



Children's Book Reviewing on the Web

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Clive Barnes on sites that offer book reviews.

The number of sites on the web to do with children's books is proliferating, but how useful are they? **Clive Barnes** discusses sites that offer book reviews. <!--break-->

Type in 'Children's Literature' as a search on the web and the number and variety of sites that come up will convince you, if you needed convincing, of the range of interests and audiences for the subject. My intention here is to give an introduction to some of the most interesting general British children's book sites, concentrating on those that offer book reviews. There is no attempt to be comprehensive, but many of the sites mentioned have links to other sites that are worth exploring.

First, a word of warning: finding an out-of-date website is like chancing on a lost civilisation where time has stood still, the streets are empty, and the signposts point nowhere. Two of the sites I visited were so out of date that I will mention no names: one still had its Christmas 2000 book list up in May, and another was very enthusiastic about the forthcoming publication of **The Amber Spyglass**. But there are very few sites that do not suffer in some way. Even **ACHUKA**, the biggest star in the British children's book world galaxy, still had its diary of year 2000 events up in May and no sign of 2001 yet.

Sites aimed at adults

ACHUKA (www.achuka.co.uk [3]) is an attractive site, which seems, to a tyro like me, to be pretty much up-to-date with web technology. Its creator, Michael Thorn, is a deputy headteacher and, in his terrestrial life, is a book reviewer for the **TES** and other journals. At the heart of the site are sets of reviews of selected new books. But there is much more. There are about thirty of Thorn's excellent interviews with authors, illustrators and other children's book world luminaries. Thorn is a knowledgeable interviewer who is as likely to ask an author where she got her hat as to offer the insight that Michael Morpurgo's books are characterised by a 'benign moral authority'. Another strength of the site is its news section that is updated weekly, and Thorn has recruited correspondents who contribute regular updates from across the English speaking and writing world.

The reviews, like the site in general, are addressed to interested adults. They are primarily of new fiction and generally brief, categorised mainly by age group, although there are separate sections for poetry and information books. The favoured books in each section are marked Highly Recommended and Star Choice and these sometimes have more extensive reviews by Thorn or his growing band of reviewers. However, Thorn assumes an interested audience and he may give short shrift to a book by an established author, even though he recommends it.

In common with many sites, most attention is given to older children's fiction and picture books. Younger children's fiction and information books are not dealt with so carefully or critically. Children's information books are generally badly served by reviewing on the web, just as they are in print reviewing. I found no site that gives new information books the attention they receive in **BfK**. Nor are there many sites yet that use a team of reviewers in the way that print

journals do.

Links with bookselling

ACHUKA has links with **Amazon**, the Internet bookseller. **The Children's Book Company** ([4]), based on a bookshop in west London, has its own on-line catalogue and launched its website in January. It aims to give help to parents in supporting their children's reading. Founded by an ex-teacher, Samantha Eels Taylor, it promises not only author interviews (only two so far), but articles on pressing topics like dyslexia and boys reading, a chat room and e-mail reading agony advice. There is a list of recommended children's books with reviews by the bookshop staff, with categories that include Multicultural Books, Reluctant Readers and Helpful Reads (books dealing with social or emotional situations like divorce or a new baby). Unfortunately, at the time I looked at it, some of the selections offered were disappointing. There were none at all in Reluctant Readers! And there were no cover images for many of the titles, a major drawback when considering whether to buy a book. This is a site with good intentions, which is still finding its feet.

For teachers and writers

Steve and Diana Kimpton also reflect an awareness of wider literacy questions in their **Word Pool** website ([5]). This is not a book shop, although, like **ACHUKA**, it is linked to **Amazon**. It is addressed to teachers and would-be children's writers as well as parents. The educational aspect is clear from the presence of Numeracy and Big Books among the headings on its front page, and it is unusual in devoting attention to information books. It's a site that is less flashy than many and, although the number of reviews is relatively small and mainly of established titles, the quality is good. Some of its review sections, of books about Christmas, for instance, are not likely to be easily found elsewhere. The only section that I had serious misgivings about was Books for Parents, where there were very few recommended books and most from a single small publisher. There is plenty of advice for would-be children's writers, stemming from Diana's experience as a writer. There are short author profiles, in question and answer form, which highlight those authors willing to visit schools. **Word Pool's** sister site, **UK Children's Books Directory** (www.ukchildrensbooks.co.uk [6]), offers links to a range of authors', illustrators' and publishers' sites, as well as other British children's books organisations.

