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select titles

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# Books for Christmas - Chris Powling, Tony Bradman, Cathy Lister, David Bennett, Steve Bowles & Pat Triggs select titles

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Six pages of books for giving chosen some of our regular reviewers and contributors.

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**Chris Powling** picks six sumptuous picture books across the age range.

Books for Christmas should be a bit like Christmas fare - rich, special and guaranteed to repeat on you for some while afterwards. I've opted for six picture books sumptuous enough for the most gourmet taste. And since Christmas is nothing if not inclusive, it's a choice that spans the age-range too...

**Grandmother's Tales**, story and pictures by Celia Berridge, Andre Deutsch, 0 233 97357 5, £4.95

Fans of Celia Berridge will recognise her formula at once: the tried-and-true revamped into something fresh and oddly original. In this case she offers a visiting Grandma who tells stories that outclass treats or even extra pocket-money... about a bully on a broomstick, about a china dog who survives burial alongside a dead goldfish, about a dynamic duo (Jack plus Mum) who get rich quick by climbing *down* a beanstalk. The starting-point, as always, is once upon *our* time - we get a single-parent family, a mixed-race hero, a backstreet witch and a gang of goblins who look uncannily like the sort of nastiness the family Hoover is supposed to beat as it sweeps as it cleans. All are presented without fuss or falsity. The words are brisk, the pictures chunkily deft in the familiar Berridge manner. 'If you found lots and lots of treasure, what would *you* do?' Grandma asks at the end. Any sensible five or six-year-old would instantly commission umpteen books like this.

**They Came from Aargh!**, 0 416 05840 X

## **The Great Fruit Gum Robbery**, 0 416 05790 X

Russell Hoban and Colin McNaughton, Methuen/Walker, £2.95 each

The Hoban/McNaughton team also reaches out to Everychild. Here the words and pictures are pitched at Infants old enough to savour tongue-in-cheek. **Aargh!** is a sci-fi spoof in which - thanks to the high technology provided by saucepans, upside-down colanders and bits of old anglepoise lamp - we explore the perilous terrain of the mod-con kitchen, habitat of the dreaded mummosaurus. In a similar vein, **Robbery** is a caper-spoof which draws its essential equipment from the broom cupboard and the dressing-up box. These are needed to kit out a king of the desert, a mermaid queen and a deep-sea diver, all bent on vengeance after baby Turpin's daring fruit-gum heist. In both books Russell Hoban mimics superbly the voice of kids-at-play, while the look of them is niftily caught in Colin McNaughton's superstrip illustrations. They're the ideal launching-pad for youngsters on their way to Asterix and beyond...

## **Trick a Tracker**, Michael Foreman, Victor Gollancz, 0 575 02975 7, £3.95

... or on their way to Michael Foreman, perhaps. He's not always the safest of bets for youngsters, but here he judges his audience perfectly: seven-year-olds, actual and honorary, who have an ear for a witty story-line and an eye for a stylish image. The front-cover says it all - a skateboarding elephant poised above a couple of slack-jawed paleolithic spear-carriers. No one can blame them for getting in a panic since, amongst other diversions, they've already been got at by kangaroos who sweep as they hop, giraffes who wear sneakers and pelicans who plonk down arrows pointing in the wrong direction. And that's just for starters. As the animals develop a taste for locomotion, they roller-coast their way through an alternative pre-history that takes account of Stonehenge, the pyramids, Aku-Aku and the Aztecs. Never has Michael Foreman been so outrageous or so funny. He's never drawn better either - his weirdly distinctive caricaturing sets off his droll text perfectly. By the time he brings us up-to-date with a final bitter-sweet joke, we swallow his environmentalist moral hard-edge, soft-focus and all. If there's a better picture-book published this year, I'll eat a jumbo-size skateboard.

## **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**, Selina Hastings and Juan Wijngaard, Methuen/ Walker, 0 416 05860 4, £3.95

This book almost had me reaching for the pepper and salt. It's not for the purist, let me say, who will refer us to the middle-English masterpiece, or, at the very least, to Brian Stone's line-by-line verse translation for Penguin. But how well Selina Hastings suggests both the prowess and the courtesie of the original... along with its marvellous jewel-like stateliness. You don't have to go along with every cut and thrust of her version to welcome it as a handsome introduction, for junior-age children, to one of the two best tales in the language. And has it ever been better illustrated'. Juan Wijngaard's colour-plates are breathtaking - a blend of the decorative and the decorous that spans six centuries and makes the printed page feel as rich and dense as a tapestry. Perhaps Hastings and Wijngaard will now turn their attention to Chaucer's **Pardoner's Tale**. That's the other one, of course.

