

Non-Fiction for Children

'Now, what I want is, Facts. ... Facts alone are wanted in life. [...] Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours.' [...] 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, ... Sheds coat in spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more) Bitzer. (Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, 1854)

I could not resist giving a snippet of the beginning of Dickens' famed response to a nineteenth-century attitude to education that he loathed. Despite the effectiveness of his satire, there is no doubt that the prioritising of 'factual' books can be detected even in recent times, in the words of any suppliers of books who congratulate themselves on sales or loans of information books rather than of novels. Yet there is an equal danger that those of us for whom fiction has been not only entertainment, but also a means of forming our own values, may ignore the need for quality non-fiction – at the peril of disadvantaging child readers. The fight to establish the importance of the narrative mode as being of equal value to that which conveys scientific or historical information, and to ensure that children are provided with quality stories, does not absolve us from the parallel necessity for books which give them factual knowledge about the world in which they are growing up.

Part of the trouble is the enormous number of varieties of non-fiction. To name but a few: dictionaries; encyclopedias; textbooks (itself a vast category); books of statistics; instructional manuals; travel books; biographies and autobiographies; histories... Some of these last categories certainly veer towards the fictional, such as celebrity lives which purport to give the exact words spoken many years before. These are only the most obvious instances of an inescapable situation: it is impossible for authors to write without expressing their own ideologies and the more they claim to present the 'truth', the greater the possibilities of deception. Teachers have of course a responsibility for opening the eyes of the young to the potentials for bias in allegedly factual material, and their task has

become more difficult with the explosion in available information today.

Much non-fiction reading is also carried out outside school. The surveys into children's reading at the end of the twentieth century, carried out by the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature, revealed that a good deal of non-fiction reading relates to children's hobbies. Other popular subject areas included the lives of famous people, animals and plants, and other parts of the world. While, as expected, adolescent boys were more likely to read factual material than their female contemporaries, more than 60% of all pupils read information books regularly, and, at Key Stage 1, more

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Fact versus Fiction: No Contest

Nicola Morgan

Too many people subconsciously undervalue non-fiction as reading material for children. Fiction seems to occupy the cultural high ground and a child (often a boy) who wants to read about tractors or creepy crawlies is regarded as a less keen reader than a child (often a girl) with her nose buried in a novel. If we undervalue as readers those who prefer non-fiction, we do a damaging disservice to the many children who might very well love reading if they were given books they liked and if their preferences were equally valued. Small wonder that so many teenage boys in particular run a mile from reading.

As well as writing books for young people, I run the Child Literacy Centre website (www.childliteracy.com) through which parents email me with concerns about their child's reading and writing. 'My son doesn't like reading' is the most common. On further questioning, it usually turns out that their son happily reads non-fiction, especially about his favourite hobby or sport. But somehow that's not considered 'proper' reading. Until recently, the vast bulk of the Oxford Reading Tree consisted of fiction; exam boards still focus on fiction and poetry as set books; non-fiction is largely ignored by reviewers in the national press; and when did you last recommend a piece of great non-fiction to a teenage reader?

We should avoid sending out subliminal messages to young readers that non-fiction is less important than fiction. After all, we don't disparage the adult reader who chooses a biography of Lenin or a book on quantum mechanics. We should be pleased that children choose to read and we should judge their material, if at all, by the quality of the writing, the content and its power, not whether it happens to be fiction or non-fiction.

When we undertake slightly different tasks, slightly different parts of our brains are activated. We know, for example, that when we think of something funny or something sad, different groups of neurons are used. Reading, and appreciating, non-fiction requires different thought processes from reading and appreciating a story, and since people's brains have different strengths and

weaknesses, it stands to reason that some readers will find it easier than others to 'get' fiction. But it doesn't make those people cleverer in any way, or 'better readers': simply different, just as a tennis player is different from a footballer, and no more or less sporty.

As adults, we choose a particular book because we hope to enjoy it. We read for pleasure and understanding. I also believe we look for a kind of truth, all of us, readers of fiction *and* non-fiction. Readers of non-fiction *explicitly* look for truth. But novels also contain a truth, and it is that truth, that contact with other experiences, with real possibilities, with an exploration of humanness, which fiction readers also look for. A novel about 'made-up' characters in a 'made-up' situation examines a *truth* about human experience. After reading a good novel, understanding is increased, just as it is after reading non-fiction. Non-fiction can tell you the freezing temperature of water, can explain the behaviour of the molecules as it freezes; a novel seeks to make you feel the cold. Both are a kind of truth. Both give pleasure and understanding to the reader. Both should have equal value.

There is another reason why we tend to encourage young people toward fiction more than non-fiction. There simply isn't enough high quality non-fiction for them, especially for teenagers. Adult non-fiction has been publishing's big success over recent years. Popular science, history, biography fly off the shelves and into the hands of avid readers. This success story is largely explained by the quality, passion and clarity of the writing. Yes, there's dross too, and many people seem not to notice its drossness – but at least they are reading. But in children's non-fiction there's not enough brilliant writing, not enough real communication. And in teenage non-fiction there's not very much of anything, dross or not.

With notable exceptions, publishers seem to think that attractive design or a few intricate pop-ups are the only requirements of quality non-fiction. They couldn't be more wrong. Nor is it enough to have some prettily framed words written by an expert historian/scientist/

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whatever: you need an expert *writer*, knowledgeable and passionate about the subject. Without the best words in the best order, the connection is simply not made with the reader, and the information doesn't properly engage the brain.

So who does it well? Here are four quite different examples of best practice. *Think of an Eel* by Karen Wallace (illus. Mike Bostock) is one of the consistently wonderful Read and Wonder series from Walker Books – the words are as beautiful as the sinuous pictures. It's poetry in the ocean. *Through the Tempests Dark and Wild* by Sharon Darrow (illus. Angela Barrett), also from Walker Books, is an atmospheric and fascinating account of Mary Shelley and her creation of Frankenstein. The *Ask Uncle Albert* series by Russell Stannard (illus. John Levers), published by Faber, is a powerful way of answering big questions about physics and the universe. And *Written in Blood* (illus. Andrew Weldon)

by Beverley MacDonald, published by Allen&Unwin, is the history of civilisation 'with all the gory bits left in', explaining serious matters with a wonderfully direct style that is easy on the reader, engagingly informative. In all of these, the quality of the text is paramount, and is supported by appropriate artwork instead of being dominated by it. In over-designed books, stunning artwork often disguises flaccid text.

If we want to keep young readers reading, both boys and girls, and if we want young non-fiction to do what the adult genre did 15 years ago, we need to act: writers should start writing; publishers should start publishing; reviewers should start reviewing; librarians, teachers and parents should start recommending; and everyone should start valuing fiction and non-fiction equally, for their important truths and their power to bring understanding and pleasure.

Learning with Pictures

Pat Pinsent

That young people learn best if enjoyment is associated with the experience is not exactly a new discovery. The Roman critic Horace and the Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney both attest to its truth. One of the classics of children's literature, Jan Comenius's *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658), established the principle of associating illustration with early learning, at the same time giving much pleasure to children who in those days were often expected to learn simply by rote. Illustrated alphabet books also rank among some of the earliest texts produced specifically with children in mind. Given this history, the tendency in the last 40 years or so for picture books to be so firmly associated with fiction is perhaps a little surprising. I did a quick count through my personal collection of picture books, totalling about 350, and located only about 20 that I would regard as non-fiction. These include a few alphabet books, several about dinosaurs, two about starting school, some 'heritage history', auto/biographies by Michael Foreman and Raymond Briggs, and Anthony Browne's *Willy's Pictures*. Additionally, some of the ones I have classified as 'fiction' might be open to question, such as the retellings of myths or Shakespeare's plays, while

obviously the fact that these books were mostly my personal choice means that a high degree of subjectivity is involved. Nevertheless the trend for picture books to be largely in a narrative mode, telling a fictional story, whether in prose or verse, is overwhelming.

If the evidence of books I have recently received from publishers is anything to go by, a slight reversal of this trend is becoming noticeable today. As well as the books reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *IBBYLink*, there are another 11, all published by Frances Lincoln, which seem to be closer to what Jerome Bruner, in his *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986) terms the 'paradigmatic' mode (more generally associated with scientific reasoning and classification) than the 'narrative'. Since these books are directed towards children, the distinction between these modes is not clear-cut, and in some instances a story framework is used in order to convey a more general principle. Another feature is that, unlike those who produced the didactic texts of the past, the publishers of such non-fiction picture books seem to have in mind a market comprising parents of young children, as well as the educationalists.

