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The English Book Scene

by Thomas K. Hinckley

England has only a quarter of the population of the USA and yet publishes about the same number of children's and young adult titles each year as does the USA. How is this possible? What are the books like? How are the books sold?

They start early. The Puddle Lane Reading Programme, for instance, is designed "for children between the ages of about three-and-a-half and six-and-a-half." As a father who hid Green Eggs and Ham rather than have to read it one more time (I do not like it, Sam I Am!), I was reassured to find interesting "real" stories that have not been sanitized beyond recognition. Then there is the Puffin School Book Club which has titles by Terry Jones, Dick King-Smith, Jan Pienkowski, Leon Garfield, Roald Dahl and many others. In the USA, these sorts of endeavors would only be available in the schools, but these series, and many more, are available in English bookshops.

And what bookshops! My estimate is that there is a bookshop for every 18,000 people. That does not include all the shops that sell books along with stationery, newspapers and magazines or other items. Most of these "general" bookshops carry a good selection of children's books, but there are also a number of shops that carry children's and young adult titles, exclusively.

One of the biggest differences between England and the USA is the greater diversity found there. Almost all children's publishers have fine titles and some titles that are almost embarrassingly mediocre. I do not know of any USA publishers who have such a range of quality. Theirs is a forthright "something for everyone." Another difference is the diversity of the individual authors. When in England, I was astounded to discover, that some of my favourite children's authors also write very sophisticated and very adult fiction.

But most surprising of all was to find English children's literature on the cutting edge. The National Book League receives more than eighty thousand pounds annually from the Arts Council of Great Britain, and administers fifteen major prizes. We went to Book House at Wandsworth and saw their exhibit of 275 children's books selected by Julia Eccleshare (author of Children's Books of the Year). What really impressed me was that the exhibit was swarming with kids on a summer's day--far outnumbering the adults present. National Book League is also a clearinghouse for more than a dozen major children's bibliographies.

The cutting edge is further demonstrated by E. J. Craddock writing in The Times on April 7, 1986:
At the recent Booksellers Association, Irish branch conference in Cork, Ian Chapman, chairman of Collins and a past president of the Publishers Association, delivered a talk on "The Book Trade In the Next 20 Years" and, as the Bookseller reported, "he stressed that the key battle which must be won, and which would settle the future of the book trade, was the battle for the children's market."

It is good that such a fundamental statement should come from one of the industry's leaders, and from one not particularly associated with children's books, indeed, "literature." If children cease to be encouraged to visit libraries and bookshops, if the allocations of public libraries for the purchasing of new books (which, inevitably, become more expensive to manufacture and therefore to retail) are not increased and, if school libraries are starved of funds, children's publishers will cease to be able to take the essential artistic risks they recently have done and will increasingly "play safe" with what they publish.

As it is, at least one of the doyennes of children's books, Elaine Moss, has expressed her anxiety that publishers are seriously underestimating the craving among children for poetry and mystery in language; that, although television has brought about an orientation towards the visual and colour, "the age-old magic of language is undiminished in its power to kindle the flame of the imagination." It is, in short, readers of the most inventive, creative children's authors (the Garners, Garfields and Dahls) who are likely to be readers tomorrow and of tomorrow's Goldings, Bainbridges and Hughes. Fighting fantasies, pop-up books and novelizations of television programmes may have kept the wolf from the children's publisher's door, but they must not be allowed to become the norm.

How I have loved those "essential, artistic risks." Some, like David Kewley, editor of the Pan Horizon series, choose to meet the challenge with "American-style bias:"

Anything that makes people read books when 44 per cent of the population never buy one can only be for the good. That's the line publishers of a new series of young teenage fiction books are taking. It is a slickly packaged collection of romance, adventure and mystery novels aimed specifically at 12- to 16-year olds. "It's a market nobody in this country has aimed at before," says Kewley. "Kids in their early to mid teens are very often stuck for something to read. They're too old for children's books, they get enough of the classics at school and they find it hard to pick their way through adult fiction." The answer, according to Kewley, is to offer them subject matter and a
viewpoint which mirror their own obsessions. So first person narrators describe the agonies and ecstasies of first love in steamy sexual detail in titles like Forever by American writer Judy Blume, Beginner's Love by Norma Klein and If I Love You Am I Trapped Forever? by M.E. Kerr. That's not to say, says Kewley, that 12-year-olds are being encouraged to have under-age sex... "We've tried to show the problems with relationships..." There will, he admits, probably be trouble from parents and smaller booksellers who insist on having a say on what feeds the impressionable adolescent mind.

"The old-fashioned moral majority type will probably disapprove..." (Helen Chappel, The Guardian, 6 May 1986).

Notwithstanding the reported enthusiasm of teenagers contacted in the Pan Horizon marketing surveys, there is still, ultimately, the British public to be dealt with. Dr. Douglas Larche of Grandview College, Iowa, who published the non-sexist, non-violent, Father Gander--Nursery Rhymes, got shellacked by Libby Purves in The Times. Her article, titled, "The Man Who Made The Gander Blander," concludes: "I fear Father Gander may have a long struggle to bring out unreconstructed British goslings into line with Utopia" (7 April 1986).

Coming from a country where I'm "that nut who dabbles in children's lit," I was a little unnerved to be taken seriously in England, and even more so to be caught in these cross-currents of diversity. I got started in CBR because I was looking for fiction and non-fiction to use in the introductory geography classes I teach, in order to teach teachers-to-be the non-textbook approach to teaching geography. I have stayed with children's literature--particularly English--because it is the last vestige of moral literature in the West. English authors subtly continue to explore choices and consequences. The real world still runs with choice-results that cannot be magically and romantically suspended. The best authors reflect that reality. Sometimes I have the urge to wander down to the newsstand and look for a lively copy of Books for Keeps, Books for your Children, Children's Books, or even Booknews, but then I remember I'm home and that here, such magazines are only to be had at the library--academic and arcane.

I don't know how the English publish so many titles in proportion to their population, nor whether they can continue, but it was glorious to be part of the English children's book scene for a few months.
Bibliography


*Books for Your Children*, Ragdoll Productions, P.O. Box 507, Edgbaston, Birmingham B 15 3 AL, England.