1984

Series Book Reviews

Gail King
Afton Miner
Lillian Heil
Janet Francis
Jan Addy

See next page for additional authors

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Series Book Reviews

Authors
Gail King, Afton Miner, Lillian Heil, Janet Francis, Jan Addy, Kathy Simpkins, Catherine Bowles, Carol V. Oaks, and Thom Hinckley

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Series Reviews Alphabetized by Publisher


Jonathan Fisher and the Centerfold Caper, by Tina Sunshine.

Unlike many series, these books share neither a common hero or heroine nor plot type. What they have in common is that they are all about teenagers. Some are reprints of books first published by another firm; others are original Avon paperbacks (called Flare Originals). The four I read were The Trouble with Thirteen by Betty Miles, Downtown and Taking Terri Mueller by Norma Fox Mazer, and Jonathan Fisher and the Centerfold Caper by Tina Sunshine. The plots in these four books are various, but all have good writing and characters that come alive. Based on them, I recommend this series.--Gail King.


This series would better be titled The Nouvea Riche Around the World. With the exception of the Indian family, the other families enjoy a far higher standard of living than I. Odilow Marmalejo lives in Mexico which has a per capita Gross National Product of $2270. A casual inventory of his shop and home indicates that he is in the upper few percent of all wage earners in Mexico.

What do you suppose 80,000 bottles of champaigne net Joel and Claude Michel? Add to that Elizabeth Michel's salary as an M.D. Maison Michel looks more chateau du Pont. And a 15 acre tulip farm in the most densely populated country in Europe is not peanuts.

But even the Indian farmer is not an exception. India is short 40 million draft animals/oXen/tractors-if you will, and here is a farmer who is rich enough to sell his draft animals at
the end of the season and can actually buy new animals at the onset of the monsoon.

I would recommend this series for exclusive private schools where rich kids go, but the public schools where the kids of peasants and peons go should shun them like the plague.--Thom Hinckley.

The Hookwright Press. Living Here Series, 1984. $9.90 each.


We live in Argentina, by Alex Huber. ISBN 0-531-03793-2. 60 p.

We live in Britain, by Chris Fairclough. ISBN 0-531-04783-0. 64 p.

We live in China, each chapter written by a different person. ISBN 0-531-04779-2. 64 p.

We live in Denmark, by Ulla Andersen. ISBN 0-531-04782-2. 64 p.

We live in India, by Veenu Sandal, photographs by Brahm Dev. ISBN 0-531-04784-9. 64 p.


We live in New Zealand, by John Ball, photographs by Chris Fairclough. ISBN 0-531-04781-4. 64 p.


We live in West Germany, by Christa Stadtler. ISBN 0-531-03798-3. 60 p.

This series was written by the middle class for the middle class, but the worst is that the 200 odd accounts come out all sounding the same: homogeneous and dull. Where are the untouchables in India? And where are the aristocracy in Britain? We are embarrassed by them and for them but the fact remains that the aristocracy have saved that country in every crisis.

As an example of dullness, Elphas Nyerere Olato (Kenya) is made to say, "I've read that in 1981 there were some 4,134,300 children in elementary schools and about 464,700 in secondary schools." Elphas looks like a bright kid, but this sentence leaves doubt about the script writer.

Even the losses of translation cannot account for sameness of language of those interviewed. But when someone in a third-world country says exactly what everyone in the industrialized West would expect him to say I am partly
surprised and partly suspicious. The prejudicial and pejorative statements with which this series is loaded are hard to bear. The most serious lack of this series is lack of comparability. Let me demonstrate this by constructing a partial table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Per Capita Gross National Product</th>
<th>Physical Quality of Life Index</th>
<th>Density per Square Miles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>$9,660</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>12,460</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>5,430</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>4,290</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>12,470</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>2,520</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of those countries India has the highest infant mortality (125) which is reflected in the lowest Physical Quality of Life of any of the countries in the list. Although NP Asiyo says the infant mortality in her constituency is 246, this should be viewed against a 1984 infant mortality for Kenya of 86 which is certainly better than the African average of 119. These books are laced with dull, dated facts, most of which are not readily comparable. Is there even a hint that the Per Capita Gross National Product is 48 times greater in West Germany than in India.