Perhaps as part of the inheritance of Anthony Browne's interest in presenting art to young children, as well as the natural enthusiasm of book illustrators themselves, several of these books focus on paintings. Lucy Micklethwait's *Children: A First Art Book* (2006; 1 84507 1166) is almost exclusively visual. A representative example from it is the section 'Sleeping', where two nineteenth-century pictures of children are captioned: 'sleeping in the hay' and 'sleeping in bed'; full details of the provenance of all the pictures is provided on the final page. By contrast, Mary Arrigan's *Mario's Angels* (illus. Gillian McClure; 2006; 1 84507 404 1) is a (presumably fictional) tale about how the artist Giotto is inspired by a little boy to include angels in the sky of the fresco he is painting. The story is followed by factual historical detail about the artist and the technique of fresco. A different approach again is to be found in *Pablo Picasso* by Sykvue Delpech and Caroline Leclerc (2006; 1 84507 676 1). This is a 'sticker book', whose only text, other than the details about the paintings, is a short account of the artist's life. My attempt to reassemble one of six pictures, 'Bouquet', from the pieces provided would probably have shamed the average five-year-old but certainly made me look more closely at Picasso's technique. In a different manner, *Lemons are not Red* by Laura Vaccaro Seeger (2006; 1 84507 461 0) is an art work in itself, with delicate paper cut-outs, attracting the attention of young children by allowing a familiar shape to appear in the 'wrong' colour before the 'right' one.

The subject of *Un Deux Trois: First French Rhymes*, by Opal Dunn (illus. Patrice Aggs; 2006; 1 84507 623 0) is clearly revealed by its title. English translations, and instructions as to how to play the related games, are provided in a separate section from the rhymes, and a CD is included to ensure that the reader and listener get the sounds right.

The natural world is well represented too. Sarah Garland's *Eddie's Garden and How to Make Things Grow* (2006; 1 84507 0895) is a simple narrative, with the figure of Eddie's aptly named sister, Lily, providing light relief by attempting to eat worms or to bury herself in the gar-

den. The story text is followed by a substantial section providing details about the plants concerned and other factors about gardening. *Snap* by Mick Manning and Brita Granström (2006; 1 84507 408 4) has the subtext of following the food chain in an entertaining way, as a fly is eaten by a frog who is eaten by a duck and so on. The same team is responsible for *Dino-dinners* (2006; 1 84507 684 2), produced in conjunction with the Natural History Museum's exhibition *Dino Jaws*, which runs until April 2007. This colourful presentation of dinosaurs' gustatory and excretory behaviour is likely to fascinate children, and again it comes with a wealth of factual material.

Perhaps more traditional in format, because they set their factual material into a fictional narrative, are Pauline Francis's *Sam Stars at Shakespeare's Globe* (illustrated by Jane Tattersfield; 2006; 1 84507 406 8) and Nick Would's *The Scarab's Secret* (illustrated by Christina Balit; 2006; 1 84507 299 5). The former has only a brief prefatory note to supply historical background, but the latter, in a manner characteristic of the contemporary approach, supplies a significant amount of detail about the ancient Egyptians.

Finally, Benjamin Zephaniah's *J is for Jamaica* (illustrated with photographs by Prodeepta Das; 2006; 1 84507 401 7), conveys a considerable amount of information about the island in characteristic verse, of which the title rhyme is perhaps representative:

J is for Jamaica, where the sun shines all
year round.
Here waterfalls and mountains and
beaches can be found.
The island is a place where many tourists
like to be,
On the map you'll see it smiling in the
Caribbean sea.

The variety of these books, all designed to enrich children's knowledge of the world they inhabit in a way which is not only entertaining but also visually attractive, surely suggests that non-fiction picture books are on an ascending curve!

Free Trade in a Knowledge Economy

Jacob Hope

'The map of the world ceases to be a blank, it becomes a picture full of the most varied and animated figures ...' (Charles Darwin)

The advent of radio, television and the internet has created a democracy of knowledge and a laissez-faire approach to information exchange. This is at variance with the society in which critically acclaimed author and illustrator, Peter Sis, grew up. Born into a Czechoslovakia oppressed by the Iron Curtain of communism, it is unsurprising that Sis has a self-professed 'fascination with people who are visionaries'. He holds the strong belief that 'it is important to look at the story of our civilisation and find ... individuals who were exceptional and without whom we wouldn't be where we are.'

This thread runs deep through two of his most innovative picture books to date, *Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei* (Farrar Straus Giroux, hbk., 1996; Sunburst, pbk., 2000) and *The Tree of Life: Charles Darwin* (Walker Books, hbk, 2003). In these, Sis presents the lives and systems of thought belonging to key founders of modern science, outlining their extraordinary abilities for observation and for free thinking.

Starry Messenger charts the work undertaken by Galileo Galilei, including the law of falling objects and the objective proof that the belief in the earth as the fixed centre of the universe was fallacious. The book also recalls the controversy to which his considerable scientific advances led, in the light of the fact that the latter discovery ultimately led to Galileo's persecution at the hands of a threatened Catholic church who only in recent times have 'apologised' for the ill-treatment of Galileo.

Similarly, *The Tree of Life* maps the public, private and secret lives of Charles Darwin, exploring his expeditions, his tireless attempts to gain recognition as a naturalist and his many publications towards this end. Darwin's greatest achievement, however, was the propounding of his theory of natural selection which he consolidated with evidence, so underpinning the modern understanding of how evolution works. The publication of *The Origin of Species* and its consequences are presented to readers

in a carefully structured gatefold spread, also enabling the controversy that raged in religious circles to be appreciated.

Symmetry between the books is created through the meticulous way in which empirical observation is recorded. Biographical interest and increased feelings of intimacy and authenticity are lent through the use of carefully selected extracts of personal testimony from both Galileo and Darwin. Text is made visually stunning and thereby more memorable with the accompaniment of Sis's highly evocative illustrations which are resplendent down to the most minute detail, providing rich historical and cultural contexts as the backbones of both works.

It is at once sobering and heartening that the stories of both men, their visionary work and indefatigable energy for using their empirical research to push back the boundaries of what is accepted, have been made available and accessible to young audiences. The manner in which Sis has embraced and encompassed the fervour and passion that both Galileo and Darwin felt for their work, fuelling the discoveries and developments they were able to make in their respective fields, is incredibly inspiring. It is impossible not to feel excited at the realisation of how these fundamental shifts in thought have radically influenced modern society.

These books are more than mere biographies – they are non-fiction titles of the highest calibre. They secure and reaffirm the key importance and the uniqueness of the form and format of books in contributing to the knowledge economies that have themselves evolved with the development of new technologies.

In 2003, in recognition of his multidimensional books, Peter Sis was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, an award designed to emphasise the importance of the creative individual in society. The aim of the award is to offer 'highly creative people the gift of time and the unfettered opportunity to explore, create and accomplish.' This kind of creative freedom and vision must surely be the driving force behind the successful publication of quality and enduring non-fiction at the heart of the democracy of the information age.

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Writing Non-Fiction for Children: An Author's View

Pam Robson

A series of coincidences led me towards a career as a non-fiction writer for children. In 1989 I was already anticipating a career change, after many fulfilling years as a middle-school teacher and language coordinator, when my headmaster received a letter from an illustrator who had been commissioned to create a children's non-fiction title about making books. Her brief included overall design and layout – the full significance of the latter only became apparent to me much later. It so happened that I had a particular interest in making books with children and was already doing so with my class of 11-year-olds. I made contact with the illustrator, Gillian Chapman, who happened to live locally, and she joined us in school to observe the children at work. The process of making books was something of a learning curve for me and the practical input gained from Gillian was invaluable. She invited me to co-author the commissioned title and though the prospect seemed daunting at the time, it proved a rewarding experience, chiefly because Gillian had control over both design and content of the book.

The title *Making Books* (Simon & Schuster) appeared in print in 1991 and proved so successful that rights were sold in many other countries and it later appeared in paperback; a new edition came out in 1993. Gillian and I travelled the country conducting 'Making Books' workshops for children and teachers – happy memories! We worked together for a number of years and Gillian retained responsibility for design and layout, as well as illustrative content, on all of the titles which we co-authored. We spent many happy hours working on texts together, though I have never lost the daunting feeling that prevails during the writing process, when the end product is for public consumption. We were intent upon creating attractive, reader-friendly books and I hope that we succeeded. A major advantage, I am quite certain, was knowing our target audience.

It is only in retrospect that I realise how lucky we were to have so much control

over those titles. Since then I have written numerous non-fiction texts but with one or two notable exceptions I have rarely rediscovered the satisfaction of that complete immersion in a project.

