



Teenage
Reading...
and Sex

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

January 1995
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the children's book magazine

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CoverSTORY

Our cover this month features Jean Ure's new book *Faces at the Window* (see Authorgraph on page 12), with a photograph by Oliver Hunter. The book is published by Corgi Freeway and we are grateful to Transworld Publishers for their help in using this illustration.

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the children's book magazine

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THE RETURN OF COMMON SENSE

Our first indication that the battle might have been won was a message on BfK's answerphone. To begin with, in fact, it was less a message than a fanfare – sounding suspiciously like a combination of Taran-Tara! and Nyeh-Nyeh-Nyeh! After this, in more moderate tones, the voice of Mike Rosen brought advance information from a journalist friend of his that those Lists of recommended books and authors had finally been dropped from Key Stage One and Key Stage Two of the new National Curriculum Orders for English.

Since, like Mike, we've campaigned against these abominations from the moment they hove into sight, we were delighted... but also anxious to have the good news confirmed officially. So the report in November 11th's *Times Educational Supplement* was most encouraging:

'exemplary reading lists at key stages 1 and 2 scrapped although categories of fiction and non-fiction have been specified... post-1900 canon at key stages 3 and 4 scrapped but pre-1900 list of authors retained... new exemplary list of four dramatists.'

Finally, in December, we received the 'second-stage proof copy' of the document that's due to be published and distributed to schools in January 1995 and it seemed safe to rejoice in a victory which, if incomplete, is still highly satisfactory.

Of course, the new Orders for English are far from perfect. As Henrietta Dombey, of the University of Brighton, has pointed out, in many respects they fall a long way short of the Cox report (remember Cox?) never mind leaving unresolved the question of how they're to be assessed. Nonetheless, they are undeniably list-less – at any rate for those crucial years when the reading habit has to be established. At long, long last the Government appears to have accepted that the canonical approach it struggled so hard to impose on teachers is politically objectionable, misunderstands the nature of literary evaluation, breaks that crucial *personal* bond between a book and an apprentice reader and actually sidelines the working out of a proper reading pedagogy... little things like that. No wonder Mike Rosen whooped a bit when he broke the news. So should we all. Hence a little celebration is called for:

TARAN-TARA! TARAN-TARA! NYEH-NYEH-NYEH!

Now we're free to get on with the real job.

And the real job, as summarised in the New Orders (unedited version), is as follows:

'Pupils should be given extensive experience of children's literature. They should read on their own, with others and to the teacher, from a range of genres that includes, stories, poetry, plays and picture books...'

These materials, furthermore – and let the words ring out loud and clear – should be used to 'stimulate pupils' imagination and enthusiasm' (our italics).

Amen to that, says BfK.

After all, with so much else competing for children's attention nowadays, it's only through kindling a genuine enthusiasm for books that we can hope to transform their initial reading into a pleasurable life-long habit. And to do this we need information about what their preferences actually are. Here's where a team at the Roehampton Institute Children's Literature Research

Editor's PAGE



CHRIS POWLING

Centre comes in. Just published is their study *Contemporary Juvenile Reading Habits* which notes that 'There has never been a sustained and comprehensive attempt to study children's reading in Britain.' The aim is to create a database which, when interrogated, 'provides a wide range of information and a "snapshot" of contemporary trends in juvenile reading habits'. As such, the survey is hugely ambitious:

*'... what children read;
how they come into contact with a range of reading matter including comics, magazines, special interest periodicals, and information publications;
what their preferences are;
whether they are satisfied with the kinds of publications available to them;
who influences their choice;
how they select what to read;
differences in public and private reading practices;
perceptions of stereotyping (particularly regarding race, class, gender, age, nationality and religion);
actual differences attributable to differences of age, sex, parental occupation and ethnic background;
pass along readership;
reading in relation to other leisure activities, etc.'*

Add to these a section for older readers which asks questions about the ways in which reading assists (or not) in helping young people to make sense of an increasingly problematic world and it's tempting to propose that the study should carry the sub-title 'Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Children's Reading'.

So far, admittedly, the investigation is only in its pilot stage. Formats and methodologies are still being tested – in this case via a questionnaire filled in by 300 or so children aged 4-16 in about a dozen schools. The full survey, of over 8,000 children throughout England and Wales, won't be completed till next year. Already there are hints of intriguing findings, however... about series fiction, for instance, which is reviewed regularly here in BfK and is identified by the researchers as 'a hugely important part of what young people read and how they choose'. If the Roehampton study manages to deliver even half the facts it promises, we'll all be greatly in its debt.

Altogether, then, the end of 1994 was pretty up-cheering for anyone who's open-minded as well as enthusiastic about children and their reading. Why, I almost sent a Christmas card to the DFE.

Let's hope 1995 is just as propitious.

Happy New Year!

Chris

Contemporary Juvenile Reading Habits costs £15.00 from Tony Warshaw, The British Library, RND Department, 2 Sheraton Street, London W1V 4BH.

First let's dispel the myth that teenagers don't read. Of course they read; the wide curriculum ensures there's plenty of that, but when there's a choice they don't reach for the literature that National Curriculum supremos would like them to experience as part of 'The Canon'. Here's where potential, major conflict emerges. Frequently a reading teenager will ask me, 'Why can't we do such-and-such a book as a class reader?' The answer so often boils down to the fact that the suggested title is relative candyfloss and so we would soon run out of things to say about it and assignments to write on it. We teach the 'canonised worthies' because they give us something to go at in the classroom, but in the process we can be giving the message that our stuff is the good stuff and their stuff is best kept under wraps. The knack is getting across the notion that both deserve equal weight but for different reasons and purposes. Pupils should never feel they need to apologise for their choice of reading material any more than we need to apologise for teaching from 'The Canon'.

Parents and relatives often exude the same subliminal message; they buy wholesome 'classics' as presents. Many don't get read so the adults become disappointed and their offspring are made to feel they're ungrateful and letting the grown-ups down. One girl told me, 'My mum buys me the books she read at school and now wants me to read them so I'll end up better than her. She doesn't seem to realise that books written for teenagers are so much better now.'

Another 14-year-old complained that her grandma was still buying her Christmas annuals every year!

Nowadays, TV and films play a big part in youngsters' lives. You're more likely to hear 'I saw a film' in schoolyard conversation than 'I read a book'. However, the media, far from killing reading, actually encourage it. Young people read the books of the series or film. One lad read all of *Archer's Goon* by Diana Wynne Jones because he'd missed a few episodes during the serialisation. Books like *Mr Bean's Secret Diary*, *Sean's Book*, *The Smell of Reeves and Mortimer*, *Vic Reeves' Big Night Out* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* owe their popularity to goggle-box watching, just like *Adrian Mole* a few years ago. I seldom have trouble 'selling' a book recently filmed or televised and some of the most astutely critical book talk emerges when pupils have encountered both book and film. They nearly always prefer the former.

Another curious side to this comes from the girl who told me she really prefers books to films because she doesn't like the director doing all the visualising for her with camera shots and locations, etc. 'You can make up your own pictures of what's happening, rather than what TV shows you is happening.' There's a roundabout way of television encouraging reading!

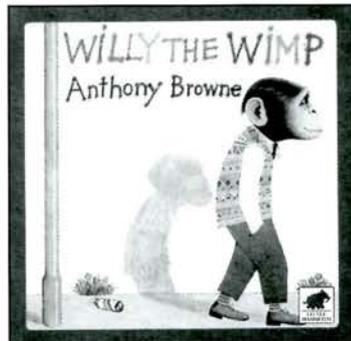
Mainly boys, I must say it, seem to have difficulty keeping up a reading interest. It's now suggested male under-achievement begins very early and is related to boys' poor reading skills and low levels of concentration as compared to girls. Classes I've spoken to about this are of the opinion that boys bend under peer-group pressure not to be seen doing anything so 'swotty' as enjoying a good book and definitely not to admit to it if they do like reading.

... MEANWHILE, IN THE TEEN

David Bennett chats to teenagers about



David Bennett.



To encourage reading adults would be far better off asking the kids what books *they* want and then insisting on an answer before marching along to the bookshop, preferably with teenager in tow. My spies tell me tokens get swapped or exchanged for cash, so that's not always the ideal cop-out for adults wishing to foster teenage readers.

Recommendation from peers or teachers it seems is a big factor in what draws individuals to certain books. Written reviews and prize-giving panels of judges barely figure in my discussions with students; evidently word of mouth mainly leads them to books. I have advocated for a long while that one of the reading skills is *choosing* what to read. I bet there aren't many of us who can say, hand on heart, that we teach this. Could it be that one of the problems youngsters face is that there's so much to choose from they don't know where to start and consequently give up or look for easy, undemanding options? Are they advised on *how* they might go about making choices? And, if so, how often is that advice reinforced? For many, using a library properly, cracking its codes and penetrating its secrets is a forbidding prospect. For would-be readers, reducing choice to a carefully selected pile or booklist is a big favour.

One extremely interesting incidence of pupil meeting book was the girl who passed through our resources centre and spotted the book *Charlotte Sometimes* by Penelope Farmer. Now 'The Cure' have a release of the same name so our avid Cure fan borrowed the book, read it and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Then there are lads like Jamie, the sort of kid who wriggles all lesson. What he really needs is to be let out for a run every hour, a bit like a puppy. He explained to me that the reason why he doesn't read is because 'it's a sitting-down sort of a thing and there are things happening around me that I want to be part of and join in.' Sounds reasonable to me.

My classes also feel that the prevailing attitudes of adults is significant. They suggest girls read more than boys simply because their parents tend to allow them to roam less and so they pick up a book.

Girls can be far more reflective about their reading as a rule; they seem to know exactly why they do it and what it does for them. Escape reading figures strongly - 'Reading a book helps you relax and go into someone else's world, forgetting your own problems, especially when you're upset.'

So, as recent concern about under-developed male potential suggests, whilst boys are out and about male-bonding with their bucko mates, many girls are applying themselves to study and getting their emotional charge from a good read.

From my discussions it's obvious girls are able to internalise their emotional reactions to texts and willingly appreciate that a book can allow the reader to witness other people's experiences second-hand. *The Diary of Anne Frank* nearly always gets referred to here. Pete Johnson's novels also seem to be appreciated for the way the reader is drawn to empathise with the char-

acters. **We, the Haunted** is one title that enjoys plenty of recommendations. Then *Jane Eyre* often comes into the frame – ‘The loneliness at the beginning made me so upset I had to read on.’

Losing David by Elida Young in the ‘Sweet Goodbyes’ series ‘made me cry out of sympathy and because I know someone who has cancer’, and **Dear Nobody** by Berlie Doherty ‘made me think hard about what having a baby means’.

More than once I’ve been told that a certain book has enabled someone to understand how friends are feeling and then to set about helping them. **It’s Not the End of the World** by Judy Blume was singled out recently. This writer nearly always gets the highest accolades – ‘It’s like another teenager telling you. Her books help you with problems’, and ‘**Blubber** made me realise that personalities are more important than looks’.

Yet, **Forever** doesn’t get total approval. ‘The gorey sex bits put me off the book. I don’t want to read what everyone else is up to.’

In the same group of Year 10 pupils, one lass had recently finished **Polo** by Jilly Cooper and was waiting for her mother to finish and pass on another by the same author!

Where teenagers are concerned, you definitely can’t always rely on serial reading to keep the pages turning. After the first flush of enthusiasm and roughly three or four titles, the novelty generally wears off in favour of alternatives. Teenagers like having series exclusively for their own use, but do not seem to be conscientiously faithful to them.

of the **Rings** and thereafter felt depressed for six months because he’d ‘lost that world’. The same lad admired the **Redwall** series by Brian Jacques, ‘not because they’re scary but because you want to know what happens. It’s an interesting, other fantasy world where you meet lots of other creatures and it’s different.’

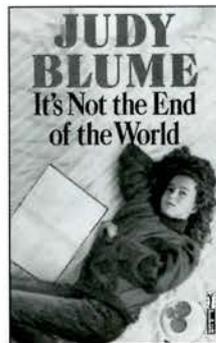
Hobbies and pastimes spawn much teenage reading. One pupil told me his sole reading material ever is **Yachts and Yachting**, but later confessed to the sports pages of the local paper. Newspapers are usually read for their sports sections, horoscopes, problem pages and music reviews.

A boom area lately for boys seems to be computer mags. I suppose here is where books meet the technological revolution and there might appear to be conflict. But when you talk to young people about what they want these mags for, it’s not the all-things-bright-and-technical-new-gadgetry they’re after, it’s acquiring details of the latest fantasy games – in effect the creative, imaginative application of the technology. Let’s hope there’s a natural progression to CD-Rom fiction books.

I’ve noticed pupils seem to be considering more picture books and poetry lately. One bright girl told me she felt she has a better appreciation of books like Anthony Browne’s **Willy the Wimp** now she’s older, especially the details in the illustrations. **Meg and Mog**, **Mister Men**, Beatrix Potter are enjoyed more now, although for reasons of street-cred this is not widely known.

TEENAGERS’ READING CORNER . . .

but their reading habits and preferences



Pupils from George Spencer School, Nottingham with Michael Rosen. Photograph courtesy of Evening Post Photo Sales.

Sex and romance often get a lukewarm response nowadays. My young ladies equate it with the Catherine Cookson their grannies read and attempt to pass on. It’s read by early teens maybe but the older ones rate it as ‘sloppy and boring’. At the grand old age of 15 my girls gave ‘Sweet Valley High’ a resounding thumbs-down. Is it because the media has broken down virtually all the previous taboos about sex by its incessant coverage and so youngsters see it as tediously everyday when introduced into teenage novels?

Horror, however, is in the ascendant with both sexes. ‘Horror’s good because you know it can’t come true and everything is unbelievable, but it lets your imagination flow’ and ‘You can escape into horror because you know it’s not really real’. Second-hand scariness is much appreciated in books like the ‘Point Horror’ titles, ‘because they show bad situations that you could get yourself into. Sometimes they’re better if someone gets killed. Then it’s more believable.’ **The Window** by Diane Hoh and **The Snowman** by R L Stine are particularly recommended.

Predictably, James Herbert is frequently cited for good horror reading. **Pet Cemetery**, **The Magic Cottage** and **Carrie** are widely read. One boy made a very revealing comment about **The Rats**. He told me that when he read about the death of the baby he felt awful for weeks – awful for having read it, not about it! Who says lads have no sensitivity to what they read?

It was a boy who gave some clear insight into his reading of fantasy, which is often more of a male domain. He’d read **Lord**

Naturally, anything by Dahl comes into the same category. ‘I go back to Roald Dahls when I’m bored. I reckon I see more in them now I’m older and they always make me smile.’

As for poetry there’s something to be said for dipping in a toe and then leaving the water. You can do that with poetry; it’s not easy to do with novels without feeling you’ve left something incomplete. Even non-reading boys are willing to have a quick poetry browse provided they’re given the right encouragement, which generally means comic and humorous material.

And that brings me to Mike Rosen. His collections always seem to jiggle a funny bone and if they don’t work with youngsters then nothing will. Even my **Yachts and Yachting** man warmed to him. ■

This article is based in part on a **Treasure Islands** programme which was transmitted on BBC Radio 4 on 27th April 1994.

David Bennett is a regular reviewer for **BfK**. He is Senior Teacher responsible for the English Faculty and resources management in a Nottinghamshire grant-maintained school.

REVIEWS

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

Nursery/Infant REVIEWS

Crocodile Capers

0 7497 1749 1

Crocodile Party

0 7497 1748 3



"Don't be silly," says Mum.
"You look just as nice as Miranda."

Susanna Gretz, Mammoth (Oct 94), £3.99 each

Susanna Gretz knows exactly how to depict the insecurities, jealousies, anxieties and even the downright contrariness of young children. Put these behaviours into the amusing context of a crocodile family, then hold up the mirror and you have books that allow children to explore the darker side of their emotions in a safe situation. That children want to, and need to, is proved by the near tatty condition of books which were pristine only a few weeks ago! JS

Starring Fred and Ursulina

Suzy-Jane Tanner, Red Fox (Nov 94), 0 09 929041 3, £3.99

This book elicits diametrically opposing views, with passionate advocates (predominantly, it has to be said, aspiring thespians of the feminine gender) and also calls of 'soppy' and 'boring!' The fact that it's hardly touched the shelf indicates that Suzy-Jane Tanner's formula of twin bears – one a tomboy and the other decidedly not, one who is always neat and tidy and the other who attracts pots of paint and any sort of mess, one whose greatest ambition is to play Sleeping Beauty while the other's is to play the back end of Daisybelle the cow – is a winner. This book is aimed at a very particular niche and it fills it very successfully. JS

Owl Babies

Martin Waddell, ill. Patrick Benson, Walker (Sept 94), 0 7445 3167 5, £3.99

When you put two such masters together, you should get pure magic and in this book you do! Benson's breathtaking illustrations match Waddell's ability to capture the very essence of our feelings. Owl Babies



"What's all the fuss?" their Owl Mother asked. "You knew I'd come back."

