 0-16, to take a final look at last year's offerings

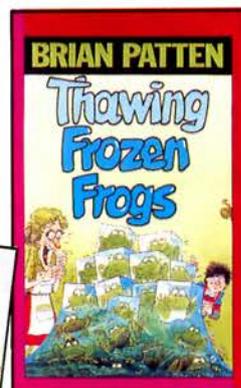
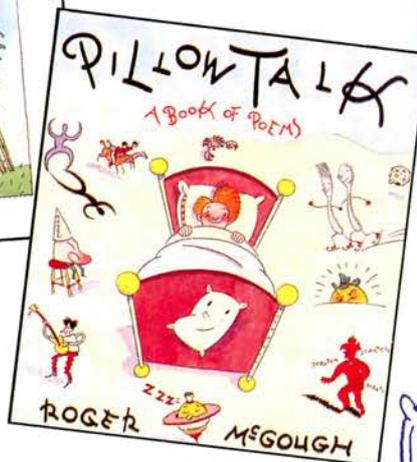
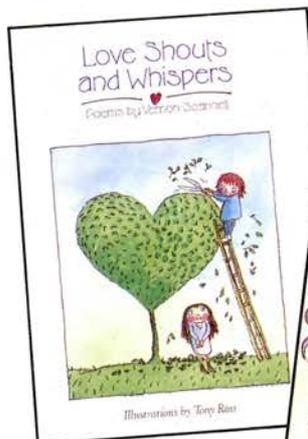
A hardback book of poetry by Roger McGough, Brian Patten or Vernon Scannell is always exciting: new autumn collections by all three is a treat indeed. As chance has thrown these poets together, let's see what they've got in common. All three write for adults as well as children. They've all been on the poetry scene for at least twenty years and are good performers of their own work. All three enjoy popular acclaim. There the similarities end: although humour is strong in these three new books, each has its own particular flavour.



"With loving, too: no point in asking why.
There is no answer." That is my reply.

Love, Shouts and Whispers (Hutchinson, 0 09 174365 6, £6.95) is Vernon Scannell's second collection for young readers and follows the same formula as his previous, **The Clever Potato** (Hutchinson, 0 09 173442 8, £5.95; Red Fox, 0 09 962280 7, £2.50 pbk): the poems relate loosely to one broad theme, in this case, love. That's not a topic with which to conjure lightly for children of nine to thirteen! But with Scannell's light touch and the delectable art of Tony Ross, there's nothing to worry about. Indeed, the focus of love in this book can be anything from self-conceit to a lullaby for a baby, cupboard love to a monster's need for affection.

*Beneath the piteous brute disguise
The need for what might humanise:
The welcome or embrace than can
Change lonely monster into Man.*



There's plenty here to amuse and enrich readers of about nine to fourteen, lots of variety and some very moving writing. It's painful to read the last two lines of 'Incendiary' about a child who sets himself on fire: *Which would have been content with one warm kiss / Had there been anyone to offer this.* Or Scannell's tight rhythms ending 'Love Shouts and Whispers': *And when white winter shakes its icy chains / Love whispers warmth that comforts and sustains.* I believe that the poems we present to children should be equally enjoyable to adults. These are. And Tony Ross's black and white drawings are magical.



Thawing Frozen Frogs (Viking, 0 670 83036 4, £7.99) is Brian Patten's follow-up to his hilarious **Gargling with Jelly** (Viking, 0 670 80644 7, £6.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.1904 2, £1.99 pbk). You get fun in abundance - daft puns, groan-making rhymes, kids getting one over adults... and the drawings that accompany the text (by David Mostyn) are in over-the-top comic style. However, there's more to Patten than the light-hearted: he's always explored the sensitive side of life, as in 'The Secret Prayer': *Dear God / Don't ever let them die, or if you do / Make sure I go too.* Or 'Hushabye Lullaby': *I try so hard / To hear the things / Behind the silence / That sleep brings.* In this book he also gives a strong green message.

*How deep the snow,
How white it falls,
How cold and sharp the air,
How perfectly each little flake
Pollutes the atmosphere.*

Good stuff.

'His ability to make us smile and be sad at the same time' (Signal) is quoted on the cover blurb of Roger McGough's new collection. This 'shadow round the corner' is one of the features of McGough's work that make him such an interesting poet for the young.

*The fifth is set in the future
(And as you can see it's the last)
When the Word was made Computer
And books are a thing of the past.*

The tone of **Pillow Talk** (Viking, 0 670 81992 1, £7.99), aimed at readers of sevenish-plus, is mainly jocular, though his poems often have a thoughtful underbelly. What's so characteristic of McGough is the wit and the wickedly clever word-gymnastics ('*Alas, poor bottom*', '*chew chew chew / na sandwiches*').

Steven Guarnaccia's line drawings on every page visually match McGough's inventive language.

*Glimpsed through the night
Is the glimmer of the day
Light is but darkness
Worn away.*

Recommended. ●



STOP PRESS: Farrukh Dhondy's first anthology of black and Asian poetry for teenage and adults readers, **Ranters, Ravers and Rhymers** is published by Collins (0 00 191359 X, £7.99) this month. Don't miss it.

The BfK Guide, Poetry 0-16,

edited by Morag Styles and Pat Triggs, is available from **Books for Keeps**, 6 Brightfield Road, London SE12 8QF, priced £5.50 inc. postage and packing. You can also pay by credit card (Access, Visa, Eurocard or Mastercard) or use the telephone order service on 081-852 4953.

It's worth every penny!

In BfK for March . . .

Bernard Ashley on being a teacher-writer

Joan Griffiths on adapting novels for radio

Elizabeth Attenborough on why books cost what they do

Chris Sutcliffe on children as judges of the Smarties Book Prize

Steve Rosson on school librarianship

Lynne Reid Banks in Authorgraph plus, of course, reviews, reviews, reviews . . .