



# The Making of Readers

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Focus on books for the 7-9s, **Colin Mills** tells us What makes a Good Book for 7-9s and teachers and children test some books from publishers' series.

One of the crucial moments in determining whether children become readers happens some time between seven and nine when they meet their first extended stories. There's a lot of new publishing in this area; time, we thought, to try some of it out. But first we asked **Colin Mills**

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## What makes a good book for seven to nines?

Whenever I'm asked that question by parents or teachers, I tend to talk about actual reading experiences that are fresh in my mind. A group of eight year olds in a classroom I've been working in recently have been reading Penelope Lively's **Dragon Trouble** (one of the new Heinemann **Bananas** series). They've been reading it collaboratively: for some of the children in the group it is their first extended text. I've observed the children, listened to the tapes their teacher has made of their discussions, and read their own stories which have come as a result of their story-reading.

Why is this (and many other) `reading context' foregrounded in my mind when people ask me the `good books' question? I think it is because I believe that our observation of how particular books are shared, enjoyed and discussed is still our best guide to what `works'. I've selected four broad areas which help me in considering books for the age group: continuity; form; content and extending possibilities.

## Continuity

Penelope Lively's book mentioned above - like most successful books for the age group - provides *continuity with prior reading experience*. By this I mean that in terms of character (a young boy and his grandfather); situation (a holiday and a child's imaginary world) and language (the involving style of the writer), the book builds upon the literary experience children have of picture books and of listening to stories *and* upon their experience of the world. `Bridging books' is the term I often use when discussing such books with teachers. Some more important aspects of the `continuity' are:

- *Pictures*: still an important part of the reading process. They can be `read' and provide important cues to novices who can be overawed by what appears to be acres of text.
- *Meeting characters that provide links with what children already know* can be important. I've met many seven year olds who are captured by the ways in which the Ahlbergs skilfully incorporate fairy tale and nursery rhyme characters into **Jeremiah in the Dark Wood** and **Ten in a Bed**.

- *The power of a good story* is an important motivating drive: 'what happens next' is as important as ever!

## Form

Important at two levels:

**First:** the physical appearance and layout of text and pictures must help the reader through the book. That sounds a truism, but I'm still amazed by some publishers' lack of consideration of line and word breaks in texts. The economics of publishing is, more than ever, giving rise to smudgy pictures and poor quality paper that would not have been tolerated ten years ago. The **Blackbirds** and **Redwings** from the Julia MacRae imprint are models of considerate presentation as are the Fontana Young Lions series.

**Second:** does the form of the book help the young reader develop the literary competence that being a reader involves? Bearing in mind Margaret Meek's point that we learn to read by virtue of the 'untaught lessons' that good texts teach us, I ask myself when I judge a book for the age group:

- Does the author invite the reader in? First pages are important here.
- Is the use of dialogue clear?
- Does the story have a 'pattern' which makes it coherent?

I find that one of the best ways to discover the answers to these questions is to listen to children talking about their reading - what do they find difficult in their first extended texts?

## Content

I'm constantly surprised by the ways in which writers for this group can hit upon original ideas. Here are some features that may guide you in choosing individual classroom collections:

- Stories that look at the seemingly small, but significant, childhood experiences.
- Stories that show how the outlandish and the dramatic lie within the taken-for-granted and the workaday.
- Humorous stories, which build upon this age group's developing enjoyment of linguistic word-play, and the zany pushing out of reality to test the limits of the realistic.
- Books which reflect the camaraderie of friendship, groups and school life.
- Good re-tellings of folk, and traditional tales.
- Books which take stock characters and creatures, but make them three-dimensional.

## Extending readers

One of the key tasks for writers and for teachers, librarians, parents and all choosers for this age group is to let the books have simple-seeming surface texts. That is, they need to tell a story in immediate and accessible ways. But the best can also make reflection and speculation possible.

Last, I want to say that VARIETY and the possibility of selecting and choosing is vital. I still sadly remember those children in Vera Southgate's study, **Extending Beginning Reading**, spending up to a term on an uninspiring reading book. Some of the promising series for seven to nines give scope for that choice.