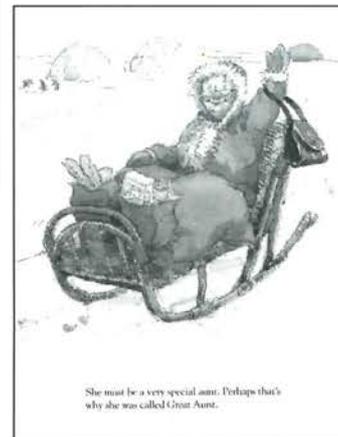
is a picture book that should be bought in quantities and issued to every family with young children. It touches on the deepest fears of all of us as we wait for a loved one to return, but in its reassuring resolution we can celebrate the warmth at the heart of a good relationship. JS

Will There Be Polar Bears?

Julia Jarman, ill. Priscilla Lamont, Mammoth (Sept 94), 0 7497 1624 X, £3.99

Buy this now, ready for next Christmas, if you didn't find it in

time for the Christmas just gone. It's a heart-warming story of Sam's disappointment at the prospect of Christmas away from home with Great Aunt Addie.



She must be a very special aunt. Perhaps that's why she was called Great Aunt.

To cap it all his sister's description of it as being 'Up North' and 'Miles and miles away' does not mean at the North Pole. How Great Aunt Addie turns his double disappointment to total delight is an experience to be savoured. JS

Infant/Junior REVIEWS

Elmer on Stilts

David McKee, Red Fox (Nov 94), 0 09 929671 3, £3.99

Elmer, the multi-coloured elephant, has been a favourite for a long time and this will be a popular follow-on. Elmer has to think fast when hunters arrive in the forest and the idea he comes up with, thanks to a passing giraffe, is ingenious and entertaining. It's also quite complex and might need some discussion with very young listeners. As usual, the pictures are bright and clear and add greatly to the text. LW

The Paper Princess

Elisa Kleven, Orchard (Sept 94), 1 85213 772 X, £3.99

A colourful picture book about a princess, drawn and cut out by a little girl but blown away before she can finish her. The paper princess whirls through a very beautiful, jewel-like world, created from collage pictures, in the search for some hair and a home. The story is attractive and the artwork even more so. As a bonus, the reader is invited to make a paper princess for him/herself and so join in the fun the author has had creating this delightful story. LW

Frog in Winter

Max Velthuis, Andersen (Sept 94), 0 86264 521 2, £3.99

A heart-rending tale of Frog, who has plainly never been told that frogs hibernate in mud at the bottom of ponds in winter. His friends enjoy the snow but when you are 'only a bare frog' it's no fun at all and the poor creature nearly freezes to death. Luckily, he's rescued by kind companions and survives to enjoy the spring. A gentle story about the value of friendship. This could lead on to discussion about animals in winter – certainly something for small children to think about. LW

The Bear Under the Stairs

Helen Cooper, Picture Corgi (Sept 94), 0 552 52706 8, £3.99

Interestingly, this book has almost exactly the same plot as Dear Bear by Joanna Harrison, reviewed in the last issue of BfK. Small child thinks there's a bear in the cupboard under the stairs, becomes obsessed with fear and is helped to deal with it by wise parent. The contrast between the two books lies in the solution found and it would be interesting to

read both books with children and chat over the problem with them. The pictures are particularly good at suggesting the dark unknown and could help a small child overcome a fear of monsters under the stairs – or anywhere else for that matter. LW

It Came Through the Wall!

Tim Healey, ill. Tony Ross, Red Fox (Sept 94), 0 09 922621 9, £2.50

A three-part, rhyming tale of a huge, horribly hairy monster – The Great Nameless Dread – that comes through a boy's bedroom wall and takes him off to the land of monsters 'all covered with hair!'. There it gives him a gift of 'mysterical light' and then disappears forever.

A carefully and cleverly controlled mock-horror story guaranteed to grip readers and listeners from the opening lines and keep them in thrall to the end. JB

Papa Lucky's Shadow

Niki Daly, Red Fox (Sept 94), 0 09 911391 0, £3.99

Papa Lucky's Shadow – his unnamed



grand-daughter – is the narrator of this story set in the Italian quarter of an American city. 'Papa Lucky was a great mover. When he was young he could dance the sequins off a champ.' Now he's old he puts on his tap-dancing shoes and starts practising again ready to hit the streets, with his grand-daughter as his hat girl, for a spot of busking.

A finely illustrated story with the warmth of family relationships, especially that of grandfather and grand-daughter, dancing across the pages. The 'hat girl', not to mention the reader, is caught up in the rhythm, movement and excitement of the dance. JB

Othergran

Vivien Alcock, ill. Elaine Mills, Mammoth (Sept 94), 0 7497 1750 5, £2.99

"The Othergran? The heart of the Othergran?" Mark wonders what on earth that can be. He pictures a snapping, flame-breathing dragon riding a broomstick. But he knows that picture can't be right. So just what does his mum want most for her birthday? When Jessica explains, Mark is determined to make his mother's birthday wish come true. He goes to visit his mother's mother and, thanks to his efforts and with the help of his grandmother's unruly big black dog, he manages to soften the old lady's heart. Thus his mother receives the birthday message she's longed for.

Family relationships are subtly portrayed in this highly accessible story which should keep junior readers turning pages right to the end. **JB**

The Three-Legged Cat

Margaret Mahy, ill. Jonathan Allen, Picture Puffin (Oct 94), 0 14 054963 3, £3.99

Short-sighted Mrs Gimble has a cat called Tom, with a wooden leg, who dreams about prowling across the world, and a bald, wandering swagman brother, Cyril, who visits just once a year for a cup of tea and a chin wag. Cyril is an embarrassment to her with his travelling and his revolting, moulting Russian hat (which readers will observe looks not unlike the curled-up Tom). On his latest visit, Mrs G all but persuades her brother to give up his wandering - his hat isn't as warm as it used to be. But he decides on just one more trip...

A wonderfully whacky tale from that wizard of a storyteller whose imagination is the inspiration for some equally zany illustrations. **JB**

Shadow the Deer

Theresa Radcliffe, ill. John Butler, Picture Puffin (Sept 94), 0 14 054380 5, £4.99

A book full of the most beautiful, tranquil illustrations. Shadow and her fawn live in the forest. We experience with them the dangers of fox attack, and see how gentle and vulnerable they are and how they have amazing reserves of strength. The protective love and concern shown here stirs our compassion. A wonderful way of introducing conservation and environmental appreciation to the very young. **PH**

Jackdaw

Ann and Reg Cartwright, Red Fox (Sept 94), 0 09 913141 2, £3.99

A simple touching story of a young boy's loneliness and his thoughtlessness in his desire for a friend. Finding four eggs in a nest he steals one and hatches it, rearing a magnificent jackdaw in his garage. All seems to go well; he has the praise of his father and a host of newly found friends, but suddenly events make him realise the painful task he has to undertake. I loved the stylised illustrations and think the two recommended reading ages - one for reading aloud ('4 years and over')

and the other for reading alone ('7 years and over') - are a helpful guide. **PH**

One Stormy Night

Ruth Brown, Red Fox (Oct 94), 0 09 929891 0, £3.99

"Is there anybody there?" said the traveller
Knocking on the moonlit door.

There can't be many who dare risk comparison with the power and atmosphere of de la Mare's 'Listeners', yet in this book we have an artist and writer, working at the very height of her craft, who creates an evocative experience that will leave no child or adult untouched. The haunting mystery of the white dog roaming the dark stormy night is to be savoured and returned to. **JS**

The Story of the Little Mole who knew it was None of his Business

Werner Holzwarth, ill. Wolf Erlbruch, David Bennett Books (Sept 94), 1 85602 101 7, £3.99

All things anal have a tremendous fascination for infant/juniors and beyond!



Holzwarth and Erlbruch have produced a classic of its kind in this powerful tale of the determined underdog - Mole - winning through to exact a perfect, if minuscule, revenge on Basil the Butcher's Dog for doing the 'business' on his head! There is a perfect match of illustration and text creating an unforgettable tale that will have your audience sitting on the edge of their bottoms wondering, then delightfully confirming, that this book is really about what they think it's about! **JS**

Stormy Weather

Amanda Harvey, Picturemac (Oct 94), 0 333 56831 1, £3.99



A book of many levels - it will be returned to again and again. As Maud thankfully leaves the stormy atmosphere in her home for a walk with Mrs Perkins, she learns about

more than just the coming of winter. This is truly a worthy winner of the Mother Goose Award. **JS**

Just Bears

Edited by Martin Leman, Pan Macmillan (Oct 94), 0 330 33073 X, £3.50

When you find a winning formula - stick to it! Superlatives abounded when I reviewed *Teddy Bears* and I was worried that another book of the same genre might be a disappointment - not a bit of it. The quality of photography, the selection of poetry and the teddy bears themselves ensure this will be another must for anyone who has a soft spot for their teddy - no matter how old or young. **JS**

Emily and the Golden Acorn

Ian Beck, Picture Corgi (Sept 94), 0 552 52710 6, £3.99

Share Emily and Jack's adventures on the high seas - the mystery of reaching the black rock, finding the secret of the shining light, seeing into the chasm of nothingness at the end of the world, and the terror of discovering that Jack is nowhere to be found. A rip-roaring story guaranteed to send the reader hurtling at an ever increasing pace to the very satisfying end. **JS**

Charlie Anderson

Barbara Abercrombie, ill. Mark Graham, Picture Puffin (Oct 94), 0 14 054464 X, £3.99

The illustrations make you want to stroke the page and the story gives a powerful message, especially for any parents heading towards separation!



Charlie, a stray cat adopted by Sarah and Elizabeth, becomes an integral member of the family. Spending the evenings and nights with them, he disappears into the woods for the day. When one night he doesn't come home, the children are distraught and, searching the neighbourhood, they find out Charlie Anderson's secret: he, like them, has two loving homes.

This is too good a story to be pitched only at children experiencing this situation - it should be available for all to see how positive sharing a life between two homes can be. **JS**

Singing Down the Breadfruit and other poems

Pauline Stewart, ill. Duncan Smith, Red Fox (Sept 94), 0 09 928821 4, £2.99

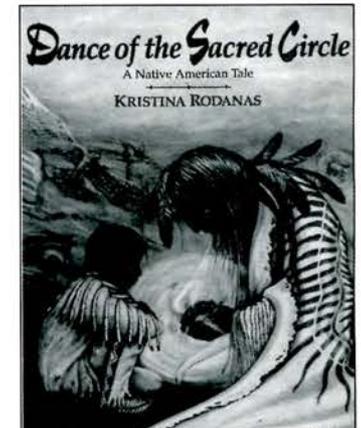


An audience of 8-year-olds enjoyed this collection of poems, written from the viewpoint of a young child inquisitive about the rituals of everyday life. Most of the poems reflect a fascination with wistful family memories of the Caribbean. There are glimpses of tropical landscapes, ramshackle country buses, creatures of the bush, and an evocation of Hurricane Gilbert. The prevalent mood is one of cheerful savouring, tinged with reminiscent sadness. **GH**

Finn's Animal

Catherine Storr, ill. Paul Howard, Mammoth (Nov 94), 0 7497 1644 4, £2.99

Finn is a little boy afraid of the darkness, which one night twists itself into a living creature. The child befriends the animal, and learns that it can shape-shift into whatever form he wants it to; after all, this organism bred of his own fear is his animal. Having transformed his fear, Finn embarks on a series of exhilarating adventures with his familiar, until the time arrives when he has to consider setting it free. **GH**



Dance of the Sacred Circle

Kristina Rodanas, Little Brown (Dec 94), 0 316 91155 0, £3.99

Based on a Blackfoot Indian legend, this story tells of how a boy from a starving tribe travels to the home of the Great Chief. When he arrives, he is rewarded with the gift of a creature to whom all of the living things he encounters have given a precious quality. While riding the horse back to his community, he crosses a river and the waters are sculpted into a great herd of horses to follow him home. Children will enjoy the striking illustrations in this handsome picture book, and may be aware of similar stories in the traditions of other cultures. **GH**

Junior/Middle REVIEWS

West African Trickster Tales

ORIGINAL

Retold by Martin Bennett, Oxford (Oct 94), 0 19 274172 1, £5.99

Pupils deserve to have this bright and folksy collection of tales told to them. Martin Bennett's style and delivery is deftly modern and traditional at the same time, with a sense of humour that cries out to be shared. How the Croc lost his teeth, why monkeys swing in trees and how Ananse the spider suffered for his greed are among the ten tales of trickery and just deserts. Worth every penny for classrooms everywhere. **DB**

The Boggart

Susan Cooper, Puffin (Aug 94), 0 14 036488 9, £3.99

A Boggart of the Old Magic melds into the modern magic of computer technology in this very clever story set in both Scotland and Toronto. From his ancestral home in a crumbling Scottish castle, he's accidentally moved with the furniture to hi-tech city-life where the food, thrills and spills might be more electrifying for a while but soon the longing to return calls for desperate measures.

Well-written, humorous and well-paced, this ought to be popular with any youngster who relishes a good yarn. **DB**

Running Battles

Kathryn Cave, Puffin (Oct 94), 0 14 036149 9, £3.50

Karen is bossy, bull-at-a-gatepost competitive, and desperately ambitious to get Olympic gold – for her 11-year-old sister, who is a promising athlete. The elder sister's aggression extends to all club officials, most teachers and her friends. When she gets on her high-horse, she's as good as invincible. But what she can't seem to see is that by channelling her drive she might actually achieve something great on her own account.

Told in an infectiously breezy and wry way by Karen herself, this could easily prove a real winner – worth promoting like mad. **DB**

Home in the Sky

Jeannie Baker, Red Fox (Nov 94), 0 09 950111 2, £4.50

A spectacularly attractive picture book in which the illustrations have been created out of natural objects and clay to give dramatic, three-dimensional and intensely realistic scenes of New York. These took the artist two years to create and were exhibited in several art galleries. However, I have to say that I wish as much care had been taken over the story itself. A very slight, rather self-conscious tale about a pigeon who gets lost really does not do justice to the artwork and leaves a feeling of disappointment. Jeannie Baker needs a story worthy of her talents... this isn't it. **LW**



Great Grandfather's House

Rumer Godden, ill. Valerie Littlewood, Red Fox (Oct 94), 0 09 925491 3, £4.50

Self-centred and determined, Keiko is certain she won't like Great Grandfather's house even before she sets eyes on it. But during her six months' stay there (while her parents visit England) she learns that country life is anything but boring. Thanks to her Great Grandfather, Old Mother and young cousin, Yoji, all of whom initiate her into the simple joys of rural Japan, she discovers a marked contrast to the city life she's been used to.

The delights of walnut sailboats, the sounds of natural things, Grandfather's paintings and stories, and the special enchantment of New Year are some of the pleasures Keiko is helped to discover as she also discovers a new side to herself.

A thoroughly enjoyable story with convincing characters and lots to think about. Water-colour illustrations add to the charm of this book, which is highly recommended for junior readers and listeners. **JB**

Them and Us

Edited by Jennifer Curry, ill. Susie Jenkin-Pearce, Red Fox (Sept 94), 0 09 995110 X, £2.99

POETRY



'She is beautiful, My half sister.'

39 pairs of poems offering a child's and adult's perspective on topics close to children's experience such as starting school, sports day, falling in love, Diwali and other festivals, bullying and riding a bike. The ages of the junior poets range from two years eight months - Ben Howson (his father wrote down his poem 'Snowman') - to 15. The adult poets don't admit to how old they are!

A clever idea for arrangement which works very well. Some of the young poets are anything but outshone by their adult counterparts and readers could well be inspired to write poetry too. **JB**

The Church Mice and the Ring

Graham Oakley, Picturemac (Sept 94), 0 333 59303 0, £3.99

The Church Mice books are very demanding of their readers' observation and literary skills. The pictures and print interact tightly and children need to be able to read both with equal ease to understand the long and often complex narrative. Having said that, there's no doubt they repay the informed attention of the reader.

This entertaining story about the attempts made by the Church Mice to find a good home for the stray puppy who is living in the churchyard has many lovely written and visual jokes. It is intelligent, witty and highly rewarding. Best as an individual treat, rather than for reading to a group, because of the close detail in the illustrations. It'll be enjoyed by any bright reader with a soft heart. **LW**

Spider, the Horrible Cat

Nanette Newman, ill. Michael Foreman, Picture Puffin (Sept 94), 0 14 054898 X, £4.99

There may be a scowling, ill-mannered, sullen young lout in some school, somewhere, who needs this story; there may also be a hopeful, patient, loving adult, trying hard with that young lout, who needs it equally. I found the story of this horrible cat, driven always to test the love of the dear old lady who adopts him, oddly moving. **PH**



Spider is redeemed in the end by the fear of losing his only friend, and both of them survive to find content-

ment. Children will take from the story what they need; to most it will be a demanding and satisfying picture book to read or listen to... but for one or two it may mean considerably more. **LW**

Carrot Tops and Cotton Tails

Jan Mark, ill. Tony Ross, Picture Lions (Sept 94), 0 00 664309 4, £4.50

A disturbing fable which explains why vegetables never talk and why no carrot is ever safe from rabbits. It all goes back to an age-old quarrel in which the rabbits, goaded beyond endurance by the taunts of the carrots, '... why do you have such silly ears', turn upon them in a frenzy of vegicide.

This is a very interesting book with several worrying sub-texts. The rabbits are dressed in puritan garb and the carrots have 'feathers' on their heads and are plainly red. Is this, then, a fable about the relationships between the early American settlers and the native peoples? Does it suggest the natives brought their destruction upon themselves? Is the message, perhaps, that murder is justified as long as the provocation is enough? Should we believe all-out war (in which even the innocent turnips are slaughtered) is a fit punishment for expressing an opinion? Or does the story teach that only by keeping one's opinions underground and allowing oneself to be walked over and chopped down (like the grass) can one obtain virtue?

