



Editor's Page - January 1990

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60 [2]

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News and comment from the Editor.

One of the weird, recurring dreams I used to have as a child was of a Messerschmidt 109 - clearly identifiable from the Battle of Britain comics I later read - dive-bombing the laundry at the back of our house. Since my only direct observation of World War II was from one end of a pram, I've always assumed the dream was a made-up job. Now I'm not so sure:

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One afternoon we children were mucking about with a football on the recreation ground or 'Rec' as we called it. Jack, the oldest of the Botwright brothers, shouted 'Fokkers!'. We ran like rabbits for the slip trenches under the trees. Twelve Fokker Wultes swooped out of the sky without warning and flew the whole length of the town spraying cannon -shells. They dropped their bombs at the north end. The back of our house was riddled with cannon fire.

The extract comes from Michael Foreman's new book **War Boy** (Pavilion, £9.99) featured on our cover. Part memoir, part reconstructed notebook, part album of oddments, it succeeds both as a period piece and - thanks to Michael Foreman's brilliant colour-work and line-drawing - as an up-to-the-minute example of what illustration at its best can achieve. Anyone from 8 to 80 will respond to his account of a childhood so extraordinary he assumed for years that the bulk of grown-up males wore uniform and it was natural for every beach to be cut off by a barbed wire fence. Not that there weren't softer moments. Christmas 1942, for instance:

I remember looking back into the room as Mother carried me to the stairs. A sea of faces in the smoke. They were dressed as soldiers and sailors but wearing paper hats. Other boys' fathers, sitting round our table wishing it was their little boy they had just kissed goodnight.

According to Robert Hull, **War Boy** is a fine example of the way information for children should be mediated. Alas, it's also comparatively rare - an oasis of genuine narrative in what, despite the splendours of the graphics, often turns out to be a desert of inert, nondescript wordage. Is it that matters of fact, being stringent and non-negotiable, *demand a* draining away of all personality from the text? Must the 'objectivity' of the known always take priority over the enthusiasm of the knower? See Robert's article 'Some Fictions of Non-fiction' on page 16 for an alternative view. His argument will be of vital interest to parents, teachers, librarians and - most of all perhaps - everyone involved in the production of information books.

The Teen Non-Scene

The 11-16 age-group especially tends to be ill-served by non-fiction. This is ironic given the struggle adults have to maintain even a minimal book presence in many adolescent lives. On the other hand we must also beware too specific a targeting, says Adele Geras in 'Who Reads Teenage Fiction?' on page 22, where she explores a genre currently much in vogue in children's books ... and much in question, too. Adele's own recipe is simply for books and writers that are *good*

enough - not least, as she's quick to point out, because readers of teenage fiction are so often aspiring rather than actual teenagers. For the latest series on offer to these youngsters refer to Jessica Yates's special review on page 11 ... and to our Authorgraph on page 12 for Val Bierman's account of Scotland's most distinguished author for teenagers, Joan Lingard.

Picture Books and Rough Books

Finding books their secondary pupils were willing to read at all was the problem Margaret Lowman and Georghia Elinas-Lewis confronted. Their solution certainly chimes with Adele's - books of high quality but not produced with teenagers specifically in mind. On page 4 you'll find their report on 'Picture Books with Older Readers'.

Perhaps this issue's most surprising and thought-provoking article, though, comes from Toby Forward who in 'Rough Books', page 20, examines the reading of inmates at Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution, Aylesbury. 'Their cells are so small and walls so thick,' writes Toby, 'that they can only be penetrated by the imagination ... when you sit on your bed, under the giant poster of the Porsche, what do you read, where do you disappear to?' The answer he came away with left him perplexed and marvelling.

Background Reading

The best part of being Editor of **BfK** is the reading I have to do strictly in the line of duty. For instance, my tireless research for the present issue included Douglas Martin's **The Telling Line** (Julia MacRae, 0 86203 333 0, £35). I came away from it not just knowing more about the art of Quentin Blake or Anthony Browne or Raymond Briggs or John Burningham (those are just the Bs), but also more appreciative than ever of the fifteen illustrators he discusses - documented throughout with full-colour plates from their work. Douglas Martin is that most agreeable of companions, someone who infects you utterly with his own enthusiasm. Don't miss this splendid book.

And don't miss the recent mini-avalanche of Beatrix Potter books from - who else? - Frederick Warne. **The Complete Tales** are offered in one volume, unabridged and with all the original illustrations reproduced from the latest reoriginated printing plates; **Beatrix Potter's Letters**, selected by Judy Taylor, include the famous picture-letters sent to young friends as well as her technical correspondence as a researcher in fungi; **The Journal of Beatrix Potter**, transcribed from her personal secret code by Leslie Linder, is a complete revision and updating of the 1966 edition. The Potter appeal seems to me to be as fresh today as it ever was - for teachers in particular, perhaps. They of all people should be able to identify with Peter Rabbit's exclusion from a certain garden by a gentleman called... er... McGregor.

Have a wonderful, book-ish 1990.

Chris

Page Number:

3

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