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News and views about books on TV and in films.

The Machine Gunners is coming

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Chas McGill and the rest of the gang from Garmouth are about to capture our screens in a six part television adaptation of Robert Westall's much-read, award-winning book. It's said to be the most expensive **BBC** children's project this year. **Tony Bradman** talked to **Paul Stone** who produced it.

When the first episode of **The Machine Gunners** goes out at around 5.10 pm on Wednesday, February 23, kids all over the country will finally get what they could have had years ago. The television history of Robert Westall's book reads almost like one of his own plots, with good luck at the beginning, mistakes and a final resolution.

The screen rights to **The Machine Gunners** were in fact snapped up by a television company very soon after it was published in 1975. But Robert Westall wasn't happy with the screenplays he was shown, and the project collapsed before any film was loaded into a single camera.

Then last year, the BBC approached him to write a play, a privilege he declined on the grounds playwriting wasn't up his particular street. But he did mention to Paul Stone (the executive producer of children's drama at the Beeb) that **The Machine Gunners** was still on offer - and Paul Stone snapped it up.

Robert Westall couldn't have picked his man better. "Ever since I first read the book," says Paul, "I'd wanted to run it into a television series. It's absolutely stunning, a book which you can't put down, to use an old cliché. I admired it on every point - the early idealism of the kids which gets knocked about, the tremendously exciting story which has a real bone to it in a drama of ideas, the unsentimental but terribly realistic approach to World War II from a kid's viewpoint. The characterisations and humour in the book are superb."

So the mighty Beeb swung into action to translate Robert Westall's story into television. After the adaptation, by William Corlett (who wrote **Barriers**), Paul's first concern - and also that of his director, Colin Cant - was accuracy. How to re-create wartime Garmouth and its inhabitants?

"We've shot the whole series on location in Newcastle and the area surrounding. I particularly wanted to capture an authentic flavour of the north-east. Both Colin and I felt that we should cast the series from real Tynesiders, and we have chosen our actors solely from the local people. Of course, the adults are all Equity members, but for the children we simply went round local schools. We think we've got some marvellous kids, too."

Authenticity has been the key word of the production, Paul and his crew going to great lengths to get sets, props and costumes exactly right. "We found that there were still some sites in Newcastle which were bomb damaged from the last

war, so that helped. The local people have been marvellous, too, especially with things like taking down TV aerials when we asked them to.

"On one occasion we were filming at night and people kept coming out of their houses to give us cups of tea and tell us their memories of the Blitz. One lady told us we'd put our searchlight in exactly the right place - where they'd put one in the war. Another said that she couldn't understand why we were shooting in one particular house. She said we ought to go to Mrs So-and-So's, because she knew for a fact that Mrs So-and-So hadn't changed her curtains since 1944."

Paul and his team enlisted the aid of The Imperial War Museum, where they found some remarkable film of dogfights in the war and were given much valuable help in other areas. The team also went to the lengths of building their own barrage balloon, which caused quite a stir in Newcastle. At another stage they discovered a real tail section from a crashed German bomber, an essential part of the story - but it was too fragile to move. So the BBC visual effects department simply built a complete, full-scale replica of it for filming.

"The most difficult sequences have been the ones involving planes. The footage we got from The War Museum was excellent, but there wasn't that much, so we resorted to filming some scenes with models. The models are remarkably good but it's a very tricky operation - getting the right scale is extremely difficult."

The machine gun itself caused a few problems, too. "We had two in the end, both exactly the same - but one's real and one's a dummy. The children couldn't handle the real one, it was too dangerous, so they're only seen with the dummy. But we had to fire the real one in several scenes, and that was quite frightening. The noise is absolutely stunning, especially when it was fired in The Fortress which the children build, because it's a very enclosed space. We had to alert the whole neighbourhood and the police beforehand, but we did use blanks. Those are prepared specially by the BBC's own armourers."

Shooting for the series took 12 weeks, and was within schedule despite some nasty autumn weather. Robert Westall himself was able to go along early during the shooting to see how Paul Stone and his crew were getting on.

"I must say I was very impressed with the obvious effort they'd put in to getting everything right," he said. "I found myself walking into the playground of a 1940s school, with all the windows covered in anti-blast tape, sandbags round the doors and shelters; boys with their hair shorn, girls with scarves tied across their chests skipping, everyone with a gasmask. I did a quick double take because for a moment it all seemed more real to me than today."

You and Me - a new direction

A new series of **You and Me**, the BBC TV programme for nursery and infant children starts this term. 'The group of twenty new programmes take us in a new direction' said **Richard Callanan**, the series' producer. "For the first time we are using books as the centrepiece of half of the programmes. The emphasis is on learning *about* reading rather than learning *to* read. We indicate how a book works and introduce words like 'book', 'cover' and 'page'. By presenting a range of stories - fantasy, traditional tales, stories of 'everyday life' - we aim to make children familiar with patterns of written language they will later read for themselves. We are also concerned to motivate interest in books and reading. The "stars" of the series- two child puppets", Cosmo and Dibs - are always eager to have stories read to them. And the stories we have chosen to feature are from the best of their kind.