Is it any wonder that college freshmen tell me that they hate geography? Raised on this, I would hate it too.--Thom Hinckley.

Dell Publishing Co., Inc. The Kids of the Polk Street School, 1984-85. $2.25 each.


There are ten books in The Kids of the Polk Street School series. I found the four I read--The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room, Fish Face, The Candy Corn Contest, and Snaggle Doodles--to be good reading. The situations, teachers, and kids in the books are ordinary, believable, and vivid, and the reader is
drawn into the worries and problems of grade school life. I recommend this series.--Gail King.

I read Cam Jansen and the Mystery of the Circus Clown in the Cam Jansen series. Cam "The Camera" Jansen has a photographic memory that gives her perfect recall of a scene once she has "click" taken of it with her mind. This gift is put to use to solve mysteries, such as the theft of Cam and Eric's Aunt Molly's wallet in the above title. I found this book less interesting than the ones about the kids of Polk Street School. Still, for younger readers wanting mysteries, it offers an unflappable detective, and lots of action. As such the series is recommended.--Gail King.

Dillon Press. Discovering Our Heritage Series, 1983-85. $10.95 each.
This is a series of history-geographies about countries of the world, chosen largely from the point-of-view of the contributions their immigrants have made when they came to the United States. They begin with a useful brief list of "Fast Facts" about the country; proper official name, capital, area, elevation, population, form of government, important products, basic unit of money, major languages, major religions, flag, national anthem, major holidays--done more snappily than they are in encyclopedias. Each author seems to mingle historical stories, information on politics, cultural individualities, information about important citizens, historical events of importance, and cultural background in an interesting blend that leaves one surprised by how much is learned. The final focus in each seems to be on the people in our country whose heritage lies in the country discussed, and how their coming into the United States has enriched our own national heritage.

With the publication of India: An Ancient Land, A New Nation in 1985, Dillon has now made available ten volumes: with Sweden, Ireland, China, Japan, Italy, France, and Korea as the others. It is apparently an on-going and ambitious series. I do not know whether there is uneven quality in the ones I have not been able to see, but the vitality of the presentations in these two make me think they will be useful companions to any geographies we presently have on library or school shelves.
Poland's government has more in common with the Soviet than it does with democracy; nevertheless it has more in common with democracy than many of us are aware of; Poles are freedom lovers, who can vote for their representatives to their Polish Parliament, the Sejm, though they cannot choose their national administration. The book begins with a brief history of how they found themselves taken over after World War II, and their present government. It describes them as people; hardworking, proud of being Polish, loving their country and its history, strongly unified in Catholicism and proud of their Polish-born Pope, speaking a language which is difficult to learn but far from impossible. A chapter entitled "Fighting to be Free" tells of a long history of their struggle for freedom—briefly but excitingly told. Another, entitled "Kings, Queens, Nights and Dragons, deals with some of the legends Polish people have been telling their children for hundreds of years. There are discussions of their holiday times, their families, their food, their educational systems, their sports, in interesting detail. The final chapter interestingly details many of the contributions made by Polish people as they immigrated to the United States, and by a number of individual Poles who are widely known in the United States, and have made American life more interesting and valuable by their contributions, many of whom we never think of as Polish. (There are more Polish people in the United States at present than there are in any other country outside of Poland.)

The style is lively; there are numerous good colored photographs; there is a good glossary; there are numerous instances of the provision of interesting facts not always provided in the usual "geography." I think it makes a good introduction to Poland for youngsters.

