



Writer Reply: Anti-Series?

Article Author:

[Nancy Chambers](#) [1]

Article Author:

[Elizabeth Hammill](#) [2]

[76](#) [3]

Article Category:

Writer Reply

Byline:

Nancy Chambers and **Elizabeth Hammill** respond to **Steve Rosson** from our last issue.

Not so, say the **Signal** team taken to task by **Steve Rosson** in our last issue.

<!--break-->

Nancy Chambers writes:

'Taking Series Seriously' (**BfK 75**, July 1992) is exactly what Elizabeth Hammill and I were doing in the January 1992 issue of **Signal**. Some of your readers might like to know what we actually wrote, so I'll be happy to supply photocopies of the relevant pages to anyone who sends a stamped self-addressed envelope marked **READING NEW BOOKS: SERIES** to me at Thimble Press, Lockwood, Station Road, South Woodchester, Stroud, Glos GL5 5EQ.

The July **BfK** article was a shrewdly compiled summary of what's good about series: an unanswerable case answering a question that was never asked. No one who's been around children's books for as long as Elizabeth or me would think that series are an intrinsically Bad Thing. 'Series' is a morally neutral concept, a convenient publishing practice. What we were (and still are; there's never an end to finding out why you think what you think) discussing is:

Why do series predominate in publishing for 6- to 9-year-olds?

According to the article, it's a matter of targets and markets and what the kids want. So why bother with one-off publishing ever, in any sector of children's books? Accepting your interpretation, I am genuinely puzzled about this.

Series are a useful part of children's publishing, because standardizing books saves time all along the line: design and production time (at the publishers'), selecting time (for reviewers and in libraries and schools).

But what books need is a continually inventive emphasis ? on the part of every adult lucky enough to be involved with them - on the utter individuality of each one. How far a series mentality gets in the way of this emphasis is a question we're entitled to ask... or so it seems to me.

Elizabeth Hamill writes:

The discussion in **Signal** was prompted by questions raised during a year's reading in preparation for an update to the **Signal** Bookguide, **Fiction 6 to 9**: questions about the predominance of series publishing for 6-9s and about the practice of many who are currently involved in making and selecting books for this age group.

Perhaps you would find it useful to know my selection criteria. I **do** think that all books should be evaluated by the same standards (I would be happier if your reviewers were to write about series fiction along with other fiction ? not

separately). I look for books with one thing in common: a story that offers readers an adventure in print and that is also a growing point. It seems important to signal those books which enable readers to stride out by giving them a sense of the possibilities in story: of the ways in which language 'can be stretched to reconstruct, remake, extend and understand our experience of living' in the world (Margaret Meek, **How Texts Teach What Readers Learn**) and in which the most inventive authors keep literature in good shape for young readers. Of 122 books selected for the update, I believe 37 series titles (given their predominance, the proportion should have been much higher) do this, including: **Never Kiss Frogs!**, **Khumalo's Blanket**, **Bill's New Frock**, **Rosie and the Boredom Eater**, **The Hodgeheg**, **Boat Girl**, **ELF 61** and **The Twig Thing**. Hardly a 'sniffy' choice!

For me, language and meaning should have pride of place, whether we are talking about **Ging Gang Goolie**, **It's an Alien** or **The Marzipan Pig**.

Steve Rosson responds:

Oh dear! How do I reply when I agree with practically everything Nancy Chambers and Elizabeth Hamill are saying? There's some furious back-peddalling going on above because, when you send for your photocopy of their original Signal article, you'll see it wasn't a thoughtful discussion about why series predominate but a 'diatribe' which dismisses them as being 'books that are pre-digested formula in concept and content'.

Having kicked series books firmly into touch, Elizabeth Hamill then offers us a book which does get the Signal imprimatur. Step forward *Little Obie and the Flood* by Martin Waddell. Now this is a neatly crafted book by a fine author but, with its understated emotion and laconic dialogue, surely intended for the most sensitive and literate of children. *Of course we need books like this*. Actually, I have a copy in my school library. It's been borrowed *once*. Children who are less than fluent readers, children whose families do not value talk and reading or children using English as their second language - and that adds up to a substantial chunk of the school population - simply don't make sense of it.

Many series titles *do* make sense to precisely these children. I've lost count of the different attempts I've made over the years to cater for their needs and nothing, but nothing, has succeeded in the way that series books have. They are constantly in demand and give enormous pleasure and reading satisfaction. In my library I have to cater for a vast *range* of readers and series books are an important part of my strategy. So I bridle somewhat when I'm asked what on earth I think I'm offering young people when I give them such books.

You've got the address. Please do send for the original Signal article, compare it with my piece and see what you think.

Editor's Note:

Steve Rosson will be reviewing series titles in future issues of BfK. Later, as Elizabeth Hamill recommends, they'll be absorbed into our regular review pages where they properly belong - and where, if they go into paperback, they already appear.

Page Number:

23

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/76/childrens-books/articles/writer-reply/writer-reply-anti-series>

Links:

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/nancy-chambers>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/elizabeth-hammill>

[3] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/76>