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News and comment from the Editor.

Backing The Book

Devoted as it is to Books That Do Things (with a little help from the reader), this issue provides plenty of evidence that Books themselves are a long, long way from being Done For. Take Ruth Tilden's **Keep Fit With Froggy**, for instance. According to George Hunt in his Round-Up on pages 22-25 here was the title which 'inspired the most laughter and affection amongst my team of helpers' despite also being 'the least complicated' of the couple of dozen pop-ups under review. In fact, the paper technology which lies behind this smartly up-to-date tale of an amphibian with aerobic inclinations isn't much more advanced than the kind already available when such novelty books first appeared two centuries or so ago.

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The same re-vamping of age-old ingenuities applies to other publications we consider - to the puzzle books assessed by Steve Rosson on page 15, to Martin Handford's inspired eye-spy games with Wally discussed on pages 28-29, or to Janet and Allan Ahlberg's re-constitution of the traditional epistolary novel which has rung bells across the world for **The Jolly Postman**. (See Allan's interview with Julia Eccleshare on our back page.) All these we celebrate - along with a new pop-up from Brian Wildsmith (pages 18-21) and Stephen Biesty in *Authorgraph* (centre-spread). Could we ask for more convincing, page-turning proof that books are as alive and well as they ever were?

Wait, though...

Judith Elliott, who's done as much as anyone to sustain the popularity of the pop-up in recent years, sounds a cautionary note in her state-of-the-art article overleaf. 'Today', she warns 'it seems hard to sell a book which is just a book, with pages and a conventional binding'. In her view, the appeal of the pop-up lies in its capacity to surprise, in its interactive and tactile quality, in the fact that 'its illusions are real in the way a screen image cannot be'. These, she predicts, will ensure its survival even alongside fully-dimensional video or CD-Rom. The sheer immediacy of the novelty book gives it huge advantages over the standard hardback or paperback.

To begin with, anyway. Having helped pave the way to book-ishness - and no one should underestimate the importance of this at a time when there's so much else vying for children's attention - the splendours of the pop-up, like those of the picture book, need to be aligned sooner or later with the more distant, more individualised vision brought about by words acting solely on their own behalf. In our last issue, Bob Hull referred to 'brilliant bits of before-your-very-eyes verbal cinema' of the sort Ted Hughes projects when he describes a rhino as an 'elastic boulder'. It's not difficult to come up with similar phrase-clips:

?The great, grey-green, greasy Limpopo river

all set about with fever trees.?

or

?Softly down the staircase,

through the haunted hall,

trying to look

small,

me and Loopy

and Little Gee,

We three.?

or

?He was so short his chin would have been under water in the shallow end of any

swimming pool in the world.?

... and so on.

The point about such language-on-tiptoe, to use Edith Sitwell's term for it, is that its quality - however self-evident to us - can so easily pass inexperienced readers by if there aren't experienced readers on hand to relish it. Margaret Meek taught us long ago how texts teach what children learn... but, in order to do that teaching, these texts may well need a little help from well-informed friends even to get in front of the children in the first place... let alone in the second or third place as the emphasis shifts from the cinematic to words in a more analytic, documentary mode.

And there's the rub. Recent times have been more than a little hard for the friends of text. Book budgets in schools are increasingly under pressure as resources are diverted into media which should be complementing literacy not competing with it; library provision and specialist expertise steadily diminishes or must be eked out across ever-widening remits; the government persists in inflating wholly factitious arguments about differing approaches to reading in order to divert attention from the over-size classes which undermine any approach; even the book-trade itself seems to be doing us no favours. Whatever the consequences for children's books of the recent collapse of the Net Book Agreement, for example, the ramshackle manner of its departure scarcely breeds confidence - or faith in those market forces we're constantly told are our only hope of salvation.

In short, as the pages that follow demonstrate, books will go on casting the spell they've always done. What's much more problematic is the future of the support systems which up till now we've relied upon to bind that spell into a continuing, maturing enchantment. More than ever books need to be backed up by committed enthusiasts - the wizards of the classroom, library and chimney corner to whom everyone here at **BfK** sends the warmest, Christmas greetings and every good wish for a happy, well-funded New Year.

Enjoy the issue!

And here, reviewed by David Bennett, is the plump Christmas Card we'd love to send our readers:

The Witness

Robert Westall, ill. Sophy Williams, Macmillan (Sept 95), 0 333 63789 5, £3.99

Robert Westall has created a book that works on many levels. He's made a plausible fusion of pagan Egyptian cat-worship and the birth of the Christ-child. He's added shades of other stories like the animals' peaceful co-existence in the fast of the divine and blended remarkably the plight of the Holy family and a she-cat exiled in Israel. This retelling of the Christmas story is a beautiful, sensual gem both in language and in its warm, spicy-coloured illustrations. Everyone should have it available as a perfect antidote to the harsh tinsel and glitter that often obscures the simplicity of the real nativity.

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