## **Fabulous Beasts**, Monika Beisner and Alison Lurie, Jonathan Cape, 0 224 01971 6, £3.95

Like **Gawain** this is less a picture book than a book-with-pictures. Each double-spread reminded me of the next exhibit in a gallery - with an adjacent blow-up of the relevant catalogue-entry lest I got lost amongst the Unicorns and Gulons and Dragons and Salamanders. If the format sounds pedestrian, don't believe it. Every aspect of the book is a delight owing partly to the deadpan elegance of Alison Lurie's writing and partly to Monika Beisner's portraits, enamelled on the surface, intricately detailed beneath. As with their previous venture **The Heavenly Zoo** it's the sort of book that gets coffee-tables a good name and I don't say this from fear that they'll set their Mimick Dog on me, a creature that will 'tag after you, mocking your walk, gestures and conversation in such a comic manner that no one who sees it will be able to help laughing.' I'd rather face a Gryphon any day. Age level? Eight to eighty.

## **The Highwayman**, Alfred Noyes and Charles Keeping, Oxford, 0 19 279748 4, £4.50

Another book able to take on all-comers. Alfred Noyes' poem was included last year in Kaye Webb's anthology **I Like This Poem** and this version confirms that her young selectors knew a good thing when they saw it. The verse has enough rum-te-tum splendour to bring out the actor-manager in all of us - writing that's easy to patronise and difficult to emulate. Try matching the swash and buckle of this line, for example: 'And he lay in his blood on the highway, with the bunch of lace at his throat.'

Mere rhetoric? You bet - and it grabs you every time. So do Charles Keeping's drawings which have such panache they give black-and-white the impact of full-colour... and that, come to think of it, is just what successful rhetoric does. Altogether this is the best collaboration of versifier and image-maker since the Coleridge-cum-Peake **Ancient Mariner**. Well, almost. Certainly enough to make me ponder on the best way of cooking a jumbo-size skateboard.

Happy Christmas ... burp.

**Chris Powling** is head of an ILEA primary school, has just had his third book published and still finds time to read books and write about them. He lives in London with his wife, Jan (who helps keep the SBA running smoothly), and their two daughters, Kate and Elly. Chris has just joined our panel of regular reviewers.

**Tony Bradman** puts poetry top of his list

Seeing as it's Christmas I might as well come out of the closet at last and admit to being a poetry freak. And this year I'm out to get the rest of you. To do it **I'm** using

**Strictly Private**, ed. Roger McGough, Kestrel, 0 7226 5694 7, £4.95

Enough said, seeing as the first edition's sold out and it's gone to a second. Some think that Roger McGough should go to gaol immediately, without collecting the £200, because there's a real risk that he could spread this minority madness to the masses. I'd buy this book for any kid over 12 who's been immune so far, along with

**Gangsters, Ghosts and Dragonflies**, ed. Brian Patten, Allen & Unwin, 0 04 821053 6, £6.95

Any normal child who's presented with poems by Adrian Mitchell, the ubiquitous McGough, Ted Hughes, Ivor Cutler and - gasp! - John Lennon will probably be instantly corrupted. Isn't the government doing anything about this shocking depravity? I am, hopeless corrupter of our nation's youth that I am. Why, I've even been known to recommend the work of that nefarious pair Mike Rosen and Quentin Blake, whose **You Can't Catch Me**, Andre Deutsch, 0 233 97345 1, £4.95, can now be bought together with the paperback of **Wouldn't You Like to Know** (Puffin). What with the appearance of Mick Gowar's **Swings and Roundabouts** (Collins), Kit Wright's **Hot Dog and Other Poems** (Kestrel) and various others, I think there's no hope for our nation's youth. Anyway, before the Royal Society for the Prevention of Verse comes to take me away, I'll recommend a few more respectable books I'd be willing to be seen reading on a bus, like

**Mouldy's Orphan**, Gillian Avery, Puffin, 0 14 03.1269 2, 75p

I love it, but then I'm a right old softy, and this touching (it really is) tale of a Victorian Child's 'adoption' of an orphan is one I'd love to introduce an eight or nine-year-old to. For slightly older kids, and worth every penny of its price is

**Another Fine Mess**, Jan Needle, Andre Deutsch, 0 233 97370 2, £4.95

the follow-up to **The Size Spies** (Fontana Lions). It's also a good excuse to say that I think Jan Needle's a superb writer, and I hope someone gives me a complete set of his books for Christmas, or his brain. I think I'd rather have the latter.

