



Editorial ? January 1994

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News and comment from the Editor.

The sheer ferocity of the phonecall took us completely aback:

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`What on *earth* did you think you were doing... utter irresponsibility... **BfK** sinking to such depths... wildly over the top... too much for any youngster to absorb... how does occult exhibitionism like this promote children's reading... total decadence on your part?' etc.

Well, not those words exactly but that was the gist of it. Afterwards it was hard to reconstruct the detail since the delivery was so impassioned. What we did gather though, before the caller slammed down the phone on us without identifying himself, was the focus of his wrath - our November cover.

Pretty scary, we'd agree. So, indeed, is the book for which this was the dustjacket - Susan Cooper's **Over Sea, Under Stone**. At least three people, presumably, were satisfied that this particular image gets the Fright Factor about right: Susan Cooper herself, her editor at Bodley Head and the actual illustrator, Andrew Skilleter. Certainly, and let's admit this at once, it never occurred to any of us that his work here was terrifying above and beyond the call of pictorial duty.

So does this mean our caller's protest should be treated as null, void and generally out-of-order?

Not at all.

Surely, the proposition that too much scariness harms children is impossible to contest, both logically and psychologically. The real problem - the problem raised by our caller - lies in determining just how much is too much. After all, the quality we call scariness is not in itself reprehensible. Short of the moment (whenever this is) at which scary becomes too scary, most children actually enjoy the excitement that's involved - never mind its usefulness as a rehearsal of what to avoid. In this respect, as in many others, youngsters bear an uncanny resemblance to the rest of the human race.

Nor, let it be said, is this a new concern. From Charles Lamb's fear of the Witch of Endor, as portrayed in Stackhouse's **History of the Bible**, to Roald Dahl's horrified fascination with the great, long, red-legged scissor-man in Hoffman's **Struwpeter**, evidence that illustration can determine at least the `shape and manner' of midnight terrors isn't difficult to find. Lewis Carroll, for instance, was so doubtful about Tenniel's drawing of the Jabberwocky that he took a poll of 30 mothers asking whether it should be retained as the frontispiece to **Through the Looking Glass**, transferred to its proper place in the text or dropped altogether. They decided, and he agreed, on the second option. Ever since, I guess, children have been as scared of the beast as I was... and turned to that particular page as often as I did.

Coping with the vagaries of individual response is only part of the problem, moreover. Context would seem to play an

important part, too - on the cuddles-can-counteract-creepiness principle. So does the medium involved. When it comes to tabulating potential trauma, how does a book under the bedclothes rate with a seat at the cinema, for example? And what significance ought we to assign to wider social and cultural factors? Here, it may be instructive to compare the 1993 dustjacket of Susan Cooper's novel with Margery Gill's 1974 version:

Rather different, yes? Behind this striking shift in visual imagery, is it entirely fanciful to detect the imperatives of an age which can produce videos like **Childsplay 1, 2 and 3**? On the other hand, the Gill cover seems oblivious of real-life risk-taking which may well send a shiver down our spines in the more safety-conscious 90s.

In short, the depiction of danger, of whatever kind, is bound to be contentious in a children's book and is always worth discussing. If we'd been able to get a word in edgeways, we'd have agreed with our caller that he had a point - a hardy perennial of a point, what's more. How sad, then, that he seemed more eager to close down the debate than re-open it. Would other readers like to make a contribution?

Enjoy this (rather less scary) issue!

Subscription price increase to Books for Keeps

It is the time of year when we announce price increases to your BfK subscription. Normally we like to do this in November but this year we were awaiting, with bated breath, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget Statement regarding the possibility of VAT being imposed upon books, newspapers and magazines. In the event it wasn't and sighs of relief were audible here and, no doubt, all over the publishing world.

However, the Budget came too late for an announcement in our November edition so, from 1st January 1994, BfK prices will be as follows:

UK and Ireland £12.90

Overseas surface and Europe £ 18.80

Airmail worldwide £21.50

We are also able to offer a range of bulk discounts from 10% to 55% to LEAs, libraries, colleges, booksellers and anyone else interested in multiple subscriptions. All enquiries to Richard Hill on 081 852 4953.

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