



The World of Children's Books - THE EDITORS

Article Author:

[Pat Triggs](#) [1]

Article Author:

[Tony Bradman](#) [2]

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The World of Children's Books

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A look at the world of children's books.

This map, reproduced here for the first time, charts the main features of the World of Children's Books. Newcomers and established inhabitants will recognise lands they know well and lands they may have visited. They will also find parts of the territory of which they may have heard but which are at present largely unknown to them.

Users of this map are likely to find themselves at home in one of the major areas. It may be in the Producers Group, where Authors and Publishers have their islands: or in the Distributors Group where booksellers of all kinds can be found: or in the Consumers Group where Education Island looms large: or even in Readerland where Parents and Children live and whose hinterland remains largely unexplored. The Disseminators Group is a mass of small islands where Commentators, Reviewers, Publishers of Small Magazines and Members of Earnest Organisations spend their time hopefully sending signals to Consumers and Readers. Also in this Group is Media Island a desirable spot, rich in resources but reluctant to be exploited.

Each area on the map has its own distinctive landscape and features: but on each single island the terrain varies and the inhabitants are found in different environments.

A look at the map will also show something of the communication that occurs between its different parts. The passage from Author Island to Publishers Island can be hazardous: across the Discount Straits the Ford Cortina Fleet is regularly piloted by brightly smiling reps: vast expanses of the oceans between the Producers and Distributors Groups and Readerland remain largely uncharted. New routes may be opened up as a result of the journeys made with this map as a starting point.

In the coming months the good ship **Books for Keeps** will be crossing the seas and exploring the lands of this world which is seen so differently by those who live in it. The view from the islands depends very much on who is looking, in which direction and whether or not they use a telescope. We will be reporting what we find out about every facet of this world. Join us. If as fellow explorers you make a discovery or can put a name to any part of this world, tell us and we'll add it to the map.

The World of Children's Books Part 1:

Pat Triggs and **Tony Bradman** on

THE EDITORS

Publishing books for children seems pretty straightforward. Author A has a wonderful idea for a book. He writes it, sends it off to publisher B, who accepts it, publishes it, and sells it to a bookseller C. Enter child D, who picks up the

book, likes it and hands over his pocket money. All very simple.

In reality the chain from author to child is a lot longer and more complicated than that, and there are problems to be considered at every link. Perhaps the pressures are strongest on those individuals who find themselves at the first link in the chain - the editors. It's they who decide what will be published. It's up to them to try and understand - and to a certain extent, control - what's going to happen to author A's wonderful book as it's passed from hand to hand down the chain.

The traditional image of the editor is of someone who sits behind a desk piled high with manuscripts, reading his way through them in search of a great new talent. Britain being notoriously class-ridden (and a large part of the class system being based on cultural snobbery), publishing still carries an aura of the 'gentlemanly pursuit' where, it's thought, sensitive, intellectual people concern themselves with Literature and literary values, not worried by vulgar considerations of profit.

The pursuit of profit

But publishing is (and always has been) first and foremost a business, whose point and purpose is making and selling a product for money. The paradox of publishing rests in the nature of the product. Books are, for better or for worse, indissolubly a part of our 'culture' in the widest possible sense. Publishers are providing a vital service. But unless they can sell enough books to make a profit, they'll go out of business - and then those books won't be published. For publishing, as for any business, the pursuit of profit is vital.

The growth in the awareness of the importance of children's books in the last 20 years has made the publishing of children's books a more profitable, and therefore more important, sub-section of publishing in general. This increases the pressures on editors - there's an inevitable desire to keep profits running as high as they were last year, and even to increase them. Increased awareness has also led to the rise of pressure from groups and from individual teachers, parents and pundits. Demands vary: children's books should be 'non-racist' or 'non-sexist': they should be 'relevant', books that the 'kids really want': they shouldn't contain 'bad language' or 'explicit' sex scenes.

How do editors cope with this?' **Pam Royds** of Andre Deutsch is in one area of publishing- children's hardbacks - which has suffered greatly from the current recession. Government cuts have meant that schools and libraries - most children's publishers' best customers - can no longer afford in many cases to buy new books. She is clear about where her responsibilities lie.

'My paramount loyalty is to my company's prosperity. I have to make money for my company, but within that basic brief I try to publish books I think kids will enjoy and like. I see my duty as encouraging a wide variety of authors with a wide variety of backgrounds and interests to write books for all kinds of children in all sorts of situations. What I do is really a mix of commercialism and publishing good books.'

