



# Reader Makers

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A round-up of recent Picture Books by **Trevor Dickinson**.

Believing, in addition to the delight and pleasure they provide, that picture books are some of the best

**Trevor Dickinson** picks the finest from this spring's fresh crop.

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Thin cinders of the reading scheme versus real book row still smoulder. The final outcome of the Government's arson attack upon Schools' Library Services is still unsure. The smoke of confusion still hangs over the meanings of Kenneth Clarke's `Three Wise Men' on primary school practice and organisation. More coals have been heaped onto the reading standards `debate' by recent NFER and HMI reports. And the ghost of Matthew Arnold (trendy) still warns that poor text won't bring reading advance.

Meanwhile, the real need is for teachers to develop children's life-long reading appetite - not mere idle `basic' skill. The best of books reviewed here are guaranteed, in sensitive teaching and parental hands, to achieve that noble aim. However, at an average cost of about £7.80 per book, acquiring these joys will be difficult at a time when (a cause for national shame) schools are noisily clinking their begging bowls, and when the essential dynamo of Schools' Library Services is at risk. These services, along with the whole issue of resources, received scant attention from the `Three Wise Men' -as if organisation and practice had no relationship to the nature, quality and extent of resources. Few children, especially the poorest, will become efficient or life-long readers if they are reared at school (or home) in Oxfam-reject book settings. Moreover, if the aim were merely to equip children with the BASIC `R', it's hard not to believe that the standards they *could* achieve would be raised if they had full access to the pick of this real book bunch.

Two final points:

It's impossible to accept the maliciously peddled myth of declining educational standards when faced with the generous talents of the authors and illustrators of these books. (And why produce them for poor readers?)

I regret that, like all league-tabling, this exercise has forced me to leave out many more books of quality, interest and value published this spring.

## COUNTING, SEQUENCING, RHYMES AND ALPHABETS

**One Pink Pig** by Sandy Nightingale (Andersen, 0 86264 376 7, £6.99) is a simple counting book with, obviously, a strong porcine element - nigh on 100 pigs featured in all - and many other chances for counting in each spread. Deliberately thumping alliteration adds well to the fun, with some amusing touches for the adult sharer (e.g. a painting by Pigasso). There's much to delight in and talk about in this reading door-opener.

A splendidly sharable book, Anne Dalton's **This is the Way** (Deutsch, 0 590 54026 2, £7.99) is an adaptation of the

traditional 'Nuts in May'/'Mulberry Bush' rhymes and rhythms, accompanied by outstanding snapshots of the young children's day from early rising to bedtime. Rare slippages of rhythm are more than compensated for by the artwork's gentle energy and humour. It's also a happy relief to see the realistic, unpatronising presence of different ethnic groups in the school scenes.

In **Jasper's Beanstalk** by Nick Butterworth (Hodder & Stoughton, 0 340 55600 9, £6.99) Jasper the Cat plants a beanseed, and plants at the same time in early readers' minds the sequence of the days of the week. There's also the painless planting of gardening vocabulary and early understandings of the realities of time, growth and the need for patience in human affairs. The text is very large and friendly. Mick Inkpen's illustrations are outstanding, humorous and likely to give pleasure to both children and adults.

A brilliantly simple idea is realised in Jenny Stow's first book, **The House That Jack Built** (Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 0717 8, £7.95). For more experienced envy, all the greens are clearly to be seen in her luxuriant illustrations. The traditional nursery rhyme is here set in the Caribbean. The colours are vivid without being garish. Old and familiar worlds are made new. (Witness the black 'maiden all forlorn'.) A remarkable achievement, both confirming and eye-opening.

Mother Mouse, pursued by a fearsomely hinted at and increasingly present ginger cat, searches for cheese in **But No Cheese** by Saviour Pirotta (Hodder & Stoughton, 0 340 56598 5, £7.99). She finds ONE fresh strawberry TWO stale raisins and so on, but is (almost frustrated in her cheese hunt. Splendid artwork from Kate Simpson supports and is supported by clear, bold, simple text. The story-line is compellingly dramatic. There's much to look at and for, to predict and to talk about.