The first of these commissions was a project to write alone a history series for Macdonald Young Books called *All About*. Having conducted exhaustive research before composing each text, I was able to suggest illustrations, most of which the designer, with whom I worked closely, was happy to use. Those titles have been published in both hardback and paperback and have also been reprinted. Some time later I had the pleasure to work with Lionel Bender of Lionheart books; who also recognises the value of communication between his team members. One of the many lessons that I have learned during my career as a non-fiction author is that it is imperative that the whole team should pull together.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges involved, I have thoroughly enjoyed each writing experience, but I have frequently felt distanced from the publishing team. Creating an information book is quite unlike writing a novel; so many team members are involved that the author can feel isolated, even stifled. Editors require a certain number of words to fit a specific space and have little patience with authors who wax lyrical! I have heard a managing director murmur, 'You're not writing poetry, you know.'

Many children, especially boys, seem to read non-fiction for pleasure. The ultimate aim of non-fiction publishers should be to provide non-fiction titles in which the perfect balance between text and image has been achieved. To do this the author needs to work closely, not only with the editor, but also with the designer and the picture researcher, or illustrator. Imbalance only happens when the author is distanced from the rest of the team. The aim should be for a fully involved and co-operative team who believe in the importance of quality non-fiction texts for young readers.

The World of Uncle Albert

Russell Stannard

I am sometimes asked how I, as a research scientist, suddenly decided late in life to start writing books for children. It all goes back to my early days as a student. I still recall the thrill I experienced on learning of the wonders of relativity and quantum theory. For example, did you know that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light? This comes about because the faster you go, the heavier you become. Indeed, if you were to travel in a high-speed spacecraft as fast as some of the subatomic particles I have to deal with in my research experiments, you would weigh as much as ten jumbo jets. At high speed, time slows down; go fast enough and you could live for ever! Speed squashes up space. At nine-tenths the speed of light you would be squashed to half your normal thickness. But don't worry – you wouldn't feel a thing because the atoms that make up your body would be squashed in the same ratio so would fit in just as comfortably as when you are stationary. Did you know your mind works faster upstairs than downstairs? But on the rim of a black hole, time appears to come to a standstill? These are just a selection of the extraordinary features that emerge out of modern physics.

Naturally, on learning all this, I wanted to share my newly found passion with others. But nobody seemed to want to know. 'What?! You expect me to understand relativity? You must be joking. One has to be a genius – like Einstein – to understand that kind of stuff.' Such was the kind of reaction I got. They claimed that when they were at school they had been 'hopeless at physics', and nothing was going to shake them out of that conviction. As far as they were concerned, it all went 'against commonsense'.

But then again it was Einstein himself who once declared: 'Common sense consists of those layers of prejudice laid down in the mind before the age of eighteen.' That being the case, it struck me that perhaps one day I ought to have a go at trying out these ideas on children, rather than adults – the rationale being that children have yet to be brainwashed into believing themselves incapable of understanding such matters.

Unfortunately, in the fiercely competitive academic world, one gets little credit for popularising science; to gain advancement, one must concentrate on research and administration. It was not until much, much later – after a number of years as head of the physics department at the Open University – I realised I had nothing more to prove in that regard, and that at last I was free to return to that early vision of introducing children to the world of Albert Einstein.

But was I kidding myself? Were children likely to be able to grasp such subjects? It was then I experienced a 'eureka moment'. It was drawn to my attention that the American child psychologist Jerome Bruner had once declared: 'Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.' It was all a matter of finding 'a courteous translation'.

What constitutes a courteous translation? In the first place the approach adopted must be in tune with the cognitive development of the child reader. This entailed me learning, from the work of Piaget and later workers, the distinction between concrete and formal thinking. This is not the place to go into such matters in any detail. Suffice to say that most children (and indeed it is now recognised, most adults) go about mentally organising their knowledge of the world through working outwards from their own concrete experiences, or imagined extensions of experience. They cannot get a handle on any approach that relies on being able to deal with theoretical models. Unfortunately, analysis of most science books reveals that they are aimed at readers who have successfully made the transition to formal thinking. This simply will not do for children, or for any attempt to popularise science. The appreciation of this fact governs crucially the manner in which scientific material has to be presented.

In the second place, a courteous translation recognises that if most children don't read textbooks, there's no point in writing up the material in that form. What do children of, say, twelve-years old, read? To answer that I spent several Saturdays in the local library examin-

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ing popular children's books (popular as judged by the frequency of the date stamps on the inside cover of the book). The children using the library at first found it puzzling that this adult should be so engrossed in their books. But eventually word got around that I was the local professor, and, as is well known, professors are allowed to be a bit odd. It was in this manner I was able to identify a list of common ingredients that go to make up best-selling children's books

Armed with this background information, I then set to and wrote *The Time and Space of Uncle Albert*, the first of what was to become the 'Uncle Albert' trilogy. It read like an amusing, exciting science-fiction adventure story – only the science was not fiction but fact. Here were Einstein's astonishing discoveries presented to the child in the guise of a story.

Great fun, but could children genuinely learn from such a story? To find out, an early version of the book was developmentally tested out in a number of schools on a completely random sample of a 100 or so 10–12 year olds. The children read the book and were then asked questions to find out whether they had enjoyed it and found it interesting (78% did). They had also to sit a written examination to test their comprehension of the underlying science. The results were most gratifying.

So, at that stage I knew that the book worked; the children could understand the physics, and moreover, enjoyed it. I then had to find a publisher. Surely no problem, given the positive results of the developmental testing. Huh! It was rejected by 17 publishers. Why? I suppose there had not been a book like this before, and publishers are notorious for not wanting to take risks. It wasn't until I sent the manuscript to Faber and Faber that it got accepted.

The rest is, as they say, history. Shortlisted for both the non-fiction Children's Science Book Prize and the Whitbread Children's Novel of the Year, *The Time and Space of Uncle Albert* is, after 17 years, still selling well in 21 translations. It was quickly followed by *Black Holes and Uncle Albert*. The third book in the series, *Uncle Albert and the Quantum Quest*, became the UK number 1 children's best-seller for a month, and even got to number 5 in the *adult* paperback best-sellers' list (only for one week I admit – but what more can one expect of a children's science book!).

One of the things that has surprised me about my books is the number that are being used as a basis for school lessons. This I had not expected; subjects such as relativity and quantum theory have little or no bearing on the National Curriculum. Their popularity with teachers appears to derive from the fact that children positively enjoy them; they find them stimulating. At a time when there is a marked drift away from the physical sciences, it makes a pleasant change. What is more, having been fired with enthusiasm over, for example, the exotic gravitational effects of black holes arising out of relativity theory, the children appear more willing to learn other things about gravity – those aspects that do figure later in the National Curriculum.

And stimulated they certainly are, judging from my mailbag. One of the delights of being a children's author is to hear from one's young readers. These letters often contain fascinating questions. A selection of these, together with my answers, formed the basis of *Letters to Uncle Albert*, *More Letters to Uncle Albert* and *Ask Uncle Albert; 100½ Tricky Science Questions Answered*. Perhaps the comment I most treasure was from a young lad who wrote to me saying: 'What I like about your books is that they teach you things without you knowing it.'

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girls than boys expressed an interest in them. It was also interesting to note that a high proportion of children's factual reading, at least in 1996, was of magazines.

This issue of *IBBYLink* can only touch on a subject as large as this, whole swathes of the topic being omitted. Nevertheless, we hope that by looking in more detail at an area not always fully enough scrutinised, we can signal its importance, and emphasise the message that providing high quality non-fiction texts is just as important as is ensuring the provision of novels and short stories which are attractive to young readers.

Pat Pinsent

Seeing the Way Animals See

An Autistic Woman's Perspective

June Hopper

One of the many pleasures of reading is that an interest in one particular book can spark an interest in another. I was about to read Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: David Fickling, 2003), which I knew was written from the perspective of a fifteen-year-old boy with autism, when I saw a review in a national newspaper of a book about animal behaviour written by an autistic American woman, Temple Grandin. I decided to read the two books simultaneously. Both are remarkable in their different ways, and while it was fascinating to find some parallels between them it is Grandin's that I focus on mainly here.

Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behaviour (London: Bloomsbury, 2005; pbk., 2006) is a scholarly work but it never gets weighed down by its scholarliness. It is delivered with a light touch and is often humorous. For a lay person like myself, Grandin's book is totally accessible because, being autistic, and therefore being ultra-specific, Grandin always explains her ideas and the scientific terms in clear, precise detail. Christopher, the autistic boy in Mark Haddon's book, writes down his thoughts and ideas in a very precise way too. It is, in fact, this very detailed, exact way of explaining things that gives both books, in their different ways, their unique registers.

