



The Perennial Pop-up

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Judith Elliott on her encounters with an enduring book-ish phenomenon.

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At a time when it seems hard to sell a book that is just a book, with pages and a conventional binding, the idea of the pop-up is increasingly attractive. But the pop-up is nothing new, and has held its appeal since the early nineteenth century. By pop-up I mean all manner of novelty books: not just books with three-dimensional structures on the page, but books with pull tabs, slides, flaps, holes, rivets, microchips, acetate, foil, mirrors. It's an irony that all these books are referred to as 'novelties' when the fact is that practically none of them are novel at all. Take them apart and you can identify the mechanisms used in dozens of pop-up books down the years. There have been a few refinements and developments, but your basic pop-up book relies on tried and tested formulae.

Pop-ups can be a nightmare to produce, made possible only by an early commitment to a frighteningly large print-run involving sales to publishers all around the world: something that's harder to achieve each year. A pop-up that flops can be a financial disaster. But when it works - eye-catching, pickupable, and with obvious child appeal - it can bring in sales far greater than most other books.

There's no special magic about the pop-up: it's what you do with it that matters, and that, for me, is the fun of pop-up publishing - the explosion of creativity that can occur when a talented artist starts experimenting with pieces of card. I've been lucky enough to work on some of the most exciting of all, including Jan Pienkowski's **Haunted House**, Eric Hill's **Where's Spot?** and Janet and Allan Ahlberg's **The Jolly Postman**. Each of these has sold in enormous quantities in many countries over many years, each had a huge impact on the novelty books market, and each led to the production of many other titles in the same genres, which have often been extremely successful in their own right. These books have been an inspiration and stimulus to many artists.

Pop-ups are perennial, but for a long period they were regarded merely as low-priced mass-market fodder, and it was inconceivable that a 'name' illustrator would want to produce one. All that changed in the late seventies. First there was Robert Crowther's **Most Amazing Hide-and-Seek Alphabet**. Then, in 1979, there was **Haunted House** - the classic example of how somebody as innovative as Jan Pienkowski can revitalise an old formula. At the time, it was terrifying. The costs seemed astronomical, the print-run required to cover them unachievable. It worked because the book's brilliance was evident at a glance. A million copies later, it's still going strong.

Haunted House was an extravaganza, a spectacularly elaborate construction with ingenuity in every square inch. But one of the joys of publishing pop-ups is how much can be achieved with how little. It only takes some imagination, and you can do wonders with one or two of the simplest mechanisms. Flap books, for instance - so popular they have become a category in their own right. For very young children it's never boring to look under a flap and find something hidden there. But it needed Eric Hill to make it work after this blindingly obvious idea had lain dormant for years. When

he showed me the first rough dummy for **Where's Spot?** there were no other flap books around. Spot's staggering and immediate worldwide success proved the irresistible attraction of this simple device and - just like **Haunted House** a couple of years earlier - opened the doors to a host of followers, including such successes as Rod Campbell and Lucy Cousins.

It took the genius of Janet and Allan Ahlberg to come up with the device of envelopes with letters in, and to apply it to a theme with the universal appeal of a postman delivering letters to fairytale characters. Like other great innovative books, **The Jolly Postman** - so simple in conception - seemed hugely daring at the time. It would cost so much to produce! Booksellers wouldn't order it for fear the letters would be stolen from the envelopes! But objections melted away as the book was completed. It had that irresistible quality that makes a bestseller.

And yet again, it was a book that opened doors and defined children's publishing in a new way. The learning possibilities of the novelty book were opened up. Teachers could see that its tactile qualities would encourage non-readers to enjoy books. Three-dimensional pages or flaps could be used to develop learning skills. Non-fiction subjects were ideal for the pop-up treatment. **The Human Body** by Jonathan Miller and David Pelham - a direct descendant of the nineteenth-century flap books used to teach anatomy to medical students - and Jay Young's **The Most Amazing Pop-Up Science Book** spectacularly demonstrate the effectiveness of the non-fiction pop-up.

Many pop-up books are produced by specialist packagers, whose skills in paper engineering and the complexities of hand assembly in factories in South America and the Far East can be combined with the editorial skills of the publishers for whom the books are manufactured. Paramount among these is Intervisual Books of Los Angeles, whose founder, Waldo Hunt, has been the great enthusiast and inspiration behind many of the most successful pop-up books of the last 30 years. When Jan Pienkowski came up with the idea of **Haunted House**, it was to Waldo Hunt that I turned for help. Thus began a legendary partnership between Wally and Jan, resulting in sales of over seven million Pienkowski pop-ups worldwide. Pop-up books, more than any others, are a team effort requiring a whole range of skills and it's the constant struggle to overcome technical problems that often forces new ideas.

In all successful pop-up books, theme and format work for each other. When Graham Philpot showed me his first ideas for **Amazing Anthony Ant**, he came up with a way of producing flaps that fold over rather than being stuck on to the paper in the usual way. A small matter, but it imposed a discipline on **Amazing Anthony Ant** that influenced the story and the structure of the whole book. Looking for little ants is such a natural idea for flaps that it led on to full pop-up treatment in **Who's at Home with Anthony Ant?**, **Hide and Seek with Anthony Ant** and **Out and About with Anthony Ant** - miniature pop-ups for bugs and creepy-crawlies.

Today the interactive novelty book with moving parts seems to have more appeal than the pop-up with dramatic paper sculpture just for looking at. This is where the pop-up bridges the gap between the book and electronic media. It marks the step before the CD-Rom takes over. And this gives one pause to think where the pop-up will go in future. So near to the fully dimensional video or CD-Rom and yet, in relation to the new media, so unsophisticated - how can the pop-up survive? What can it offer children accustomed to learning and playing on screen?

The fact that it is tactile, that you can pull it apart and see how it's made, that its illusions are real in the way a screen image cannot be, should work for pop-ups - even, in future, give them something novel to offer. Small-scale, personal, the pop-up can be a unique and special creative medium that coexists with the electronic book, just as live theatre coexists with television and video.

The pop-up's perennial appeal lies in its capacity to surprise - and there may still be surprises ahead: a new paper engineering mechanism, for instance, that no one's thought of before. Come to think of it, Richard Brassey's **The Store Detective**, to be published by Orion in 1996, where you can make the lift doors open and close as you go through the department store - now *that's* a new one ...

Details of books mentioned:

Haunted House, Heinemann, 0 434 95635 X, £10.99

Where's Spot?, Heinemann, 0 434 94288 X, £6.99; Puffin, 0 14 050420 6, £3.99

The Jolly Postman, Heinemann, 0 434 92515 2, £9.99

The Most Amazing Hide-and-Seek Alphabet Book, Viking, 0 670 48996 4, £12.99

The Human Body, Cape, 0 224 04210 6, £12.99

The Most Amazing Pop-Up Science Book, Watts, 0 7496 1481 1, £14.99

Amazing Anthony Ant, Orion, 1 85881 005 1, £8.99;

Who's at Home with Anthony Ant?, 1 85881 161 9; **Hide and Seek with Anthony Ant**, 1 85881 162 7; **Out and About with Anthony Ant**, 1 85881 160 0, Orion, £3.99 each

The Store Detective is published in September 1996.

Judith Elliott has had a long and distinguished career in children's books. She's worked for Heinemann, Orchard and is now Managing Director and publisher with Orion Children's Books.

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