Edward Lear's alphabet book, **A Was Once an Apple Pie** (Walker, 0 7445 1948 9, £7.99), ought to have appeal both in and beyond the early years. Julie Lacome's illustrations are clear, simple and excellently matched to Lear's words. The latter have that particular delight in language which cannot be caught too young and which is an essential pre-requisite for growth of reading appetite. What initially appears here to be mere rhyming nonsense is generally rooted in close observation: it also prompts a desire to join in the game. For instance, I can't resist my own sixth line amendment to:

*J was once a jar of jam*

*Jammy*

*Mammy*

*Clammy*

*Jammy*

***Double Whammy***

*Jar of Jam*

The combination of Iona and Peter Opie with Maurice Sendak makes **I Saw Esau** (Walker, 0 7445 21513, £9.99) an outstanding book, offering so much in both word and picture. With over 170 rhymes from home, street and school, an immense contribution is being joyfully made here for children to grasp and use.

What is slightly archaic in structure is grist to the child's language mill - and helped to be so by Sendak's gently sharp or nicely heavy-handed visual wit. What is old and familiar in the text makes for enjoyable sharing across generations: what is less familiar will become well-known in a book that deserves to be long treasured.

**KNOWN WORLDS**

All the books in this section, even with dogs, cats, frogs, ducks and rabbits as lead characters, present worlds which young readers (and adults) will readily recognise from their own experience.

A frazzled Mum copes with two young children, dog and rabbit in **Doing the Garden** by Sarah Garland (Bodley Head, 0 370 31635 5, £6.99). Although everything, drawn brilliantly, is slightly down-at-heel, there's a feeling of a huge appetite for life as Mum decides, with the children, to 'do the garden'. The simplest of texts, with accompanying balloon dialogue, misses no chance to exploit the humour of gardening and garden centre shopping. (Note the cashier's acid eye and the proudly lunatic bone-burying dog.) The book rings the happiest of bells.

**In Hannah's Temper** (Deutsch, 0 590 54012 2, £5.99) Celia Berridge takes a generous, authentic and loving look at the way a real child behaves. Hannah is in a day-long foul mood, irritating Mum, persecuting the rabbit, slamming doors and toys - and worse. But, as it should, and often does, all ends happily. The story is told in amusing, well-controlled verse form. The illustrations are excellent with Hannah's every movement closely observed and (on the back cover) a wittily caught look of real apprehension in the toys' eyes.

A family picnic disturbs the animals underground in Ruth Brown's **The Picnic** (Andersen, 0 86264 377 5, £6.99). There are nice switches of perspective as, for example, the young child's eye looks enormous to the burrowed creatures. The language is richly demanding - 'Instant darkness, total panic, chaos and confusion reigned' - but it reads aloud very well, compels thought and brings early understandings to children. The artwork is of that very high quality always associated with Ruth Brown.

A runner-up for the 1990 Mother Goose Award, Gus Clarke is on excellent form again in **How Many Days to my Birthday?** (Andersen, 0 86264 372 4, £6.99), the tale of three-year-old Danny's pestering desperately for his fourth birthday. The author has caught the child's impatience beautifully in both text and picture and has spoken wittily to those able to look at the book with younger readers.

For those who don't object to the parental threat (unfulfilled) of ghosts, giants and a wicked witch to curb little Joe's uncooperative behaviour, **"No!" Said Joe** by John Prater (Walker, 0 7445 2146 7, £7.99) is a hugely entertaining book. The story is told in boldly printed, well-handled rhymed verse, and the illustrations are of a very high quality. Joe's conduct will be instantly recognisable by many who will want to share the book with their own Joes (and Janes).

**In First Class** (ill. Sue Porter, Orchard, 185213 304 X, £7.99) Rose Impey gives us six stories (on lined paper) describing life in Mrs Candy's pre-'Three Wise Men' classroom, likely to appeal to all but humourless or loony anti-Plowdenites (and those who object to tail-cut worms!). There's energy, fun and fancy in this closely observed world in which daily something new is learned by the children - and by their teacher.

With the theme that some people never learn, Quentin Blake excels in **Cockatoos** (Cape, 0 224 03115 5, £7.99). Weary of his daily ritual greeting, Professor Dupont's cockatoos hide from him - in dining room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, lavatory, attic, garage, cellar and on the roof. He can't see them but we can, which makes this an amusing, highly sharable book. So here, without the burden of assessment, there is observation-training, language delight, fantasy and life.