One can learn a lot about autism as well as animal behaviour from Grandin's insightful book. It was during her teens that Grandin found that she had a special rapport with animals. She did not connect this special rapport with her autism, however, until she had been working with animals over several years. After carrying out extensive studies, Grandin, who is now an associate professor of animal science at Colorado State University, concluded that autistic people and animals relate to the world in much the same way. Both are controlled by what they see (p. 30) and what they hear (p. 49) and that can be a big problem if what they see and hear frightens them. As Grandin explains, while non-autistic people can reason with themselves through words about what is frightening them and per-

haps talk or think themselves out of their fear, autistic people and animals cannot do this. During this aspect of her discourse, and indeed throughout the book, Grandin illustrates her findings with instances drawn from her own personal experiences and those of other autistic people, as well as with case studies on animal behaviour. Her unique ability to see from the animals' point of view and understand their fears and behaviour patterns has informed her work over forty years and has resulted in her being instrumental in implementing more humane treatment for farm animals.

And humans have greatly benefited from Grandin's insights, too. Grandin has observed how both humans and animals experience a calming sensation under deep pressure. For instance, humans respond to the deep pressure of massage, while cattle seem pacified by the feeling of the squeeze machine which holds them steady while the vet gives them their injections (p. 4). These observations led Grandin to invent her own special squeeze machine which has become a world-wide pressure therapy for autistic people to alleviate anxiety. Mark Haddon, in fact, gives a touchingly realistic account of the effects of deep pressure in relation to autism in his novel, when Christopher describes the calm feeling and sense of security he experiences when he squeezes himself into the confined space beside the boiler in the airing cupboard.

What I think gives *Animals in Translation* a wide appeal is the fact that Grandin also draws on topics that might interest the more general reader as well as those interested in other specialist subjects. Take perspective for instance. In a section which outlines the kinds of genius that some autistic people and animals possess, Grandin considers why autistic savants are good at perspective drawing (p. 299). A non-autistic person looks at the picture of a building and sees a three-dimensional image because the brain has already processed all the myriad details of lines and shapes which make up the whole. This process, however, does not happen with an autistic person, who continues to see all the

details that make up the whole picture. Thus, there are some autistic people who can draw all these separate features and produce an accurate three-dimensional image without too much trouble. A 'normal' person tackling the same exercise would need to deconstruct the image first, not always an easy task. Grandin refers here to Betty Edward's book *The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1999) which demonstrates how the brain of the 'normal' person can be usefully fooled when it comes to perspective: some art teachers get their students to turn a picture of a building upside down so that they only see the lines and shapes rather than the unified, three-dimensional object that their brains would have processed had they been looking at the picture the right way up. This exercise made the drawing of the perspective easier and also encouraged the students to look at things in different ways.

Animals show their genius in amazing ways too, and Grandin cites, among their other accomplishments, their ability to learn complicated migratory routes and their incredible powers of perception. As she explains, animals are keen observers of minute details; they are able to 'pick up' on the body language of humans, including those movements which would be imperceptible to other humans (p. 289). Dogs, for instance, can

anticipate the seizures of their owners and alert them because they are able to identify particular body signals.

While Grandin is against anthropomorphising animals, she does think that it is important to consider the animals' points of view. And while she is not suggesting that people will one day be able to converse with animals the way Hugh Lofting's Doctor Doolittle did, she is convinced that humans can learn to communicate with them and understand what they are trying to communicate back. One thing she is sure of: those people who do have a particular affinity with animals are a lot happier than those who do not (p. 307). I'm sure that those of us who enjoy the company of dogs and/or cats would agree with this.

Whether Grandin is describing animal antics, such as the parrot that regularly every spring courted its owner and treated the owner's husband as a rival, or discussing the responses of autistic people and animals to pain, her total dedication to her work and her compassion are evident on every page. And this is in great part thanks to the prose of her co-author Catherine Johnson, who herself holds a PhD in communications and has two sons who have autism, something which allowed Grandin's own particular way of expressing herself to shine through. A remarkable and inspiring book.

Volunteer wanted

The Word & Image Department is looking for a volunteer to complete the work of processing children's books which accompanied the Renier collection when it moved to the National Art Library in 2000. The tasks involve checking for duplicates on the online catalogue, checking again on the microfiche versions of the Renier catalogue, and then accessioning and pressmarking the books ready for full cataloguing at a later stage.

It is hoped that the work will take either (preferably) two to three weeks of most week days, or a few months of one or two days a week.

If you would like more details, or are interested in assisting the NAL in this way, please contact:

Deborah Sutherland, Stock Control Manager, WID, Victoria and Albert Museum.

email: d.sutherland@vam.ac.uk phone: 020 7942 2386

Rights People

Alex Webb and Alexandra Kirby

It is a rather remarkable fact that only 3% of all books published in English are books in translation, particularly since the figure is closer to 25% in Germany, and even higher in some other countries. Why do English publishers publish so few works in translation? It isn't a question of quality, as many other countries have long and celebrated literary traditions. Many of the books we consider classics were first published in languages other than English.

This is especially true of children's books, with titles like *Pippi Longstocking*, *The Little Prince* and *Babar* all claiming places on the list of timeless children's stories we all know and love. However, the contemporary equivalents – such as Cornelia Funke's *The Thief Lord* or the Geronimo Stilton series from Italy – seem to be few and far between. Even with such exciting initiatives as the Marsh Award, which recognises children's books in translation in the UK, few books from abroad seem to be making it onto UK and US bookshop shelves.

One factor is certainly the sheer number of submissions that UK and US editors receive. How would a Greek book, for example, ever make it to the top of the pile when most editors don't have time to get through unsolicited submissions in English, let alone books not yet translated? Even if an editor were interested in publishing some foreign fiction, where would he or she begin to look? There is certainly no shortage of books to be considered and the task can be quite daunting.

It was the consideration of these questions that led to the creation of Rights People, a new rights agency with an exclusive focus on children's fiction. The agency is a team of experienced and innovative rights professionals with a passionate commitment to selling children's fiction internationally.

Having seen that the main obstacle faced by foreign publishers trying to sell rights in the English language market is accessibility, Rights People aims to make its international submissions as easy to read and acquire as a submission from a UK or US agent or author would be. By providing information, synopses and samples in English, as well as facilitating the translation of the book, Rights People wants to make the acquisition of a foreign language title as smooth as possible. And the good news for books in translation is that English language publishers are eager to look at fiction from other markets. A few recent successes have proven that books in translation needn't just be 'worthy' additions to the list. A great story, well told, will work in any language. Rights People is excited to have the opportunity to be introducing quality fiction from around the world to readers in the US and the UK.

Rights People will be at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October with its first list of international titles.

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Recent Children's Literature Events

June and July were so full of events that it seemed worth describing some of them for those who may not have had the chance to be there.

An evening at Random House

An interesting evening was held at Random House on Tuesday June 13 with Melvin Burgess, E. E. Richardson and Dean Vincent Carter speaking about their recent books: *Sara's Face*, *The Intruders* and *The Hand of the Devil*, respectively. They discussed issues such as the appeal of horror stories to young adult readers, and the authors who had influenced them.

Richardson (who admitted to Elizabeth Emma, but presumably feels that the initials are a better marketing ploy) spoke of her use of folk tales and rhymes, and suggested that the conventions, and even a certain degree of predictability, can help young readers towards the mastery of a situation and the facing of their own fears. She likes to write about ordinary people with extraordinary problems, and, within a fantasy mode, to aim at psychological truth.

Dean Vincent Carter felt that his books confront young people with the problem, 'What would I do?' He suggested that teenagers want to read something that no one is telling them they ought to read.

Burgess admitted that in his latest novel he had been thinking of the changes in facial appearance of celebrities such as Michael Jackson. He recalled some of his earlier books which had taken the perspective of animal characters, and admitted to feeling that he had 'done' that subgenre, before moving on to his more recent work for young adults. Although he claimed not to write series, he had needed two novels, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, to deal with the themes from an Icelandic saga, a form devalued at the Renaissance, yet on a par with the narratives of Homer and the Bible. He also commented that he found censorship rules bizarre, seeing them as being in place to 'placate the moral minority', while making it more difficult to write for sixteen-year-olds.

Writing Together at the Royal Institute of British Architects

This celebration on Wednesday June 14 at the RIBA of the work of an organisation devoted to bringing writers into schools featured two laureates.

Andrew Motion, the Poet Laureate, spoke about the inspirational role that writers can play in helping young people to realise that English in schools is not simply a 'box-ticking' exercise.

Jacqueline Wilson, his children's counterpart (and therefore, she said, not as invisible as most middle-aged women!), talked about her own individual approach and how most of the main characters in her books developed by means of their own creative endeavours, something that could stimulate children's writing. Her priorities for the remainder of her tenure as laureate include making authors more visible with a travelling exhibition, and continuing to emphasise the value of reading aloud to children.

Other speakers described their experiences in schools, and how the writing of young people had been encouraged by meeting authors. Jackie Kay in particular enlivened the audience with her account of what it is like to be a Glaswegian black writer.