It's been a great year for picture books. I'd buy

**Peepo!**, Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Kestrel, 0 7226 5707 2, £4.50

for anybody. Allan's rhyming text, Janet's beautiful 1940s period illustrations and the simple device of a hole in a page to play Peepo! through combine to make a superbly warm and friendly experience. A classic, and a great way to round off a great Ahlberg year - buy

**Funnybones**, Heinemann, 0 434 92503 9, £3.95, and

**Each Peach Pear Plum**, Picture Lions, 0 00 661678 X, 85p

Another classic in the making is Jan Ormerod's wordless picture book

**Sunshine**, Kestrel, 0 7226 5736 6, £3.95

The finely drawn illustrations of a little girl's morning go down a bomb with pre-schoolers. Kestrel are following up next year with **Moonlight** (the same girl going to bed), and next year I'll be buying the two as one present for somebody (probably me).

On a slightly heavier note - and for slightly older (and heavier?) children, i.e. up to eight, I'd go for

**Hansel and Gretel**, illustrated by Anthony Browne, Julia MacRae, 0 86203 042 0, £4.95

Oh no, I can hear you saying, not another Hansel and Gretel (there are another two out for Christmas)! Well this isn't just another Hansel and Gretel. It's the same story, but Anthony Browne sets the illustrations foursquare in a contemporary-but-not-quite context. The pictures are sombre, and therefore work well with what is, after all, a very sombre story. But for those who like their experiences to taste sharp, even in picture books, this is a genuinely valuable updating. I'd be careful about which child I bought this one for: but for the right child it could be a book in a million.

A book I'd buy any child is

Frank and Polly Muir's **Big Dipper**, Heinemann, 0 434 95 170 6. £5.95

Remember the annuals of your childhood? Giant compendia of all sorts of (mostly appalling) stories and pictures, read in an hour, consigned to oblivion by Boxing Day? Well, Frank Muir's resurrected it, and as with the promised second coming, this one's got the lot and more staying power. Specially commissioned material from all sorts of minor names like Harry Secombe, Bill Tidy, Spike Milligan, Quentin Blake and John Yeoman, Colin McNaughton and a cast of thousands make this little number a real bargain.

Finally, I've got to admit to my other perversion; historical fiction, that minority taste which still refuses to lie down and die. Good to see that Rosemary Sutcliff is still on form with **Frontier Wolf** (OUP) and **The Sword and the Circle** and **The Road to Camlann** (both Bodley Head), and also that Puffin are still keeping faith by re-issuing **The Lantern Bearers** this year. I'd buy the lot for any child I could tear away from **Swap Shop** long enough to get them to read them. You can't beat a good story with a beginning and a middle and an end. Which is where I've come to, so Merry Christmas and a reading new year.

**Tony Bradman** is a journalist. In his spare time he specialises in unpublished poems, unfinished novels and unending conversation. He and his wife Sally have two daughters, Emma and Helen, whose arrival started Tony off on children's books.

**Cathy Lister** fits books to people

Whatever else awaited me under the Christmas tree, as a child, there was always a book. My mother chose those books for myself and seven brothers and sisters with great care and, I am sure, found great pleasure in the task. It was a task that was perhaps easier in the fifties as she would not have been as overwhelmed by the sheer number of books published for children each year. Choosing for 1981, the never ending flow from the publishers adds to the pleasure but

also to the difficulty of the task.

What to buy is the problem faced by the child in

**On Market Street**, Anita and Arnold Lobel, Benn, 0 510 00118 1, £3.95

an intriguing alphabet book with an extravagant character garbed in goodies to match each letter of the alphabet from apples to zippers. For a child who delights in checking detail and is ready to match words to pictures this should be an absorbing gift. Among the twenty-six stall holders are an elegantly gloved lady, a zany dancing girl in a costume of lollipops, and a well and truly zipped up gent with twirling moustache. The lack of instant action may cause adults to feel this is not an exciting book but I feel it is one that a child will pore over for many hours and recall many years later.

