



Editor's Page ? July 1980

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News and comment from the Editor.

?Have you seen it?' 'What do you think?' `I couldn't believe it.' `It's a farce.?

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No, not comments about **Books for Keeps** (at least not that we've heard!); but the opening remarks of lots of conversations since 24th April and the announcement of the winner of the £7,500 National Book Award (Children's Literature section). We had the information in advance for the May issue and Colin Dann's **The Animals of Farthing Wood** seemed rather an odd winner - in fact the entire short list was strangely assorted; but it seemed only fair to delay comment until we had read the report of the judge, Sir John Betjeman.

Well, we've read it. So have others - hence the opening remarks. Sir John is a good poet but apparently ill-equipped to evaluate children's books. Casting around for criteria, he has hit on `the binding and spine' as important features. Alan Garner's **Stone Book Quartet** clearly didn't win because it was a boxed paperback set! **Farthing Wood** did because `it looks like a book - even when the dust wrapper is off. It also `has a happy ending'. The intention may not have been to be patronising, but that is the effect. The Arts Council has given `the kiddies' a pat on the head, one of them has got a big lollipop and now they should go away and play.

Anyway, are huge awards what is needed? (Or for that matter expensive adjudications - Sir John Betjeman received £2,000.) Last year a meeting of all sorts of people who have to do with children and books was asked how the Arts Council could best help. There was a remarkable degree of agreement and lots of practical suggestions. Awards came well down on the list - even from authors. So why another award? At the SBA we could do a lot with £7,500 (that's just in case the Arts Council is still wondering what to do with the refused History section prize).

Something else to think about - Holidays

We had holidays in mind for Authorgraph No. 3 (page 14). Malcolm Saville's books (fiction and non-fiction) are good holiday companions. When we visited him in Winchelsea he took us on a guided tour of that lovely old hill-top town. Full of enthusiasm he recounted its history; he made us *see* the sea filling the plain between Winchelsea and Rye and the ferry waiting. He told us why one part of the wall was called King's Leap. `Of course,' he said at the end, `I don't believe a word of it.' No matter, for us he had brought the past to life. As we left he was off to the post with a bundle of letters - replies to children who had written about his books. Earlier in the day he had said he thought Enid Blyton was responsible for turning more children on to books than anyone. It occurred to us that Malcolm Saville could take some credit for that too.

Cover story

Peter Firmin's dragon skimming the waves with all those smiling holiday-makers aboard really sets the mood for this

issue. It's from **The Last of the Dragons**, and we're only sorry we couldn't afford to reproduce it in full colour. Peter Firmin's detailed, quirky illustrations are just the right complement to E. Nesbit's story in this picture book version. Also out this month, in *Picture lions*, are two Noggin stories (**Noggin and the Flowers** and **Noggin and the Island**). If you haven't met Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin's saga of Noggin the Nog, you've a treat in store. Peter Firmin did new illustrations for these; we so loved his inventive illuminated capitals that we persuaded him to do some especially for us for *Puppets and Pictures* (page 12).

Thinking ahead to Autumn

I don't want to take the shine from summer holidays still to come; but in eight weeks or so the autumn term will be with us. If you are thinking of having a book event, better start planning now. (Don't forget Children's Book Week is 4th-11th October.) If you can't get to London for **Children's Books of the Year** (see News, page 22), why not hire it from the NBL and do it yourself? Book soon, though - it's in great demand. This issue's How to? (page 10) tells you how to plan an author visit. Lots of authors are keen to meet their readers, but terrified at the prospect - I've been with some who were literally shaking. Bernard Ashley is not in this group. The last time I saw him 'performing' he was cheerfully autographing books, hands, arms, bits of paper and chatting easily with children - but then he is also head of a junior school. In general with authors - handle with care.

Break in the Sun

Bernard Ashley's latest book **Break in the Sun** is just out (OUP, 019 271434 1, £3.95). I think it's his best yet. Patsy, in trouble for bed-wetting, runs away with a bargeload of amateur actors.

She finds herself playing a part in more ways than one trying to stop her new friends discovering that the police are looking for her. Also looking is Eddie Green, her stepfather (the major cause of her flight) and a reluctant Kenny. Kenny is a fat boy, a misfit and a marvellous creation; the relationship which develops between him and Eddie is one of the best things in a very good book. (Charles Keeping's double-page drawings of Thames-side scenes are an extra pleasure.) Due in Puffin in December, it's already being filmed as a BBC TV serial.

Here's hoping for a break in the sun for everyone.

Pat

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