Members of the audience were all given a copy of *Great Books to Read Aloud* (Random House, 2006), an illustrated collection by a number of contributors of short descriptions of 70 'tried and tested' books for all ages up to 11, with a preface by Jacqueline Wilson. This lively and attractive volume, at only £1, should be given to every parent who complains they don't know what to give their child to read! (See www.greatbookstoreadaloud.co.uk.)

Launch of *J is for Jamaica* at the Jamaican High Commission

The launch of Benjamin Zephaniah and Prodepta Das's new collection of rhymes illustrated by attractive photographs, *J is for Jamaica*, took place at the Jamaican High Commission in Kensington on Monday June 19. After some coloured punch and exotic delicacies, Benjamin Zephaniah talked about his pride both in his Jamaican origins, and in being born in Britain, a country that for the most part has absorbed people from all over the world. He claimed that in order to have a sense of where they're going young people need to have a strong sense of where they've come from. He hopes that books like this one will help children in Britain have this sense of their origins. (See elsewhere in *IBBYLink* for a brief review of this book.)

CLPE Poetry Award 2006

At the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) on Tuesday July 4, the CLPE Poetry Award was presented by Michael Rosen to *Why does my Mum always Iron a Crease in my Jeans? Poems about important Stuff* chosen by Fiona Waters (Puffin). The CLPE Poetry Award was set up in 2002 and was awarded for the first time in 2003. The award aims to honour excellence in poetry written for children. It is presented annually for a book of poetry published in the previous year. The judges of the award this year were Valerie Bloom, Roger McGough and Tony Mitton, with their chair, Margaret Meek Spencer, who noted some of the problems the judges are faced with in comparing anthologies with single author collections, or past poets with living ones.

Those present at the award ceremony were also entertained by performances of poetry by children from two local schools, who certainly seemed to be enjoying the poems they had worked on.

The CLPE Poetry Award is supported in 2006, as in 2004 and 2005, by Mr and Mrs J. A. Pye's Charitable Settlement. The other books shortlisted for this year's award are: Gerard Benson, Judith Chernaik and Cicely Herbert (eds), *The Carnival of Animals*, illus. Satoshi Kitamura (Walker); June Crebbin, *The Crocodile is Coming!*, illust. Mini Grey (Walker); Belinda Hollyer (ed), *She's All That! Poems about Girls*, illus. Susan Hellard (Kingfisher); Michael Morpurgo and Jane Feather (eds), *Cock Crow: Poems about life in the countryside*, illus. Quentin Blake (Egmont). Further information from Ann Lazim 020 7401 3382, ann@clpe.co.uk.

'Making Exclusion a Thing of the Past' at the Unicorn Children's Theatre

This event was held on Thursday July 13 at the Unicorn Children's Theatre in Southwark. Quentin Blake was joined by a group of children from a C of E school in Gravesend to say 'We want to see far more disabled characters in books'. The Quentin Blake Award is made annually by the Roald Dahl Foundation to a charity, chosen by Blake himself, which would benefit from additional support for a new project. Booktrust was recently selected, and chose to use the Award to carry out a unique consultation project which aimed to collect the views of children across the UK on the representation of disability (or absence of it) in children's books. In autumn 2005 every UK school was mailed with a consultation document and a series of workshops run by writers and illustrators followed. The former children's laureate met some of the children and there was discussion of the importance not only of making disabled children feel included but also ensuring that books reflect a representative picture of society. Quentin started to re-sketch the Chocolate Fudge Banana Cake from *All Join In* to include characters with different conditions. He then commented how the book world has a real duty to respond to this need. Booktrust's Project Manager Alexandra Strick commented: 'Many disabled children told us that they have grown up never seeing themselves in books ... What is also interesting is that non-disabled children were equally vocal, feeling that books quite simply do not reflect the real make-up of the society we live in'. More information at www.bookmark.org.uk.

Many of those at the ceremony took advantage of the opportunity to attend the afternoon performance of *Cyrano* by the Catherine Wheels Theatre Company. It was noted in the programme that the film version has 2000 actors and lasts for 2 hours 15 minutes, while the version performed at the Unicorn has three actors and lasts 70 minutes. It was very entertaining.

Diversity Matters: Growing Markets in Children's Publishing

24–25 June 2006, Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London

Laura Atkins (Steering Committee Member)

Over 200 people gathered for this conference, run by Arts Council England and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. They included publishers, teachers, librarians, local education authorities, booksellers and members of the general public, who listened to a combination of keynote lectures and discussions, as well as participating in smaller workshop sessions. The conference focused on the publishing and distribution of books for children that reflect our diverse society: what is currently available, the difficulties faced by those producing and selling the books, and where we need to go in the future. The full programme is on the Arts Council website: www.artscouncil.org.uk/diversitymatters.

Shami Chakrabarti of the human-rights organisation Liberty gave the keynote speech. She spoke of how books can share values; while some people are threatened by diversity, she sees children's books as an opportunity to show what unites as well as what differentiates. Malorie Blackman spoke of the shorthand that comes from shared experience and said that predominantly white, middle-class children's book editors may miss nuances from outside their own background. Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, spoke of how children's books changed his life by opening a universe far beyond where he lived; he emphasised how we express our cultural values and build a sense of national identity through the stories we tell and the myths we build.

A range of issues were covered by three panel discussions, including a panel representing Arts Council-sponsored research and the *Books for All* supplement published by the *Bookseller* which looks at the reading habits of black and Asian readers (it can be downloaded at the conference website); an author/illustrator panel; and a panel including an independent, a mid-size and a mainstream publisher. Suresh Ariaratnam, a journalist, told of the importance for booksellers to work closely with, and to reflect, their communities, as most booksellers admit to having no author events featuring non-white writers. Author Bali Rai spoke of the importance for him when growing up of finding books featuring

black or Asian characters (such as those by Farrukh Dhondy), and why he now does so many school visits, offering young people the opportunity to see themselves reflected not only inside a book, but in the background of its author. Mishti Chatterji, Director of Mantra Lingua Publishing, spoke of the London bombings and how we still aren't asking ourselves what led those young British Asian men to feel so disenfranchised. She feels that multicultural books play an important part in a diverse society. Over the weekend many people spoke of the importance of publishing books for *all* children, to reflect the diversity and range of young people living in Britain today.

Workshops covered a range of issues, including the bookseller's perspective, the importance of diverse materials in schools and examples of good practice, books in translation, how to get published, and ways to increase access to jobs in publishing. Eight workshop sessions offered smaller groups more time to participate and discuss a large range of questions.

Gary McKeone, Director of Literature for Arts Council England remarked in his closing comments that while there is room for some optimism, there is not room for complacency. The conference was successful at offering a broad range of material, looking at the history of this issue as well as its current state, generating discussion, and bringing people from different sectors of the children's book world together to share ideas. While evaluations were very positive, those attending felt it was important that there be some sort of legacy going beyond the conference. Francesca Dow, Managing Director of Puffin Books, noted that by 2010, 1 in 5 children in this country will be from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. So there is a clear moral and business imperative for publishers and booksellers to move forward on this issue.

In the future, recordings of some of the speeches and photographs will be made available, so keep an eye on the conference website for details. There is also a more detailed report on this event on the PaperTigers website: www.papertigers.org.

'Around the World' Series – Frances Lincoln/Oxfam

Frances Lincoln have recently published two books for pre-school children, in association with Oxfam. Their publicity states that these books belong to 'a [new] photographic series introducing different topics and their place within different cultures and countries. This series aims to draw parallels with children from many different cultures. For example, when choosing hairstyles, many different factors come into play: fashion, climate, age, tribe or special occasions. Illustrated with stunning photographs from India, Vietnam, Ghana and many more countries, this series is perfect for use in the classroom or at home.'

The photographs are certainly stunning, and the format of the books is durable: they are 22.5 cm square with very strong unbendable covers. Each double spread has text on the left and a photo on the right. The text consists of four or five lines of description in a large sans-serif font and a speech bubble from the main person in the photo – almost always a child. The final double spread is a world map with a clip from each photo that has a pointer to the country – which is named on the map.

The books would probably be enjoyed most by children of four or over, especially when the book is shared with an adult so that each spread could lead to a discussion of the reader's own experiences contrasted with the experiences of the people in the photos. Beginner readers could read and enjoy the books on their own but would not gain as much as when sharing with an adult.

As the books will be on sale in Oxfam, I don't think the price (necessary for such high quality books) will be a deterrent to parents interested either in making children aware of their country of origin or of ways of life far different from their own.

■ ***Bicycles***, Kate Petty, illus. Oxfam photographers, hb 1 84507 331 2, £9.99, pp. 32, 10 March 2006

The photo of the taxi-bike (Kenya) puts my heart in my mouth – no safety regulations or helmets there! The photo shows the taxi 'driver' with one child on his handlebar and two children on a back-carrier seat going across a bridge. The text says:

These three boys are coming
home from school in Kenya.
They are travelling across
the river on a taxi-bike.

