



Editorial ? May 1996

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News and comment from the Editor.

Reading Words and Pictures...

It's been an odd couple of months since our last issue. <!--break-->Here at **BfK**, we've been suffering something of an editorial double-whammy - on the one hand preparing this Spring Picture Book edition of the magazine and on the other making final arrangements for our updated Guide, **Poetry 0-13**, which is published in the next fortnight. For me, the constant switching of attention from pictures that are worth a thousand words to words that are worth a thousand pictures has been... well, *interesting*.

Admittedly, the two are far from antithetical. You don't have to view a poem as a kind of Verbal Icon like a nineteen-fifties New Critic (now utterly Old Fashioned, of course) to appreciate that its appearance on the page makes a huge difference to the way we contemplate it. Oscar Wilde's famous quip that a 'poet can survive anything... except a misprint' is, as usual, a much more serious observation than it first appears. The very brevity of verse, compared with prose, means that a typographical twitch, however minor, can so catch the eye that the rest of what's printed blurs out of sight. Suddenly, especially if you're the writer, your vision is filled with Fly. There's no room for any surrounding Ointment. Once, I asked Charles Causley to sign a copy of **Jack the Treacle Eater** which had just won him, along with Charles Keeping, the Emil Award for the year's best combination of text and illustration. 'Certainly,' he said, 'but before I do that, may I...?' and he turned to the one spread in the book with a pair of misprints *and corrected and initialled them*. I got the distinct impression he'd have been only too happy to put the errors right, by hand, in every single copy of the print-run.

Appearances matter, then. As the redoubtable Oscar also remarked, only the superficial person does *not* judge by them. It's enough to make you wonder, for instance, how much your response to a poem is affected by such details as the type-face in which it's set:

Moor-hens

Living by Bate's Pond

(Each spring and summer day)

Watched among reed and frond

The Moor-hens prank and play ...

Three versions of Moor-hens, Moor-hens or Moor-hens by Charles Causley, Charles Causley or Charles Causley.

Now I haven't the slightest doubt which of these I prefer, prefer or prefer... but I'd be amazed if there was total, or even general, agreement with my choice. So where does this leave any chance of establishing a consensus when it comes to

the *illustration* of text? For entirely valid reasons, some people would claim that, in the case of poetry especially, any attempt to match word and image is downright destructive of the vision of each individual reader. Interestingly, Charles Causley himself wouldn't agree. When asked which of Charles Keeping's pictures for **Jack the Treacle Eater** he liked best, he cited the illustration to the poem quoted above on the grounds that it made him take a fresh look at its subject.

Does all illustration do this, though? Or only the best? Furthermore, while we're in rumination mode, what contribution to a book's success or failure is made by the element of overall design - the bringing together of word and image through a combination of typeface, layout, paper and even binding?

There, now... and you thought editing a children's book magazine must be fun!

Actually, it is - providing you resist the temptation to seek a definitive answer to all these questions at once. For a book is an object in itself as well as a medium of meaning. Any number of variables may be crucial to the impression we form of it. Add to these, moreover, the factors we bring to the equation as readers - our own tastes and experience and expectations - and it's pretty clear that what we've got here isn't table-tennis, 'arry?', as Frank Bruno remarked of a rather different human activity. The mere scoring of points is one thing but deciding which books are winners is quite another.

That, however, is precisely what **Poetry 0-13**, and this issue of the magazine, are about. In the former case, which of the thousand-or-more verse collections and anthologies published since our 1988 Poetry Guide are most worthy of our continuing attention? In the latter, which of the Spring List of picture-books is likeliest to last? Neither can be decided in absolute terms - every single **BfK** reader has the right, not to say the duty, to make up her or his own mind about the opinions our commentators offer.

Mind you, we've done our best to provoke *quality* disagreement. In the pages which follow, we've backed up our regular reviewing team with the likes of Brian Alderson, Julia Eccleshare, Stephanie Nettell and Korky Paul. And our updated Poetry Guide, produced in collaboration with Prof. Viv Edwards's Reading and Information Centre at the University of Reading, is co-edited by Morag Styles, with contributions from, amongst others, Prof. Brian Cox, Prue Goodwin, Iona Opie, Jill Pirrie and Michael Rosen in support of the best set of poetry critics we could assemble.

Yes, such expertise is formidable. But I still relish the 'phone call from an unidentified subscriber we received a few weeks ago. She was consumed with embarrassment because she'd 'never made such a call before?', but was also hopping mad about a new picture book she'd just read. In her view, it was a 'betrayal of childhood?' and she felt she had to share her anger with *someone*. Try as we might, we couldn't persuade her to leave her name or address... though the book itself is reviewed, in very different terms, elsewhere in this **BfK**. No, I won't reveal its title. If she reads this, we're still hoping that a certain librarian 'somewhere in Northern Ireland?' will contact us again so we can give due credit, and prominence, to the point of view she expressed so persuasively.

Enjoy the issue, then. And send for **Poetry 0-13**. Better still, if you possibly can, attend the Conference at Reading on 8th June where we'll be launching it. We'd love to say hello ... whether or not you're a librarian from somewhere in Northern Ireland!

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