**The Big Alfie Out of Doors Storybook** from Shirley Hughes (Bodley Head, 0 370 31516 2, £8.99) is a miracle of a family book which makes me ponder the more positive prospects of grandfatherhood. There are four excellent stories and four excellent free verse poems. All centre delicately, and with unfailingly benign touch, upon Alfie's growing grasp of the world around him. The line and wash is brilliant - by an artist who has looked more closely than most at faces (black and white), at animals, at the natural world and at buildings. And she still finds time for the Save Our Libraries fight! Shirley Hughes for Prime Minister!

## FOLK AND FANCY

Outstanding, delicate beauty haunts and captivates the eye throughout **Dragon** by Wayne Anderson (Hutchinson, 0 09176361 4, £7.99), the story of a dragon in a world-search for its mother and its own kind. Eventually he's helped by a

human child -'not frightened for he knew magic from his story books'. There is, however, a slightly unnerving ending as the dragon, enfolded in his mother's great wings, `gently lowers the boy onto the snow'- and leaves him. Perhaps a sequel awaits?

The translation from the Swiss by Anthea Bell of the Grimms' **The Bremen Town Musicians** (North-South Books, 155858 140 5, £7.95) lends itself very well to reading aloud: the tale is excellently told. Bernadette Watts' illustrations are beautiful - an extraordinary but totally apt combination of the gentle, the autumnal, the witty and the menacing.

In Alan Garner's **Jack and the Beanstalk** (Harper Collins, 0 00 193456 2, £8.99), dark, brooding, and dramatic artwork from Julek Heller complements and is complemented by the text's compelling language to make a most powerful rendering of this English folk tale. The feel of words spoken ('That's reckoned him up, rump and stump, it has') is always close in a book that's ideal to read aloud.

With the aid of rat, cricket and flea, the young blacksmith tames the white stallion, makes the princess smile and thus wins her hand and the kingdom in **The Princess Who Could Not Laugh**, retold by Marlies Horger (Ragged Bears, 1870817 99 0, £7.95). The prose of this translated retelling has a fine ring to it, and the illustrations from Gennadij Spirin are truly remarkable - at times sumptuously elegant, at others delicately refined. A book that would productively grace any junior or secondary school library.

## THE WORLD AROUND

A cluster of books about, or concerned for, the natural world.

The youngest readers (and those with them) will greatly enjoy Martin Waddell's **The Pig in the Pond** (Walker, 0 7445 2168 8, £7.99), the story of Neligan's heat-oppressed pig and its dip in the farm pond - along with an eventually nude Farmer Neligan and a host of farm animals. With helpful repetitions the text is fresh - as are the outstanding pictures by Jill Barton, which invest the animals simultaneously with authentic vitality and some convincingly human looks.

**Red Fox on the Move** by Hannah Giffard (Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 0703 8, £7.95) has all the qualities which brought its predecessor, **Red Fox**, high praise. There's the same bright, energetic boldness of image and compelling drama in the text as Red Fox and Rose lead the five cubs from their bulldozed home amid genuine excitement in the search for a new lair. The eye is continually captivated by the skilled use of colour, shape and detail.

With Julia Draper's **A Secret Place** (Deutsch, 0 590 54003 3, £7.99), we have an excellent book approaching the conservation theme in a most attractive, unpreachy fashion. When the natural beauty of a piece of wasteland is destroyed, a young girl develops a wild area in her own garden. With a sharp eye for detail and rich colour tones, Julia Draper has produced an optimistic book which could well encourage similarly hopeful activity and equally proper regard for our wild flora and fauna.

Wendy Lewison's **Going to Sleep on the Farm** (Andersen, 0 86264 396 1, £6.99) shows us a small boy, ready for bed and surrounded by his farmyard toys, asking his father, in tiring turn, how various animals go to sleep. Gradually the boy himself falls asleep and father puts him gently to bed. Rhymed without force, the text runs clearly in single or double lines at the foot of each large page. It matches beautifully the lovingly observed artwork from Juan Wijngaard in a most positive and warm book.

Rightly described on the jacket as a `fable of our times' and with just the right degree of sentiment, **The Paperbag Prince** by Colin Thompson (Julia MacRae, 1856812014, £8.99) explores the desecration of the countryside. Framed by profusely and aptly detailed illustration of a quality which demands constant attention, the immensely readable text centres on the old Paperbag Prince's quiet determination to restore his territory to its better natural state. A title which deserves to be widely popular through and beyond the school years - not least with students of Art.