## Testing... Testing... 7 to 9s?

**Four teacher librarians tried out books from seven series published for this age range.**

**Lesley Zeibecakis** has a class of 7-8 year olds in a junior school in Bristol.

The books were received eagerly. Many children in the class could not tackle them as a 'read' but they were still interested. They liked the 'feel' of the books, commented on the nice shiny paper and hard covers. This was a new experience for them, being reared on a diet of paperbacks. They particularly liked the illustrations for **The Moon Monsters**, **Gone to the Dogs** and **The October Animal**. They spent a long time just looking at the books guessing at the stories and playing with them - sorting them into groups according to the publisher's logo, playing bookshops. This was all valuable experience and will provide a stimulus to tackling the books later when they are ready. About fifteen children in the class were ready and more than willing to start reading the books. Off their own bat they sorted them into two groups according to how difficult they thought they would be. Gazelles, Banana Books, Blackbirds and Kestrel Kites were classed as 'easier' on the grounds of shorter length and larger print. (The larger type-size of the Kestrel Kites seems to have stopped them noticing the 90+ pages. Redwings though shorter were classed as 'harder'.) Books in this group were the most popular and the most widely read. The fact that they could get through a whole book in one session boosted their confidence a great deal and they were quite prepared to tackle any book from this group (though they found **Mr Berry's Ice-cream Parlour** 'too long and boring'). They quickly learned the series logo of the different publishers and were happily looking for Blackbirds and Gazelles in the public library secure in the knowledge that they would be able to read them.

Redwings, Antelopes and Eagles, although attractive, were classed as 'more difficult'. Some children started a book and then gave up, some finished without I fear understanding or gaining much from the experience. Everyone was intrigued by the idea of **Gone to the Dogs**. Only two children - the most competent readers - read all of this group (**Demon Headmaster**, **Little Angel** and **Dogs**) and no title produced any remarkably strong response.

The most popular books were:

**The Moon Monsters**, Douglas Hill, Banana Books

Particularly welcome as it 'hooked' the boys. (In general the boys were much harder to attract and please than the girls.) Girls liked it to.

**The Ghost Child**, Emma Tennant, Banana Books

Provoked much discussion about ghosts and a search for more 'ghost books' in the library. We ended up having a ghost week!

**The October Animal**, Denise Hill, Gazelles Much sympathetic empathy for the boy who wanted to keep this very

appealing animal.

**My Gang**, Catherine Sefton, Gazelles

The children liked the idea of a gang of girls but the girls in my class weren't so pleased when they found that a small boy gets the better of the gang. Neither was I!

**The Nearly Terrible Birthday**, Delia Huddy, Blackbirds

Again lots of sympathy for Minty and much pleasure at the happy ending.

**The Little Dressmaker**, Eleanor Farjeon, Blackbirds

Much enjoyed. 'It's like a fairy story.'

**John Parkins** tried out his books with a class of 9-10 year olds in a village near Bath.

I simply put the books in the classroom and stood back to see what happened. The Blackbirds, Redwings and Banana Books drew the most positive response. There was great excitement as the children passed them around and organised a waiting list for themselves to keep track of whose turn it was next. They decided that Banana Books looked 'friendly' and after the reading got going this proved to be the most successful series of all those we were trying out. The Eagles attracted in the main the more literate children (not necessarily those with the highest reading ages!), probably on account of their greater length and general appearance; but the topsy-turvy idea of **Gone to the Dogs** was well-received by everyone and the cover caused much discussion even among those who decided the book was 'too hard'. Karla liked **Little Angel Comes to Stay**. 'I thought it was very funny. I can imagine how little Gabrielle felt in amongst all the other children. I would like to read more stories about Little Angel.'