There's much to make the reader uneasy in this book. **LW**

A Caribou Journey

Debbie S Miller, ill. Jon Van Zyle, **ORIGINAL** Little Brown (Nov 94), 0 316 91154 2, £3.99

If only all information books could be like this one! Jon Van Zyle's illustrations reflect the biting Alaskan landscape and express eloquently his obvious love for the land and its people. Debbie Miller's knowledge about the caribou is extensive and the detailed text explores their habits, habitats, the background of other Arctic creatures and the dangers they all face living in such a hostile environment. **PH**

Dimanche Dillar

Henrietta Branford, ill. Lesley Harker, Lions (Jul 94), 0 00 674748 5, £2.99

An engagingly odd, semi-comical, neo-Gothic tale about an orphaned heiress who falls into the hands of a villainous pseudo-guardian, masquerading as a nun. Dimanche Dillar's childhood is full of suspiciously close encounters with death, averted by her heroic and eccentric governess. As Dimanche approaches adulthood, her guardian's patience evaporates, and the subsequent alarms and excursions involve a gypsy rover, a gravedigger, and an old gardener in the broil, as well as a comical copper, two ghosts and a brace of genuine nuns in the victory

celebrations. When selecting an audience for this book, take into account the largely female cast and the extreme scarcity of dull moments. **GH**

The Stealing of Queen Victoria

Shirley Isherwood, ill.
George Buchanan, Red Fox
(Oct 94), 0 09 918181 9, £2.99

A touching story of Boo and his grandmother living above Mr Timm's antique shop. A bit of an antique himself, Mr Timm leads a quiet, predictable life. Boo and his grandmother are offered money to steal one of Mr Timm's antiques, Queen Victoria to be exact. After that the book is compelling reading and events follow thick and fast. There's a happy ending, not the one Boo wanted, but contentment is just around the corner. **PH**

The Ghost of Joseph Grey

Jon Blake, ill. Anthony Lewis, Simon & Schuster
(Sept 94), 0 7500 1500 4, £3.50

An unusual school story in which 'quite an old' Mr Roberts who 'often seemed to have his mind on something else' amazes his pupils. It's by torchlight one night in the old school that Mr Roberts' lessons first begin to be the best ever and the true identity of Joseph Grey is solved. Jon Blake creates open direct curiosity which is superbly child-like and knows the special uniqueness of relations between young and old, teacher and pupil, friend and friend. An intriguing and poignant story which had 8-year-olds spellbound leaving many eager to read it for themselves. **GR**

Desert December

Dorian Haarhoff, ill. Leon Vermeulen, Pan Macmillan
(Sept 94), 0 330 33460 3, £2.99

Where Seth lived 'sometimes the fog blew in with its clammy breath' and 'the sun sucked the waterpools like a hungry baby . . .'. From here on Christmas Eve Seth makes the important journey across the Namib desert to see his mother, father and new baby. He meets an old man, a young miner and a beautiful giant oryx, and the help he gives them is significantly reciprocated so that he arrives safely and bearing gifts. There are obvious parallels with the Christmas story, but this is uniquely magical in its own right. The charcoal illustrations are beautiful, the language inspired. **GR**

The Finger Eater

Dick King-Smith, ill. Arthur Robins, Walker (Sept 94), 0 7445 3091 1, £2.99

The Merrythought

Dick King-Smith, ill. Mike Reid, Puffin (Aug 94), 0 14 034652 X, £3.25

Two very different books from an author who attracts readers of all ages and interests. Ulf is a finger-eating troll with razor-sharp teeth whom a resolute Gudrun sorts out once and for all by . . .? Well, 6- and 7-year-olds guessed what would

happen, although they weren't quite sure how the operation would materialise.

The Merrythought is 9-year-old Nick's chicken wishbone which really does seem to have uncanny powers. This vicar's son learns to think selflessly and matures considerably through his growing sense of responsibility and consideration for others.

Neither book should be missed. **GR**

The Haunting of Pip Parker

Anne Fine, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, Walker
(Sept 94), 0 7445 3093 8, £2.99

This award-winning author has produced another unforgettable book. It's Christmas Eve and poor Pip Parker is too scared and tired to be excited for she cannot yet banish the horrible skull shape from her bedroom wall. She suffers the awful tiredness of many sleepless nights, the loneliness of being doubted, and the fear and frustration of the skull's endurance. All this is very real for the reader as it's written in the confiding first-person and this predicament could so easily occur! 7- and 8-year-olds loved this and it really got them thinking! **GR**



The Big Prize

Rob Childs, ill. Aidan Potts, Young Corgi (Nov 94), 0 552 52823 4, £2.50

Another in the popular football series which is highly entertaining with its true to life mixture of disappointment and triumph. Chris's promising talent prompts his selection for team mascot by Selworth FC but, disastrously, he suffers a twisted ankle hours before he's needed. Andrew, with credible brotherly bluntness, is less than sympathetic, but a compromise is reached and the episode ends happily. Grandad supplies relentless support throughout, and characters and relationships are totally believable. **GR**

Hi There, Supermouse!

Jean Ure, Red Fox (Oct 94), 0 09 921311 7, £2.99

A squabble between two mismatched sisters, one cloyingly girly, the other a bit of a rip, over who should play a cute role in an amateur theatrical production sounds like a good start for some

swinging stereotypes, but in Jean Ure's deft hands the scene is set for a thoroughly unsentimental family comedy. Dad's evasiveness and mum's favouritism, together with clan tensions which unleash the rivalry between Rose and Nicola, are pitilessly disclosed in the course of the story. The overall mood remains light-hearted, and the climax is a celebration of individuality and independence. **GH**

A Trunkful of Elephants

Edited by Judith Nicholls, ill. Chris Riddell, Mammoth (Oct 94), 0 7497 1753 X, £2.99

Another of Judith Nicholls' wonderfully heterogeneous anthologies. From a wide range of sources,



Turn Turn Turn

'There is a time for considering elephants
There is no time for not considering elephants'

ADRIAN MITCHELL

including Donne, Kipling, Belloc and Lawrence as well as contemporary poets like Grace Nichols and Adrian Mitchell, she has collected a half-century of meditations on the elephant. Most of the poems are very short and intense, as if attempting to encompass the largest mass of animality in the smallest mass of words. The odd amalgam of emotions inspired by this creature is well reflected here. There are praises for its majesty, jokes about its bizarreness, and, most strongly, a sense of awe and sorrow at its threatened demise. **GH**

Your Mother Was a Neanderthal

Jon Scieszka, ill. Lane Smith, Puffin (Aug 94), 0 14 036603 2, £3.25

Being the latest instalment in the adventures of 'The Time Warp Trio' - American schoolkids who can transport themselves through time with the aid of *the book*. Here they visit the Stone Age, intending to impress the natives, and end up interceding in prehistorical gender strife after near-lethal encounters with mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers. If you or your children are new to these stories, you'll probably enjoy the relentless cliff-hanging and smart repartee of this adventure. I certainly did - though I detect a slightly formulaic note creeping in. **GH**

Dinotopia

James Gurney, Dorling Kindersley (Sept 94), 0 7513 7023 1, £9.99

A huge, seductive banquet of a book. Purporting to be the journal of a nineteenth-century biologist shipwrecked with his son on a lost continent where dinosaurs and humans live in harmony, it encompasses narrative, scientific notes, music, diagrams and detailed anthropologi-



The city of Pooktook, from *Dinotopia*.

cal description, all wreathed in utterly sumptuous illustrations.

The paradise lost of Dinotopia has fascinated all the children to whom I've shown this testament, though the visionary quality of the illustrations has been a more effective lure than the fairly challenging text. Nevertheless, it's good to have in your classroom for the sheer hedonistic delight it offers young browsers. **GH**

The Witches and the Singing Mice

Jenny Nimmo, ill. Angela Barrett, Picture Lions (Sept 94), 0 00 664402 3, £4.99

Three witches pass through the highland village of Glenmagraw to take up residence at a deserted house. They enter the village only to make impossible demands of the craftsman there. When these demands are refused, the village children begin to succumb to a sinister sleeping sickness caused by the bites of the singing mice. This is a short and peculiar little story strongly supported by Angela Barrett's intensely atmospheric paintings of dark and diabolical struggle. A happy ending is provided by the village cats, so don't be too cautious about recommending this lively story to readers of a nervous disposition. **GH**



'Haweniyo, the Great Spirit, stepped upon Young Buffalo's head and pushed it toward the ground'. From *The Great Buffalo Race*.

The Great Buffalo Race

Barbara Juster Esbensen, ill. Helen K Davie, Little Brown (Nov 94), 0 316 91156 9, £3.99

This book presents a retelling of an Iroquois legend explaining how the buffalo acquired a hump. The great race of the title is between the old leader of the buffalo herd and his young usurper, who between them lead their herds to near extinction while pursuing the scent of rain during a drought. This is a harsh but ultimately optimistic story, good for reading aloud and for independent readers to enjoy alone. Helen K Davies' refulgent water-colours, incorporating Seneca designs, provide a vivid evocation of the wilderness and its creatures. **GH**

Middle/Secondary REVIEWS

Someone Came Knocking

Anne Merrick, Puffin (Sept 94), 0 14 037136 2, £3.50

After fleeing from abuse and degradation, Tod assumes the life of a near wild animal. He goes on the run with a curious rag doll for his only companion and comfort. Slowly shreds of memory solidify into a quest to reach 'the house with the green door' where he knows his existence will finally assume some lasting meaning.

Not so much complex as circuitous, this tale will take some sticking with, but should amply reward serious, experienced readers who like a challenge. **DB**

Hexwood

Diana Wynne Jones, Mammoth (Sept 94), 0 7497 1848 X, £3.99

There is no compromising in this long, hectic, chockerblock, fantasy novel from a doyenne of the genre. A computer cyberg - the Banus - which has the ability 'to take any situation and persons given it, introduce them into a field of theta-space, and then enact... a series of scenes based on these people and this situation', is working to its own agenda and thereby pitting the viciously determined rulers of the universe against their subjects.

It's a demanding read, pulling in page after page of challenging ideas that'll require a doughty readership. **DB**

The Other Facts Of Life

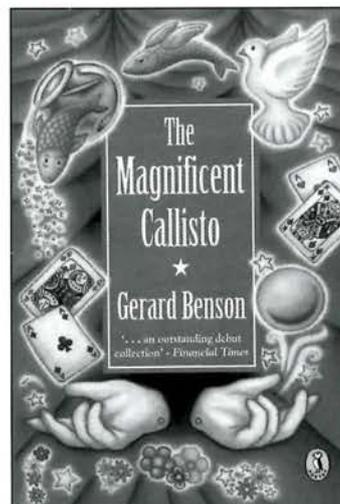
Morris Gleitzman, ill. Nick Sharratt, Puffin (Sept 94), 0 14 036877 9, £3.50

A title that merits a sharp intake of breath and is guaranteed to create cult status. Ben's strange behaviour worries his parents almost as much as their apparent insensitivity to global concerns worry him. After some hilarious crises in their family life, it takes a potential tragedy to jolt them all into the here and now and put things into perspective. Ben's crusade for environmental awareness has serious undercurrents, but read this first for the sheer effervescent fun of it all. **PH**

Jim Ugly

Sid Fleischman, ill. Marc Vyvyan-Jones, Puffin (Aug 94), 0 14 036351 3, £3.50

Knowing if a dog likes you or not is always an uncertain business; with Jim Ugly - half timber wolf, half mongrel - it's a huge risk. Jake presumes his beloved father is dead and Jim is his only reminder of him. Lively and full of twists and turns, Jake and Jim's crazy journey through the Sierra Nevada mountains had me hanging on every page and insatiably curious at the same time about the missing diamonds. They do eventually turn up but by that time it's too late and they're going to prove incredibly messy to retrieve. **PH**



The Magnificent Callisto

Gerard Benson, ill. Cathy Benson, Puffin (Sept 94), 0 14 036974 0, £3.50

A poetry book to have sets of because it does most of the teaching about poetry for you, inviting readers in with a lively, simple and very funny poem and continuing to amuse and surprise. It's never dull or long-winded and ends with the witty poem 'Help' where a mad typewriter creates new words and happenings with increasing drama. The collection will engage interest and excite

curiosity, providing at its heart a wonderful show of words and ideas. A magical book. **AJ**

An Angel for May

Melvin Burgess, Puffin (Sept 94), 0 14 036981 3, £3.50

This is a gem of a book, which moved me long after I'd put it down. Tam, unhappy at home, frequently visits the ruins of Thowt It Farm. One day he's led through time by an old woman and her dog, back into the Second World War. Tam befriends May, mentally scarred by the bombing raids, who begs him to stay.

Tam loves his 'life' on Thowt It Farm, but is afraid of being trapped permanently in the past. In trying to escape this, he discovers the identity of the old woman and learns a good deal about how to treat his fellow men. This has real potential as a class reader for Year 8 pupils. **VR**

The Panic Wall

Alick Rowe, Mammoth (Oct 94), 0 7497 1772 6, £3.50

Gary's problems increase through shyness, his father beats his mother and he's subjected to awful bullying, but all the time there's the possibility of support through the evangelical group of young Christians. He falls in love with one of them, though when that fails it seems like the hardest pain of all to bear. The group helps him deal with the bullying and the bully himself proves to be Gary's final rescuer. It's compelling in its description of Gary's sufferings and offers an optimistic view of how all that can be overcome. **AJ**

Korean Folk-tales

Retold by James Riordan, Oxford (Oct 94), 0 19 274160 8, £5.99

Like others in this excellent 'Myths and Legends' series, this collection contains many very good stories and reminds you of the enormous range of tales. These, too, are good for reading aloud, although in this edition the individual stories are often lost. One solution is to link them with similar tales from other cultures or to have pupils produce

them as single illustrated editions where the story can be pondered over. **AJ**

Kezzie

Theresa Breslin, Mammoth (Oct 94), 0 7497 1771 8, £2.99

Set in the depression of the 1930s, this story follows Kezzie as she overcomes enormous hardships when she and her sister have to deal with being orphaned. Kezzie, with the kindness and help of a few special people, is able to find her way through until, after an accident, her sister is shipped off to Canada as free child labour. Kezzie eventually rescues her sister and the story ends leaving you waiting for the sequel. The physicality of the hardships is well described and this is both exciting and moving with a very strong central character. **AJ**

Death Penalty

Dennis Hamley, Scholastic 'Point Crime' (Sept 94), 0 590 55705 X, £2.99

Not only does this come as part of a very popular series, from a popular writer, it's also cheap, it's exciting, it centres on football and has a marvelous climactic scene at Wembley when the whodunnit is solved in the most surprising way. Add to this the fact that it's about the fixing of football matches and you have a further reason to buy copies knowing it will be read to death. **AJ**

The Snowman Who Couldn't Melt

Paul Stewart, Puffin (Aug 94), 0 14 036136 7, £3.50

A strange mix of a story, part fairy tale, which eventually becomes a moving account of Amy's attempts to rescue the snowman. He's been made by the cruel and heartless Balthazar Grot with ice for a heart and is therefore unable to melt. Amy arranges for the snowman to come to the summer beach, to take part in the sandcastle competition which will give them access to the funfair in the hope of showing him the best side of human beings. It isn't so easy - the climax will leave many readers sad but satisfied. **AJ**

Somewhere in the Darkness ORIGINAL

Walter Dean Myers, Adlib (Aug 94), 0 590 55622 3, £5.99

Jimmy's father, Crab, comes to reclaim him from his grandmother, Mama Jean, with the promise that they must leave New York for Chicago where he is to start a new job. But Crab, knowing he hasn't long to live, has actually escaped from prison and is desperate to return to the scene of his crime and persuade Jimmy that he was wrongly convicted of shooting someone. Their journey together is marked both by the actual events and their shared need to forge trust and bridge the gaps between them. AJ

Talking to Strangers

Anne Cassidy, Scholastic 'Adlib' ORIGINAL (Aug 94), 0 590 55621 5, £5.99

This is a moralistic story, but like the best preachers it never lectures its readers. Caroline Mitchell, aged 10, is murdered: last seen talking to strangers. Maggie Kennedy, from the secure base of a loving family, is curious to discover who killed Caroline. There are some shocking twists to the plot but the book never relies on histrionics, rather on contrast and comparison. We see, after all, only what is wrong when it's set against what is right. Highly recommended reading for Year 7 and beyond. VR

The War of Jenkins' Ear

Michael Morpurgo, Mammoth (Sept 94), 0 7497 1754 8, £2.99

Toby Jenkins is unhappy at his public school until the arrival of a new boy, Simon Christopher. The boys become close, but Simon has a remarkable secret to share: he is Jesus Christ. From disbelief to acceptance and back to doubt, Toby runs the gamut of emotions in trying to come to terms with this situation. He loses the most important battle of all – loyalty – and the ending of the book starkly shows the consequences of his error. This remarkable book would make an excellent class reader for Year 8. VR

Groosham Grange

Anthony Horowitz, Walker (Sept 94), 0 7445 2476 8, £2.99

Groosham Grange is a school of witchcraft as David, expelled from public school and newly arrived on Skull Island, discovers. An hilarious spoof – a sort of literary burlesque, it speeds along at full tilt from page to page. The outrageousness of much of the humour will ensure its instant appeal – especially with Lower School boys. The unexpected ending should warn every unreasonable parent to curb her/his behaviour. VR

Here's to You, Rachel Robinson

Judy Blume, Pan Piper (Oct 94), 0 330 33288 0, £3.99

Blume never lets her readers down when chronicling family life. Rachel Robinson is a 'holier than thou' model student but my sympathies lie with her troublesome brother at having to share a roof with such a perfect person! Expelled from school, Charles is sent home and seems determined to cause as much trouble as possible. Rachel cannot understand why her friends are

attracted to him and she takes refuge in her music, reading *Psychology Today* and falling for her brother's gorgeous tutor. All is neatly resolved and everyone seems set to live happily ever after. Readers wishing to fill in any gaps should first read *Just As Long As We're Together* before embarking on this one. VB

Bonnie Dundee

Rosemary Sutcliff, Red Fox (Nov 94), 0 09 935411 X, £3.50

I vividly remember meeting Rosemary Sutcliff when she launched *Bonnie Dundee* in Edinburgh in 1983. Her diminutive frame was cruelly crippled, yet from those bent hands came magical writing. The story of the Covenanters and John Graham of Claverhouse is woven into a fascinating and exciting story told through Hugh Herriott, a young lad in his service. It's a tale of divided and conflicting loyalties at a time in Scottish history when families were set against families over the question of religious freedom. Rosemary Sutcliff transports her readers to another time and places them in the forefront of the action. She had a rare gift. VB

Nightjohn

Gary Paulsen, Pan (Oct 94), 0 330 33604 5, £3.50

Sarny, a 12-year-old slave girl on a tyrannically run plantation in the Deep South, becomes fascinated by Nightjohn when he's brought shackled, scarred and defiant to work alongside her comrades. When he reveals a secret mission to spread the forbidden skills of literacy amongst the slaves, Sarny is immediately pulled into a web of both triumphant and tragic possibilities.