Advice for parents

For no nonsense excellence in short reviews of older fiction titles, there is no better place to go than **Book Trust** (www.booktrusted.com [7]). There is plenty of excellent advice here for parents, the most comprehensive list of children's literature organisations, and a collection of basic fiction book lists for different age groups. They may date back to August 2000, boast no fancy graphics and no book buying facility, but in terms of number and variety of titles, they are outstanding. Nowhere else could you find such an extensive list of fiction titles dealing with dyslexia, nor lists of teenage titles with boys as main characters. It even has an up-to-date diary of coming events.

For children too

None of the sites which we have looked at so far have children as their intended audience. **Mrs Mad's Book-A-Rama** (www.mrsmad.com [8]) is aimed at children as well as parents, teachers and librarians. Run by another ex-teacher, whose initials are M.A.D., its main focus is book reviews, although it does offer games and some interesting links for children, including CIA maps of Europe. Once you've got past a front page that's as busy and dazzling as a pinball machine, the reviews themselves are thorough. They include a plot summary, an evaluation, an estimation of age level and gender appeal and, often, a personal response from the reviewer: 'parts of this story are so poignant that they made me want to weep.'

The reviews are a mix of old and new titles and the aim is to offer a range of reading choices. The real innovation is a Bookfinder facility. This allows you to enter a combination of factors, age range and genre, for instance, and the Bookfinder comes up with some suggested titles. There aren't perhaps enough reviews within the system yet to make it

really impressive. But it could be interesting as it develops, and the whole site is great fun.

Reading Matters (www.readingmatters.co.uk [9]) looked after by another husband and wife team, Jill and David Marshall, has a Bookchooser similar to Mrs Mad's Bookfinder. The Marshalls could never be accused of taking a less than serious approach to book reviewing. Jill reviews for 'intelligent young readers', and has no time for age ratings or marks out of ten. She reviews only fiction she's happy to recommend and only for able readers above the age of ten (though that's my estimation not hers!). She does it in some detail with few concessions in vocabulary to her audience. Some of her reviews can be pretty cerebral. This is the only site with an 'Ideas' section that draws out significant themes in modern children's fiction. But there will be keen readers who will respond to her approach, and to a choice of books that includes nineteenth- and twentieth-century classics, as well as the latest titles.

For and by children

Keen readers Tim and Chris Cross, feel that **Reading Matters** is 'slightly boring to visit'. But then, Tim and Chris have a rival website, **Cool Reads** (www.cool-reads.co.uk [10]), so they have an axe to grind. Tim and Chris are 12 and 14 years old and they review books for their own age group. Their site's already attracted the endorsement of national newspapers, and the **Financial Times** has recently recruited the brothers as reviewers. There were around three hundred reviews on the site when I visited, all set out to answer five basic questions about character, storyline, how easy the book is to get into, and style. They are all straightforward and brief, using a star rating system ranging from a single star, 'read this book only if you've nothing better to do?', to five stars for 'a cool read - get hold of this book?'. Every review helpfully begins with the age of the reviewer at the time of reviewing. The Cross brothers have an eclectic taste in reading and include a number of older titles among the reviews. The categories which they use go beyond the usual Ghosts and Adventure to include 'Survival stories where kids manage on their own' and 'Animals tell the Story'. A look at the entries under some of the sections does reveal a masculine bias to the reviewing. War has a whole page of reviews but Love and Romance has only four reviews, all from guest reviewers.

Like Mrs Mad, Tim and Chris encourage guest reviewing and there are a large number of guest reviews from children on the **Cool Reads** site. The opportunity for children's participation is one of the attractive possibilities of the web, and the site that possibly carries this furthest is **Stories from the Web** (hosted.ukoln.ac.uk/stories [11]). This is produced by a consortium of library authorities and developed by The Centre for the Child in Birmingham. It's an ambitious site for children, with interviews with authors, book tasters, competitions, and stories and reviews submitted by children. As the children are mainly in the 8-11 year-old age range, unfortunately there often isn't enough of a review to form a recommendation for anyone else. The site is also poorly laid out, with a trace of trying too hard to be child friendly. Information for parents and teachers about the project hides behind a button labelled 'boring adult info?', and every page is cluttered up with a small print list of all the partners in the project that uses up the bottom fifth of the page. Nevertheless, it's a project that, through library based clubs, has drawn children into reviewing on the web, and is capable of further development.

Author and illustrator sites

Author and illustrator sites are now plentiful and will be the subject of a future review article in **BfK**. Let **BfK** know about your site, if you would like it to be considered for review.

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