



New York Diary - March 1983

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Article Author:

[John Mason](#) [1]

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A new regular report from **John Mason**.

John Mason reports on Children's Book Publishing in the USA

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In children's book publishing offices up and down the Manhattan avenues, tensions mount in early January as the American Library Association's `Midwinter' Conference draws near, the one at which the winners of the annual Newbery and Caldecott Awards are announced. These awards, the equivalent of the British Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals, are the only two out of all the plethora of book awards in the U.S. that are guaranteed to have a substantial impact on sales, since thousands of libraries, and many bookshops, automatically stock the winning books. They are, as one children's marketing director said to me, "the big banana". Publicity staff who think they have a strong contender for the awards are poised beforehand with books, press releases and glossy photos all ready to send out at a moment's notice. Authors and artists sit at home biting their nails, waiting for the fateful phone call.

In the event, this year's Newbery Medal went to **Dacey's Song** by Cynthia Voigt. a story of four lonely, abandoned children and their grandmother in the Chesapeake Bay area. It's a sequel to Voigt's first novel **Homecoming**, and is published by Atheneum. The Caldecott Medal was awarded to **Shadow** by Marcia Brown, who has won it twice before, in 1955 and 1962. **Shadow** is a translation of a French poem "The Sorcerer" about the fearful imaginary world of African storytelling traditions, powerfully illustrated with collages. It's published by Scribner's. Neither book is yet published in England, but I understand **Homecoming** is in the works at Collins, so watch out for this and, perhaps in due course, **Dacey's Song**.

On the map

Amid a merry-go-round of corporate mergers and take-overs some small independent publishers continue to flourish here all on their own. A few years ago, hardly anyone had heard of Schocken, an erudite publisher of high-brow literary works of mainly Jewish interest. But then they published **Masquerade**, after it had been turned down by some twenty top U.S. publishers much to Jonathan Cape's dismay. They went on to sell 400,000 copies, with an imaginative competition in which the winner was promised a round-trip to England on British Airways, and a spade to start digging with when he got there! **Masquerade** really put Schocken on the map as a trade publisher that could successfully promote unusual/ controversial picture books. Now they have continued in this vein with **When the Wind Blows**, turned down by both major U.S. publishers of Raymond Briggs (25,000 sold to date), and with Terry Jones's book of **Fairy Tales** (10,500 sold).

Language

Of course, one of the problems of selling a book like **When the Wind Blows** in the U.S. is that so many of the little details in the book are unfamiliar to American readers - place names, local authority officials, and so on, which the English reader takes for granted. Even the language is strange - "Crumbs!" used as an expression of dismay sounds even more comical over here than Briggs intended it to be. Fortunately, Schocken recognized the overall integrity of the book and did not attempt to "translate" it, but many other American children's book editors go through agonies trying to remove all traces of "Britishisms" from British books to make them palatable to American kids. Sometimes this is simply a matter of substituting American vocabulary - gas for petrol, tub for bath, yard for garden - but other times whole expressions or sentences are altered and nuances of meaning lost. For example, at the end of **Spot's First Walk** (Eric Hill), when Spot gets back from his various misadventures and is asked by his mother what he's been up to, in the British version he replies nonchalantly "Not a lot." Since this expression is never used in America, his American editors substituted the much more unambiguous "Nothing", which doesn't quite convey the same subtle humour.

Stetson

Not that any of this seems to bother Eric Hill, who has plans to take up permanent residence in Tucson, Arizona, this spring. Perhaps in the next book Spot will be wearing a stetson hat as he rides around the ranch!

Banned

What do **The Catcher in the Rye**, **In the Night Kitchen**, **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**, **The Diary of Anne Frank**, **The Grapes of Wrath**, **The Wizard of Oz**, **The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes**, **Tess of the d'Urbervilles**, **Huckleberry Finn** and **Webster's Collegiate Dictionary** have in common? The answer is that they're all books that have recently been banned somewhere in America. The American Booksellers Association's campaign against censorship reached a high point last autumn with "National Banned Books Week". The idea originated with a dramatic display of banned books in a padlocked cage at last year's ABA annual convention which attracted much attention. Many people said that if such displays could be prominently mounted in bookshop windows all across the country during one particular week, it would attract media coverage and heighten the public's awareness of the censorship issue. The campaign was coordinated by ABA head office which mailed out to booksellers a poster, press release and list of banned books. Using this material, booksellers put on all sorts of ingenious displays of the banned books, featuring such things as padlocks and chains, prison bars, mock fires, brown paper wrappings, warning signs and flashing lights. Even in very conservative communities, "members of the public expressed shock and dismay at finding recognized and cherished books in the display," reported one Midwest bookseller, and overall the Week certainly succeeded in generating lots of publicity.

Blank

The Moral Majority recently circulated its own list of "the top ten books we would like to see banned" - the list was a blank sheet of paper, to dramatize the message that the Moral Majority does not advocate book censorship at all. Mm. That may be their official position - in theory. But it doesn't explain why they marched into a public library in Virginia last year and demanded to see the names of people who had borrowed certain books. I call that totalitarianism. The library did too - and refused.

Footnote

John Mason worked for Penguin and Methuen before moving to New York where he is now Promotion and Publicity Manager at Putnam.

This is the first of a new series in which John will be sending us news of children's books from 'across the pond'.

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