In a simple but compelling story, told in Sarny's dialect, Paulsen depicts the atrocities inflicted on the slaves with distressing clarity. The verisimilitude of the book is further emphasised by an afterword in the form of a troubled meditation on the role of slavery in American history. GH

Freak 1: Through the Lightning Gate

0 09 933341 4

Freak 2: Death and the Lizard Man

0 09 937181 2

Jim Eldridge, ill. Stephen Player, Red Fox (Nov 94), £4.99 each

These A4 graphic novels have been developed with the specific purpose of attracting reluctant readers at KS3 and 4. They attempt this by presenting the frenetically eventful adventures of Freak, a streetwise 17-year-old, zapped into a parallel dystopia where animal species have all evolved into warring humanoids. Freak befriends a lion woman, falls foul of an obscene tyrant and helps rescue a lizard man from wrongful execution in storylines which extol the virtues of comradeship and honesty while depicting some pretty lurid violence.



The visual impression you gain when flicking through the pages is one of intense ugliness. It'll be interesting to see how far future titles extend the aesthetic horizons of their intended readership, once the enticing nastiness has done its necessary work. GH

Older Readers REVIEWS

Riot

Peter Beere, Scholastic 'Point' ORIGINAL (Sept 94), 0 590 54169 2, £5.99

Here is a convincingly real portrait of modern inner-city estate life painted in 112 bleak snapshots. Our eye-witness guide is 16-year-old Steve, fearful for his black friend, Carlton, his Greek employer, Joe, his lonely, alcoholic, high-rise mother and his girlfriend, Tish. All around them order is crumbling into an orgy of racially-motivated anger and violence, born of frustration and a hopeless despair. 'It was down to "them and us", and I didn't know who was "them" and who "us" any more...' A very powerful, captivating read – especially for the politically aware. DB

The Roads Are Down ORIGINAL

Vanessa Spence, Heinemann (Nov 94), 0 435 98930 8, £4.99

This first-time novel in the 'Caribbean Writers' series is definitely for older readers, with its basic plot of a young woman falling for a 60-year-old married man and having his baby. It's embellished by the fact that she's

a Jamaican and he an American, and by the reactions of her very varied Kingston friends to the high-profile relationship. When his American wife decides it's time to reclaim her husband, allegiances and opinions seem to shift and alter. DB

The Split

Angela Dracup, Red Fox (Nov 94), 0 09 919861 4, £3.50

This story may be too far removed from many children's experiences to strike any real chord, yet what it has to say has its roots in the everyday. Anna's parents are divorcing – should she stay in Sweden with her mother and brother, or return to the world of wealth and indulgence provided by her rich father?

The issue is complicated by her father's girlfriend and Asa, an old man whom Anna befriends. In many ways this is a compelling story, but its stereotypes of old age and family ties occasionally strain the reader's credulity. Recommended for readers aged 13 upwards. VR

In Sickness and In Health (First Comes Love 3)

Jennifer Baker, Scholastic 'Point Romance' (Sept 94), 0 590 55625 8, £3.50

Take one 18-year-old motorcycle-riding hunk: tall, dark and handsome. Add one attractive, intelligent 18-year-old female and marry them. Include a pinch of politically correct issue – cancer – and, just to stop things getting *too* serious, sprinkle in a couple of romantic sub-plots. Ensure that long sentences rarely raise their ugly heads and studiously avoid using any words which might – unspeakable thought – enrich a reader's vocabulary. Multiply by three and you have a trilogy which is guaranteed success and a strong case for buying (and using) a very large box of matches. VR

When You Can't Say No ORIGINAL

Sylvia Hall, Scholastic 'Adlib' (Aug 94), 0 590 55669 X, £5.99

The most painful book I've ever read. It should be required reading not only for young adults but for teachers, social workers and parents dealing with the problem of child abuse. The author portrays the fear and bitterness of a child caught in her father's 'secret' abuses and the devastation at not finding the support of her mother. Lisa had a close relationship with her father but the kisses and cuddles developed into a nightmare of illicit activities.



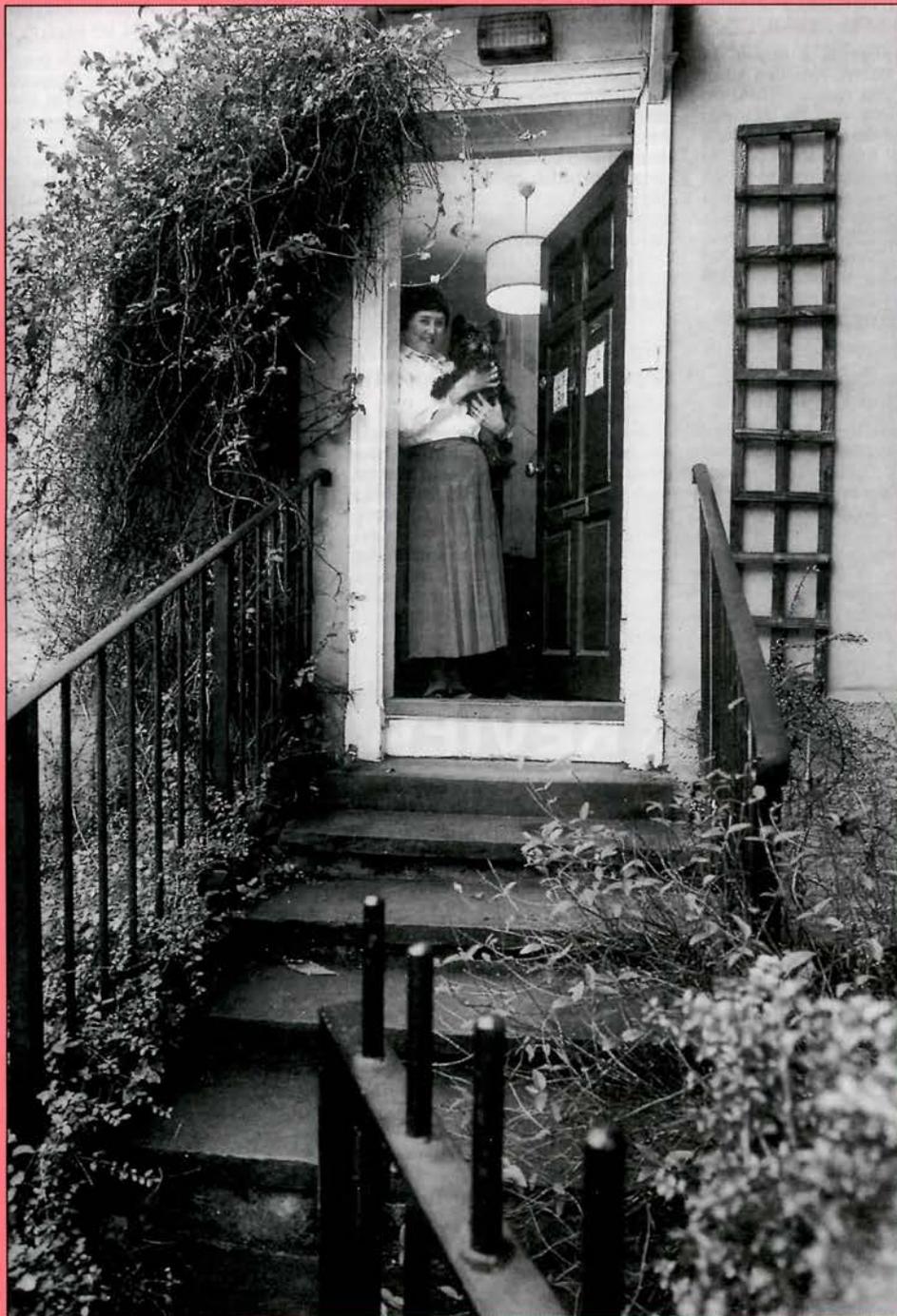
When she meets Mike, she finds herself unable to develop a normal relationship until she decides the only way out is to disappear – for good. A powerful and extraordinary book. VB

Reviewers in this issue: David Bennett, Jill Bennett, Val Bierman, Pam Harwood, George Hunt, Adrian Jackson, Val Randall, Gill Roberts, Judith Sharman and Liz Waterland.

Authorgraph No.90

Jean Ure

INTERVIEWED BY LINDA NEWBERY



I entered Jean Ure's house to find myself vigorously welcomed by something resembling a pack of fox hounds, although readers of Jean's books will know that if she were anywhere near a hound pack it would be to wave a banner in protest at the killing of animals for sport. Jean, her husband Leonard, six dogs and two cats live in a 300-year-old house in suburban Croydon, close to a railway station – Jean's concern for environmental issues extends to a refusal to drive, so she relies on public transport to reach the conferences and school book weeks she attends regularly.

Upstairs is a room devoted to music – another of Jean's absorbing interests which is often reflected in her writing – with outside speakers, a sofa and floor cushions so the dogs can listen in comfort, too. Jean's study is on the ground floor, furnished with an impressive table (found on a tip years ago and carried home), a walnut desk and shelves overflowing with books. On the desk are heaps of correspondence and ten or so brand-new books which Jean is about to register for Public Lending Right – by the end of this year she'll have published five new titles, and there are others newly issued in paperback or reprinted. A glass-fronted cabinet is entirely filled with Jean's books – five shelves full, jammed tight, with newcomers waiting for space. Readers of *BfK* will know how prolific Jean is as a children's author, covering the whole range from first readers to challenging teenage novels. They may not realise she has other identities, too; there are at least three other names represented on the shelves, including Sarah McCulloch, writer of Georgian romances, who appeared in the early eighties. 'After having my first book published while I was still at school, I was desperate to be a professional writer,' Jean explained. To earn a living she translated Sven Hassel's novels from the French, tried her hand at various short-term jobs and then decided to write historical novels for adults. 'I enjoyed writing the Sarah McCulloch books because I could pretend to be Jane Austen, but I've no desire to go back to it now. There were endless battles with editors over what I could and couldn't put in the books. There's far more freedom in writing for teenagers – I can't think of a single subject you couldn't tackle if you handled it carefully.'

Jean certainly doesn't shrink from taking on controversial subjects, as a quick trawl through her recent teenage output will testify: homosexuality in *Play Nimrod for Him*; society's treatment of the elderly and jobless in *A Place to Scream*; a teenager's death from cancer in *One Green Leaf*; government secrecy and deception in *Plague 99* which won the Lancashire Book Award. 'I don't want to preach, but I do want people to question their own beliefs and prejudices.'

Although she doesn't write with didactic intent, there is certainly no doubt as to where her sympathies lie on the subject of animal rights. Reviewers have occasionally objected to this, but discussing it we agree that a novelist rarely presents a topic neutrally; fiction is much more likely to show the difficulties and grey areas which confront a character who tries to make a stand. Jean's novels don't suggest simple answers to tidy problems and even the strongest-minded characters may not find it easy to stick to their principles. *Always Sebastian*, a sequel to *If It Weren't for Sebastian*, shows that the animal rights issue isn't just a matter of black versus white; Maggie, heroine of the earlier novel and now a mother, suffers from compassion fatigue in the face of her daughter's realism and Sebastian's illegal exploits. Increasingly, Jean's own commitment to animal welfare – she's a campaigner for Animal Aid and the National Anti-Vivisection Society – finds its way into her books, even when not an issue; Judith in *Dreaming of Larry*, for example, is a vegetarian, and the heroine of the new thriller, *Faces at the Window*, has very definite views.

Jean says that food can be a difficult ingredient in her books; 'I couldn't write about people eating meat, not characters I like, so I either have to make them vegetarian or avoid mentioning what they eat.' From her visits to schools – sometimes to represent the views of the Vegetarian Society rather than as an author – Jean is encouraged to find many young people share her concern for the environment and for the humane treatment of animals.

Social realism is always a feature of her writing, even when her subject is the traditional teenage fare of friendships, school and romance. The characters' backgrounds are always convincing: an early novel, *A Proper Little Nooryeff*, which deals with the embarrassment of an unwilling male ballet dancer, draws clear distinctions between the home lives of working-class Jamie and his partner, Anita, and the relative expectations of their parents. Characters from differing backgrounds also come together in *The Other Side of the Fence* in which Richard leaves his affluent right-wing parents after a row and teams up with Bonny, a streetwise and amoral survivor; the outlook of each is broadened by the unlikely pairing.



I'd supposed the teenage novel was Jean's preferred genre, but she told me that writing for the younger age groups brings her a different kind of satisfaction. 'I like the ideas I can explore in a teenage novel, but with the younger books there's a conciseness that pleases me. Also, I can be happier!' She's written extensively for this age range with popular titles including *Wizard in the Woods* and *Jo in the Middle*. A recent book for the 9-12 age group, *The Children Next Door*, has, unusually for Jean, a ghostly element. I commented that all her books, regardless of intended readership, are very skilfully paced. She attributes this to her years of experience in writing for the adult market.

Through conversations with readers, Jean has discovered teenagers seem to enjoy bleak endings; some have said they would have preferred David's death in *One Green Leaf* to be directly portrayed, and that they wanted Gillian in *A Place to Scream* (already a frightening enough vision of Thatcher's Britain taken to extremes) to be left completely without hope. In fact, once or twice Jean has given way to an editor who asked for something to be toned down, but she insisted on having her own way with *Come Lucky April*, the sequel to *Plague 99*. In this novel, which is concerned with the evolution of new communities following the devastating plague of the first book, Jean describes a society dominated by women, in which men are castrated as a measure of social control. 'Miriam Hodgson, my editor at Methuen, didn't think I ought to go as far as having them castrated, but without it a main point of the book would have been



lost.' (The book's dedication is to 'Miriam, who fought me womanfully every inch of the way'.) The balance between the need for communal safety on the one hand, and individual freedom on the other, is examined here and in the final part of the trilogy, *Watchers at the Shrine*, in which time has moved on but attitudes to women, in particular, have regressed. The trilogy wasn't originally planned as such; the idea for the final part came about because Dennis Hamley, reviewing *Come Lucky April* in the *Times Educational Supplement*, wrote 'the trilogy must be completed'. Jean needed no further encouragement to approach Miriam Hodgson with the idea for *Watchers at the Shrine*, which contrasts future societies organised along widely differing lines; one of the communities treats an antiquated nuclear power station as a religious shrine, without realising that it's responsible for the outbreak of deformity among new babies. Chris Powling described this book, two *BfK* issues ago, as so compelling that he felt it should have been longer.

Although Jean's name would certainly appear on any list of popular writers for teenagers, and in spite of her enviable position as a writer whose books are greeted enthusiastically by both reviewers and readers, she isn't optimistic at present about the outlook for teenage fiction. 'Writing for pre-teens is much more in demand. Teenage books just aren't selling enough to make money, apart from horror stories. When I visit schools I may find that one or two teenagers read voraciously, but a lot of them don't choose anything more demanding than "Point Horror" or "Babysitters' Club".'