The speech bubble could be from any of the children:

This is the
quickest way
home!

Such a photo indicates the way of life of these children and of the adult.

Another of my favourites is of 'Tomasá' using a bicycle wheel as a spinning wheel. Her clothes are brightly coloured and attractive. She belongs to a group of weavers in Guatemala and weaving brings her money. She says she is going to use the money to buy a new dress – I assume one that either she has made or that has been made by another member of the group. Again the photo and the text give an intimate glimpse of a way of life for such a group of people.

■ ***Hair***, Kate Petty, illus. Oxfam photographers, hb 1 84507 330 4, £9.99. pp. 32, 10 March 2006

The photos vary from a Vietnam boy washing his hair to some beautiful plaited styles which are now more familiar to us than they used to be, since young adults of African origin living in the UK sometimes take great pains to follow these elaborate ways of dressing their hair. Felicia is giving Anongee a row of curls in Ghana: '... Felicia parts Anongee's curls into neat rows. Then she ties them into little clumps.' Anongee has

an anxious look and her speech bubble says 'I have to sit very still.' Hair styles for extreme heat and extreme cold are shown and Samullah in Pakistan is wearing an enviable hat to add warmth to his already thick hair.

I am sure that any child reading and discussing this text will want to try out some of the styles and to find hats to match those in the photos. Whether anyone will have to patience to wait for their hair to grow to the length of Liliana's (in Peru) is doubtful.

Jennifer Harding

The Picture History of Great Explorers

Gillian Clements, pb 1 84507 464 5, pp. 96, £7.99, Frances Lincoln, 1 April 2006 (new edition)

The publisher describes the book as 'suitable for National Curriculum English – Reading, Key Stages 1 and 2; National Curriculum History, Key Stage 1. A chronological guide to the history of world explorers.'

The contents shows at a glance the list of explorers, each of whom is given a full page. (A few explorations involve more than one explorer.) The book starts with two double-page spreads of 'The first explorers' and 'The ancient explorers'. The book ends with 'Final frontiers – ocean depths', 'Final frontiers – space', a glossary and an index. All illustrations are in full colour. The author describes herself as 'an armchair explorer who did a degree in Geography ... and was inspired to write this book by her desire to discover exciting facts about different parts of the world.' It certainly seems to be a labour of love.

A vast amount of information is packed into this book, with maps, illustrations and context information (also illustrated). Near the beginning of the book is Vasco da Gama, whose voyage I remember drawing in my history book at school and annotating with his discoveries. All of this I remember as fascinating and I can still recall much of the detail. I say this as this is a book of information and there are no suggestions for activities. The pupil may need enticing to sample these informative and exciting pages in an interactive manner. Would I remember about Vasco da Gama if I hadn't drawn the map, put in his voyage, then written about the historical importance and smelled some of the spices that were brought back from India?

The page on Vasco da Gama gives his dates, a head portrait to the left of the heading and his coat of arms to the right. The text is central, with an illustration of da Gama butting into the text on the left and a Muslim trader on the right. A summary of the voyage conveys the difficulties of the enterprise and its achievements in clear concise sentences that flow and encourage reading on to the end. The left margin includes a map of the voyage to India and information on scurvy, from which many of his crew died. At the foot of the page, a bar heading, 'Da Gama's famous voyage brought Portugal trade and power', is followed by three illustrations and captions of other important events of the same era; for example, the middle illustration is captioned '1492 Leonardo da Vinci designs a flying machine'.

For more recent times, the page on Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary follows a similar layout – but no two layouts are identical. This particular page's left margin includes a definition of a sherpa and explains why they acted as porters for European expeditions. The right bar describes the planting of the flags on the summit and the Christian and Buddhist responses of the explorers to the momentous occasion.

The contributions to exploration by non-humans have not been forgotten; an inspired inclusion is 'The canine cosmonauts'. Throughout the book, the scientific, technological and cultural aspects of the explorations are emphasised. The writing is lively and the illustrations and maps are eye catching. A book I shall want to keep.

Jennifer Harding

Pirateology

Dugald A. Steer, Templar, 2006, 1 94011 270 0

This compendium (to describe it as a book would be too limiting!) straddles the borders between fiction and non-fiction. For one thing, the narrative has to be constructed by the reader from a combination of short passages dated between 1723 and 1726 from 'The Sea Journal of Captain William Lubber, Pirate Hunter General, Boston, Massachusetts', together with the material provided from material that Lubber has accumulated in his treasure chest. This involves a myriad of objects, including a royal proclamation against pirates; maps with vital pieces missing; pictures of dwellings, animals and ships; a Chinese ransom note; and a sundial. The fictionality is admitted in the publisher's note at the beginning, which admits:

Pirateology was allegedly [my emphasis] found ... by divers searching for wrecks off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in 2006. While it mostly conforms to accepted ideas about historical pirates, there are a few elements, such as the 'black spot', which were previously unknown except in works of fiction such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Research has revealed no other traces of William Lubber, his ship the *Sea Cat*, or his nemesis, Arabella Drummond.

At the same time as its fictionality, the publication serves as an introduction for young readers to the scrutiny of primary and secondary historical sources, and in effect to a kind of new historicist vision of the relevance of all kinds of evidence, combined with a post-modernist use in a literary context of writing that is not 'literature.' Not that the theoretical substratum is likely to deter young readers possessed with an interest in the topic of pirates (and it is heartening for female readers to note the sex of the 'famous' pirate being pursued) – their skills in working with a range of different kinds of material have probably already been honed at internet websites, including www.pirateology.com. It may present more of a challenge to adults, whose experiences with traditional texts can be something of a barrier against full appreciation of this kind of innovation!

Pat Pinsent

Down the Back of the Chair

Margaret Mahy, illus. Polly Dunbar, London: Frances Lincoln, 2006, £10.99, hb 1 8450 7440 8

Some hairy string and a diamond ring were down the back of the chair.
Pineapple peel and a conger eel were down the back of the chair.
A sip, a sup, a sop, a song, a spider seven inches long.
No wonder that it smells so strong – down the back of the chair.

Margaret Mahy's outstanding work over forty years has been recognised by numerous awards (including an IBBY honour twenty years ago and the Carnegie twice), the most recent being the Andersen Medal for 2006. She is nothing if not eclectic in her writing, from picture books to poetry to young adult novels, all written with a sensitive understanding of her audience's interests, experiences and emotions. In her latest book for the youngest audience she revisits a favourite poem which has formed part of her repertoire for school visits and talks, and which has previously only been available as part of an anthology of New Zealand writing.

It is a typical Mahy work, treating a potentially devastating situation comically (Dad has lost the car keys, and his resultant inability to get to work threatens the family's miniscule income), but reaching a happy, if improbable resolution. Mahy's heroine Mary, an enterprising toddler, knows that many things end up 'down the back of the chair' and insists he should excavate that area to find his keys. What he finds down there on his way to recovering the keys is highly imaginative, impossible and end-

lessly entertaining, and it is all portrayed with such a deft use of language, rhyme and rhythm that you can't stop yourself joining in.

Polly Dunbar's illustrations add immeasurably to the text, being bright, funny and busy, and bringing to life all those wonderful objects which emerge in Mahy's poem. The visual relationship of text to picture, together with the fonts used, make this a highly accessible book for even the youngest reader, the words, like the images, swirling around the page as though just flung into the air from 'down the back of the chair'.

This delightful version of the poem is surely destined to join *A Lion in the Meadow* as another Mahy classic for all ages.

Over the Moon

Jean Ure, London: HarperCollins, 2006, £4.99, pb 0 0071 6464 5

As well as her innovative and thoughtful novels about social issues for older teenagers such as *Bad Alice* (2003), Jean Ure has built a reputation for series books which are easy reads, which engage her audience, and which deal with issues of concern to 10–13-year-olds. This is a short novel in one of those series, about twelve-year-old Scarlett, whose only interests are clothes, boys and appearing cool. However, when family relationships break down, and her mum moves out, Scarlett realises that there are more important things in life, and enters a period of turmoil and self-doubt which culminates in an unsuccessful attempt to run away. Reluctant to return to school, she discovers that outward appearances can be deceptive, and that things are rarely as clear cut as they seem at first.

Scarlett tells her own story, lending a directness and truthfulness to the novel which will appeal to girls approaching teenage. Ure is confident in her understanding of this age group, its concerns and its language; the characters in her short novels, such as this, serve a valuable purpose in allowing her readers to examine and work through their own feelings and experiences.