"The books chosen and the methods of presentation reflect the programme's commitment to positive discrimination in connection with race, gender roles and class. We aim to show a variety of form of family, social and working life, a variety of faces, voices and behaviour and encourage respect for them all.

"We hope that children will have the stories reread to them after the programmes.'

The books are

Charlie Strong and his Favourite Song Frances Knowles and Brian Thompson, Longman, 1975. (Breakthrough Red Set F) £1.60

Where's Spot? Eric Hill, Heinemann, £2.95

New Blue Shoes Eve Rice, The Bodley Head, £2.25: Puffin Books, 80p

Meg's Car Helen Nicoll and Jan Pienkowski, Heinemann, £2.95: Puffin Books, £1.00

Meg at Sea Helen Nicoll and Jan Pienkowski, Heinemann. £3.10: Puffin Books, 95p

On My Way to School Celia Berridge, Andre Deutsch. £2.95

The Gingerbread Man (traditional, rewritten).

Maxine's Piano Chris Abuk (specially commissioned for the programme to be published later 1983 by Longmans).

Norton's Night-time Jane Breskin Zalben, Fontana Picture Lions, 90p

Raju's Dream Barrinder Kalsi (specially commissioned for the pro-gramme, as yet unpublished).

(**You and Me** runs this term from 10th January to 10th February - Mondays and Wednesdays at 10.00 am. Tuesday and Thursday at 2.00 pm. The series will be repeated in June this year and a further six times in the following four years.

The Dark Crystal - a fantasy for all the family

Not wanting to compete with E.T, fever the distributors of **The Dark Crystal** are keeping it back until the middle of February. **Books for Keeps** took a twelve-year-old friend to an advance showing of this new variation on the classic conflict between good and evil. In this version Jen the only surviving Gelfling (or so he thinks) is charged with restoring harmony to a divided world by replacing the missing splinter of the Dark Crystal at the exact moment of the Great Conjunction of his planet's Three Suns. Against him are the evil Skesis, cruel tyrants determined to retain their power. Among his friends, the wise and gentle urRu who have sheltered and protected him in preparation for this moment. The film is visually outstanding. The characters and the world they inhabit, designed by Brian Froud, have been brought to the screen by Jim Henson - creator of the Muppets. These puppets are extremely lifelike and the outward appearance of each one matches beautifully its role in the story. The storyline is strong, simple and easy to follow. Only the final moments when the urRu and the Skesis are united once again as the urSkesis may need explaining to the younger cinema-goers.

Our 12 year old's verdict? "Really great. I'm going to tell my friends to see it."

Two book versions are available, both very faithful to the film.

The Tale of the Dark Crystal Donna Bass, ill. Bruce McNally, Macmillan. 0 333 34406 5, £4.95, a picture book, is strong on illustrations, but rather leaden and uninspired in the retelling.

Novelisation by A.C.H. Smith (same title) (Futura 0 7088 2231 2, £1.50) reads well. Good for Secondary pupils who have enjoyed the film or are 'into' the genre.

(For those who just might not have noticed there are also two E.T. books, both from Sphere, both by William Kotzwinkle.)

Watch the Romans

A new series of BBC TV **Watch** starts on January 11th. (Tuesdays at 11.00, Wednesdays at 2.00 for five weeks). It is about The Romans.

Just published is an activity book of cut-outs, drawings, recipes and quizzes which would be useful for follow-up. It is devised by John Reeve and Patsy Vanags of the British Museum Education Service.

The Romans, British Museum Publications, 0 7141 2024 3, 95p.

Also in view

The Boy who Won the Pools

TVS (Executive Producer Anna Home) is making a bid for the Sunday tea-time audience with this ten part serial about Rodney Baverstock, the sixteen year old schoolboy who wins three quarters of a million pounds on the pools, and falls into a world of rock music, video, and big business. Rodney, you won't be surprised to hear, remains totally cool and laid back about all this and about the cast of 'bizarre' and 'zany' characters who surround him. (All that is except girlfriend, Liz, who is a beautiful, ordinary no-nonsense sort of girl with - her values in the right place). We are promised 'hilarious lunacy', and no-one has said 'whacky' yet - but give them time.

The books read as if you need to meet the characters first. Tune in at 5.30 on February 20th. In ten weeks it could become a cult.

The Boy who Won the Pools. Gerard Macdonald, Fontana Lions, 0 00 672062 5, £1.00 (Also available in hardback from Collins).

and

Tucker's Luck

That delinquent with a heart of gold, Tucker Jenkins (played of course by Tod Carty) is back with his own series (BBC 1, Tuesday, March 8th at 5.10. for nine weeks).

Bob Leeson has written a book based on the series **Forty Days of Tucker J** (Fontana Lions. 0 00 672176 1. £1.00) published at the end of February.

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