When she's at home, Jean writes for most of the day, between 9.30 and about 6.00, with frequent interruptions from dogs and the telephone. Although she usually has several books at different stages of production, she

works intensively on one from start to finish, without breaking off to do something different. 'It's painful starting to write; that's why I try to keep going once I've begun.' Apart from the initial difficulty, she says that writing comes easily to her: 'because most of it's half-written in my head, or in the form of copious notes'. She showed me some pages of a first draft, hand-written on lined paper in a mixture of shorthand and longhand. 'I always write my first draft by hand, and use a typewriter rather than a word processor. I type up each chapter as it's finished, revising as I go. When the first draft is finished, I read it aloud and make more corrections. It's very important to read aloud, to show up the faults.' Does a writer of her experience ever get stuck, I wondered? 'Not very often. If it does happen, it's because the scene is wrong in some way, and I need to think of a different way to do it.' Of her earlier books she says, 'There are some parts I can read with pleasure, but looking back I often wish I could rewrite from the character point of view. The reward of writing is capturing characters on paper – feeling that you've done your duty by them, if that doesn't sound too pretentious.'

Many writers would feel that their most high-flown aspirations had been fulfilled if they achieved a fraction of Jean's output. I asked whether she still had any particular writing ambitions. 'Mainly to carry on writing about subjects that interest me or rouse me, or things I feel passionately about.' There's no doubt that she will. The safe in her office contains a wallet folder bulging with plans and notes for future novels – some sketchy, some outlined in detail, at least one she can't wait to start. That glass-fronted bookcase is going to need an extension. ■

Photographs by Richard Mewton

Some of Jean Ure's books:

Play Nimrod for Him, Bodley Head, 0 370 31184 1, £7.99; Red Fox, 0 09 985300 0, £2.99 pbk
A Place to Scream, Doubleday, 0 385 40013 6, £6.99 pbk
One Green Leaf, Bodley Head, 0 370 30784 4, £7.99; Corgi, 0 552 52506 5, £2.25 pbk
If It Weren't for Sebastian, Red Fox, 0 09 960800 6, £3.50 pbk
Always Sebastian, Bodley Head, 0 370 31536 7, £7.99
Dreaming of Larry, Doubleday, 0 385 40011 X, £7.99; Corgi, 0 552 52615 0, £2.99 pbk
A Proper Little Nooryeff, Bodley Head, 0 370 30470 5, £7.99; Corgi, 0 552 52711 4, £2.99 pbk

The Other Side of the Fence, Corgi, 0 552 52466 2, £2.99 pbk
Wizard in the Woods, Walker, 0 7445 1530 0, £7.99; 0 7445 1717 6, £3.50 pbk; Chivers Audio, £12.85
Jo in the Middle, Red Fox, 0 09 997730 3, £2.99 pbk
The Children Next Door, Deutsch, 0 590 54150 1, £5.99 pbk
Plague 99, Mammoth, 0 7497 0333 4, £2.99
Come Lucky April, Methuen, 0 416 15712 2, £9.99; Mammoth, 0 7497 1015 2, £2.99 pbk
Watchers at the Shrine, Methuen, 0 416 18824 9, £9.99
Faces at the Window, Corgi, 0 552 52790 4, £2.99 pbk

Non Fiction REVIEWS

Magic

Jon Day, Wayland, 0 7502 1231 4, £8.50
JUNIOR

Would-be magicians will enjoy this book – the tricks have helpful step-by-step guidelines, and attractive informative photographs aid explanation. Parents and carers will appreciate the undemanding props – such as old newspapers, four marbles and a coin, and a pack of cards. Positive images are shown: girls allowed to be magicians as well as helpers and a multi-cultural society is portrayed.

The approach is through a trick per country on each double-page spread – which works well enough for Australia's Great Levant or Houdini's magic tree (from France) but Greek marbles is only effective as a corny pun.

At £8.50 this isn't cheap and a future paperback might appeal more to the home market. As a school library purchase with its tricks for novices, useful addresses and generally lively feel in text and photographs, it should prove popular. **GB**

Castle

Richard Platt, ill. Stephen Biesty, Dorling Kindersley (Cross-Sections series), 0 7513 5046 X, £12.99
JUNIOR/MIDDLE

For their latest production, talented duo Stephen Biesty and Richard Platt have turned their attention to castle life in the fourteenth century. The result is a matchless blend of words and pictures and a wonderfully entertaining and informative book.

Based largely on Chinon in France and Chepstow on the English-Welsh border, all the features of Biesty's castle (c.1350) are gradually revealed in an ingenious sequence of nine large, detailed and colourful cross-sections, starting with the outer gatehouse and ending with the arsenal tower. Moreover each spread also incorporates a thematic aspect (Living like a Lord, Trades and Skills, etc.) cleverly portraying the lives of the castle's inhabitants in times of war and peace.

Although the illustrations are another visual tour de force by the gifted Biesty, Richard Platt's is no mere supporting role. His detailed captions and supplementary text provide just the right mix of background data and fascinating facts beloved by younger readers (did you know a nobleman shaved by rubbing his chin with a pumice stone?).

Just in case any further encouragement is needed to scrutinise every page thoroughly, the artist has hidden an enemy spy in each spread, though some readers might enjoy spotting the courting couple instead! **VH**

The Great Recycling Adventure: a lift-the-flap look at old things made new

Jan McHarry, Watts, 0 7496 1850 7, £9.99

JUNIOR/MIDDLE

Industrial processes don't, as a rule, make riveting illustration-matter and so most of the recycling books we see miss them out to concentrate on the beauties of the bottle bank and the potential of plastics. This one, however, in its own idiosyncratic and entertaining way, *does* focus on the re-making - removing at a stroke all the dullness and complexity of actual plant and process and replacing them with a Heath Robinson-cum-'Where's Wally?'-style fantasy version.

So giant wind-powered axes fragment old plastic bottles and the resulting flakes are washed in a huge bath complete with hot, cold, claw feet and rubber duck, and an army of blue-collared minions supervises the regeneration of paper – drying it along with their washing, skiing on its perfect surface and flattening it with an enormous ride-on electric iron. Five spreads deal in turn with paper, glass, metals, plastics and textiles (62%

Children first

Children took shelter when fighting began. But the defenders ejected them. In the Calais in 1316, the sick and weak would not let many starved to death. Anything they could do to help.

Important preparation for sieges. These extensions to the wall-protected the defenders.

Watch-turret

A high tower raised above the castle walls gave a fine view over the nearby countryside. Some castles, such as Urquhart in Scotland, were sited especially to provide the best possible view.



Roofing

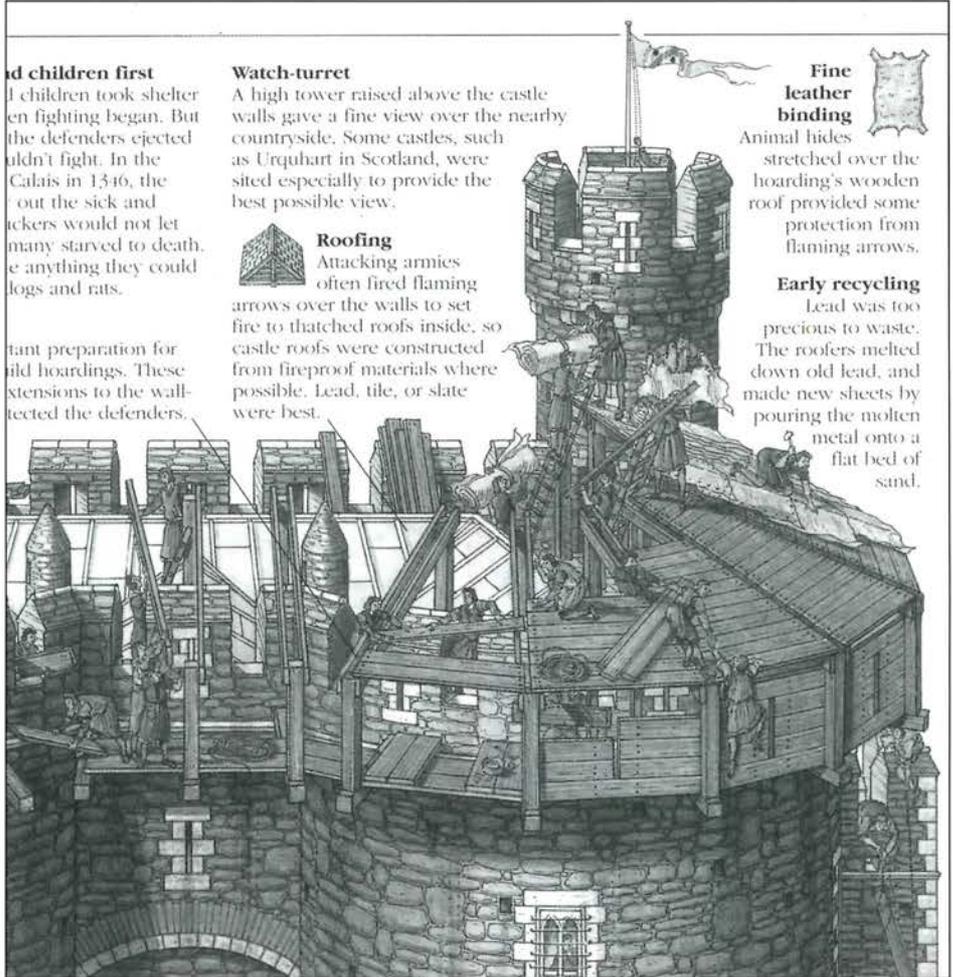
Attacking armies often fired flaming arrows over the walls to set fire to thatched roofs inside, so castle roofs were constructed from fireproof materials where possible. Lead, tile, or slate were best.

Fine leather binding

Animal hides stretched over the hoarding's wooden roof provided some protection from flaming arrows.

Early recycling

Lead was too precious to waste. The roofers melted down old lead, and made new sheets by pouring the molten metal onto a flat bed of sand.



A detail from *Castle*.

of average dustbin contents) and central to each is a straightforward account of what actually happens.

There are flaps to lift, doors to open and wheels and slides to engage to find out more surprising information. The whole thing's a lot of fun and will probably be at its best shared by a small mixed age/ability group in a corner of the library. **TP**

Your Living Home

0 7502 1304 3

Your Wild Neighbourhood

0 7502 1305 1

Philip Parker, Wayland (Project Eco-City series), £9.50

JUNIOR/MIDDLE

One of the things you learn from long walks by canals is the way each carries a green seam into the densest city centre, which becomes an excellent inroad for plants and animals on the move. Railways and roads do this in their own way too, and are just some of the features that Philip Parker examines in *Neighbourhood* – a pleasant round-up of outdoor urban ecology. We wander about the townscape spotting wild and feral things in a variety of habitats – streets, buildings, ponds, parks and wasteland. The spotter-spectrum ranges from trees to algae, badgers to beetles and there are some nice bits of Did-you-know-ery: 60% of all cats killed on the roads are black, which doesn't seem very lucky, but reflect that a large number of accidental deaths means a thriving population and cease to worry about the future of the hedgehog. I thought the cover picture of a red squirrel was a shade optimistic, though.

Last year saw an invasion of Clinton's White



'Brown rats flourish in the quiet nooks and crannies of disused railway stations and embankments.'

From *Your Wild Neighbourhood*.

House by rats and, at the same time, a plague of mice in our own Palace of Westminster. It takes one to know one I suppose but Parker refrains from comment in this little 'Did you know?' from *Living Home*. Here we look at woodworms, clothes moths and lots of other creepy-crawlies as well as mammals. A commercially necessary world-wide element introduces possums, monkeys and racoons but the most praiseworthy inclusion of all is a whole spread devoted to the lowly woodlouse – possibly the only creature that will voluntarily eat school chalk and whose habits and presence are all entirely benign.

Each volume's value is much enhanced by an ample, relevant bibliography and address list.

This pair will make a useful addition to ecology project collections. TP

Stamp Collecting

Neill Granger, Oxford University Press (A First Guide To series), 0 19 910062 4, £9.99

JUNIOR/MIDDLE

'There are millions of stamps, hundreds of countries and scores of topics and themes' confides Neill Granger, and he should know since he's been a stamp collector since boyhood and is now an experienced auctioneer.

This enormous output could prove a daunting prospect for budding stamp buffs, but the author provides plenty of helpful suggestions on how to narrow the choice (Birds, Space and Trains are apparently top of the thematic pops), as well as useful practical advice on what you need to get started and how to organise and write up a collection.

The colourful, attractively laid out pages are also full of interesting items about the very first stamps, early mail services, how stamps are made, famous forgeries and cinderellas.

There's also a section on famous collectors, but it's to be hoped that aspiring young philatelists don't emulate one Alfred Hind, who thought he owned the only copy of a very rare stamp and on discovering the existence of a second, bought and subsequently destroyed it to ensure he still owned the only one. VH

How Do We Know Animals Can Think?

Steve Parker, Simon & Schuster, 0 7500 1520 9, £8.99

MIDDLE/SECONDARY

Dogs have tremendous powers of perception, sheep have abundant faith; they act upon these attributes in certain ways which we interpret as evidence of 'thought'. Parker provides a nice definition of thinking (choosing what to do in a situation) before going on to show how various animals exemplify it. We find bees dancing, sea-otters using tools and chimps making them, and he also shows us how many 'simpler' animals appear not to have to think but survive successfully too.

This book allows us to compare and contrast various voluntary animal activities - breathing, locomotion, nesting, communication, migration, breeding and sleep - before ending with 'How do we know what animals are thinking about?' and 'Do animals have fun?' Parker is professional enough to offer no facile answers here (in fact he's properly reticent in this respect throughout the whole book). I know our dog is happy to think about anything I choose to believe he's thinking about, especially when our sheep are having fun at his expense.

This slight-seeming book actually has a lot of provocative questions to offer. Its value lies not only in the information that accompanies them but in the glimpses it provides of the limits of objectivity in the process of scientific enquiry. TP

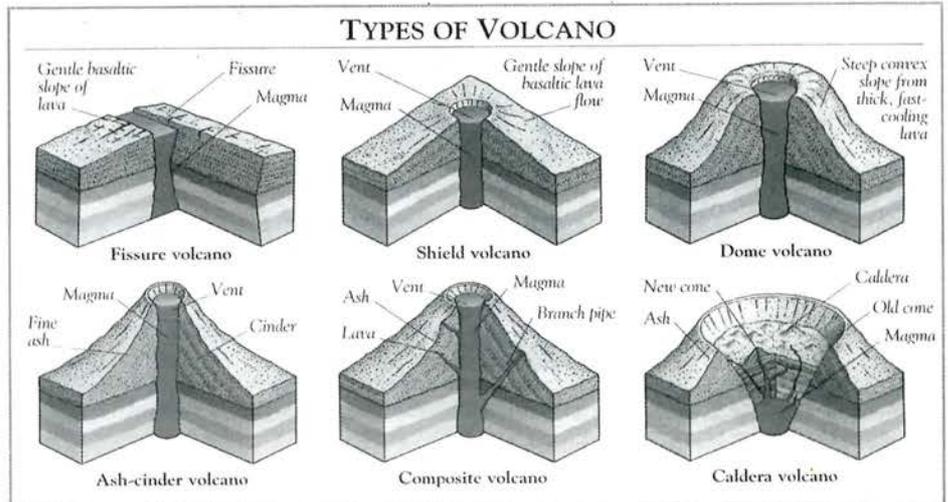
Life in the Freezer

Alastair Fothergill, photos. by Ben Osborne, BBC, 0 563 40378 0, £8.99

MIDDLE UPWARDS

Emperor Penguins are superb - when all other creatures are leaving the Antarctic landmass for a warmer winter further north, the Emperors haul out onto it and start incubating their chicks. For two months the father birds stand on the snow-swept terraces like a frozen football crowd until the hatching happens, whereupon the mothers come home from the sea with bellies full of fish for the chicks. It must be a good life - there are millions of Emperors. And this is the main message of the book - that for animals adapted to the ghastly conditions, life in the freezer is good, food and space are abundant and they'd be silly to live anywhere else.

You probably remember the TV series - almost as spectacular for the polychromatic wardrobe of the breathless and visibly ageing Attenborough as for its remarkable close-up look at Antarctic wildlife.



One of the 'clear colour diagrams' from *Dictionary of the Earth*.

It spawned a forbiddingly dense and glossy Big Book at the time, but now the BBC have distilled out an excellent 'specially written text for young people'. This provides an agreeable word/picture balance with the probable result that all of us will read more of this version than the original.

For once 'stunning' is the word for Osborne's photography as we examine first the land, then the sea and its islands, then the seasons. Images of albatross, seals, penguins and whales are familiar enough, but all combine here to present the picture of successful survival which distinguishes Antarctic fauna. And we are left in no doubt that here is an environment well worth conserving. TP

Dictionary of the Earth

John Farndon, Dorling Kindersley, 0 7513 5227 6, £12.99

SECONDARY

Physical geography was always something of a mystery to me as a teenager, with cwms/corries far removed from daily experience in the Vale of York. I would certainly have benefited from this *Dictionary of the Earth*. Despite its compact size (it would fit into a largish pocket) it has clear

colour diagrams, broad coverage (over 2000 entries) and far more detailed text than is usual from this publisher. Subjects range from the Age of the Earth and Earth in Space to Human Impact and Earth Science Pioneers. The arrangement is thematic with a detailed subject index, and there's a good explanation of how best to use it.

The book is full to the brim with interesting snippets and definitions that inform and encourage dipping. The author's enthusiasm for his subject is infectious and now I not only understand why armchair-shaped hollows scraped out by ice were unfamiliar but can recognise them in their true setting. GB

Non Fiction Reviewers: Geoff Brown, Vee Holliday and Ted Percy. Non Fiction Reviews Editor: Eleanor von Schweinitz.