Resisting the pressures

Julia MacRae, who left Hamish Hamilton to start up her own hardback children's imprint a couple of years ago, exemplifies the traditional British 'literary' publisher, who is concerned with 'good writing'. But even she is beginning to feel the pressure of commercialism. **'First and foremost I'm a "book person". I'm terribly old-fashioned in that sense. I'm not consciously aware of who's going to read a book or whether it's got "significance". I'm primarily interested in encouraging and developing a writer's talent. As I see it, the essence of being an editor is having an instinctive feel for what it's like to be a creative artist. It's not a creative role, it's subordinate, something like a producer in the theatre. It's getting a writer to do his best work.'**

'But increasingly these days you've got to understand business, if only so that you can survive and look after your writers. I feel you've got to resist the pressures, though, and it depresses me to look round publishing and see that it's increasingly being run by financially trained businessmen with no feel for it.'

Joanna Goldsworthy of Victor Gollancz is also very definite about what she's doing. **'I want to publish books kids want to read, I can't publish so-called "good writers" who don't sell. It's commercially unviable.'** In the sixties she was one of the first British publishers to introduce American fiction for children. **'It was bold and brash, it had energy - kids wanted to read writers like Judy Blume.'**

Marketing an image

Paperback publishing began with the desire to sell more books to more people by producing them more cheaply. It has always therefore been more aware of marketing than the traditional hardback imprints. **Rosemary Sandberg** describes how she sees it.

'An editor builds a list- that is, an editor publishes a range of books with a particular focus, almost a specialisation. Some specialise very heavily. This makes for a much more concerted marketing approach. What you're really doing is building an image, as you would with any other product.' Rosemary works for Collins who have two paperback lists, Fontana Lions and Armada, each with its own distinct image: her particular responsibility is for Lions. **'I see my role as publishing the best available books for children, but to do that I have to know what they want. So the contact between me and the outside world has to be constant.'**

Tony Lacey at Puffin agrees about images but has a special problem. Puffins are still the 'brand leaders' in children's paperbacks. partly because of the company's longevity and image, in most people's minds as part of the British cultural establishment. Tony wants to update Puffin's image, without losing the authority which goes with the name.

One thing that he's particularly worried about is the increased pace of paperback children's publishing, a sentiment echoed by the other editors we talked to. **'The problem is that I'm having to make my decisions earlier and earlier. There are so many paperback companies and the whole scene is so much more competitive that increasingly I'm being asked to decide to buy a book before it's been published in hardback. I'm reading the manuscript a couple of days after the hardback publisher.'**

The runaway costs of actually producing a book mean that more and more hardback publishers are having not only to sell the paperback rights before they publish, but also to arrange co-editions - simultaneous publications with foreign publishers - before they can afford to publish it themselves. Economic pressure has in fact turned the traditional nature of British publishing upside down. It used to be that a book was published in hardback, then 18 months or two years later it would appear in paperback. Now more and more books are being published in both paperback and hardback simultaneously, and some appear in paperback first and then go into hardback. This looks likely to increase.

Fewer hardback novels are getting published, so in a sense - as Rosemary Sandberg put it - **'the traditional supply is drying up.'** Hence the need for paperback publishers to start producing their own original books. She for one is taking the bit between her teeth and publishing an original novel this autumn. but publishing novels is a risk business. Julia MacRae thinks that she can't **'abdicate my responsibility to publish fiction' and will try to keep doing it in any way she can.** **'If we cut back on novels we're doing it to the detriment of the future. Kids need stories.'**

Good plots and good writing

So what does an editor look for in a manuscript or a book? 'Good plots', 'good writing' were the two qualities which cropped up again and again in what the editors said. They all also talked about instinct and judgement. **'I have to play my own judgement, and a knowledge of where the strengths of my list are.'** (Tony Lacey): **'You have to work on instinct all the time. When you read a book you get vibes from it.'** (Rosemary Sandberg): **'I like to be able to react instinctively and emotionally to a book. If I enjoy it it's a good sign - that's not self-indulgence. A good story's a good story, and kids need a good strong plot. There's too many introspective books around today, and I think humour is very important.'** (Joanna Goldsworthy).

Risk books

What about 'risk' books, books with 'bad language', sex or violence of any of the 1001 things publishers can get hammered for" The general consensus of opinion was that it depended on the book. Tony Lacey has had to face this sort of problem a lot. **'The trouble is that if a book is divorced from reality then kids won't buy it. I get lots of letters complaining about all sorts of things.**

'The problem is that with most kids' books you're selling to an adult who's buying it for a child. That means that you've got to keep the adult happy too. If there's something in a book that he'll balk at, then the child won't get to see it however good or relevant or worthy it is.'