In "Mexico Today," the author of this children's story of the country and its people, "is like a giant with one foot in the past, one foot in the present, who with both hands reaches out to the future." She goes on to describe the giant in more detail, first geographically and then in terms of the people and their ways: their religion, their music, their love of dance, their fiestas, their art, their movie industry. Twenty pages outline briefly the history of this ancient and modern land; famous tales of ancient times, their heritage from the Myas, Aztecs, Toltecs, are followed up with the history of the arrival of the Spanish, teaching of Christ, with the resulting blend of old and new which created a special kind of Mexican religious belief. The last brief chapter concerns the history of the Mexican people in the territory which is now part of the United States; their contributions to our culture have been most considerable, and are so today; this discussion helps to create
an awareness of the sources of cultural contributions in our
American melting pot, and an appreciation of those people.
There is a glossary of oft-used Spanish terms, a list of Mexican
consulates in the U.S. and Canada where additional information
can be acquired, and a bibliography of other books about Mexico
and the Southwest.--Carol V. Oaks.

Scholastic, Inc. Sunfire Romances, 1984-85. $2.95 each.

The Sunfire Books are historical romances about young 15-16
year old heroines who face difficult times--war, hunger and hard
work. It is evident that these books are all written using the
same formula. They are all 346-47 pages in length. One heroine
is much like the other; they all come from affluent families,
have beautiful hair and eyes, extravagant clothes and have been
taught to be ladies with servants to wait upon them. In every
book there are two men that the girl thinks she loves--one
approved by the family and one a stranger to her way of life.
So each heroine is faced with a choice. The historical
background is very generally treated, and no evidence of much
research. In fact, there isn't much evidence of logical
thought. For example, in Susannah, the crops die because of a
drought at Dogwood Hill, but on the neighboring plantation,
which can be seen in the distance, the yard is overgrown with
Pokeberry bushes as high as the shoulder. Dandelion and
hopclover dot the overgrown lawn. Since the plantations are
obviously close together, it is difficult to believe that one
could suffer from drought and the other be overgrown.

Even small items like plants around the driveways seem to be
part of the formula. In Susannah, the reader finds that during
the Civil War the Northern troops cut down all the dogwood trees
lining the driveway for firewood. In Danielle, the army cut
down the dogwood trees that lined the driveway during the War of
1812. Perhaps because of the formula writing limitations the
plots are contrived. For example the hero is always at hand
when there is a crisis even though he is supposed to be far
away. Would that real life were so ordered!

These books are of mediocre quality, but they are a relief
from the sex saturated books of today. The first book is rather
interesting but the formula type writing makes all the others
too predictable--when you have read one you have read them all.
Because the heroines are so beautiful, the heroes so dashing,
and the endings so everlastingly happy, readers will probably

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become "hooked" on the series and want to read them all. The only difficulty with this is they will miss out on books with better literary quality.--Catherine Bowles.

Scholastic. The Girls of Canby Hall, 1983-85. $1.95 each.
203 p.
The books in this series deal with various events and adventures in the lives of three roommates at Canby Hall, a private girls' school in the East. The three heroines, Dana, Faith, and Shelley, meet for the first time when they arrive at the school and are assigned to be roommates. Though of different backgrounds and personalities, they become fast friends and come to share each others' joys and woes. The most appealing thing about the books is how this bond of friendship holds strong and true, offering companionship, understanding, and help, not just to each other but to the other girls at Canby Hall also. The main weakness is that the characters and situations are described rather than developed.--Gail King.

Scholastic, Inc. Wildfire Romances, 1984. $1.95 each.
I read two Wildfire Young Adult Romances, Christy's Love and Miss Perfect. While the settings are sketchy and the secondary characters little developed, still, both of these books have heroines who work through problems and in the process grow and learn more about themselves and others. Probably the quality of the books in the series is uneven, but based on these two, I would say that, as YA romances, they are good YA romances.

172 p.
I read two Windswept Mystery Romances, The Hidden Room and The Disappearing Teacher. These books employ the formula of heroine placed in a new and exciting setting where something strange happens. A handsome young man makes life more interesting and lends a hand in detecting. After several twists and turns and false leads, the mystery is solved. This is an acceptable series for teenagers wanting light reading which combines mystery and romance.--Gail King.


