

The Media

On some children's books

"It is children that read children's books", William Goodwin once told Charles Lamb, "but it is parents who choose them". If this is true, what do parents want from a children's book? Is it their desire to have their children instructed or entertained? Or is it that they wish to frighten them into good behaviour, persuade them into it or fill them with love of God? Or is it that they just want something to keep their children out of their way?

The answer is provided by children's books themselves. And as such they tell a great deal about contemporary tastes, about the virtues and the prejudices of the society—whether the emphasis is on truth-telling or obedience, on football or on animals. And precisely because of this they are, with a few notable exception (such as Alice), ephemeral.

It is doubtful, however, that what worries parents affect the children at all—lousy grammar, slipshod write-ups, dreadful twee illustrations, and the utter banality of story all are accepted as *de facto*. Also accepted with entire equanimity are the morals propagated. Thus if a popular children's book chooses to call its West Indian characters 'niggers' the nickname spreads swiftly amongst the young. Consider, the effect of the following example cited by Ian Steward in a survey of infant books for the University of Sussex Centre for Multiracial Studies: "I shall go on to Nigger Minstrels . . . they all look very funny. Their faces are as black as coal but their hands are not black. Do black men ever wash, Tommy?" (See also *Zenith*, London January 1972).

Racial bias such as this can be found—often in terms of innocent passing remarks—in many children's books. Lydia Whit, in a survey of children's books for Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development (VCOAD) gives many examples of racial bias in children's books, two of which I quote below:

"The natives, in fact, seem as destructive as the baboons, but it is very difficult to get them to change their habits".

"Africa . . . was like a huge cake just waiting to be eaten." (*Impact: World Development in British Education*, VCOAD, 1971).

Currently undergoing through their thirty-seven printing are Little Black Sambo books. Helen Bannerman writes authentic, rather touchy fairy stories, always charming, their fantasy never laboured. On the whole she ought to be congratulated for offering children a group of small non-white heroes—Sambo, Quibba, Quasha, Bobtail and Co.—with whom they can sympathize and emphasize (not least when Little Black Sambo devours 169 pancakes at one sitting). And the

underlying ethos seems quite inoffensive—except when one looks slightly below the surface. Consider the name itself: Black Sambo. Stanley Elkin in his book on slavery makes the following comment on the name: "the name 'Sambo' has come to be synonymous with 'race stereotype'". No wonder the West Indian youngsters after listening to the stories at school find themselves dubbed 'Sambo' in the playground.

At the age of nine and ten the kind of story books one reads can be loosely described as 'escapist'. This is usually generalised to mean the ostrich-like avoidance of the real world while a hysterical sublimation of an imaginary world is set in its place. For one thing such books may help to trigger off a reading habit which can later be channelled into more profitable directions: and if they are well written they can do a lot for improving the language of children. However, the moral side of children's books is not to be underestimated.

Puffin have published many fairy tales most of which make a pretty good reading. For those children who may take these books a little too seriously, a dose of Barries' *Sentimental Tommy* and its companion volume *Tommy and Grizel* may prove useful. Tommy is the boy who could not grow up, and the disastrous effects of this on himself and those with whom he comes in contact is the stuff that make the 'clinical-problem-story book' so popular today.

Still as popular as ever are Enid Blyton and Beatrix Potter. Although they cater for slightly different age groups, both exert a strange compulsion over children with styles that are at once both literary and graceful. This is much more than what we can say about another popular children's books series: the Ladybird series.

The Ladybird series are designed to help the youngsters with their reading. Ironically, this series suffers from the greatest of style defects: confusion of tenses. Allowing that on particular exciting moments one may change from the past to the present tense, but this is no excuse for such tripe as 'Now Peter is going into the castle'. At the centre of the Ladybird series is the scathless nuclear family: mum and dad, their two children, and of course, their dog, Rover. The stories involve having a *Happy Holiday*, meeting *Our Friends* and what have you in terms of the British middle-class chores. On the whole Ladybird series does possess some charm and quality but one wonders why something which is designed to be superb visually, with only a few words to nudge it along, should suffer from such style defects and is too invertebrate to make a good story. It is no wonder that these

stories fail to sustain the interest of most working class children.

After the familiar and the stereotype it is refreshing to look at *Hackney Half-term Adventure* (Centreprise, 34 Daltons Lane, London E.8, 20p). This is a book that has specifically been written for children of one locality: the inner London Borough of Hackney. The idea and the background philosophy of the book may, however, be of much wider interest. *En deux mots*, the story revolves round a group of four friends—two of whom are West Indians—and a genuine local hero, the famous footballer Alan Mullery. The text is illustrated with original photographs of familiar landmarks of Hackney, thus reinforcing a story which is fundamentally realistic. All this makes it easy for the young readers of Hackney to identify themselves with the characters and their life-style. And this is what makes the book so original and forceful.

Ziauddin Sardar

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