Filtering the book through the system is something that concerns Pam Royds very much. She publishes Jan Needle's books, and **My Mate Shofiq, A Fine Boy for Killing** and **A Sense of Shame** have all come in for a lot of stick. **'People complained about the "racism" in My Mate Shofiq. But it's a realistic novel which is making a point about racism and trying to do something about it. There was a total misconception about that book among people you would expect to say "at last, a publisher who's had the courage to bring out a book which has something relevant to say".'**

'It was the same with A Fine Boy for Killing. People said that it would encourage kids to be violent. But if we had an education system which promoted reading as a vital way of using leisure time then the kids who are smashing in shop windows in Brixton would be reading instead. That's where my job is relevant- publishing books which have something to say and working to get more kids to read them.

'But at the same time I think I've got to resist the pressures which are very strong not to publish good "middle class" books. If a book is good and I think some kids will get something out of it then I think I should publish it.'

A dearth of fiction

In this connection Pam Royds is worried about the **'dearth of good fiction for older kids'**. She feels that the picture book market is flooded, and that **'kids who have so many picture books don't need them as much as a 12-year-old who's about to drop out of reading altogether needs a good contemporary novel which will keep him reading.'** She feels her list is **'over-balanced'** towards the picture book at the moment **'because that's what I can sell.'** Tony Lacey, however, still believes that the picture book is vital. His interest in picture books - and therefore the new enlarged format for Puffin picture books - grew out of personal experience, reading them to his own two small children.

So far we've been talking to five people whose instinctive commitment is to 'good' fiction. But what about books of information and activities, joke books, crosswords, codes, riddles' What about Enid Blyton, Willard Price, The Hardy Boys and all those pony books" They are a large part of children's book publishing and they sell. For Tony Lacey the success of titles like **The Crack-a-Joke Book** and **The End** means that he can keep Rosemary Sutcliff in print. Her books don't sell in great quantity but it's important to him to keep her on the Puffin list.

Looking for something new

Almost exactly the same comment is made by Liz Roy, editor of Knight books. 'The sales per year of our Rosemary Sutcliff titles would be difficult to justify to an accountant; but it's important to keep good writers in print' The Knight list is deliberately wide ranging: Elizabeth Goudge, Barbara Willard, Rosemary Sutcliff, Enid Blyton, Willard Price, Pony series, 'serious' non-fiction, puzzle books, activity books - including offerings from the ubiquitous Gyles Brandreth. **'It's too easy to aim down market or up market. Having an all round list means that wholesalers look at everything we do. The fact that we publish Enid Blyton gives us an entree into a massive group.'**

Big sales for quick-turnover, impulse-buy activity books ('**You're always on the look-out for something new, something different to make yours stand out from the rest. They are all so similar.**') and popular fiction mean that Liz Roy can wait a little longer for a return on her investment in more slow-moving titles. '**But I don't take on a title that won't stand the test of time. Our titles go out of print and then go back in again. We can no longer afford something that's only going to have one edition.**'

That doesn't mean that she won't take a risk on newish writers. '**If there's someone I think is an investment for the future (Chris Powling for instance) I'll take him on. It takes a while to establish a new name; we won't make much, if anything, on the first printing. But if your gut reaction tells you you're reading an exceptional writer you go ahead,**'

But Liz Roy would defend publishing Willard Price and Enid Blyton on more than economic grounds. '**If a child is to be able to finish a whole book it gives him enormous confidence to go on reading'. As well as that, 'children need different things at different times, like adults.'** She quotes Geoffrey Trease's definition of '**children who are not very well, not very bright or not very happy**' as those who need easy escapist fiction. What wouldn't she publish? '**I think books for under-tens should be optimistic. Older readers can take a more ambiguous view of life but I wouldn't want to publish anything full of tawdry petty pessimism, nor something that took a totally negative view of roles, whether sexual or racial.**' (She defended **The Famous Five** - '**there are a lot of little girls like Ann, and George is a tomboy**' - and made no comment about Willard Price.)

All things to all people

Liz Roy's slightly protective attitude towards child readers is repeated, but much more strongly, by **Lynne Bradbury**, one of the three editors at Ladybird who are responsible for over 500 titles. '**Because we cater for such a huge market we need to be all things to all people. Some people buy our books without opening them. They see Ladybirds as good value and they trust us. So it's important that there's nothing harmful or offensive in our books.**'

They are very aware that Ladybirds are often bought by people who wouldn't normally buy books and there's a sense that they feel a need to educate parents of young children. '**In the revised illustrations for the Key Words reading scheme we never show the children by water without an adult or a life jacket, "Sweets" is one of the Key Words but we tried to play it down because of what dentists and dieticians say.**' For the same worthy reason they do 'prestigious' books on Road Sense, Home Safety, First Aid which '**take a long time to pay for themselves**'.

