



Editorial ? July 1991

Article Author:

[Chris Powling](#) [1]

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News and comment from the Editor.

Have teachers ever looked as burnt-out as they do at the end of this school year? Probably, yes. That edgy, sunken-eyed, bump-into-the-furniture weariness seems to go with the season. Other occupations bring exhaustion too, of course. Last month, for instance, while visiting the splendid Nottingham Children's Bookfair, I came across some happy but pretty worn-out librarians. Nevertheless, though I'm as busy these days as I ever was and still spend plenty of time with children, I haven't felt as tired-as-a-teacher since ... well, since six years ago when I last worked full-time in a school. It's very much an occupational hazard. Another is trying to get non-teachers even to recognise the phenomenon.

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Till now, that is. For I've just read a book - actually written by a non-teacher - which opens up for everyone the exhilarating, side-splitting, gloriously unpredictable and totally knacker-ing day-to-day reality of classroom life. It's by Tracy Kidder and it's called **Among Schoolchildren** (Picador, 0 330 31817 8, £5.99 pbk). The book simply follows Chris Zajac, a real-life teacher of 10-year-olds through a complete school year in an unlovely city in the East Coast of America.

America?

Don't let this put you off. However unfamiliar the details, the essence of Kidder's narrative checks out with classrooms the world over.

What's extraordinary about the book-apart, that is, from having a Good-Word-or-Two for the teaching profession on almost every page- is that the portraits of the children in her class are just as warm, just as convincing as that of Chris Zajac herself. Damaged and infuriating though so many of them are, they emerge as worth all the effort she expends so generously on their behalf ... and not always successfully, let it be said. At the end of the year, Chris admits to being defeated by the odd, deeply disturbed Robert. "He's my failure, I guess. Him and Clarence." Just so we know where he stands, though, Tracy Kidder's final two sentences read 'She hadn't given up. She had run out of time.'

Imagine, if you can, such an endorsement from Ken Clarke. I'm thinking of sending him a copy of **Among Schoolchildren** - with a note pointing out the only significant difference between Chris Zajac's class and that of countless equally committed teachers in Britain's state schools: it consisted of only twenty children! The next time you hear that ritual gripe 'what on earth do they do in schools these days', recommend this book. It's essential reading not just *for* educational insiders but for outsiders too - not least those of us whose own line of work is heavily dependent on teacherly input.

Prizes Galore

For the children's book world this is the season of prizes. Our Authorgraph (centre-spread) celebrates the writer who -

deservedly and not before time - has scooped quite a number in recent months: Anne Fine. On page 21, Michael Rosen reports on the BfK/A & C Black Nonsense Song Competition and on page 25, Anthony Browne describes this year's judging of the Mother Goose Award. Anyone who suspects prize-panels merely rubber-stamp foregone conclusions should turn to Tony's piece at once! See also our News pages, 30-31, for an update on the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals, the Children's Book Award, the Macmillan Award, this year's prize for a children's book on science, and an account of 1991's Eleanor Farjeon Award which goes to one of the most distinguished of all translators of children's books, Patricia Crampton. Congratulations to all winners and runners-up.

End of Term Tales

The rest of this issue celebrates, if that's the right word, the end of the school year 1990-91. On pages 4-5, Liz Waterland's 'SAT Upon' predicts the demise of you-know-what (let's hope she's right) and on pages 22-23 David Bennett discusses class readers in the secondary school. Both are regular reviewers and feature writers ... but Teresa Grainger is a newcomer. Earlier this year she wrote to us suggesting a piece on using **BfK** in the classroom. 'By children?' we asked. 'Exactly,' came the reply. 'I've been doing it for ages.' See pages 26-29 *for* Teresa's article. Teachers everywhere, we hope, will spot possibilities there for work with their own class. In fact, we're banking on it. For some time we've been discussing the possibility of a **BfK** schools' competition with our sponsors, **Books For Children**, and Teresa's project concentrated our minds wonderfully. So tuck her article in a safe place, perhaps a lesson-preparation file, for the new school year. And consult the foot of this column for another gentle hint about plans we have afoot. All will be revealed in our September issue.

Another piece that sprang from a letter-see where writing to us gets you? - is Veronica Heley's on page 14. She sent a note complimenting one of our reviewers on his remarks about a novel of hers with a Christian message. This led to a 'phone call and the request for a full-scale description of the way in which Veronica's religious faith reinforces or compromises her needs as a storyteller. It's a theme Alan Brine picks up on our back page with his discussion of books, new and not-so-new, which have a religious dimension - not, of course, necessarily Christian. Nor, necessarily, making this dimension explicit. Assembly takers, please note.

Gone Green

... at last! Our long-awaited **Green Guide to Children's Books** is now available. See page 8 for full details. And see the corner of our London office for a slumped but grinning Richard Hill who led the team that brought it together. What was I saying about *teacherly* burn-out? All in a good cause, though. We think the Guide has the future written all over it but tell us what you think.

Have a good summer!

Chris

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