



# Teachers, Children & Books

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**Terry Downie** reports on a recent survey of fiction in Avon's primary and secondary schools.

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In January, all Avon Junior/Primary and Secondary schools received a bright green A3 form asking `Which fiction works well with your 9-14 pupils?'. By the end of February, nearly 30% of schools in each sector had responded - a good return, so I am told. Perhaps the stunning colour (our printer's choice) contributed to this. Columns on the form were headed:

Author	Title	Pupil Age	Method of use (read to class, read with class, small group reading, individual reading)	Any comments on activities and materials used with book
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The first three items were processed by computer using the Quest program so that I have printouts listed by author, title, Primary, Secondary and total mentions and by youngest/oldest reading of any book. I make no claim to have statistically viable results - and not all entries were processed for various reasons: Quest couldn't handle all the data; I didn't expect to see the book mentioned more than a couple of times; the teacher couldn't remember the author/title or I'd never heard of the book; I got bored with entering Roald Dahl titles. So the printouts don't show some things of interest. For example, at Primary level, there's considerable enthusiasm for myth, legend and folk-tale, a sprinkling of `classics' - **Treasure Island, Just-so Stories, The Wind in the Willows** - and more than one instance of teachers reading aloud from Enid Blyton, Willard Price and reading scheme books. Given time, I hope to make a more thorough analysis. However, the results as they stand make an interesting description of our teaching practice and of children's experience of reading in the Junior/Secondary classroom. I suspect that the other 70% of Avon schools or a response from another authority would show much the same pattern.

## What books and when

Of the top 40 titles (See Top of the Class tables below) many are fine books. Over half are fantasy. Three-quarters are by British authors. About a third are by women. A handful have strong central female characters. Two books could be described as having a multi-ethnic perspective. All *are* in paperback; in fact, the only hardback mentioned at all was Dahl's **The Witches**. There are seven Dahl titles in the top 40 and, in the whole survey, he is mentioned over four times as often as any other author (11 titles) with Byars coming second (9 titles) and Bawden third (8 titles). There is one 1984 paperback in the top 40 and six books first published over 25 years ago (see Table 3).

What about the also-rans? Outside the Top 40, there is one mention each for **The Crane** and **Slake's Limbo** (Primary) and for **The Outsiders** and **Summer of My German Soldier** (Secondary). **Jacob Two-Two and the Hooded Fang** is listed twice (Primary) and **Tuck Everlasting** twice (Secondary). Three Primary teachers use **Conrad, the Factory-Made Boy**; four Secondary teachers use **Bridge to Terabithia**. There are thirty records for Dick King-Smith titles and two mentions of picture books, **Where the Wilds Things Are** and **Father Christmas**, both at Primary level.

Probably no-one will be particularly surprised by the titles mentioned most frequently or by the overlap of reading between Primary and Secondary. Perhaps the youngest/oldest ages for some books (see Table 2 below) will raise a few eyebrows. (I'm glad that some teachers gave me information outside the 9-14 range I specified.) Who would deny that there is much in **Danny** and in **Charlotte's Web** that can be enjoyed by a 7 year-old and by a 12 year-old? After a pause for thought, perhaps, wouldn't we agree that many 10 year-olds are concerned about the possibilities and effects of nuclear war so that a reading of **Z for Zachariah** (presumably edited? I don't know) may be appropriate for top Juniors as well as CSE candidates. One of the five Primary teachers who listed **Walkabout** explained that although it 'might appear "too old", it was used as part of a project on Explorers and a lot of discussion came out of it.' Survival, identity, relationships between individuals and between cultures - aren't these preoccupations of any age group, which can be explored and illuminated in 'the secondary world' of fiction? I wouldn't be surprised if stories from **The Goalkeeper's Revenge** are read to children younger than 8 and I know 16 year-olds who still ask for **Spit Nolan**, having heard and read it many times before. And why not? Those of us who have the reading habit and had it in childhood know that tasting and skipping, grasping what you can at the time, immersing oneself and revisiting are all part of the pleasure. Is this why we abridge **The Silver Sword** and read it quickly to 7 year-olds as an adventure story, use it again with 10 year-olds in a project on the Second World War and ask 13 year-olds to study it for half a term and write about the character and development of Jan? What, though, happens to the book and to the children when we do?