'Without the protection of an adult's pouch to keep it warm, the emperor penguin egg and young chick would soon freeze to death.' From *Life in the Freezer*.

SWEET VALLEY HIGH IN SE7

SALLY SAUNDERS

"Look at that!" Elizabeth Wakefield had been dreamily staring up at the sky, her head on Todd Wilkins's shoulder, her long, golden-blond hair falling onto his chest. She sat up and pointed through the windshield of the BMW at the brilliant light streaking through the night sky. "It's a shooting star!"

Todd squeezed her hand. "The perfect ending to a perfect night."

The opening lines of Francine Pascal's latest series, Sweet Valley University, have it all – glamour, romance and a hint of opulence; the stuff dreams are made of, all set in a seemingly never-ending Californian summer and a continuation of the highly successful Sweet Valley phenomenon that attracts over 50,000 readers every month in the UK alone.

I can remember when the first Sweet Valley title, **Double Love**, was published in 1984. There were several 'teen series' around at the time, notably Sweet Dreams, Romances and Heartlines. Like many children's librarians I was overwhelmed by the demand for these and the new Sweet Valley titles from teenage girls who had never previously used a public library. I can also recall a marked reluctance on the part of many librarians to stock the new series, which were dismissed as 'pulp fiction'. Caught between an immense pressure from our newly acquired borrowers and a moral dilemma (largely self-imposed) borne of the traditionalistic view that we should be providing what teenagers ought to read and not necessarily what they actually want, I made a bold decision – to sit firmly on the fence. I would stock Sweet Valley in the hope that, having lured my unsuspecting public into the library, I could persuade them to borrow 'proper' books (whatever they are!). Picture the scene – 'I'm sorry, Tracy, all the Sweet Valley books are out, have you tried Dickens?' Dream on!

Sitting in my children's library in North London all those years ago I truly believed that Sweet Valley would be another five-minute wonder; a passing phase in a fickle youth culture. Well, we all make mistakes.

Francine Pascal visited the UK last year to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Sweet Valley – now one of the most enduring series. I spoke to her on the last day of her week-long tour when she visited Greenwich to talk to an enthusiastic audience of 11-13 year-olds.

With impressive originality, I began the conversation by asking why she thought Sweet Valley was so successful, and like a true professional she responded with genuine enthusiasm as if she'd never been asked that particular question before.

'I was a very optimistic teenager,' she says, 'and my conflicts were the stuff of everyday teenage trauma – loyalty, friendship, sacrifice, honour, truth and love. I think the books appeal because teenagers today are still an idealistic breed.'

Francine Pascal originally created Sweet Valley for television, and when this idea was not successful she revamped it into what she describes as 'a teenage soap opera in book form'. She draws a great deal of inspiration not only from her own memories of growing up in New York, but also from her three grown-up daughters, her grandchildren and friends. Perhaps it's the universal themes that emerge from these collective experiences that hold the key to the continuing success of the series – and explain why Francine receives over 1,000 fan letters a

week from as far afield as Russia and Indonesia. Peer pressure, boyfriends, parents, school, looks and fashion and sibling rivalry are not only universal themes but are also, of course, the major sources of trauma which exclusively confront succeeding generations of teenage girls.

A predominantly female audience of 150 fans from Greenwich listened quietly to Francine, with the kind of rapt attention not normally displayed at 4pm on a Friday afternoon. She must have described a hundred times before how the series came to be written, the underlying philosophy and how many copies are sold by her publishers,

Transworld, every week; yet she clearly still enjoys Sweet Valley and gives her readers tantalising glimpses of more to come.

When a response was invited from the audience, I was really impressed by the detailed knowledge of Sweet Valley these young people possess – the kind of in-depth analysis that's more usually associated with set novels at A-level. The questions

were searching and intelligent, and I must confess that the true extent of my misjudgement of the series was brought home by the realisation that there are very few subjects Francine Pascal is not prepared to tackle. Racism, drug abuse, anorexia, teenage pregnancy, suicide and death are just a few of the themes dealt with over the years, and dealt with effectively it seems. These teenagers remember it all, just as they remember the gentle morality which, though never intrusive, clearly guides the actions of the heroines, Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield, and the many other characters who occupy their world. If a mistake is made there are repercussions, if a character is wronged they get hurt – Francine Pascal admits that each title has a 'hook ending' to keep the reader coming back for more, but the endings are not necessarily happy; a welcome touch of realism in the land of golden sunshine, convertibles and beautiful people.

This land, represented by the posters, balloons, banners and T-shirts in the Sweet Valley livery of pink and yellow which bedecked the Jacobean mansion in Charlton, SE7, where I met Francine Pascal, seemed, initially at least, somewhat incongruous. So, too, did the all-American refreshments of popcorn and fruit juice cocktails – complete with cherries and paper umbrellas. These are the inevitable spin-offs from a successful idea, and it would still be easy to dismiss Sweet Valley as the kind of lightly-whipped confection that teenagers can safely digest between real books if one didn't have the hard evidence of success and commitment from both creator and consumer alike. The truth is that for many teenage girls, Sweet Valley books form their staple reading diet and Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield are their friends.

For the few boys in the audience, grouped defensively in one corner in a 'go on – impress me' kind of way, the event was obviously a little baffling. They had volunteered to be there, and they listened – perhaps won over by the sheer enthusiasm of the speaker; but the world of Sweet Valley is not for them. It was created for girls, and is aimed at, and read by, girls.

As Francine herself says, 'I wanted to do something for teenagers that was inside their world . . . a microcosm of the adult world where teenagers are in control and the action is driven by girls.'

From the first Sweet Valley title, which was based on the concept of a





Francine Pascal.



'A predominantly female audience of 150 fans from Greenwich listened quietly to Francine, with the kind of rapt attention not normally displayed at 4pm on a Friday afternoon.

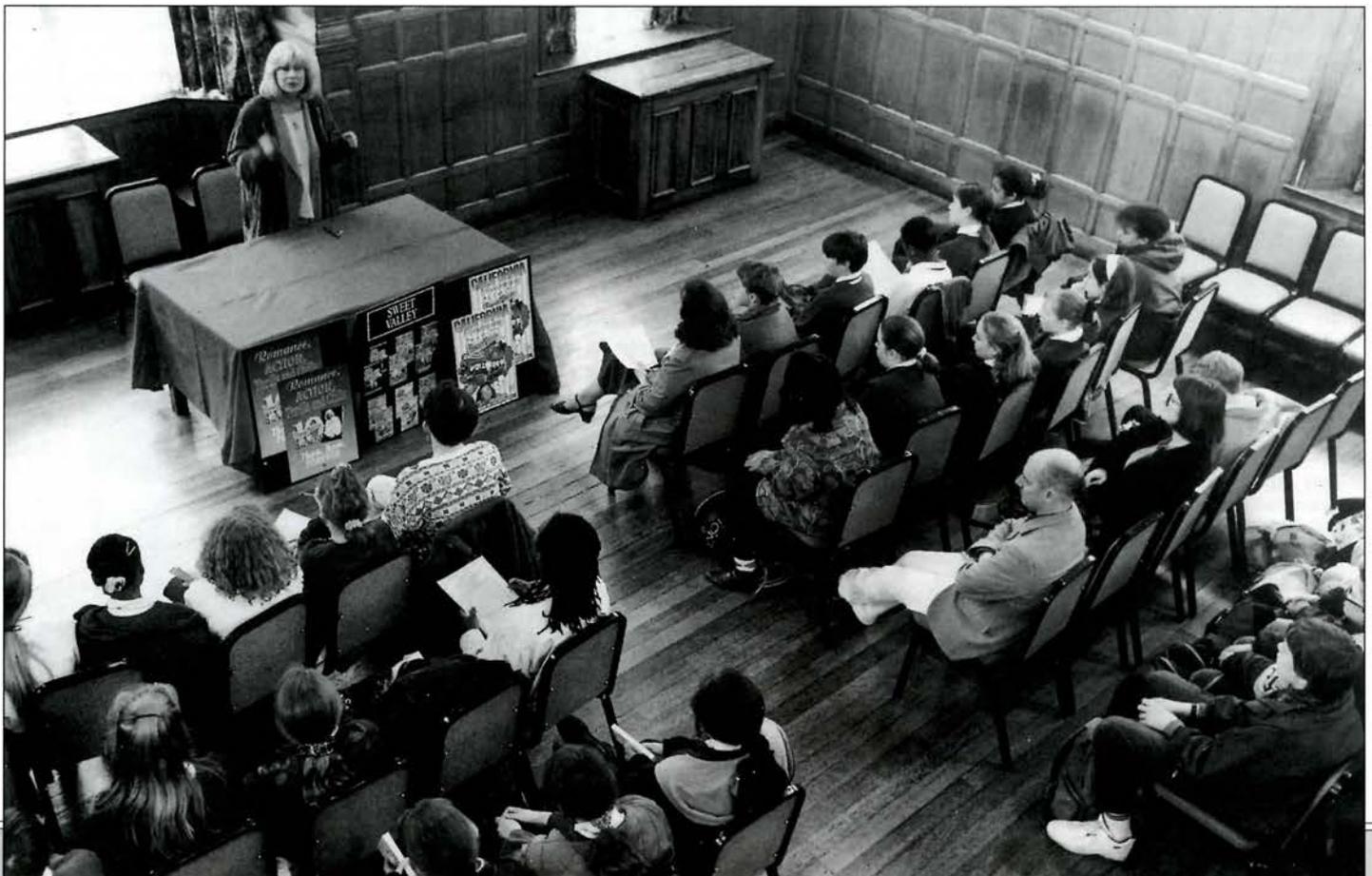
13-year-old girl not getting on with her mother, to the latest in which our heroines leave home for the first time, this philosophy remains unchanged – and why not? 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it!'

Sitting by an open fire in this impressive setting (and, yes – nibbling popcorn), I put away my carefully prepared questions – each as staggeringly unoriginal as the first – and simply listened. I'd intended to pursue the Sweet Valley phenomenon doggedly to the bitter end so that you, dear reader, might share with me the secret of its success. I now realise it's futile to attempt such in-depth analysis – it works, it has worked for ten years and it will probably continue to work for many years to come. Teenagers are electing to read it in the face of tough and varied opposition from computer games to **Neighbours** and we should be glad of it.

Perhaps the biggest challenge will come from Sweet Valley's own TV series, which began filming in America last year and may soon be shown in this country, though I have great faith in Francine's devoted fans, her continued inspiration and her dedicated team of writers. Personally, I can't wait for Sweet Valley 'Forty-somethings' – as the twins approach middle-age and discover the trauma of peer pressure, sibling rivalry, parents . . . and, of course, how to encourage their own children to keep on reading. ■

Over 100 Sweet Valley High books have been published, of which around 75 are still available in paperback from Transworld.

Sally Saunders is an Education Librarian with the Project Loans Service of the London Borough of Greenwich.



No Forum for Teenage Fiction

PEGGY WOODFORD

The Children's Publicity Manager at my publishers, Transworld, is in despair at the lack of review space given to teenage fiction. The worst offenders are teenage magazines – few ever mention books, thus by default promoting the image that books aren't cool. This is particularly depressing for publishers who work hard at attracting teenage readers. Transworld have an excellent 10-16 catalogue which has combed their backlists; the choice of SF, Adventure, War, Mysteries, Contemporary Issues, Fantasy, Poetry, Humour, etc. includes many writers who would be surprised to find themselves on a teenage list: Isaac Asimov, Christabel Beilenburg, Stan Barstow, Joanna Trollope. Yet only one listed book – *I Was a Teenage Worrier* – briefly caught the teen magazine editor's eye. No interest was shown in the rest. I rang a few editors to ask why books were ignored.

Just *Seventeen*, leader of the field with 300,000 readers aged 14-15, told me there was 'no celebrity spin-off' so it wasn't worth their while financially to review books. The assistant editor, Sarah Bailey, said: 'We know our readers would rather read articles about celebrities, about popular culture, than book reviews.' When I tackled her about the powerful effect of a short, but regular, corner of a page devoted to books near the other regular reviews of video, films and pop music, her reply was that there was 'no hope of a change in our editorial policy'. But they do print a short piece of original fiction each week. A crumb of comfort.

'Celebrity-led' was a phrase that kept cropping up. A staff writer at *Fast Forward*, aimed at 12-13 year-olds, used it almost apologetically, and admitted that nothing was done or would be done for teenage fiction beyond occasional competitions which resulted in free give-aways of books. It's clear that literature is viewed by those who put together teenage magazines as something to be ignored. 'There's no demand for it.' Precisely, because the teenage culture they peddle is geared to a TV/pop music/cult-clothing world with financial spin-offs built in. Sex, celebrities, more sex, agony columns, and appearance – and that's it. No demand for anything else is created.

What about coverage on radio, on television? I could only think of occasional items on *Live and Kicking* and *Treasure Islands*. Anna Home, Head of BBC TV Children's Programmes, agrees there is a lack of a forum: 'Children's television programmes only get reviewed if the reviewer happens to have flu. We feel very strongly that in broadcasting terms there's a gap between the end of Children's Programmes and the beginning of so-called Youth Programmes, i.e. the age range 13-15. At various times I've tried to fill this gap but it's very difficult as people are not prepared to release funds for such a relatively small age group.'

Sally Avens, Head of Children's Drama on BBC's Radio 4, also admitted not enough was done, particularly since the demise of Radio 5. She was sure the demand was there, but with only a 30-



Anticipation



Frustration



One week later: Renewed Hope

'The worst offenders are teenage magazines – few ever mention books.' Here, a mention for magazines in a book, taken from *I Was a Teenage Worrier* by Ros Asquith (Corgi).

minute broadcast from Radio 4 on Sundays aimed at 10-13 year-olds, it's not going to be met. She made an interesting point, that there was a class issue behind the lack of interest shown by teenage magazines. They bend over backwards to attract the largest possible readership and avoid anything remotely middle class ('only middle class parents are seen to be concerned about their teenage children's reading'). This is class prejudice with a vengeance, and those who suffer its most serious effects are the 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds. Their vulnerability, poised as they are in inchoate rebellion against childhood and adulthood, between both and part of neither, makes them easy prey. They lose the habit of reading because it isn't cool, isn't 'sexy'. They could easily keep it or acquire it for the same reason.

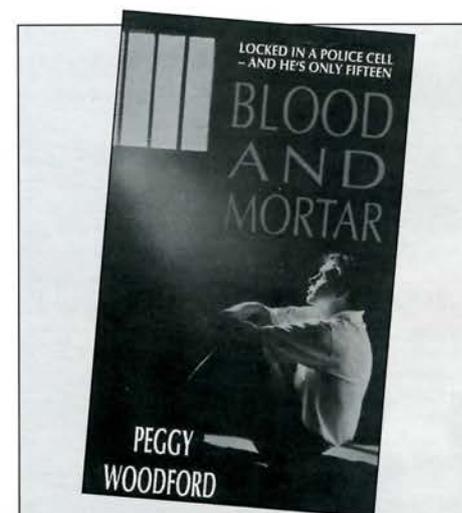
If all was well in the general national press, this wouldn't matter so much, but reviewers, and reviews, of books for teenagers hardly exist. A reviewer will tuck in a few encouraging sentences about a crop of teenage books twice a year if we're lucky. Space given to book reviews has shrunk everywhere, but that given to books for teenagers seems to have shrunk the most. If a school librarian doesn't happen to promote a new book, it disappears without trace.



Peggy Woodford.

The press is only interested in negative reports – that teenagers are not interested in books, no longer read, have appallingly low reading ages, etc. Yet there's a whole thirsty market out there, longing for guidance and not getting it. The Book Trust in Scotland recently brought out a list for teenagers called *Radical Reading*. Lindsey Fraser, the Executive Director, says 'We were completely taken aback by the demand.' They had to seek funding for a reprint and have now distributed 90,000 copies of *Radical Reading* and are bringing out a summer issue as well. If only the national press backed up these enlightened efforts by proper reviewing of new books, parents and teachers would get guidance too.

So, if the early teens aren't helped by their own magazines and television programmes to find a good book to read, and their parents get no guidance from regular general reviewing about what to buy for this notoriously difficult age range, is it surprising that publishers and writers alike despair of the media? And is it surprising that teenagers rapidly lose the habit of reading at leisure and for pleasure? ■



Peggy Woodford's latest book for Transworld is *Blood and Mortar* (0 552 52774 2, £2.99). She once worked for BBC TV and has been an English teacher, but now, when she isn't writing, she helps her eldest daughter run a business.

In Britain, it's hard to be honest with youngsters about sex . . . but even harder in the USA.

Sex is not just any old hugging and kissing. And it's not just about love. I know that much.

Well, it's not just making babies, either.



Let's talk about sex

Stephanie Nettell interviews Robie H Harris about her new book for Walker.

It was a three-minute spot on an NBC-network show in Atlanta, Georgia. They had taken the male and female drawings of pre-puberty, puberty and young adult from *Let's Talk About Sex* (called in America *It's Perfectly Normal*), and carefully drawn a black box right across the torsos, leaving only legs and heads. You might, like Robie Harris, wonder why they were showing them at all.

'It was such a quick shot, I thought "I'm losing my mind, they couldn't have done this! Do I comment? But with three minutes that would be the whole interview. . . ." So I talked instead about how important it was to keep kids healthy, to give them this information *before* they're sexually active. I'm still not convinced I did the right thing, but I'd decided not to get into the combative role.'

