



Pick of the Paperbacks '90

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Members of **BfK**'s reviewing team expand on their best read in 1990.

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

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The Abduction

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

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

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

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

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

DB

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

The Big Alfie and Annie Rose Storybook

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rabble Starkey

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

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

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

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

Lois Lowry writes with quiet assurance and wisdom. At one point Rabble, reading **The Yearling**, thinks of the main character's life as being 'not fancy or nothing, but so filled up with hard work and hopes and haves and haven'ts all

tangled there together in ways that tugged and ached'. The portrayal of this in Rabble's own life is exactly what makes **Rabble Starkey** a memorable book. **LN**

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

Julian's Glorious Summer

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

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

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

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

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

Annie Banannie

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

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

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

Often, as adults we're almost dismissive about children's friendships, perhaps failing to recognise that children's sense of time is quite different from ours so that the apparently transitory nature of their relationships doesn't reflect the intense and powerful emotions involved. Leah Komaiko and Laura Cornell have clearly recognised this as they've sketched in the highlights of this friendship, funny, ghastly and just quietly special. The only jarring note is that the age

of six is mentioned - it would've been far better not to specify any age as it seems inappropriate in some cases and far too limiting for such an important book.

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

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

Blitzcat

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jackaroo

Cynthia Voigt, Lions, 0 00 6736114, £2.75 (**BfK 62** - May)

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

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

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

society.

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

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

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

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

In addition to her reviewing for **BfK**, she reads for Heinemann, helping to recommend titles for inclusion in their New Windmill list. She also edits a magazine for Lancashire County Advisory Service and lectures on children's literature for Avon Teachers of English, NATE and at conferences and training courses for Lancashire teachers.

When I Dance

James Berry, Puffin, 0 1403.4200 1, £2.99 (**BfK 64** - September)

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

I gather up all my senses

Well into hearing and feeling,

With body's flexible postures

Telling their poetry in movement

And I celebrate all rhythms.

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

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

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

Only one of me /and nobody can get a second one /

from a photocopy machine ... I am just this one. /Nobody else makes

the words / I shape with sound, when I talk.

There's the marvellous exuberance of the first poem:

Dave. Dear Dave. / I could write a letter / of only Dear Dave. /

My favourite words echo / and whizz me round the world and back.

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

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

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

Martin's Mice

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shan Helps Rani

0 233 98523 9 (English only)

0 233 98524 7 (Bengali/English)

0 233 98525 5 (Gujarati/English)

0 233 98526 3 (Punjabi/English)

0 233 98527 1 (Urdu/English)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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