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News and views about books on radio, TV and in films.

The Bagthorpe Saga

Led by Dandy Nichols as Grandma, Helen Cresswell's whole preposterous tribe of Bagthorpes has been made flesh and put on our screens.

How does this popular comic invention stand up to being whisked from imagination into TV reality? How will TV Bagthorpe fans react to the books?

David Bennett wonders.

I am devoted to eccentric Grandma Bagthorpe, head of a family of super egotists. Jack the youngest grandson is the only ordinary one among them, and the central character of **Ordinary Jack**. At every turn he is eclipsed by his aggressively brilliant family until Uncle Parker, himself pretty remarkable, decides to manufacture some extra-ordinariness for his young nephew. Although the attempt fails, **Absolute Zero** sees some reflected glory for Jack, when his dim dog Zero beats the whole family to winning public acclaim in the world of advertising by becoming the nation's most lovable mongrel, no mean feat when the main opposition is Grandma, by now an unholy alliance with Daisy, the Parker's demoniacal four-year-old.

In Book Three the competitive spirit is rife again. Grandma decides on a Family Reunion, which means the visit of the kill joy but brainy 'Dog-collar Brigade'. The Bagthorpe brood feels compelled to outface them at every turn, possibly by getting into the **Guinness Book of Records** by fair means or foul, but no one reckons on the Unholy Alliance, who manage to outdo everyone with an inimitable coup de grace.

Bagthorpes v. the World has Henry misreading his bank statement and the family creating chaos upon chaos as they take to self-sufficiency, whilst coping with Daisy in her burial and death phase, suspiciously aided and abetted by her doting Grandma.

These very fast-moving episodes in the lives of chaotic, larger-than-life characters are told with humour and invention in a way that is endearing to most adults, but which only a certain sort of child enjoys. The predominant middle-class tone, the uncompromising literary references and vocabulary, the dashes of precocious flamboyance probably go down well in Kensington or Cheltenham but might easily miss the mark in Cardiff or Merseyside. My pupils, who hail from a good social mix, either love the Bagthorpes or hate them and it is mainly upon their reactions that I judge the general appeal of the books.

The TV version will doubtless have greater general impact than the books and will create a wider interest in the Bagthorpes, for if Helen Cresswell's humorous creatures are faithfully portrayed then young audiences are in for plenty of visual fun and, like **Giles' Cartoons**, lots of hilarious small details and irrepressible characters - come to think of it, grandma is my favourite character in **Giles' Cartoons** too!!

Ordinary Jack - Puffin, 0 14 03.1176 9, 75p

Absolute Zero - Puffin, 0 14 03.1177 7, 75p

Bagthorpes Unlimited - Puffin, 0 14 03.1178 5, 85p

Bagthorpes v. the World - Faber, 0 571 11446 6, £4.50

(in reading order)

Inside Television

Many children are keen to know what goes on behind the camera.

Making Television Programmes,

Peter Wiltshire and Tim Hunkin, Dinosaur, 0 85122 210 2, 60p

is designed for young children but is informative and useful at any level. Very young children would need an adult at hand to explain some of the more difficult concepts. A good book for sharing and talking.

A Day with a Dancer 0 85340 691 X

A Day with a TV Producer

0 85340 793 2

Both by Graham Rickard, Wayland, £3.25

Two from Wayland's excellent **A Day in the Life** series. The dancer is Sue of Legs and Co. - her day includes filming **Top of the Pops**. The producer is John Nathan-Turner of **Dr Who**. We have two days with him - one on location filming, one in the studio.

Each page of these books has a black and white photograph and eleven or twelve lines of text. The author is careful to explain technical terms as they arise in special 'footnotes'. There's a lot in these books in easily accessible form. A useful bibliography at the end points the way ahead.

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