She was pre-armed. Back home in Cambridge, Mass, she had consulted 'a wonderful non-profit group called Political Research Associates, who have been tracking the right wing in our country for 17 years', about probable accusations that she's positively ordering kids to have sex, that it'll be her fault when they become pregnant, get infected and die . . . She had no intention of speaking in deepest Florida, say, or parts of Texas. Even in Massachusetts, which defied the recent surge to the right by sticking to a Kennedy, there have been 41 challenges to the health curriculum, AIDS education and sexuality, in the last 18 months. 'Stealth candidates, highly funded and trained, come into the State, running for School Boards and local councils, and they really do terrify parents by distorting one sentence out of context.'

'Most of the challenges die when parents, realising what's being taken away, fight back - although that doesn't mean every community in the country will do that.' She's encouraged by enthusiastic mainstream support from *Publisher's Weekly* and the American Library Association - some libraries even considering removing the anti-theft sensor in the book to allow a child to quietly walk away with it. Indeed, in the first month of promoting her book, the response was an overwhelming welcome tinged with near-despairing relief. 'There is a great big middle out there. A survey showed 90% of American parents *want* their children to have this education, *want* their children to stay healthy in the nineties.'



Robie H Harris.

Nevertheless, she emphasises, the choice remains theirs.

Implacable opponents still question her including homosexuality. 'I talk about Sappho and Spartan warriors because I want to give the kids some historical perspective, to show that this didn't just happen in the seventies in San Francisco! The rate of depression and suicide among gay teens is absolutely alarming, and not to talk about it would have been an enormous omission. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror in the morning if I'd left it out.'

Robie (her own version of Roberta as an insistent three-year-old) seems to have prepared all her life for this work. Growing up in Buffalo, an English major at college, she went to New York intending to train as a teacher at Columbia, but was irresistibly drawn to Bank Street graduate college of education, 'an extraordinary place, psycho-analytically oriented, centred on child observation, and still at that time with some of the fascinating women who'd founded it in 1917.' Here she helped design and run one of the first Headstart programmes with poor

families on the West Side; when CBS were worried at the seduction of their child-education talents by the blossoming *Sesame Street* on public TV, they turned to Bank Street. She became one of three writers of five-minute slots, five days a week. 'We worked all day, every day - and really learned to write!'

Her husband, a PhD in urban studies and planning, runs a PAC (Political Action Committee) lobbying the House and Senate to support issues concerning poverty and deprived children, teenage mothers and pre-natal care. The argument common to Headstart, pre-natal needs and *Let's Talk About Sex* says intervention saves later social and emotional costs, and is, she insists, an issue of health rather than sex.

Her small nephews' narcissistic fascination with her first baby (her sons are 22 and 24) led to *Before You Were Three*, written with her close friend, children's writer Elizabeth Levy. It was the first of many titles, fiction and non-fiction, but few have demanded the consuming six-year labour of this latest. When the family moved from New York to Cambridge, she tapped into the wealth of knowledge such university towns nourish, and became engrossed by infant and toddler research 'with a lower-case R - not data gathering'. She was given multitudinous open-ended help, from Planned Parenthood and the Aids Action Committee, lab professors and doctoral students, to her own boys and their friends. The stimulating contact with so many has made fiction seem dauntingly lonely!

Her next book, *Happy Birthday* - a picture book on all the things a baby can do on its first day of life - is again illustrated by Michael Emberley, whom she first approached wholly instinctively after having met him at a book-signing. Everything, including the Bird and Bee dialogues, was already written, but she wanted to offer a complete package to an editor, with honest but not voyeuristic illustrations of real Americans, not Hollywood myths, in respectful, caring relationships. It proved a miraculously sympathetic collaboration, with visual explanations replacing text whenever possible while reflecting the balance and tone she had struggled to achieve.

Beneath that comfortingly maternal exterior and calm voice there is unflinching commitment. 'I really do believe in the separation of Church and State: it may sound simplistic and naive to expect people to practise their own beliefs without messing with other people's, but our whole nation was founded on different groups coming together for *freedom*.'

Let's Talk About Sex by Robie H Harris, illustrated by Michael Emberley, is published by Walker Books (0 7445 5252 5) at £12.99. For a fuller review of the book, see Val Randall's *Sex Books Round-Up* on page 20.

I've heard enough about sex for now.

Not me.



Facts for the teenage life



Val Randall on Sex Information Books.

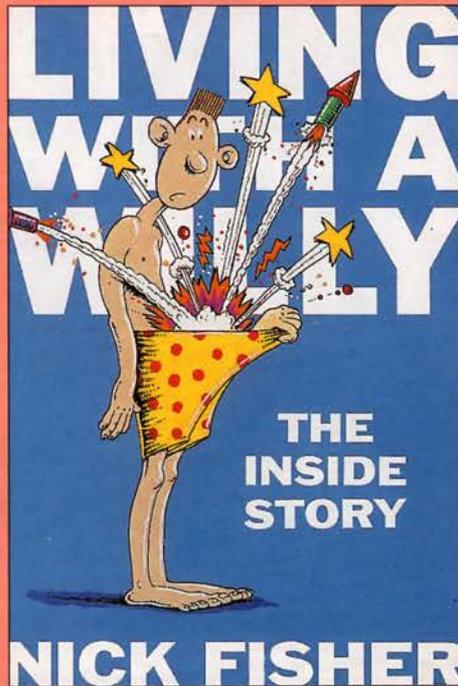
Sex is one of mankind's biggest preoccupations. The most jaundiced of us have to admit that teenagers – even in their worst moments – are a part of the human race and as fascinated by the thrill of the forbidden as the rest of us.

Since motivation is not a problem, what are the criteria to be used when assessing books about sex aimed at young people? How do publishers chart this minefield to ensure their product will sell?

Covers are of paramount importance. **But David – don't you know about the Facts of Life?** by Philip Boys and Corinne Pearlman screams 'inadequate!' at the hapless reader. Yet it's a somewhat different story between the covers. Cartoon strips imaginatively fictionalise a variety of subjects: most teenagers would identify with the situations discussed here. The potted biographies at the end of the book finally convince that condescension was no part of the publisher's plan.

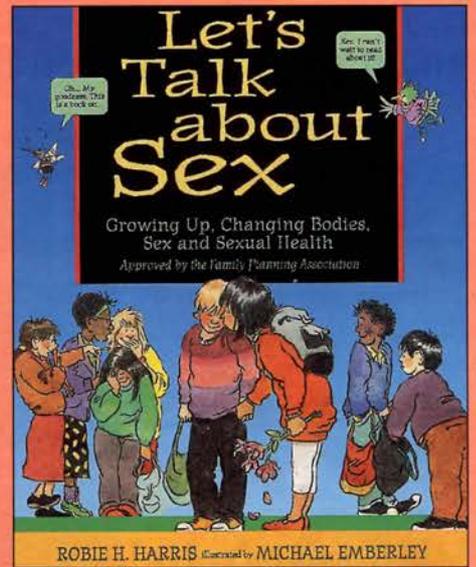
The pseudo-medical textbook cover seems to be favoured by a small number of publishing houses. Less dismaying than **But David . . . , Sex – How? Why? What?** by Jane Goldman is simply coldly uninviting. Yet this guide for older teenagers is clearly written and extremely thorough in its coverage – everything from knowing your body to coping with unwanted pregnancy. This is detailed and helpful information about sex – including open answers to questions which many young people are afraid to ask.

Similarly informative, but with a much more appealing cover is **Straight Talk – How to Handle Sex** by Jane Butterworth. A blur of graphics with key words superimposed – understanding, independence, freedom – may sound contrived but has a sophisticated impact which makes it a more acceptable book to take from the shelves and up to the till.



Nick Fisher is a prolific writer of sex books for young people and his covers cannot be said to suffer from a surfeit of sophistication! **Living with a Willy – The Inside Story** has a bemused cartoon character nervously clutching copious boxer shorts, out of which a variety of technicolour rockets are exploding. This cheerful, chatty book may well offend strait-laced parents but it will find a wide audience among teenage boys because it speaks their language – not in that embarrassingly hearty tone which teachers adopt when they're trying to be 'matey' – but naturally interspersed between statements and questions by and from young people. Young boys will find what they need to know and frank advice is given about the need for sensitivity and the unacceptability of machismo. A worthy book, likely to be of service to both boys and girls.

Nick Fisher strikes again in **Boys about Boys**, a book stimulated by the correspondence he received in his role as 'Agony Uncle' for **Just 17** magazine. In the introduction Fisher explains that he wants the



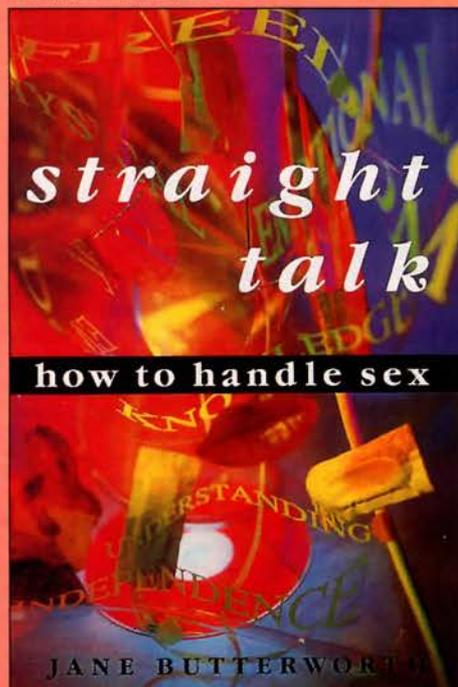
book to be 'a guide and a trigger for further discussion . . . and understanding'. It's certainly that – no-nonsense headings like 'Macho Activities and Behaviour', 'Myths and Realities' and 'Big Boys aren't emotional' demolish harmful stereotypes and replace them with role models which are put within the reach of any teenage boy. The tone throughout is matter-of-fact with the underlying assumption that this is how all thinking young adults behave.

As the cover suggests, girls too will benefit from reading this attractively priced book, since they're too often at the sharp end of incomprehensible and wounding male behaviour. After all, explanations promote understanding which, in turn, gives the confidence to deal with a potentially unpleasant situation.

Fisher scores once more with **Your Pocket Guide to Sex**. Anything bearing a flash stating 'The Book the Government Tried to Ban' with the terse quote 'Smutty' from Brian Mawhinney, Minister for Health, on the back cover is bound to be a sure-fire winner with teenagers and young adults. It doesn't disappoint: it really is pocket-sized, it retails at £2.99 and it fulfills the promise of the blurb to guide young people through 'the complexities of sex' and help them see that 'good relations and emotions can count for a lot more than notches on the bed post'. Hurrah for common sense!

It would be perfectly possible for an antagonistic reader interested only in superficialities to latch onto the occasionally graphic teenage terminology but that would deny all the book's strengths. It provides an accessible source of sensible information about the sort of anxieties teenagers often succumb to and this is substantiated by the question and answer format familiar from teenage magazines. Celebrity quotes add further authority to a pleasing package. This is great value – counselling between soft covers.

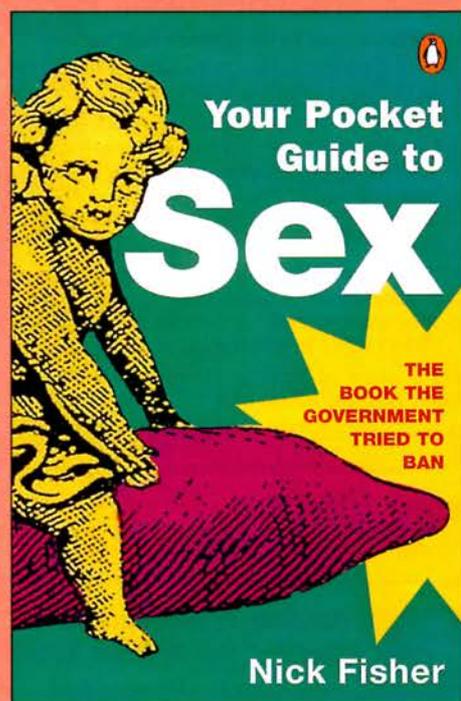
Girls finally get their own book with **Girltalk** by Carol Weston, who describes it in her introduction as 'a personal encyclopaedia'. This is a fair description of the nine chapters which broadly cover all the topics at the front of teenage minds. Two chapters are devoted to sex and relationships and they consist of short, sharp wordbites of advice: immediately digestible but not wholly comprehensive. It's a browser's book, to return to as the need arises. **Girltalk** is



attractively presented, with the tantalising rider 'All the Stuff Your Sister Never Told You' emblazoned across the front cover.

Anita Naik, like Nick Fisher, is a **Just 17** columnist and her book is liberally sprinkled with extracts from the hundreds of letters she receives each week. **Coping with Crushes** has a far narrower scope than any of the other books discussed in this article but it's mentioned here because it's an excellent offering: well-written, sympathetic and with constructive advice in the right measure. Naik never demeans – she quite properly points out that unrequited love is one of life's most painful and memorable experiences and that it's also a valuable learning process, preparation for the real thing when it finally comes along.

The understated black and white cover sets the tone for the narrative – there's no sensationalism, but a clear-headed exploration of an important issue, well-documented by the letter extracts which appear in every chapter. This is a valuable addition to the armoury of advice available to young people and well worth £4.99.

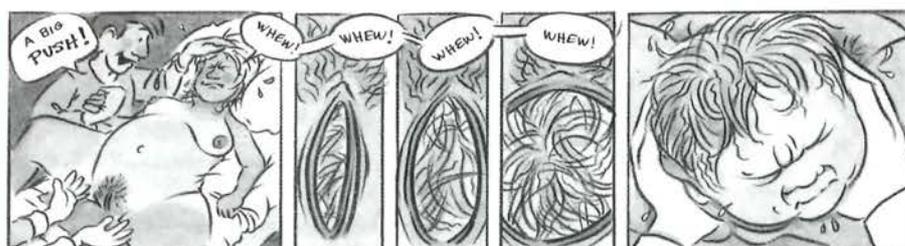


Let's Talk About Sex by Robie H Harris and illustrated by Michael Emberley is very much the star of the show. The cartoons are non-threatening: the disabled, homo- and bi-sexuals, and ethnic minority groups are all catered for in an entirely unaffected way. This unself-conscious approach, rippling with gentle humour, eases readers into what could have been potentially embarrassing situations.

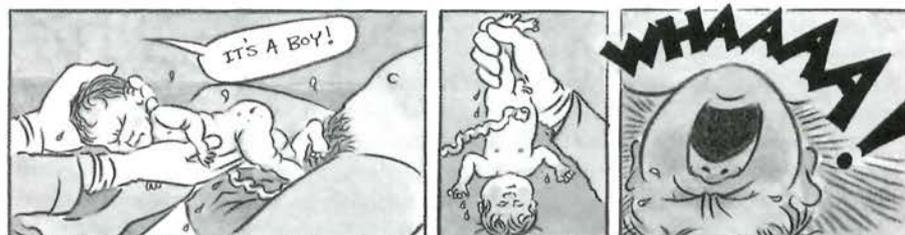
The cartoon commentators, Bird and Bee, polarise attitudes to sex – the enthusiastic former leading the avowedly reluctant latter – providing young readers with a comforting off-stage voice. Their own attitudes will be represented here: more Bee than Bird, I suspect, but there's no hint of censure or criticism.

The best books about sex for young people deal with the subject in a forthright way, often employing the language and terminology which teenagers themselves use. Those which incorporate humour, usually in the form of cartoon strips, jokes or asides seem to deliver their message effectively and more palatably than sober texts which read too

When it's time to be born, the mother's muscles squeeze and push the baby out



and into the vagina. The vagina stretches wide and out comes



the baby, who is still connected to the mother by the umbilical cord,

The birth of a baby, from **Let's Talk about Sex**.

much like medical handbooks.

Publishers should think hard about how sex books are packaged: a cover can sell a book or make its journey to the cashpoint a humiliating one. Teenagers are shy about buying books on this subject and the last thing they want is to be patronised or embarrassed. Price should be a consideration, too – most teenagers would balk at spending more than £5 on a book.

There seem to be far more books about sex for boys than for girls. It is rather dangerous to assume the existence of the stereotypical teenage girl, with a supportive mother, approachable sister and a group of female friends who will listen, advise and counsel. There's strong evidence that this network of emotional support is far more common amongst groups of girls than groups of boys, but many girls feel as isolated and confused as their male counterparts and should not be denied the help they need.

Those books which, gently but firmly, tackle deep-seated prejudices about sexual behaviour are the ones most welcome in the marketplace. Simply not dealing with issues like disability, homosexuality and mixed race partnerships can indicate to young people that these are subjects best avoided, that the individuals concerned are somehow odd, or inferior. A quiet acknowledgement of the whole range of sexual behaviours is more likely to educate wisely: avoiding difficult issues can indicate tacit disapproval.

Most important of all is the uniformly insistent message that asking for knowledge is the only way to overcome ignorance and the confusion it generates. Many young people are unhappy because they have no-one to ask about their fears and problems and this leaves them vulnerable to manipulation or exploitation. Young people need to be guided towards rewarding sexual relationships and this area of education has often been neglected or tackled badly. If adults cannot or will not approach this subject, there are now a variety of books which will at least open the door to discussion.

