



Editorial - January 1991

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News and comment from the Editor.

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

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Good value?

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

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

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

Roald Dahl

About one children's writer, though, our conscience is pretty clear. No author this century has got more critical knickers

in a twist than Roald Dahl. Has anyone exposed more completely the sheer *narrowness* of so much children's book reviewing? His refusal to restrict himself to the sort of children's fiction that *adults* tend to prefer - 'permanently updating **The Wind in the Willows**' as he once sardonically put it - helped incorporate farce, satire and knockabout comedy into writing for youngsters and, of course, they loved it. With a few honourable exceptions, the grown-ups took much longer to cotton on. As a farewell tribute to this storytelling magician, we're reprinting an article from November 1981's **BfK** which was one of the first to suggest the children's estimate might have been right all along.

Bookquest

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

Nonsense Song-writing

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

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

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

Have a wonderful, readerly '91.

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