That phrase at Ladybird hasn't quite the same meaning as it has for other publishing houses. A first print run for Ladybird is a vast 60,000 copies, minimum. '**And we're not taking a risk.**' Lynne was a bit coy about sales figures but said at the top selling younger end of the list titles were '**well into six figures**'. Standard price and standard format simplify some editorial decisions. Other issues like the move to large format and how to keep a balanced list are discussed by everyone within the firm.

'**We're very democratic here. But we're not trend-setters. We're an old family firm and we wouldn't want to damage the image.**'

Breaking cosy images

Busy smashing images and creating new ones is **Jill Mackay** at Piccolo who thinks that the world of children's books has been too tight and too cosy for too long. She wants to lift the lid on it. '**I'm into unit sales and making money, but I try to have a product that kids rather than adults will buy. I spend a lot of time with kids, I have contacts at TV companies, record companies, radio stations so that I know who's getting the most fan mail. They're the people to get to do a book. Hence books by John Craven and Paul Daniels.**' She too talks about 'establishing brand loyalty to Piccolo books', but she's mostly into originating her own material. '**It's all about realising you're a publisher 24 hours a day. I even picked up an author on holiday last year - a Scandinavian bloke who's an expert on Viking folklore, so I got him to do a book on Vikings**

She's also had her share of 'problem' books, but in a sense that's what she's most interested in doing. It's why she published Judy Blume and why she did a book about menstruation, **Have You Started Yet? 'I had kids writing to me saying that they'd kissed a boy and started bleeding and they were thinking about committing suicide. Kids like that really need those books. They're necessary and important, and it doesn't matter how much flak you get about them. That's why I do the research - it means the books are exactly what the kids want and written in a way they'll understand.**

'I'm not interested in Rosemary Sutcliff or Geoffrey Trease. My aim in life is to make sure kids are educated about the important things, but I want them to be entertained too. I want kids to feel reading is as natural as breathing, not middle class one-upmanship. I also assume that kids are their own best censors. A kid picks a book up, looks at its blurb, cover, price and reads the first 15 lines. Then he'll either say it's for me or it isn't. Kids aren't as susceptible as adults to hyping. They know what they want'

Jill Mackay like Pam Royds thinks that unemployment is here to stay and that reading is vital in helping kids - and adults - cope with it. **'Seeing a kid with a book means there's hope - any book. But there's hope even if he's only reading a comic. We have to get away from the clone-like element in kids' publishing, the inward looking attitude that says kids' books are sacrosanct They're not They're in the real world, like the rest of us.'**

Individual people

So there they are. The editors, making their contribution to who decides what children read. They have much in common and important things about which they differ. In the end what gets published on any list comes down to the people who are actually *doing* it, and depends on their individual tastes, ambitions, skills, flair and philosophies. But making decisions about *what* to publish is only the first step. Then comes helping and advising writers and artists, reading proofs, deciding on what size type to use, how many pages and most important how many copies and what price, commissioning illustrations, covers. seeing books through the printers, coping with irate (or blissful) writers and readers. All in the end directed towards selling books and making a profit so they can stay in business.

Julia MacRae

I'm primarily interested in encouraging and developing a writer's talent. Kids need stories.

Elizabeth Roy, Knight

I don't take on a title that won't stand the test of time.

Photo by Tara Heinemann

Joanna Goldsworthy, Gollancz

I want to publish books kids want to read; I can't publish 'good writers' who don't sell.

Rosemary Sandberg, Fontana Lions

What you're really doing is building an image.

Lynne Bradbury, Ladybird

We need to be all things to all people. It's important there's nothing harmful or offensive in our books.

Tony Lacey, Puffin

With most kids books you're really selling to an adult who's buying for a child ... you've got to keep the adult happy too.

Jill Mackay, Piccolo

I want kids to feel reading is as natural as breathing, not middle-class oneupmanship.

Photo by Roger Crump

Pam Royds, Deutsch

What I do is really a mix of commercialism and publishing good books.

Later in this series we'll see what people who inhabit other islands think of the editors and how they do their jobs.

For a book, getting published is only the first step. Telling the world it exists and can be bought comes next. That's the job of another group of people who live on Publisher's Island - those in Marketing and Publicity.

What they do and the decisions they make or carry out play a large part in deciding what children read. To find out how it works (or doesn't) read the next article in our **World of Children's Books series**

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