Growing up has never been easy for three to eight year olds. But today's world sometimes seems a more complicated, more confusing, more difficult place in which to make the transition from baby to adult. This series of books deals with modern-day issues through the eyes (large, black and white photographs) and ears (large, bold, read-aloud text) of a young child. With honest clarity, emotions related to problems surrounding families (making babies, new baby, adopted one), divorce, death, handicaps, phobias, and going to the hospital were examined. Although color photographs would have aided a young child's interpretation (e.g., Making Babies), the black and white pictures did precisely convey the emotions described in the text. However, all but one of the series utilized white, middle class families to depict the stories. The text itself vividly portrayed the egocentric view of these problem areas as a preoperational child (as Piaget would classify this age group) would perceive them.

A major asset of the series was the parallel text for parents which elucidated the concepts portrayed on each page of story text. This commentary made suggestions with regard to points of discussion for photographs, conversation with the child(ren), ways to define complex terms, and how to handle topics of difficulty (e.g., "How does a baby grow in your tummy?" "Why did Grandpa die and leave me?") Sometimes these explanations were a little complex and required some background knowledge in child psychology to fully comprehend their meaning. In general, however, it was a well-written series and should be useful to both parents and children in developing an understanding of and discussing difficult crises which may occur in a young child's life. Even if a parent does not read the story with a child, the adult text should help the parents gain insight into how
young children perceive the world around them and how these perceptions affect their thinking.--Kathy Simpkins.


Imagine a nurse-in-training living on her own small yacht in a California marina; a tall, dark and handsome stranger, who is really a wealthy playboy trying to keep his identity a secret from everyone; a Dalmation named Patches and a ski-masked attacker--throw them together with a basic Harlequin formula, some very cliched dialogue ("You're just like all the others"). 

"If anything happened to him, she'd die," and the classic "She couldn't spend the rest of her life afraid"), stir vigorously and you have Elizabeth Jones: Emergency.

Part of the Bayshore Medical Center series, it is full of cliches, poor dialogue and characters who have no depth or individuality. The jacket synopsis says ". . . in between her shifts and schoolwork, [Elizabeth] manages to give more parties than anyone could imagine . . . . Who could ask for more?"--hopefully any reader who reads for excitement and stimulation will ask for a lot more.--Jan Addy.

Franklin Watts, Inc. Down on the Farm Series, 1983. $8.90 each.


Cliff Moon's Down on the Farm series dealing with animals on the farm is characterized by stilted language, clear, bright pictures with precise machinery, realistic animals, ugly people and a remarkably unclear point-of-view. In the volume Sheep on the Farm the reader sees lambs playing a game together while the Pigs on the Farm volume displays several aspects of the butchering process including a graphic though bloodless throat slitting.

Interspersed in the primer-format-paragraphs are coy questions such as "Which do you think are bigger, hen's eggs or turkey's eggs?" In spite of the fact that the series is produced in picture-book format and seems intended for early primary grades, the language and depth of detail is more appropriate for upper grades--even junior high.

At the 1983 publication date there were four volumes available: Pigs and Sheep on the Farm, as mentioned, Dairy Cows on the Farm and Poultry on the Farm. The facts presented in the
series are at least regionally accurate, but the format, 
language and illustrations are not satisfactory.--Janet Francis.

$8.90 each.

The Easy-Read Modern Wonders Series on applied engineering by 
Cass R. Sandak is done very well. It is not a superb series but 
the information is accurate for the most part and clearly 
presented. The diagrams are useful in focusing the reader's 
attention on the essential parts of the complex structures 
explained. To be a superb, above the ordinary series, the 
author would have to be completely accurate and communicate a 
more passionate human interest in his topic and the examples he 
has shown of each kind of structure (communicate the "wonder" 
that the title to the series implies). That kind of contagious 
enthusiasm for a subject would capture the imagination of young 
readers and could come from excitement about the aesthetic forms 
of bridges, roads and dams; all of them possess forms capable of 
provoking the pleasurable gasp that comes when one sees shapes 
that are beautiful. An example is a bridge designed by Alan 
Firmage (that has not yet been built--just outside of Auburn, 
California) whose intricate curves and lines of support were 
planned to span the Ruck-a-chucky Canyon; or a more well known 
bridge, the beautiful profile of the Golden Gate in San 
Francisco or the famous Brooklyn Bridge in N.Y.C.