As Nick Fisher so succinctly puts it in **Boys about Boys** – 'if there's anything you want to know – it's all right to ask. In fact, it's not only all right to ask, it's important to ask.' ■



From **But David – don't you know about the Facts of Life?**

Val Randall teaches at a secondary school in Lancashire and is a member of **BIK's** regular reviewing team.

Book Details:

But David – don't you know about the Facts of Life?, Penguin, 0 14 090350 5, £3.99

Sex – How? Why? What? The Teenager's Guide, Piccadilly, 1 85540 215 5, £6.99

Straight Talk – How to Handle Sex, Pan, 0 350 32462 4, £5.50

Living with a Willy – The Inside Story, Pan, 0 350 35248 1, £5.50

Boys about Boys, Pan, 0 350 32595 0, £5.50

Your Pocket Guide to Sex, Penguin, 0 14 024367 4, £2.99

Girltalk, Pan, 0 350 32805 4, £5.99

Coping with Crushes, Sheldon Press, 0 85969 700 2, £4.99

Let's Talk About Sex, Walker, 0 7445 3252 5, £12.99

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JANET AHLBERG

1944-1994

With more than four million copies sold of *The Jolly Postman* and *The Jolly Christmas Postman* alone, along with worldwide critical acclaim, Janet Ahlberg's success as an illustrator was spectacular. Yet she remained shy, modest and unassuming. Her friendliness was remarked on by everyone who met her. Beneath the freshness and humour of her books, though, lies a tough-minded regard for craftsmanship that was also very much a personal trait.

She trained as a teacher but soon found herself far more at home in a studio than a classroom. Her collaboration with husband Allan began with *The Brick Street Boys* (1975) and culminates, later this year, in *The Jolly Pocket Postman* – though with *Burglar Bill* (1977), *Each Peach Pear Plum* (1978), *Funnybones* (1980), *Peepo* (1981), *The Baby's Catalogue* (1982) and many other titles to choose from, for most of us it's impossible to pick a favourite.

Her description of how her books came about was typically unpretentious:

'Usually, Allan tells me an idea; this may be one of a number of candidates – none of which are yet written – and we talk about it, and if we are agreed he proceeds with the writing. I read it, he hopes that I will like it and mostly I do.'

As easy as that . . . except hours of labour went into both the words and the images.

Janet's early death, after a two-year battle with cancer, has robbed children's books of one of its brightest, and nicest, talents. CP

One in Twelve New Books Lost by British Public Libraries Through Spending Cuts Alone

British public libraries have lost, through falling expenditure, one in twelve of the new books they purchased ten years ago says a new report, *Public Libraries and their Book Funds*, published by the National Book Committee.

The worst situation emerges in London and the English Metropolitan Districts where one-quarter of new books have gone. Northern Ireland has lost one-seventh of its new additions. The English Counties, Wales and Scotland have maintained spending, but expenditure in the English Counties and Wales remains below the UK average. Scotland is the best spender per head of population at £2.49. In England, one in ten of new public library books has disappeared.

The report calls on the Secretary of State for National Heritage to remedy the situation. A legal duty is placed upon the Department to superintend and promote the library service, and appropriate legal action is urged in those areas where swingeing cuts have been made.

For information, telephone John Davies (Educational Publishers Council) on 0171 580 6321 or the Press Office at Book Trust on 0181 870 9055.

• AWARDS •

Kurt Maschler Award 1994

£1,000 in prize money and a bronze statue goes this year to Trish Cooke and Helen Oxenbury, for *So Much*, published by Walker, 0 7445 2220X, £9.99

1994 SPECIAL needs Book Award

WINNER:

See Ya, Simon by David Hill, Viking, 0 670 84866 2, £8.99; Puffin, 0 14 036381 5, £3.25 pbk

HIGHLY COMMENDED:

Blabber Mouth by Morris Gleitzman, Macmillan, 0 330 33283 X, £2.99 pbk

Jessy and the Long-Short Dress by Rachel Anderson and Shelagh McNicholas, A & C Black 'Jets', 0 7136 3798 6, £5.50



The Smarties Book Prize

1994 Overall Prize Winner and for the 9-11 Category: Hilary McKay's *The Exiles at Home* (Gollancz, 0 575 05598 7, £9.99)

Children from Euxton Primrose Hill County Primary School, Chorley chose *The Exiles at Home*, and Hilary McKay was presented by Class 4 with a trophy and £6,000 at Book House in London. The young panel commented:

'We chose *The Exiles at Home* because it reminded us of our families – the characters were so real. It was so good that we didn't want to put the book down!'

6-8 Category Winner and a prize of £2,000: *Dimanche Diller* by Henrietta Branford, ill. Lesley Harker, Lions, 0 00 674748 5, £2.99 pbk

0-5 Category Winner and a prize of £2,000: *So Much* by Trish Cooke, ill. Helen Oxenbury, Walker, 0 7445 2220 X, £9.99

Earthworm Award 1994

Project Kite by Sian Lewis, Andersen Press, 0 86264 439 9, £8.99



From Puffin, chosen by Wendy Cooling, comes a booklist for teachers and librarians – in a new format which is smart, glossy and enables the contents to be kept up to date very easily.

Available from Elaine McQuade or Pauline Cooke at Penguin Children's Books, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ or telephone 0171 416 3000.

Lindsey Fraser appointed Head of Young Book Trust and Deputy Director of Book Trust

Lindsey Fraser, Executive Director of Book Trust Scotland, has assumed management responsibility for Young Book Trust and also becomes Deputy to Brian Perman, Executive Director of Book Trust. She'll continue to be based in Edinburgh and the staffing of Book Trust Scotland will be increased from three to four with the addition of a new Young Book Trust Project Manager.

Jean Egbunike, previously Marketing Co-ordinator, has become Publicity and Promotions Manager for Young Book Trust and Book Trust.

Lindsey Fraser began her working career as a bookseller – at James Thin in Edinburgh and Heffers Children's Bookshop in Cambridge. On her appointment she said:

'These changes establish Young Book Trust as an enthusiastic, informed and noisy national voice for children's books. Always central to Book Trust's operation, Young Book Trust's role will be strengthened by expertise and energy from both sides of the Border, from board level down. It's an exciting new job and I'm looking forward to it.'

• POSTERS •

Newly available from the Welsh Books Council . . . a spectacular, full-colour poster to promote reading, plus author leaflets on Jenny Nimmo, Catherine Fisher and Clare Cooper. Contact Menna Lloyd Williams, Welsh Books Council, Castell Brychan, Aberystwyth, Dyfed SY23 2JB (tel: 01970 624151).

And



from Book Trust Scotland a 'Wild About Books' poster. Delightfully illustrated by Julie Lacombe and available in English, Gaelic, Bengali, Chinese, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. Each poster costs £2.00 (inc. VAT and p&p) or £1.75 if five or more are ordered. Available from Book Trust Scotland, 137 Dundee Street, Edinburgh EH11 1BG.

READISCOVERY

A Book in the Hand of Every Scot – Man, Woman and Child!

That's the aim of a major campaign launched in Scotland with the assistance of award-winning writer William McIlvanney and children from Garnet Bank Primary School. Readiscovery is a year-long campaign to promote books and reading all over Scotland in 1995.

Scotland has long been regarded as a nation of readers – but in an age where the number of leisure pursuits has doubled in the past decade, there are clear indications the reading habit is under threat, particularly amongst young people. Readiscovery will put across the importance of reading, the benefits to be gained from it and – most importantly – the pleasure to be found in it for everyone.

The campaign, initiated by the Scottish Arts Council, will act as an umbrella for the many book events already happen-

ing in Scotland, and is working closely with Book Trust Scotland and existing book organisations. There will be local activities in bookshops and libraries under the Readiscovery banner from Stranraer to Thurso – including The Book Bus touring Scottish primary schools, a nationwide poster campaign, author visits galore and a National Book Day planned for Saturday, 12th August 1995.

For details, contact Readiscovery, The Scottish Book Centre, 137 Dundee Street, Edinburgh EH11 1BG (tel. 0131 221 1995).

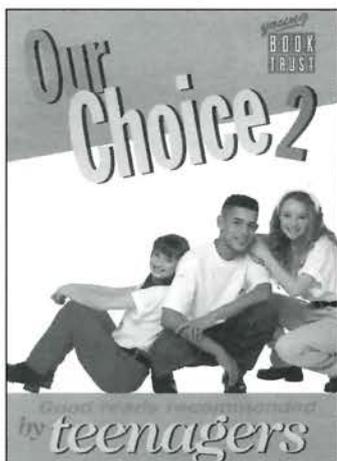
Apology

In our November 1994 issue, we incorrectly named the publisher of *Designing and Planning a Primary School Library* and *The School Library: Preparing for Inspection* as the Library Association. This should have read, of course, the School Library Association. Our apologies for any confusion caused.

Over 80 books selected and reviewed by teenagers from all over the country. Categories include Contemporary Fiction, Science Fiction and Fantasy, Horror, Thrillers and Non-Fiction.

Our Choice 2 is a magazine intended to help young people find some of the books they want to read. Designed specifically to grab the attention of its intended audience in the same way that a pop magazine, TV/video guide does . . .

Published by Book Trust, *Our Choice 2* is available from Young Book Trust, Book House, 45 East Hill, London SW18 2QZ and costs £3.00 (discounts for bulk orders). Contact Jean Egbunike on 0181 870 9055.



BfK News



IAN SERRAILLIER

1912-1994

A schoolmaster for much of his working life, also the founder and general editor, with Anne Serrailier, of the New Windmill series (over 400 titles) for Heinemann Educational Books, Ian Serrailier is best known for his novel *The Silver Sword* published in 1956.

This, without doubt, is his finest achievement. The straightforward, matter-of-fact prose style fits the storyline perfectly – of a family of Polish children searching war-torn Europe for their parents:

'They liked the stories from the Old Testament best. Their favourite was always Daniel in the lion's den. They enjoyed it just as a story, but for Ruth it had a deeper meaning. She thought of it as the story of their own troubles . . .'

For Ian Serrailier, all the best stories had a 'deeper meaning' and his re-telling of ancient legends – of amongst others, Hercules, Jason, Theseus, Beowulf and Sir Gawain – testified to this with a vigour, skill and read-aloud quality which brings them within the range of youngsters otherwise all too likely to miss them.

He was also a writer, and anthologist, of verse:

"Who's that tickling my back?" said the wall.

"Me," said a small

Caterpillar. "I'm learning to crawl."

In short, a literary all-rounder.

Ian Serrailier once said 'I cannot remember a time when I did not want to become a writer. I was practising all the time, even when I was still at school . . .'

Lucky for many children that he did.

CP

March BfK

In our next issue . . .

Alan Wakeman on translating *The Little Prince*

Viv Edwards on choosing books for pupils for whom English is a second language

Eleanor von Schweinitz on the structuring of non-fiction

Books to link in with VE Day

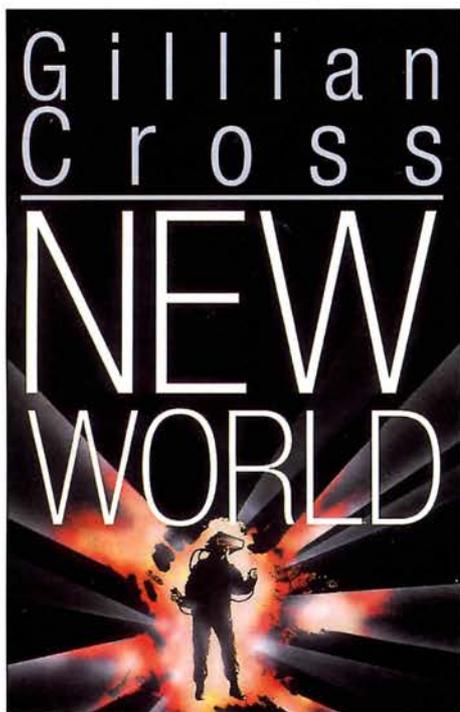
Gillian Cross in Authorgraph

plus, of course, reviews, reviews, reviews . . .

CHILD INTO ADULT

Julia Eccleshare reviews fiction for teenagers . . . and beyond

The danger of the dubious argument that teenagers don't read is that books won't be published for them. If we ever lose sight of the concept of publishing for the serious teenage reader, we'll be in real trouble. These youngsters are on a reading cusp between 'children's' and 'adult's' books. My first two choices begin that cusp – fitting happily into the children's book tradition. The second two move to the end of it and lead seamlessly into adult books.



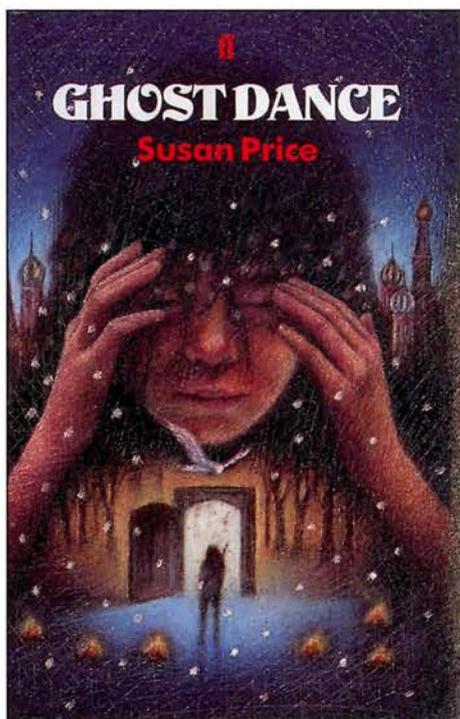
Gillian Cross has a rare talent for making each of her books different in both style and content. What remains consistent is the quality of her writing. Here the style and tone are tough and hard-edged as befits a story interweaving computer technology and game playing. *New World* (Oxford, 0 19 271723 5, £8.99) pushes the make-believe world of the computer game towards a frightening reality. Miriam and Stuart are invited to take part in the secret testing of a new virtual reality entertainment. Screen terrors gradually become real as Miriam realises the 'game' is tapping into her own most secret fears. Behind the technology Gillian Cross unravels a realistic family story as Miriam learns that sharing fears and feelings is strengthening rather than diminishing.

Jenny Nimmo's *Griffin's Castle* (Methuen, 0 416 19141 X, £9.99) is less optimistic in its conclusion as Dinah has no supporting adults on whom to fall back. It's the insecurity of her background – an absent father and young, weak-willed mother – which causes her to rely on a powerful imagination. Housed in a once fine, now dilapidated house by her mother's latest admirer, Dinah allows her fantasy and fancy a free rein. She's determined to make the house a home. In her imagination she recreates the main room for

Christmas – 'She decided to visit the harp room to arrange the furniture and choose a place for the Christmas tree. There was a spruce sapling in the garden, only a metre high. She could dig it out and hang her silver bottle tops on it. She would ask Jacob or Barry to help her move the griffin mirror and place it above the fireplace. Reflected candlelight would fill the room with stars.'



Dinah rouses the stone animals set into the walls of Cardiff Castle to keep her safe and give her strength but, in the end, it's her own resilience that enables her to cope with the shortcomings of her situation. Jenny Nimmo is sensitive and sympathetic but never sentimental in her understanding of Dinah's predicament.



Susan Price's 'Ghost World' sequence leaves reality far behind and is breathtaking in its imaginative range. *Ghost Dance* (Faber, 0 571 17182 6, £9.99), the third so far – and there may be more – is a book of such intensity it's almost painful to

read. It is violent, shiveringly but never gratuitously. Though ostensibly about the reign of Ivan the Terrible, it's also about political dictators anywhere, any time and any place. It's about the frailty of human nature. It's about the need for magics and beliefs to shore up inadequacy. It's about human destruction of the countryside. All bleak subjects . . . and this is a stark book, but not gloomy, and through its few but powerful good characters it offers hope and optimism.

Like the previous 'Ghost World' titles (*Ghost Drum* and *Ghost Song*), the storyteller is the cat. As it paces round and round the tree, it unfolds the story so the book has the qualities of a tale told by an itinerant ballad seller. Set in a distant past and in a far-off country with shamans, wizardry and cold lands where reindeer and bear wander, it's full of exotic and vivid pictures. Details of clothes and buildings, smells and shades of light and dark are crystal clear, managing to evoke visual treats as well as offering a literary delight. The stink of sweat that hung in the air around the crowd changed its note, became a blunter, more clubbing smell in Shingebiss's nose: a loathsome smell of fear and hunger. It tainted the air like the stink of bad meat, and made Shingebiss's skin prickle.'

Susan Price has the ability to create a mythological style all of her own which combines an aura of authenticity with stunning originality.



Janni Howker also uses a ballad-like narrative in *Martin Farrell* (Julia MacRae, 1 85681 225 1, £8.99) which, like *Ghost Dance*, is set in a distant (though nothing like as distant) past. Family feuding in the borders provides the background to a dark story of revenge. Apparently all alone in the world after the death of his step-father, Martin Farrell finds that a complex and vicious web of family lies engulfs him. Unravelling what he can, he uncovers the truth about his inheritance, a truth which must have terrible, murderous consequences. *Martin Farrell* is a slim book and Janni Howker's characters are more sharp silhouettes than flesh and blood. But, the tautness of the story construction, with tiny episodes picked out in the sparest of prose, and the sharpness of her ear for elliptical dialogue makes it a difficult but deeply rewarding book to read. ■