Christmas is a time for books to keep and two that I would choose to give children of seven-plus, to be shared and treasured by all the family, are newly illustrated versions of Oscar Wilde stories:

**The Happy Prince**, ill. Jean Claveric, Oxford, 0 19 279750 6, £4.95

The illustrations fit exactly the period in which Wilde wrote and perfectly reflect the loneliness and love of which he tells.

and

**The Nightingale and the Rose**, ill. Michael Foreman and Friere Wright, Kaye and Ward, 0 7182 1259 2, £3.75

This is a harsher, more tragic story than the previous one and the translucent shades of blue pervading each illustration are an expression of the tragedy of unrequited love. There is not the lasting joy of the Happy Prince but a fragile beauty in the illustrations which makes it a perfect partner.

Tony Ross's perceptive wit and audacity in rewriting traditional folk and fairy tales is in sharp contrast to the evident acceptability of Wilde's 'fine' writing. In particular his rakish drawings must cause any child already familiar with the traditional version of one of his texts to smile.

**Little Red Riding Hood**, Puffin, 0 14 050.314 5, 80p

has the heroine toppling downhill on a bicycle. I shall not resist the temptation to slip this one into a stocking.

Along with it shall go the endearing

**Warton and Morton**, Russell Erickson, Knight, 0 340 26535 3, 85p

an ideal 'read alone' tale for a seven-year-old just becoming a confident reader. Two home-loving toads set off to find adventure and become separated. Warton's search for his brother is the theme of this exciting and eventually comforting tale. There are three other Warton and Morton books so this could prove a pleasing starter for the child who enjoys collecting books in a series.

Gifts of anthologies and collections of short stories were among my favourite childhood possessions. One this year which I know would have given me great pleasure and which I would delight in giving to a nine-year-old friend whose reading tastes reflect my own many years ago is

**The Faber Book of Modern Fairy Stories**, ed. Sara and Stephen Corrin, 0 571 11768 6, £5.95

All the tales were written in the past hundred years but contain many of the elements of folk and fairy stories developed over centuries. The collection begins with Ted Hughes' **The Iron Man**, surely the strongest of modern folk tales, linking the traditions of the past with a mechanical age to come. It ends with Thurber's tale of the giant, Hunder. In

between are tales of humour, magic and fairies by authors such as Helen Cresswell, A.A. Milne, Walter de la Mare. The black line illustrations draw the browsing reader with just a suggestion of the humour and mystery, sadness and fear which are found in the tales.

Sadness and fear are very much elements in a story by a new author.

**Goodnight Mister Tom**, Michelle Magorian, Kestrel, 0 7226 5701 3, £5.50

tells of a small, timid boy evacuated to the country and the trust that grows between him and a lonely old man. It is a lengthy story and at times runs away with itself but having observed children share and discuss this book at length and with evident enjoyment I feel it will find a wide audience. There is much pain for the reader in this tale of a child brought up by a mother so mad that she has taught him that happiness is a sin. There is also opportunity to laugh at the antics of fellow evacuee, Zac, and to smile as Willie's happiness is released. It is not a book that every child will want to tackle but a thoughtful story for the child of twelve or more who enjoys reading about people and relationships but rejects stories of everyday modern life for something a little more profound. My son has thought and re-thought **Goodnight Mister Tom**. His own copy will be under the tree.

My fourteen-year-old daughter is an avid reader of any and everything from the cornflakes' packet to Charlotte Bronte! somewhere in between she has recently read and enjoyed K.M. Peyton's **Flambards** series (Puffin). She is delighted that the set is now complete with

**Flambards Divided**, Oxford, 0 19 271452 X, £5.95

I suspect that fans will find it a sad and frustrating book as the reality of Christina's marriage to Dick is unfolded and she eventually remarries the reckless Mark Russell. There is something woolly but satisfying about K.M. Peyton's combination of romance and historical background. Perhaps I should await the paperback edition but the spirit of Christmas persuades me to complete this series with the hardback edition as a much wanted gift.

I shall assuage my guilt at such extravagance by buying another hardback with a horsey theme but one which should help to make a positive bridge between child and adult reading.

**The Dark Horse**, Rumer Godden, Macmillan, 0 333 32183 9, £4.95

is essentially a true story of a failed race horse imported to India and to renewed success. It is also the story of British people who risk their reputations through acknowledging the Eurasian community in Calcutta. In the background, quietly influencing the story, are the love and hardship of an order of nuns, working for the oldest and poorest of Calcutta's people. It is an absorbing story of relationships between men and animals, made intriguing by the truth that lies behind it.

Roll on Christmas!

