



Alfie and the Birthday Surprise; Rhymes for Annie Rose; The Nursery Collection

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4

Hughes' celebrated and justifiably popular 'Alfie' series, published over the last 16 years, have been reissued as handsome large format hardbacks to mark their author's 70th birthday this year. They are joined by this, the first new Alfie story for some time, in which Alfie and his family help neighbours Maureen and Mrs MacNally cheer up Mr MacNally with a surprise birthday party and special present.

Beautifully presented, with clear, uncluttered print and illustrated in glowing colours, this new picture book deals with the death of a loved pet, the sadness this causes and the kindness that brings resolution. Carefully removed from Alfie's direct experience (the cat who dies is the MacNally's Smoky), the young reader can take part at one remove and empathise with Alfie as he helps find a way to help Mr MacNally. This is Hughes at her best and a fitting addition to the 'Alfie' series.

In **Rhymes for Annie Rose**, now in paperback, the familiar world of Alfie and Annie Rose is the setting for a collection of some 26 rhymes, often banal in their simplicity and of uneven quality, but many of them evoking, in combination with the illustrations, aspects of a child's world perfectly. Thus the cuddly toys, teatimes, friends and imaginative games of a comfortable white middle-class childhood are celebrated, along with toe-counting and action rhymes.

In **The Nursery Collection**, Hughes' well-known series of little books for pre-schoolers (**Bathwater's Hot, Noisy** etc.), first published over ten years ago, is brought together here in one large-size volume. Each of the original books, featuring a small girl and her baby brother, illustrates a different concept in the setting of typical family-life, Hughes-style. Colour, size and shape, sounds, opposites and numbers are all introduced.

For this volume, many of the pictures have been redrawn or sharpened up, and the colours are much stronger than in the originals. Some of the original pictures and words have been lost to fit the new format. On the whole this does not

matter very much, though I found it irritating in the 'Colours' section that each colour now shares an opening with another, making it less useful for display in a nursery or reception classroom and maybe confusing for sharing with a group or class of children. Similarly, in 'When We Went to the Park', one opening deals with numbers five to nine, which previously were spread over three openings - not much time here to consider each number separately.

My own children have used these books over and over from babyhood to the sudden realisation of the beginning reader that 'I can read this!' - the text is largely in Hughes' gentle rhyme and easily remembered and repeated. I am a bit concerned that having all five concepts in one volume might induce a tendency to rush on through the lot, whereas the separate volumes lead one to explore each at a more leisurely pace. However I am sure that anyone coming to this collection for the first time will find it as useful and enjoyable as ever.

Running Order:

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