Jack Russell & Company

Trudi Edgar, illus. Dandi Palmer, Verwood: Maybank, 2006, £8.99, pb 0 9550 1950 8

This is the story of a small Jack Russell dog which arrives at an old house one wild and stormy night to fulfil a magical destiny by rescuing a puppy which has been mistakenly kidnapped by birds. It is a self-publication which undoubtedly served a purpose for the author in reviving memories of family pets, but which is likely otherwise only to fulfil the needs of a very dedicated dog-story-loving audience. Although a warm and genuine love of dogs shines through, it can never dispel the very traditional anthropomorphism of this unusual work. The possible readership is likely to be among 8–12-year-old dog lovers.

Bridget Carrington

Ingo and The Tide Knot

Helen Dunmore, HarperCollins, 2005, hardback £12.99. ISBN 0 00 720487 6, 2006, paperback £5.99, ISBN 0 00 720488 4; 2006, hardback £12.99. ISBN 0 00 720489 2

Fantasy, marine ecological issues and confused adolescent emotions combine seamlessly in the first and second parts of Helen Dunmore's 'Ingo' trilogy, set on the Cornish coast. At the beginning of *Ingo*, Sapphire's father tells her an old Cornish story about the mermaid of Zennor who fell in love with a human. He went and lived under the sea with her and became one of the Mer, the beings who inhabit a strange and beautiful marine world. This fable, a twist on the Hans Christian Andersen tale and those stories from an older tradition about mermaids, sets the narrative tone for what follows.

After their father mysteriously disappears, believed drowned, Sapphire and her brother Conor meet Faro and Elvira, half human and half seal-like Mer people. Sapphire and Conor are drawn irresistibly to this other world where, on discovering that they can breathe underwater, they experience an exhilarating freedom beyond anything in their normal, everyday lives. Sapphire has a more complex personality than Conor, and Dunmore skilfully weaves her protagonist's confused emotions in her everyday life around her loyalties which are torn between Ingo and the human world.

In *The Tide Knot*, in which Sapphire and Conor, with their mother and her diver boyfriend, have moved to another part of the Cornish coast, these conflicts, together with an impending crisis of terrifying proportions, reach a greater intensity. The tide knot is the snake-like jumble of coiling tides deep within the ocean that keeps the water ebbing and flowing and when this tide knot loosens, the consequences are considerable. Dunmore conveys brilliantly the sense of the sea as a conscious, unstoppable entity. With climate change and rising sea levels affecting our world, the Ingo novels have a timely relevance.

With Sapphire, who seems sometimes older than her years, as the narrator, both 'Ingo' stories have an urgency and an immediacy which propel the reader onwards. Both stories are imbued with a strong sense of place: from the lyrical names of local inhabitants, like Treynarnon and Trewhella, to the vivid depictions of the land and seascapes. There is a lyricism, too, in Dunmore's descriptions of Sapphire's thoughts and feelings during her excursions deep beneath the sea and in her encounters with the sea creatures, and one is reminded that the author is a poet as well as a novelist.

At the end of *The Tide Knot* there is still much to be answered and one wonders what the outcome of the relationships between Sapphire and Faro and Conor and Elvira, beings drawn together from two very different worlds, will be. Whatever happens, Sapphire's loyalties are going to be tested to the full, and I eagerly anticipate the third and final part of a trilogy that can be enjoyed by older children, young adults and adults alike.

June Hopper

From the Dairyman's Daughter to Worrals of the WAAF: The Religious Tract Society

Dennis Butts and Pat Garrett (eds), Lutterworth Press and Children's Literature, Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006, £30, pb 0 7188 3055 5

This is a collection of thirteen essays based on the Children's Books History Society study conference at the University of East Anglia in 1999, marking the bicentenary of the Religious Tract Society (RTS) and Lutterworth Press. The book analyses the children's literature produced by the publisher (the RTS changed its name to Lutterworth in 1932), charting the development of the genre from the evangelical tract through to the popular school story, and spanning a period from the late-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. It shows how publishing worked within the context of a missionary society with a global reach.

The book details the nature and development of the tract genre both in Britain and America, before looking at the range of RTS and Lutterworth output of children's titles, including its movement into magazine publishing. It studies the two great magazines for which the RTS and Lutterworth were known to generations of children, the *Boy's Own Paper* and the *Girl's Own Paper*, as well as other magazines, such as *The Child's Companion*. There are also chapters on popular tracts, such as *The Dairyman's Daughter*, and successful authors, from Hesba Stretton and Mrs Walton to W. E. Johns and Laura Ingalls Wilder. It also includes surveys of American religious tracts, boys' school stories, secular publishing for girls and the presentation of gender roles.

These essays explore how, in order to reflect an increasingly secular age, the subject matter widened, providing more non-fiction in the RTS's periodicals as well as an increasingly broad range of fiction, mostly secular in nature. It was also necessary for the Society to alter its didactically religious tone in order to present its Christian values with more subtlety. Contributors, who include Brian Alderson, Mary Cadogan, Aileen Fyfe and Anne Thwaite, provide a chronological and social history of a body which was a major influence on the direction and development of children's literature from its inception as the RTS in 1799, through their name change to Lutterworth in 1932, and into the 1950s.

The style and scope of individual chapters is understandably varied, but each is lively, interesting and well informed. The numerous black and white illustrations support the text admirably, while the extensive bibliographical notes and references, together with the thorough indexing, indicate the breadth and depth of scholarship which the essays reflect. Appended is the catalogue of the exhibition which accompanied the conference and provides considerable additional information.

Although a pricey paperback, this is an invaluable overview of the contribution of a significant publishing house, and should be recommended reading for all those who are interested in the fascinating history of the rise of a literature for young people.

Bridget Carrington

English with Abbey and Zak

Tracy Traynor, illus. Laura Hambleton 1 84059 4764, Milet, 2006

English with Abbey and Zak is aimed at beginners aged 5–10 who may be starting to learn English, or seeking to improve their language skills. The author states that children learn languages best if the learning is enjoyable. This philosophy is followed through with a presentation of material that is bright, colourful and visually stimulating. The text is kept to a minimum, concentrating on the acquiring of useful, everyday phrases that can be put to immediate use outside the learning experience. The variations on such basics as learning numbers, the time, 'my name is' are interesting, with the content on each double-page spread well judged for the amount that can be taken in by a young beginner at any one time. There are also good activities to recap and reinforce the learning in the form of quizzes after every few presentations. The inclusion of a word list at the end to encourage and reinforce understanding of the key words and phrases that have been introduced is beneficial.

Accompanying the book is a CD to aid pronunciation and listening practice. The voices are clear, and ample time is given for learners to repeat words and phrases without losing the thread of the exercises. There are some interesting sound effects to make the situations in which the language is being used feel authentic and fun.

The author has indicated that the book can be used as a resource in a guided learning environment, or for encouraging beginners to learn with a friend. While the book and the CD are complementary and contain excellent material, there could be some confusion if beginners, left to their own devices, followed the suggested learning pattern and discussed the pictures before listening to the CD. While the illustrations are fun, it is not clear, for example, if the labels in the 'How do you feel' unit (pp. 18–19) refer to the hand or the finger, the foot or the toe; likewise, are the friends feeling hot or upset/confused, cold or wishing to take something from the table? Another such example is the 'In the Café' unit (pp. 38–39). Without any guidance as to when to ask for 'pizza' or 'a pizza', or the fact that you don't ask for 'sandwich' but rather 'a sandwich', there could be misunderstanding and confusion in the learning process. With the CD, it would have been helpful to have a spoken form of all the phrases set out in the book. For instance, on pages 8–9, there is good reinforcement of 'I'm' but nothing to illustrate 'he's/she's'.

In conclusion, this is a very useful resource for use with beginners in a guided learning environment in the home or in the classroom. The book is colourful and eye catching, and the material is set out in a way that would encourage learners to have some fun with language. Advice for teachers and parents on how to use the course is based on sound teaching and learning practice. However, while the introduction suggests that learners might like to use the material to learn with a friend, it is imperative that learning is led by someone with a good knowledge of English if confusion and incorrect usage of the language are to be avoided.

Starting English

Tracy Traynor, illus. Anna Wilman, 1 84059 4799, Milet, 2006

Starting English is an introductory course aimed at adult and young adult learners who already have a little knowledge of English and want to continue their studies. The situations within which each unit's content is set relate closely to everyday life; for that reason, the book is billed as being useful for learners who wish to visit an English-speaking country, or to do business with English speakers.

Each unit follows the same pattern, and contains dialogues to introduce and illustrate new language points, grammar 'boxes' to highlight the rules being focused on, and listening and 'have a go' exercises to build confidence and reinforce understanding. Where usage may create traps for the unwary, there are interesting and useful 'tips' to explain the niceties of British life. Reinforcement of learning is provided through review sections, but while the exercises are varied and interesting, understanding of what needs to be done may, in some cases, need guidance. Having such things as bus or train timetables to hand may not always be possible where learners are working alone.