### Why these?

What are the reasons for this pattern of use and what are the implications? To start with why do so many of us choose the same books and these particular ones? Perhaps we have in mind the Schools Council's question: *'Is this book one we can imagine a responsible teacher justly recommending to pupils at a certain stage of development on the ground that they are likely to take from it some imaginative experience valuable to them at their own level, over and above the mere practice of reading skills?'* (**Children and their Books**, 1977) Or do our reasons look more like this? Mine often have.

- **I like it/they'll like it/the last class did**
- **They ought to like it**
- **It's different from/very like the last book**
- **It fits in with the work we're doing**
- **You can do a lot of work on it**
- **It's a good example of ... (genre, style, theme, etc.)**
- **I know how to read it/use it**
- **I've always used it**
- **It's been televised/filmed**
- **It's nice and short/long**
- **I don't/they won't like the alternatives**
- **It's the only one left in the cupboard**

Does the fact that nearly two-thirds of the books were published over ten years ago bear out Rosemary Sandberg's observation that it takes that long for teachers to find out about a book? That may be the case, especially if we take into account the time it takes for word to get around that it 'works well'.

Those good books which are scarcely mentioned - how did teachers come across them? Did someone go on a course/read a review/talk with colleagues from another school? Are books like **The Crane** and **Jacob Two-Two**, writers like Christine Nostlinger and Natalie Babbit, on their way up the charts? (Some of them have waited a long time if they

are.) Certainly the word about Dick King-Smith is spreading fast through Avon's Primary schools; part of that may be because he lives locally and is a frequent visitor to schools.

Any why so few picture books? The case for sharing picture books with older children has been well made for several years: training and in-service courses must have introduced large numbers of teachers to the delights, the sophistications and the value of books like **Granpa** and **Would You Rather?**, **The Church Mice**, **Anno's Journey**, **Gorilla**, and **A Walk in the Park**, **Outside Over There**, **Fungus the Bogeyman**, **Not Now Bernard** and **I Hate My Teddy Bear**. They *are* being read to and by children in this age range. Perhaps the teachers who filled in my form didn't think of them as significant reading experiences or considered them not appropriate to a survey of fiction.

There are signs in the survey results of teachers 'colonising' books - authors and sequels which children might well be allowed to devour independently or by their own choice. To read aloud more than one of **The Dark is Rising** or the **Narnia** series must be to deny some children this pleasure - and surely precludes introducing them to other, better books which they might not meet on their own? I can sympathise with the desire to stick to a recipe for success that must lie behind all the Dahl reading, but it must be questioned for the same reasons. Are *all* his books of such value that we want to endorse them by reading them aloud? I'd defend anyone's right and need to read rubbish and happily slump into my own brands of undemanding fiction in the sun or in the bath but why choose to read cliched, flawed, formula books aloud to children?

### **The Missing Books**

Where are all the other good books? Where are the more recent books? Where are the hardbacks? What about African, Asian, Australian, Caribbean, Canadian writers in English? Surely we need books by Buchi Emecheta, Patricia Wrightson, C. Everard Palmer... What about authors in translation?

How hard are we looking for powerful, positive books which genuinely offer some valuable 'imaginative experience' wherever and whenever they are set? I note that the following titles, some of which provide strong images to counter stereotyping of all kinds, are missing from the survey: **Nobody's Family is Going to Change**, **The Butty Boy**, **Homecoming**, **Handles**, **Thimbles**, **A Question of Courage**, **Welcome Home**, **Jellybean**, **The Broken Saddle**, **Philip Hall Likes Me**, **I Reckon Maybe**, **The Peacock Garden**, **A Strong and Willing Girl**, **The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Tales**, **The Village by the Sea**. Open a review journal, read a recommended list and you immediately meet acclaim and enthusiasm for these books and others like them. Maybe they're in the schools but teachers aren't yet sure if they 'work well'?

