



Information Please About - What's New in Information Books?

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Keith Barker considers some innovations.

Keith Barker looks at some innovations.

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For some years there has been a tendency in the publishing of information books for children to try to find a new angle in design and presentation. Parts of the body have popped up from the pages, tadpoles have become frogs before our eyes, frogs have trapped flies, bees have danced, as publishers explored the possibilities of exploiting paper engineering to teach and inform.

There have also been interesting developments in the way child readers have been made aware of the way the information presented to them has been gathered. The Halsteads in their books in prehistoric creatures were some of the first to realise the possibilities of blending fact and fiction.

However, whether these newer methods are used or not, there are still important principles involved in the presentation of information to young people: the information should be accurate and up to date, it should be presented in a clear and concise manner and it should be immediately attractive. Does this recent batch of innovative information books stand up to this test or are they merely old stuff tarted up in new clothes?

The Legend of Odysseus

Peter Connolly, Oxford, 0 19 917065 7, £7.95

Winner of the **TES** senior information award, this is clearly an outstanding way of presenting Greek mythology. Homer's story is intertwined with facts on life at that time and on where modern Greece fits into the fable. The book is attractively and clearly illustrated, the particular success being the monsters (the Scylla bears comparison with Dr Who creations). Unfortunately the dialogue in the story part of the book too often sounds like soap opera with, for instance, Zeus pontificating like a public school head ('Any god that I catch interfering . . . will get a good thrashing and will be expelled from Olympus').

The Horse Soldier

Martin Windrow and Richard Hook, Oxford, 0 19 273157 2, £7.95

Gloriously illustrated, this celebration of horses in battle is similar to Peter Connolly's **Odysseus**. Information on the use of horses in wars from pre-Christian periods to World War One is interspersed with wordy fictional accounts of the lives of ordinary soldiers of the time. Given the proviso that some adults may well feel that this type of information should not be brought to the attention of young people, **The Horse Soldier** does provide its information in an

immediately accessible and attractive way while also supplying enough of the gruesome detail which many children relish.

The Vikings: Fact and Fiction

Robin Place, CUP, 0 521 30855 0, £4.25

Using the same technique as the Halsteads in their dinosaur books, Robin Place has created a fresh approach to a well worn topic. The left-hand page of each double spread is devoted to the factual side of life among the Vikings, with easily comprehensible facts, clearly linked to black and white illustrations, and observations on how archaeologists have discovered these facts. The right-hand page tells the fictional story of a group of Vikings throughout a year. A further volume on the Romans is planned for later this year.

Evolution

Raymond Hawkey, Michael Joseph, 0 7181 2725 0, £9.95

A pop-up factual book in the manner of **The Human Body, Evolution** shows its true nature on the first double spread when a volcanic eruption spills over and obliterates part of the text. The pop-ups are indeed impressive from the aforementioned volcano to the astronaut who leaps from the moon. The paper engineering is also most successful in its depiction of the catastrophic effect of a meteorite dropping on New York. However, this technical brilliance does tend to push the words into second place although the author is not done a great service by the publishers who often chop the text about to accommodate the illustrations.

The Train

Ray Marshall and John Bradley, Viking Kestrel, 0 670 81322 2, £7.95

In the same series as **The Plane**, winner of the first Smarties innovation award, this is also a good example of successful paper engineering. Happily though, the text and the pictures are more successfully combined with the flaps showing, for example, how power travels from an electric pylon through to an engine to make it move. The writers are able to convey their information in a clear and interesting way with aspects of the subject succeeding each other in a totally logical way.

Outside-in

Clare Smallman, Macdonald, 0 356 11819 3, £5.95

Designed for younger children, this lift-the-flap book shows the inside parts of the bodies as children breathe, eat and move. The concept is laudable although often the flaps are designed so that small fingers cannot manage them very successfully. The illustrations are bright and colourful if not particularly outstanding while the text is clearly written. However, this book still does not replace my favourite body book of all time, Judy Hindley's **How Your Body Works** (Usborne, 1975).

Body Plans

John E. Llewellyn-Jones, CUP, 0 521 31711 8, £1.95

Animal bodies to colour, cut out and stick together so that each model creates a 3-D effect. The list of animals ranges from a snail to a rabbit so that ranged alongside each other, the models do create a problem of perspective! Some are more complex than others while the binding of the book means that some are difficult to cut out (perhaps photocopying or tracing would be better solution and would give the book a longer life?). Whether the idea of creating a model will give young readers the incentive to read the page of dense information accompanying each animal is somewhat doubtful.

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