The layout of the units manages to pack a lot of material into a fairly confined space. However, the use of colour, and a variety of print styles, along with the grammar and tip boxes appearing in different places as the units progress, help to provide some freshness. It would, perhaps, have been helpful for the grammar boxes to have had headers such as 'comparisons' (p. 28) and to have referred the learner to the relevant pages of the grammar section at the back of the book. This would provide a quick reference mechanism should the learners wish to consult the point at another time. Also, while the illustrations generally support the points being focused on, it is not helpful to try to label an 'ear' in unit 9 on a head that has been covered with long hair.

These points are minor. The introduction sets out an excellent teaching/learning plan that is based on sound teaching practice. The language points that are included deal with everyday situations and use practical contexts for learners to practise in. The CD gives good reinforcement of the points covered and offers short listening practice. While individuals or pairs learning outside the classroom context might have difficulty gaining the full value of the lessons, the book would be a good classroom resource.

Barbara Murray

The Children's Bookshow 2006: Poetry Matters

29 September – 15 November 2006

Now in its fourth year, The Children's Bookshow is the only annual UK tour of writers of children's literature. Timed to coincide with National Children's Book Week and National Poetry Day, the tour is supported by Arts Council England. In 2006, the Bookshow will bring the best of children's poets, including Michael Rosen, Allan Ahlberg, Val Bloom, and Grace Nichols to children's audiences throughout the UK. Poetry Matters starts in the newly renovated Art Deco De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, 29 September 2006, and finishes 15 November 2006, at L'Institut Français, London with Belgian children's poet Carl Norac, our own brilliant Michael Rosen and with Quentin Blake in the chair.

In conjunction with East-Side Educational Trust, a series of forty schools workshops will run alongside the tour with excellent young poets including TS Eliot 2006 Award short-listed Polly Clark and Poetry Book Society recommended Kate Clanchy. The work produced will be submitted for the new National Write-a-Poem Competition for children from the Children's Poetry Bookshelf.

To accompany the Bookshow, a comprehensive and exciting new guide to children's poetry will be published. *Universal Verse: Poetry for Children* brings together over 200 lively reviews reflecting the best work of individual poets and anthology collections currently available in print within the UK. The book is edited by Deborah Hallford and Edgardo Zaghini who produced the highly acclaimed *Outside In: Children's Books in Translation* (Milet) which accompanied the Bookshow tour of children's writers from abroad in 2005. *Universal Verse: Poetry for Children*, with a Foreword by Michael Rosen, will be published by Barn Owl Books, October 2006, Paperback £6.99.

The Children's Bookshow 2006: Poetry Matters – tour details

Friday 29 September 10:30	John Agard and Grace Nichols, Bexhill on Sea, De La Warr Pavilion Marina. (Part of Bexhill Children's Festival)
Monday 2 October 13:00	Adrian Mitchell and Ian McMillan, Oxford University Museum of Natural History
Tuesday 3 October 11:00	Ian McMillan and Shamshad Khan, Leicester, Phoenix Arts Centre
Wednesday 4 October 11:00	Jackie Kay, Newcastle, Seven Stories
Thursday 5 October 13:45	(National Poetry Day) Kit Wright and Val Bloom, Ilkley, The King's Hall. (Part of the Ilkley Literature Festival)
Monday 9 October 13:00	Val Bloom, London, Bloomsbury Theatre
Wednesday 18 October 10:30 & 13.30	Michael Rosen and Brian Patten, Manchester Library Theatre
Friday 20 October 13:00	Allan Ahlberg, Sheffield, Crucible Theatre (Part of the Off The Shelf Festival)
Wednesday 15 November 18:30	Carl Norac and Michael Rosen, Chaired by Quentin Blake London, L'Institut Français (Part of L'Institut Français Youth Festival)

For further information contact Sallie Robins, 14 Shannon Court, Dynevor Road, London N16 0DD; 020 7249 4858; 07733 330344, sr@srpr.net

National Children's Book Week (75th Anniversary Year)

Monday 2 October – Sunday 8 October 2006 Organised by Booktrust, National Children's Book Week is a celebration of the wonderful world of children's books. Every year, thousands of schools and libraries take part in Children's Book Week and plan events to help encourage children's interest in books and reading.

www.booktrusted.co.uk/cbw/index.html

National Poetry Day: Thursday 5 October

The Poetry Society has chosen the theme of 'Identity' for National Poetry Day 2006. What is identity? How do we develop it, how do we define it, how are we defined by it? NPD 2006 will encourage people to explore personal, community, and national identity alongside a deeper exploration into the very nature of poetry and how poetry contributes to sense of self.

www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npd/npdindex.htm

East-Side Educational Trust

East-Side Educational Trust is a highly-acclaimed, award-winning, world-record breaking arts and education charity which was established in 1994 to raise young people's standards of achievement in language and literacy and to promote independent learning through the use of creative arts and drama. East-Side's mission is to introduce children to the arts and literature in London by providing creative opportunities to participate actively alongside professional artists. www.eastside.org.uk

National Write-a-Poem Competition

The Children's Poetry Bookshelf National Write-a-Poem Competition is inviting children aged 7–11 years to write a poem on the theme of 'Me'. Submissions will be accepted online and by post from 14 September.

www.childrenspetrybookshelf.co.uk

Poetry Book Society/Children's Poetry Bookshelf

Founded by TS Eliot in 1953, the Poetry Book Society (PBS) is an organisation devoted to developing and maintaining a readership for poetry in the UK. The PBS offers the best new contemporary poetry to its members. Every quarter it publishes the *Bulletin*, the definitive review of new poetry books in the U.K. The PBS is for everyone who enjoys poetry – dedicated readers, occasional browsers, and absolute beginners. The Children's Poetry Bookshelf is a membership club especially for younger readers.

www.poetrybooks.co.uk

IBBY NEWS

IBBY appoints new co-director

IBBY has just appointed a new Director of Administration. Her name is Estelle Roth and she will be working with Liz Page at the Secretariat in Basel. She comes to IBBY from the logistics company DHL where she gained extensive administrative experience. Estelle speaks perfect French, German and English and very good Spanish. Estelle will be attending the Congress in Macau, China and will start in her new position on returning from the Congress. With Liz as new Director of Member Services, New Projects and Communications, the IBBY Secretariat is ready to begin an exciting new period of IBBY activities.

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Bookbird

Valerie Coghlan and Siobhan Parkinson have produced a spectacular special issue of the IBBY journal *Bookbird* to celebrate the 30th IBBY World Congress in China. The articles are almost all written by Chinese authors, academics and publishers, providing a wealth of information and commentary about modern Chinese children's literature not available elsewhere in English. This issue will be a vital reference source for a long time to come. See www.ibby.org and click on Activities for full details of how to subscribe to *Bookbird*.

CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

Time Everlasting: Representations of Past, Present and Future in Children's Literature; British IBBY/NCRCL MA conference

Saturday November 11 2006, Froebel College, Roehampton University. Speakers include Victor Watson, Celia Rees, Jamila Gavin, Mary Hoffman, Morag Styles, Margaret Meek, Farah Mendlesohn and Philip Reeve, together with a wide range of workshops on different aspects of the theme. There will be a reception to celebrate the contribution to children's literature of Philippa Pearce. For details and registration form, contact Laura Atkins, NCRCL, Froebel College, Roehampton University, Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PJ L.Atkins@roehampton.ac.uk, 020 8392 3008.

In the Picture: The Story so Far

Wednesday October 11 2006, NCVO, King's Cross, London. This conference aims to inspire the book world to include disabled children. Plenary speakers, a panel, exhibitions and workshops. Contact In the Picture, PO Box 8164, Leicester, LE21 3AF, inthepicture@scope.org.uk, 0116 3546751.

CLPE Multicultural Book Fair, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

Wednesday 18 October, 2006, Noon–6.30pm, CLPE, Webber Street, London SE1 8QW

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| 1.00pm–2.00pm | Choosing books for children: Adult workshop for parents and practitioners |
| 2.30pm–3.00pm | Stories, songs and rhymes for under-fives |
| 4.00pm–4.45pm | Children's story-telling session: Sandra Agard |
| 5.00pm–5.45pm | How does sharing stories from many cultures support learning? Discussion forum with invited panel including family-learning practitioners, parents and a storyteller. |

Meet booksellers and publishers, see the best of multicultural books, story props and games. Free refreshments for children. Opportunities to browse and order books and story props. See www.clpe.co.uk. Contact: ann@clpe.co.uk.

The next issue (Spring 2007) of *IBBYLink* will be devoted to the November conference – 'Time Everlasting: Representations of Past, Present and Future in Children's Literature'. We nevertheless welcome reports, reviews, announcements of impending events, etc. PatPinsent@aol.com