Our two Kestrel Kites (**Mr Berry's Ice-cream Parlour** and **Rat Saturday**) drew a lot of adverse comment: 'the pictures are very dull'; 'the pictures were boring and when I say boring I mean BORING'; 'I thought it was a good book at the start but when I got to the back of the book it was boring'; 'when you get half way it gets boring'; - are fairly typical remarks. Interesting that they were all made by boys who had been attracted by the covers but perhaps, even at nine, were not as readers up to the greater length and complexity of these titles. Antelopes and Gazelles were generally liked for their layout and appearance and perceived by the children as 'more serious' books.

Some comments:

**Dragon Trouble**, Penelope Lively, Banana Books

'I'd like to read more books like this.' (Toni) 'The pictures go with the writing ... I was stuck in the book, I think I was Peter.' (Robert) 'I thought the story was going to be brainy but when I read it it became good (Suzzanna) 'It is exciting, it is funny, it is good.' (Darren)

**Jane and the Pirates**, Jules Older, Banana Books

'I thought it was great. I liked the way the pictures were drawn and I liked the way the story was set out.' (Karla) 'I liked it when Redbeard took Jane from his (sic!) mum and dad. I couldn't wait to read the next chapter.' (Wayne)

**The Rag Bag**, Anne Hughson, Gazelles

'It had things in the story that happen in real life.' (Karla) 'The pictures are good, they are a sort of sketch. I like things like houses being knocked down. I don't know why but I do think it's the best book I've read.' (Gary) 'It is silly to go in the place where they knock houses down just for your Gran's bag.'

**Sandy Fletcher's** readers are 7-10 year olds in a primary school in Bath.

Our seventeen assorted titles were greeted enthusiastically and most of the class were eager to get reading. Perhaps because I made a point of telling the children that these books were particularly for their age group and I would be interested to know what they thought of them, the books became known as 'the special books'.

Twenty-four of the twenty-nine children in the class read one or more of the books.

(I have 10 first-year juniors, 15 second-year juniors and 4 third-year juniors - five children have severe reading difficulties.) The children were obviously recommending books to each other and were good at deciding who would like which stories. For the older and more confident readers whether there were pictures in the books didn't really matter. The story was the thing. The most sought after titles were:

**The Saddle Bag Hero**, Sian Lewis, Antelopes Lyn wants a fierce dog for her birthday; she gets a guinea pig who proves to be not such a bad substitute.

**Bright-eye**, Alison Morgan, Kestrel Kites Several children were clearly moved by this gentle story of a girl who hatches a wild duck's egg.

**Mr Majeika**, Humphrey Carpenter, Kestrel Kites

A funny school-based fantasy in which the class nuisance meets his match.

**Tigers Forever**, Ruskin Bond, Redwings A young Indian boy is determined to save a tiger.

**Midnight Pirate**, Diana Hendry, Redwings The adventures of a lonely child and a kitten, the midnight pirate.

**Christabel**, Alison Morgan, Blackbirds Christabel the goat is expecting kids; Bethan has a particular interest in the outcome.

**Smiley Tiger**, Barbara Willard, Blackbirds A beautifully shaped story of a small boy and a tiger rug.

Of these I read **Midnight Pirate** and **Tigers Forever** to the class which resulted in a waiting list to read them. I don't think it's any accident that most of the sought after titles feature animals. Most of the children have pets, some keep goats. (Christabel had a good start and this, prompted by me, led to more Alison Morgan, Bright-eye.) The books are still being read and talked about.

**Ron Rendall** has a class of 36 second-year juniors in Radstock, near Bath.

The arrival of seventeen new books generated a great deal of interest; many children read more books in a few weeks than they would normally tackle and complete over half a term. Children talked about the books amongst themselves and were constantly recommending titles to one another. I had to institute a 'reservation' system and the requests are still coming in. Was all this enthusiasm simply because the books were something new - a refreshing change from the rather tired-looking titles on our class bookshelves? That was obviously part of it but can't account fully for the lively, interested shared reading experience these books created. The children are regular and keen buyers of paperbacks from our Book Club but I've never seen them so eager to discuss and recommend as they were with this collection. Watching and listening gave me some clues to explain why. 'They feel like real books'; 'some books take too long to read, but you could read these quickly ... you didn't get bored'; 'they are about the right easiness'; 'the words are big' (she was referring to size of type) 'and not too many on a page'; 'the pictures are nice'. We talked a lot about layout and design; it's obviously crucial for the fledgling reader.