**I think there are three factors which shape the pattern of reading revealed by the survey**

### **Increasing the Pool of Knowledge**

The first is the extent of our knowledge of books. We need a commitment to increasing our pooled awareness of what is available and worthwhile. Every teacher does not need to read every review and every new book, but by load-sharing we should be able to keep abreast of the best fiction. It doesn't take long to scan a couple of review journals and note recommended titles for our age range, nor to make a half-termly trip to library, bookshop or school library service to get hold of the most likely-sounding of those titles. How long does it take to skim an average-length children's book? Share the reading of ten books among even a small school or department, devise a comment sheet or simply exchange views over coffee, narrow down the field to maybe five books to consider in more depth - and you have a painless, even pleasurable increase in expertise which is even more valuable if acquired by schools working together. Advisors, Reading Centres, local branches of NATE can set this up but so can individual teachers. One of the rewarding outcomes of the survey has been to put teachers who have expressed a desire to exchange information in touch with each other.

### **Spending Money, Reading Books**

The second factor is finance, an obvious constraint, but what needs looking at is not just how much money there is but how it is spent and this links closely with the third factor - the ways in which we use books in the classroom.

Popular belief would have it that Primary classes are read to from single copies by their teachers and that Secondary pupils have a copy each to follow while the teacher reads and to take away for reading or writing homework. The survey bears out this pattern, by and large. I have to ask why, if only single copies are needed, there aren't more titles, more recent books, more hardbacks. And why do older children each need a copy? Is 'gather round' reading really impossible at 11+ except for the odd short story and should this sharing experience of narrative be lost? Are there always valid reasons to exploit books for homework tasks? Clearly, a school which invests in sets of 35 will be reluctant to abandon the use of those books. I question whether such money is well spent.

Individual reading is common to both sectors; some teachers sent interesting accounts of how this is recorded but I would like to know more about the circumstances in which it takes place, the time given to it, the teacher's intervention in selecting books and guiding children's choice and, again, what space is made for sharing of the experience. How widespread is Primary allotment of as much as two half-hour private reading sessions each day and do Secondary teachers know which of their pupils have been used to this? How fruitful can one 35-minutes-a-week library or bookbox lesson be for

Secondary classes and how many English teachers, whose instinct is to spend three or five lessons a week or a whole fortnight or a whole half-term reading to, with or alongside their classes, feel threatened by the perceived demands of other areas of the English curriculum? Two Secondary schools, with whole school silent reading for pupils and staff in tutorial time, are described in the ILEA's English Centre booklet on fiction; are other schools trying this?

Most interestingly, there is evidence from both sectors in the survey of small group reading. In financial terms this makes sense. Given an average paperback price of £1.50, the Primary teacher can buy a set of four books for £6.00, or two titles for £12.00. For £60, a Secondary year can be resourced with 5 copies each of eight titles. Many Primary classrooms have built-in flexibility so that short sets can be used by small groups alongside other types of work. English Departments can offer a greater range of books. Both sectors can admit to misjudgement at low cost, by re-allocating short sets to another age group or by spreading minority-taste books to shelves and boxes. This may happen annually and why not? In my experience, it's more worthwhile than flogging dead books or splitting well-embalmed sets to fill bookbox spaces.

### **Doing Things with Books**

But the crux of the matter is what we do with the books, or expect children to do. The last column of the form, inviting 'comments on activities and materials' gave insufficient space for some teachers who, I'm delighted to say, sent letters, topic webs, booklets and invitations to visit their schools to discuss and examine resources. I was also delighted to see from a few terse statements that 'we read it just for fun'. More of this, I hope. Earlier, I described some of the pleasures of reading. Here are some more. The grip of having to know what happens, the deliberate slowing-down because you don't want it to end, and the after-glow of joy and sadness when the world of the book and your own world separate. Are the sexual parallels unapt? For most of us, as adults, reading is a private experience whereas for our pupils it's a public one. We have the knowledge and they don't as yet. I don't expect to hand over much of my knowledge or experience but I'd hope to use them to give children room to develop their own. How?

The activities shown in Table 4 are various, typical, valuable and not all easily identifiable as Primary or Secondary. Most of them came from Primary schools, in fact, but discussion of sex-stereotyping or conservation, the creation of book jackets or character sketches, the examination of war novels or metaphor are part of some children's classroom experience at 9 and at 14.