Another way of grabbing the attention of readers would be 
some mention of human interest stories about the structures such 
as the old bridge in Florence (pictured in the text on p. 7) 
which facist forces during World War II did not destroy as they 
retreated because the allies promised (and kept that promise) 
they would not use it for getting soldiers across the Arno 
River. Or perhaps a little more could be said about the 
struggle to build the Brooklyn Bridge (title page) than that it 
took 16 years to build. The subject of applied engineering 
would seem worth the effort to communicate that excitement to 
young readers.

When one looks at the books individually, some titles in the 
series are a little better than others. The one on tunnels 
showed interesting examples, especially the inclusion of the 
wind tunnel which is a unique use of this man-made device. 
There is a short history of tunnels and many examples of all
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types including some of the very long tunnels (12 1/3 miles) in the Alps of Europe. The one on dams shows all kinds with diagrams that are clearly done and useful. Canals has a good part on their history and an excellent description of locks on page sixteen.

In the one on Roads there is a slightly questionable statement in the section on "Roads for Tomorrow." It says that highways will be larger with 10 to 12 lanes when that would seem to depend on the size of the cars and possible curtailment of the numbers of private vehicles. Perhaps the highways will be narrower to make more room for people. Mr. Sandak would do better to sound a bit less sure of the size of highways as he does with the rest of his predictions.

In Bridges Sandak defines the three basic bridge patterns as beam, arch and suspension, but an engineer friend disagreed saying there is a new kind called a cable stay unless Sandak would define it as a variation of his basic three. The only other complaint was that the diagram on p. 12 showing the parts of the bridge did not look like any of the three basic bridge patterns. If the top were curved it could be an arch, but it is not. If there were cross bracing it could be a truss but there are no cross braces. Perhaps the artist was not an engineer.

In summary, this series is very competently done, with minor exceptions, and has good photographs and clear diagrams which aid and clarify the text.--Lillian Heil.


The Franklin Watts Holiday First Books are library bound with attractive, colorful covers but with black and white illustrations. Colored illustrations would have added a great deal to the series but the added cost might have been prohibitive for some purchasers. Each holiday is competently researched and new ideas and interesting customs are presented. All books in the series are indexed and the Valentine's Day and Thanksgiving volumes include short bibliographies. There can never be too many holiday idea books in a library and this series would be a worthwhile, and no doubt popular, addition.

From the beginnings of Valentine's Day through today's customs, this volume hits the high points. Emphasis is given to the history of English and American Valentines and popular
symbols are explained. Generous samplings of Valentine verses
are sprinkled through the text. The author includes the oldest
recorded Valentine message which was written in 1415 by a
Frenchman, Charles, the Duke of Orleans, who was imprisoned by
the British in the Tower of London. He wrote the following love
verse to his wife:

"Wilt thou be mine? dear love, reply,
Sweetly consent, or else deny:
Whisper softly, none shall know,
Wilt thou be mine, love? ay or no?

Contrast Charles' plaintive note with a sample of today's
passionate expressions.

"Hickory dickory dock
Your face would stop a clock."

Ideas for Valentine's fun and games--and food--are also
included. It's probably the only place in the world where you
will find a recipe for "Valentine Kidney Bean Salad."

