



The Jolly Postman: another Ahlberg classic

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Chris Powling examines another Ahlberg classic.

Chris Powling, starry-eyed and over-excited, contains his enthusiasm long enough to give a revealing coherent account of **The Jolly Postman**, winner of the Emil Award, a magic pudding of a book full of new delights and surprises.

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Once in a while a picture-book arrives that's so brilliant, so broad in its appeal, it seems to be a summation of the state-of-the-art. For me, *The Jolly Postman*

is just such a book. As a matching of word and image it's a virtuoso performance; as a feat of design it's without a flaw; as an instance of the sort of bliss only a book can confer it's equally alluring for child and adult; as a conspectus of *Where It's At Right Now* it gives the current latitude and longitude of the illustrated book for children with pinpoint accuracy. In short, Janet and Allan Ahlberg have come up with a Mistress-and-Masterpiece.

In my view, that is. But my view is certainly suspect for reasons shrewdly diagnosed by the former pupil who remarked 'we can always tell when you're keen on a book because you go all starry-eyed and get over-excited'. Beware, then. This appraisal of **The Jolly Postman** is offered in the spirit of celebrant rather than critic - my vision being cluttered and my emotions a-twang from sheer enthusiasm. Mind you, I'm in good company. When judging the 1986 Emil Award with Margaret Meek and Elaine Moss, I had an early and unsettling impression that this distinguished pair were holding back in much the way I was - like gamblers saving an ace for just the right moment. They were, too. Our admiration and pleasure at this year's offerings by Blake and Burningham and Foreman and Hutchins and Wilson was entirely shared but so, it turned out, was our preferred front-runner. Once we'd each revealed our full hand the Prize was settled. As veteran-panellists we were astonished, given the quality of the entry, at the ease with which we chose our winner.

Perhaps we shouldn't have been. For what lifts **The Jolly Postman** above even competition as classy as this is the sort of simple, bright idea that's obvious once someone has thought of it. After all, what's the most personal, most user-friendly mode of written communication - opted for by storytellers from the very start of sustained narrative? A letter, yes. Link this mode, deployed as correspondence in real envelopes between the most familiar and best-loved characters from nursery rhymes and tales, with an illustrated 'holding' text and what have we got? Well, a neat example of what scholars of a structuralist and semiotic disposition call intertext - a strategy we've encountered before in the Ahlberg opus with **Each Peach Pear Plum** and **Jeremiah in the Dark Woods**. It's a joke scene, Margaret pointed out, but also a very serious game for behind every text stand other texts, not just as references but as embeddings in our culture.

Hence our delight as differing registers, rhetorics and conventions are gloriously mocked by Goldilocks's letter of apology to the three bears (personal interaction), Jack's postcard to the giant (holiday brochure), a mail-shot to Hansel and Gretel's Witch (advertising), a solicitor's warning to the Big Bad Wolf (the law), a complimentary first-off-the-press marriage memento for Cinderella (publishing) and so on ... a succession of send-ups woven together in a

marvellous montage of writing and re-writing.

All of which, you may say, is very well for structuralists and semiologists but what about the kids? Will they be laughing? You bet, because, as always, Janet and Allan Ahlberg have their implied child-reader firmly in focus - any from top-infant on upwards who is ready to grin at stories partly outgrown but still recalled with affection. Indeed, my guess is that many youngsters will also spot the element of inter-pic in Janet Ahlberg's warm, witty illustrations - the stamps and postmarks and handwriting deftly parodied, the sly reference to other imagery by way of a Briggs giant or Pienkowski owl or Bestall bear.

Yes, **The Jolly Postman** is clever stuff-made cleverer still by the traditional virtues it's careful not to neglect. Author and illustrator play craftily off each other, for example:

*Once upon a bicycle
So they say,
A Jolly Postman came one day
From over the hills And far away...*

?so Janet teases Allan with a sign-post that reads *Faraway 4 miles* and offers an end-piece which has the hero reading his own letter. Both text and illustration, in fact, are as balanced and free-wheeling as the postman's progress through the book's pages which is, to say the least, fluid:

*So Cinders read her little book, The Postman drank champagne
Then wobbled off On his round again
(and again and again - Oops!)*

...and continues to the next call, on the Big Bad Wolf, which sobers him up considerably.

Altogether, it's hard to imagine the book giving more pleasure - unless, perhaps, it just happens to miss a reader's favourite storybook set-up. In which case no more is required than a bit of *readerly* intervention. The book is envelope-sized, after all, so why not reach for pencils, paper and the family post-kit to continue the delivery? Not least of **The Jolly Postman's** virtues is the bond it makes between reading and writing. It's an R.S.V.P. of a book which invites participation through an implicit post-or-inter script. There's been no better encouragement for epistolary enterprise since the invention of the pen-pal. Small wonder it gives me stellar-vision and hyper-activity: a condition, I fancy, we can predict for almost everyone on whom this postman calls.

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