Another important factor in creating this atmosphere, I'm sure, was that every child found something to enjoy. Judgements and responses were varied.

The lack of coloured illustrations in all but the Banana Books was important to some: 'I wish it had had more colourful pictures' (**Your Guess is as Good as Mine**); 'The grey makes it a bit gloomy' (**Mr Majeika**). These were readers happy to read at the length - even thinking 'it's a bit short' - but still needing the support of good illustration. Others, less concerned with pictures, were left wanting more: 'It didn't talk down to you and was believable. I really felt for Dino. I wish it could have been longer.' (**The Christmas Rocket**). The mark of a good read - to be sorry it's over!

In the classroom there was a great sense of sharing and comparing of responses, weighing and evaluating, and the struggle to put into words however inexactly what had been thought and felt. 'The book is telling us not to want what others have got because they think they like the things.' (**Freckle Juice**). '**Tigers Forever** was exciting but **Freckle Juice** happens in school and was not so exciting but I did enjoy it.'

Opinions varied about all the books but some were top of the pops with everyone.

**Freckle Juice**, Judy Blume, Banana Books 'Not too many hard words ... it is very colourful ... very funny.'

**Mr Majeika**, Humphrey Carpenter, Kestrel Kites

'The characters are very well thought out ... it was interesting ... it ought to be called Hamish Bigmore because most of it is about him ... I'd like a series of Mr Majeika books: Mr Majeika Strikes Again or Mr Majeika in Trouble ... I enjoyed it but it should have been longer.'

At the children's request I read **Mr Majeika** aloud. There was total attention and involvement and lots of laughter. The reservation list got much longer!

**Smiley Tiger**, Barbara Willard, Blackbirds 'It was believable ... well written and very enjoyable.'

**The School Trip**, Jacqueline Wilson, Antelopes

'Lots of funny parts ... I could picture the story in my head ... it seemed real ... some hard words, but I could read them ... I really liked this one.'

**Tigers Forever**, Ruskin Bond, Redwings 'Comfortable to read - not too hard, not too easy ... the tiger was a good character ... I liked the end because there would be more tigers in the world.'

**Tracker**, Mary Cockett, Gazelles

'A very good animal story ... exciting to read.'