Much of the Thanksgiving volume deals with the history of the
Pilgrims from the time they left England, through their stay in
the Netherlands and their difficulties getting established in
the New World. It, of course, covers the celebration of their
first Thanksgiving in the new land. But it also touches on
earlier Greek harvest festivals and traces such celebrations
down through history to the present. Children will probably be
surprised to learn that Thanksgiving was first celebrated by the
Pilgrims in 1621 but it did not become a national holiday until
after the Civil War in 1863. Before 1939 and since 1941,
Thanksgiving has been commemorated on the fourth Thursday of
November. The book will explain what happened between those
years.

Thanksgiving games and projects are described and recipes are
included. The recipe for Indian Pudding is easy to do and very
fitting for Thanksgiving. The reviewer also tried the author's
family recipe for "Roozie's Rolls" which were very good but
probably a little difficult for children.

Following the same series format, the Halloween volume
includes the origin of Halloween and legends from around the
world. It tells a little about witchcraft and superstitions in
old New England and Europe and about how the "Trick or Treat"
custom originated. Ideas are given for parties and costumes and
the volume ends with some "scary" stories of "Things that Go
Bump in the Night."

Some of the "future predicting" games would be fun to try and
the "Magic Spot" game would be sure to mystify your friends.

From the beginning of time, as man knows it, people have
celebrated the end of the cold, dead winter and the beginning of
a new spring season when everything appears to live again. This volume tells of the origins of spring holidays through history and throughout the world. It continued with a description of Jewish spring festivals such as Tu B'Shevat, Purim, and the Passover. A simple recipe for "Hamentaschen," a Purim cookie, is given and several of the Passover symbols are explained.

The story of Easter is told, including the history and customs from many countries. Holiday projects are suggested and ideas for party fun are given. The suggested bunny cake decorations would be simple enough for very young children and fun for adults.

It is probably the Christmas book in which the rather somber black and white illustrations are most distracting. Such a joyful season somehow demands a cheery, colorful treatment. Otherwise, the book is informative and fun to read. Beginning with the history of Christmas, the book covers traditions around the world; describes the music of Christmas, including the words and origin of many of the popular Christmas carols; suggests inexpensive gifts and decorations for children to make; tells of Christmas food traditions and includes simple recipes to try; and concludes with A Visit from Saint Nicholas by Clement C. Moore.

The reviewer especially liked the idea for a simple door star decoration made from five evergreen boughs. She also tried the recipes for "Peanut Butter Balls" and "Christmas Mints." They were both simple to make and tasty.--Afton Miner.

Franklin Watts, Inc. Impact Biographies, 1983-84. $8.90 each.


This series is written for sixth grade and up. The purpose of the series is well explained in the title, Impact. Hence, they do not deal with the individuals and make them come alive, but with the impact their contributions have had on the world. The authors seem to be well qualified; they have fine educational backgrounds and have done considerable research. There are many quotes included in the text and the source and circumstances concerning these quotes is given. The books are well organized with a short bibliography of books for further reading, an index of important events and a table of contents.

The weak part of this series is that the format of the books is so uninteresting. The pages are very compact with long
paragraphs, and the style is that of an informational book whose purpose is simply to impart facts. They do give an accurate account of the achievements of the person and in this the reader finds few weaknesses. However, the drama of the person's life, the details that make him/her seem real to the reader are missing. As previously stated, the purpose of the books is to show the impact of their contribution to the world but when the famous person doesn't come across as dynamic, it's difficult for the reader to see how that world leader could have much "impact."

Other subjects in this series include:
Susan B. Anthony
Marie Curie
Albert Einstein
Henry Ford
Mohandas Gandhi
Martin Luther King
V. I. Lenin
Golda Meir
Eleanor Roosevelt
Franklin D. Roosevelt
Anwar Sadat
Margaret Sanger
Mao Ze Dong--Catherine Bowles.

Franklin Watts, Inc. Take a Trip To Series, 1983-84. $8.40 each.
Take a Trip to Antarctica, by Keith Lye and Henry Pluckrose. ISBN 0-531-04514-5. 32 p.

This series has splendid photography throughout. The shot of the polar bear on the ice (Canada) is beautiful.