In some schools, mainly Primary, close attention is being given to texts through activities such as prediction, doze, sequencing and labelling (DARTS - Directed Activities in Relation to Texts). Sometimes this is shared by the whole class, often it's small group work. Teachers in both sectors make books serve topics and topics serve books. Modelling activities can be illuminating for the whole age range - flow diagrams of plot using colour to mark crisis points, visual representations of relationships, pie charts to show the relative importance of characters. These activities are accessible to young children and demand the same close knowledge and discernment as essays do of A-level students.

Most of us want reading to be enjoyable, discerning, confident, independent, central. For this to happen, good books must be around children and children must be around good books. I'm going to peg my concluding remarks to the title of a talk Margaret Spencer recently gave for Avon teachers - **The Child's Grasp of The Book; The Book's Grasp of The Child**. We must seek out books which exert a real grasp and create an environment which allows them to do so. Some books work privately on their readers; others encourage the voicing of responses. We should be more ready to give books their own space, to leave them alone with the child at times. And when active responses are made, we should be alert to whether the outcomes we devise do a service to book and reader, or not.

I think we can develop the child's grasp of the book in two ways. We must have the confidence to stand back and let children explore books in small groups so that they can make their own experience, not constantly have to measure up to ours. And we must also know what important things there are to be grasped in each book and how to enable children to discover them and so become owners of the books they read.

**Terry Downie** is the English Editor at Avon's Resources for Learning Development Unit (RLDU) which instigated and analysed the survey. Terry invites comments and contributions from readers' own experiences in this area. Contact her at Avon RLDU, Bishop Road, Bristol BS7 8LS.

## Top of the Class

### TABLE 1

**The top 40 titles overall, in order of popularity:**

- **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, C. S. Lewis
- **Danny, the Champion of the World**, Roald Dahl
- **The Silver Sword**, Ian Serraillier
- **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, Roald Dahl
- **Stig of the Dump**, Clive King
- **The Iron Man**, Ted Hughes
- **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler**, Gene Kemp
- **Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH**, Robert C. O'Brien
- **The Hobbit**, J. R. R. Tolkien
- **I am David**, Anne Holm
- **Charlotte's Web**, E. B. White
- **The Eighteenth Emergency**, Betsy Byars
- **George's Marvellous Medicine**, Roald Dahl
- **The Twits**, Roald Dahl
- **The BFG**, Roald Dahl
- **Supergran**, Forrest Wilson
- **James and the Giant Peach**, Roald Dahl
- **Goodnight Mister Tom**, Michelle Magorian
- **The Battle of Bubble and Squeak**, Philippa Pearce
- **Fantastic Mr Fox**, Roald Dahl
- **The 101 Dalmatians**, Dodie Smith
- **The Shrinking of Treehorn**, Florence Parry Heide
- **Walkabout**, James Vance Marshall
- **The Ghost of Thomas Kempe**, Penelope Lively
- **The Machine Gunners**, Robert Westall
- **The Goalkeeper's Revenge**, Bill Naughton
- **Grinny**, Nicholas Fisk
- **The Fib**, George Layton

- **Smith, Leon Garfield**
- **The Midnight Fox**, Betsy Byars
- **Flat Stanley**, Jeff Brown
- **Carrie's War**, Nina Bawden
- **Tom's Midnight Garden**, Philippa Pearce
- **Gowie Corby Plays Chicken**, Gene Kemp
- **Bottersnikes and Gumbles**, S. A. Wakefield
- **Z for Zachariah**, Robert C. O'Brien
- **The Worst Witch**, Jill Murphy
- **Daggie Dogfoot**, Dick King-Smith
- **The Arthur Books**, Alan Coren
- **A Dog So Small**, Philippa Pearce