## Books used

### GAZELLES

Hamish Hamilton, £1.95 each, stated age range 5-8. 48pp

**The October Animal**, Denise Hill, ill. Jennifer Bailey, 0 241 11252 4

**My Gang**, Catherine Sefton, ill. Catherine Bradbury, 0 241 11154 4

**Something from Space**, Ursula Daniels, ill. Maureen Bradley, 0 241 10918 3

**The Rag Bag**, Anne Hughson, ill. Kate Rogers, 0 241 11367 9

**Goal for Charlie**, Jov Allen, ill. Janet Duchesne, 0 241 11366 0

**Tracker**, Mary Cockett, ill. Maria Majewska, 0 241 11304 0

**Monkey Tricks**, Christopher White, ill. Jennifer Bailey. 0 241 11071 8

**Ursula Sailing**, Sheila Lavelle, ill. Thelma Lambert, 0 241 11247 7

## **BLACKBIRDS**

Julia MacRae, £2.95 each, stated age range 5-8, 48pp

**The Nearly Terrible Birthday**, Delia Huddy, ill. Kate Rogers, 0 86203 203 2

**The Little Dressmaker**, Eleanor Farjeon, ill. Charles Front, 0 86203 202 4

**Linda's Lie**, Bernard Ashley, ill. Janet Duchesne, 0 86203 099 4

**The Christmas Rocket**, Ann Molloy, ill. Laszlo Acs, 0 86203 128 1

**Christabel**, Alison Morgan, ill. Mariella Jennings, 0 86203 136 2

**Smiley Tiger**, Barbara Willard, ill. Laszlo Acs, 0 86203 161 3

## **ANTELOPES**

Hamish Hamilton, £2.75 each, stated age range 6-9, 96pp

**The Video Affair**, Richard Dennant, ill. Janet Duchesne, 0 241 10621 4

**Jenny and the Wreckers**, Fay Sampson, ill. Vanessa Julian-Ottie, 0 241 11368 7

**Beryl the Rainmaker**, Joan Phipson, ill. Laszlo Acs, 0 241 11238 9

**Burglar Bells**, John Escott, ill. Maureen Bradley, 0 241 11118 8

**A Bit of Give and Take**, Bernard Ashley, ill. Trevor Stublely, 0 241 11301 6

**The School Trip**, Jacqueline Wilson, ill. Sally Holmes, 0 241 11153 6

**The Saddle Bag Hero**, Sian Lewis, ill. Karen Heywood, 0 241 11302 4

**The Money Makers**, Ann Forsyth, ill. Kate Rogers, 0 241 11152 8

## **BANANA BOOKS**

Heinemann, £1.95 each, stated: age range 7-9, 42pp

**The Moon Monsters**, Douglas Hill, ill. Jeremy Ford, 0 434 93024 5

**Dragon Trouble**, Penelope Lively, ill. Valerie Littlewood, 0 434 93022 9

**Freckle Juice**, Judy Blume, ill. Coral Guppy, ; 0 434 93021 0

**Jane and the Pirates**, Jules Older, ill. Michael Bragg, 0 434 93020 2

**The Big Stink**, Sheila' Lavelle, ill. Lisa Kopper, 0 434 93023 7

**The Ghost Child**, Emma Tennant, ill. Charlotte Voake, 0 434 93025 3

## **REDWINGS**

Julia MacRae, £3,50 each, stated age range' 7-11, 48pp

**On the Night Watch**, Hannah Cole, ill. Kate Rogers, 0 86203 170 2

**Earthquake**, Ruskin Bond, ill. Valerie Littlewood, 0 86203 182 6

**The Haunting of Hemlock Hall**, Lance Salway, ill. Angelica Verney, 0 86203 157 5

**Your Guess is as Good as Mine**, Bernard Ashley, ill. Steven Cain, 0 86203 134 6

**Kit**, Jane Gardam, ill. William Geldart, 0 86203 132 X

**Midnight Pirate**, Diana Hendry, ill. Janet Duchesne, 0 86203 159 1

**Tigers Forever**, Ruskin Bond, ill. Steven Cain, 0 86203 133 8

## **KESTREL KITES**

£3.95 each, stated age range 7-10, 96pp

**Rat Saturday**, Margaret Nash, ill. Maggie Ling, 0 670 80080 5

**Mr Berry's Ice-cream Parlour**, Jennifer Zabel, ill. Patricia MacCarthy, 0 670 80075 9

**The Conker as Hard as a Diamond**, Chris Powling, ill. Jon Riley, 0 7226 5933 4

**Mr Majeika**, Humphrey Carpenter, ill. Frank Rodgers, 0 7226 5907 5

**Bright-eye**, Alison Morgan, ill. Vanessa Julian-Ottie, 0 7226 5906 7

## **EAGLES**

OUP, £3.95 each, stated age range 8-12, 64-144 pp

**Gone to the Dogs**, John Rowe Townsend, 0 19 271471 6

**Little Angel Comes to Stay**, Rachel Anderson, 019 271472 4

**The Demon Headmaster**, Gillian Cross, 0 19 271460 0

**Going Home**, K M Peyton, 0 19 271459 7

**Jump!**, Ken Whitmore, 0 19 271461 9

**Junk Castle**, Robin Klein, 0 19 271487 2

We shall return to the topic of books for 7-9s in the July issue of **Books for Keeps**. If you are working with children in this age range and have comments, ideas or experiences you would like to pass on, why not get in touch. Ed. (Address inside front cover.)

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