## A MISCELLANY

Kathy Henderson's **In the Middle of the Night** (Walker, 0 7445 1540 8, £8.99) is a truly remarkable book deserving a long and treasured life. In bold print a simple, extended poem tells what is happening outside when all in the house are fast asleep. The shop window-cleaner calls, a dust-cart rumbles by, offices are vacuumed, astronomers observe, bakers bake, nurses nurse, cats prowl and babies are born. The soft-focused 'photography' of the pictures by Jennifer Eachus has an extraordinary beautiful quality. There's something life-affirming about the combination. Children, their teachers and their parents are *entitled* to meet this fine, fine book.

In **Jack's Fantastic Voyage** by Michael Foreman (Andersen, 0 86264 369 4, £6.99) Jack's grandfather lives in a boat-shaped house full of his sea-voyage paintings. He tells Jack of his nautical adventures, but Jack's friends say that Grandfather is an impostor. One night, however, Jack and Grandfather steer the boat-house through a storytelling night of storm and frozen seas. Safely home, Jack sees Grandfather chipping the last icicle from the roof. What is dream? What is story? What is reality? Brilliant illustration is supported by very well handled language to produce a book both delightful and thought-provoking.

Stanley's stately home visit and his foiling of a burglary in **Stanley Bagshaw and the Ice-Cream Ghost** (Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 12760 2, £8.50) must appeal throughout the 8 to 80 age-range. Using comic book techniques, with consummate skill, Bob Wilson gives frequent cause for loud and genuine laughter. The narrative is carried forward relentlessly in vastly entertaining rhymed verse - and there is a host of jokes (sometimes inoffensively vulgar) in the cartooned pictures. While much is larger than life, reality always hovers firmly in the background.

**Where's Mama? Où Est Maman?** by Diane Goode (Andersen, 0 86264 3716, £6.99) is a simple story told in both English and French. The book could have enjoyable uses across a wide age-range from the early years through to the secondary school, where teachers of French and Art could make imaginative use of it. Two young children lose mother at a Paris rail-station, and are helped in their search for her by a friendly gendarme. The storyline is gently amusing with each page having a pleasant twist. The stylised images are delightfully detailed with, again, a sense of fun apparent on every page.

Anne Gatt's retellings of nearly 60 **Aesop's Fables** (Pavilion, 185145 439 X, £10.99) are extremely well handled - many with important messages for those who rule us (if they can read) and control the purse strings. (Note the price of the book!) For those able to make wise use of Aesop, this is an outstanding collection, especially for the sharply observed, carefully detailed and always stimulating, bright, fresh artwork from Safaya Salter.

**Glasses - Who Needs 'Em?** by Lane Smith (Viking, 0 670 84313 X, £8.50) is an intriguing and very clever oddity which may not be universally popular - but I love it! The endpapers comprise reprints of old adverts for spectacles. The text, in different colours and, like a sight test, of different sizes, explores a mad optician's attempts to persuade his young client that glasses are fine. With bizarre, striking illustrations, the book will have devotees across the age-range.

Virginia Hamilton's **In the Beginning** (Pavilion, 185145 865 4, £12.99) is a truly remarkable collection of 25 Creation Myths (including two Old Testament stories) supported by 41 unique illustrations from Barry Moser. Together, in a beautifully produced book, with text of carefully shaped simplicity, both stories and pictures make demands. Coming from a wide range of cultures, the tales remind us of humanity's obsession with its origins. They show, sometimes comically, sometimes with quiet pain, the different attempts by diverse cultures to explain their worlds; and they show, more importantly, the similarities in our efforts to explain. Virginia Hamilton's prefatory, explanatory and closing notes, together with her source list, are valuable ingredients in a very important book.

## A WELCOME RE-APPEARANCE

Heinemann are reissuing four Alison Uttley's from the late 1920s and early 1930s - **The Squirrel**, **The Hare and The Little Grey Rabbit** (0 434 96925 7); **The Story of Fuzzypeg the Hedgehog** (0 434 96926 5); **How Little Grey Rabbit Got Back Her Tail** (0 434 96927 3); and **The Great Adventure of Hare** (0 434 96928 1). Delightful facsimile editions at £4.99 each.

The books are as old as (or older than) I am. Grandparents, parents, friends and teachers who recall these wonders from their own childhoods may wish to relive and share their own early pleasure with today's youngsters.

**Trevor Dickinson**, OBE, retired recently as a member of HM Inspectorate. His travelling roadshow promoting children's books and reading is well-known throughout the UK.

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