**The 20 most popular books at Primary level:**

- **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**
- **Danny, the Champion of the World**
- **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**
- **The Silver Sword**
- **The Iron Man**
- **Stig of the Dump**
- **Charlotte's Web**
- **The Hobbit**
- **George's Marvellous Medicine**
- **I am David**
- **The Twits**
- **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler**
- **The BFG**
- **Supergran**
- **James and the Giant Peach**
- **Mrs Frisby and Rats of NIMH**
- **The Eighteenth Emergency**
- **Fantastic Mr Fox**
- **The Battle of Bubble and Squeak**
- **The 101 Dalmatians**

**Books, mentioned by quite a few Primaries, which are also read in 25-50% of Secondaries:**

- **Goodnight Mister Tom**
- **The Goalkeeper's Revenge**
- **Grinny**
- **The Ghost of Thomas Kempe**
- **The Fib**
- **Carrie's War**

**The 11 most popular books at Secondary level:**

- **Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH**
- **The Machine Gunners**
- **The Eighteenth Emergency**

- **Walkabout**
- **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler**
- **Z for Zachariah**
- **Goodnight Mister Tom**
- **Smith**
- **The Ghost of Thomas Kempe**
- **Carrie's War**
- **Fireweed, Jill Paton Walsh**

**Books, mentioned by Secondaries, which are also read in 25-50% of Primaries:**

- **The Silver Sword**
- **Stig of the Dump**
- **Danny, the Champion of the World**
- **I am David**

<b>TABLE 2</b>	<b>Youngest</b>	<b>Oldest</b>
<b>Z for Zachariah</b>	10	15
<b>Dragon in the Garden, Reginald Maddock</b>	10	15
<b>Kes, Barry Hines</b>	9	16
<b>Walkabout</b>	9	14
<b>Smith</b>	9	14
<b>Run for Your Life, David Line</b>	9	14
<b>Pinballs, Betsy Byars</b>	9	14
<b>Goodnight Mister Tom</b>	9	14
<b>The Machine Gunners</b>	9	14
<b>Fireweed</b>	9	14
<b>Elidor, Alan Garner</b>	9	14
<b>The Ghost of Thomas Kempe</b>	9	13

<b>The Midnight Fox</b>	9	13
<b>Grinny</b>	9	13
<b>The Runaways, Victor Canning</b>	8	14
<b>Gowie Corby Plays Chicken</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Nothing to be Afraid Of,Jan Mark</b>	8	14
<b>Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH</b>	8	13
<b>The Goalkeeper's Revenge</b>	8	13
<b>The Fib</b>	8	13
<b>I am David</b>	8	13
<b>Carrie's War</b>	8	13
<b>The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler</b>	8	12
<b>Stig of the Dump</b>	8	12
<b>The Eighteenth Emergency</b>	8	12
<b>The Wolves of Willoughby Chase, Joan Aiken</b>	7	13
<b>The Silver Sword</b>	7	13
<b>Danny, the Champion of the World</b>	7	12
<b>Charlotte's Web</b>	7	12
<b>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</b>	6	12

<b>TABLE 3</b>	
<b>Date of first publication of Top 40 titles</b>	
<b>Before 1960</b>	6
<b>1960-1970</b>	11
<b>1971-1975</b>	10
<b>1976-1980</b>	9
<b>Since 1980</b>	4

**TABLE 4**

**Things Done with Books**

**DARTS and Writing**

prediction, doze, alternative endings, sequencing, poems, stories, plays, discursive, characters, personal, reviews, diaries, newspaper articles

**'Topics'**

conservation, pollution, India, sea, growth, flight, China, USA, Romans, pirates, soil, animals, survival, crime and police, Australia, city life, 20th century, minibeasts, World War II, Stone Age

**Language**

adjectives, homonyms, puns, idioms, metaphor

**Talk and Drama**

discussion of moral/social/ethical issues, sex stereotyping, family, personal fears. dreams, animal rights, empathy, taping

**Modelling**

strip cartoons, friezes, illustrations, storyboards, book jackets, posters, maps. craft-construction

**Specific Books**

**Walkabout** - explorers topic

Dahl- creative writing

Lavelle/Cleary - non-soppy girls

**Run for Your Life** - with new class

**Fireweed, The Machine Gunners,**

**The Silver Sword** - comparative study

**The Weirdstone** - British, Nordic folklore, D and D boys

**The Owl Service** ? Mabinogion

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