**Cathy Lister** is an Australian who's been living in this country for 16 years. A speech therapist turned teacher, she now works in a middle school in Staffordshire and is responsible for English and Language on the curriculum. She is married to Rupert and they have two children, Clare and Simon.

**David Bennett** combines sure-fire standards with new discoveries

Compiling my own Christmas present booklist comes very easy to me; compiling one for others is far more difficult. However, I do have certain rules of thumb. For instance, any child old enough to focus gets Raymond Briggs' **Father Christmas**, Pat Hutchins' **Rosie's Walk**, Maurice Sendak's **Where the Wild Things Are**, The Ahlbergs' **Each Peach Pear Plum** or Eric Carle's **The Very Hungry Caterpillar**, all of which, in my opinion, ought to be available to every household through vouchers in the back of Family Allowance books. Since successive Governments haven't woken up

to this fact I do my bit, sometimes beneficently bestowing the whole lot on a single, very special child.

This year I'm tempted to break out and give

**Queen Yesno**, Mary Tozer, World's Work, 0 437 79422 9, £3.95

I found it visually very appealing, after the style of Caldecott and brimming with amusing detail, plus a salutary tale of a Queen who changes her mind to the exasperation of all around her, who are reduced to engage the services of the witch Isabella Bella and her six sisters to see if they can effect a cure for the lady's annoying indecision.

I shall buy

**Georgie and the Buried Treasure**, Robert Bright, World's Work, 0 437 28815 3, £3.50

for my own five-year-old Georgie, who sees it as a personal accolade every time his name appears in print and, incidentally, loves Bright's little ghost, portrayed in those curious black and white illustrations. This time Georgie and his friends are trying to stop their neighbour, Mr Snead, from digging up and ruining the entire neighbourhood in his hunt for treasure. Luckily they also manage to trick him into sinking a much-needed well whilst he's about it.

Children that can focus *and* read get **The Church Mouse** by Graham Oakley, Russell Hoban and Quentin Blake's **Captain Najork**, Florence Parry Heide's **The Shrinking of Treehorn**, (when I can catch it in print) or **Flat Stanley** by Jeff Brown. Once again, they seem like standard equipment for a happy and healthy young life, alongside a good selection of folk and fairy stories.

Out of this year's abundant crop

Moira Kemp's **Cinderella**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10636 2, £3.95

has caught my eye. The exquisite, medieval-looking, illustrations convey all the sinister cruelty of The Grimm Brothers' version, upon which it is based. The pumpkin and white rats of popular panto have been replaced by a magically generous hazel tree and protective white bird, which might confuse some children, but, on the other hand, could prove a welcome twist to others, who feel a bit jaded by the oft-repeated, more usual version. There are shades of direct cruelty which could upset sensitive types, but which, after all, is the essence of traditional fairy tales.

Number one eight-year-old, son, who no longer believes that he is the prototype for Sendak's Max, is stuck on Wide Range Readers Green Book II, only because his Junior School is dedicated to their reading scheme and offers him nothing else. He gratefully casts his colour-coded reader down and reaches for **Asterix, Tintin, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** and **Mrs Pepperpot** when he gets home. I shall certainly load his stocking with a couple of the former and add

**The Great Ice-Cream Crime**, Hazel Townson, Andersen 0 86264 005 9, £2.95

Embryo magician Lenny finds a sack of cash which leads him and his pal Jake into a kidnapping and possibly treasonable tangle involving no less a personage than Princess Anne, plus two ice-cream vendors! This fast, well-illustrated tale should hold the attention of most rumbustious boys and make a good middle-distance bridge between short stories and full-length tales.

**Maggie Gumpton Flies High**, Margaret Stuart Barry, Hutchinson, 0 09 143450 5, £3.50

is a useful new collection of stories which should prove successful, especially with girls. Here zany Maggie and her attic friends Polly and Pinky Dars carry on their tit-for-tat exploits, scoring points off each other in a mildly engaging and amusing way, which no doubt will cater for that fascination which many imaginative children have for the private lives of their toys.

Children's own lives should be brimming with a sense of magic for as long as possible in my estimation and there's no better time than Christmas for ladling out great puddin' basins full of the stuff. Nine, ten and eleven-year-olds will come in for two types of magic from me this year.

**The Kettlewitch**, Maureen Osborne, Heinemann, 0 434 95584 1, £4.95

offers the Witches and Boggarts kind, very humorous and fast moving, with Cathy and Mike chasing around London and the Eastern Counties after their younger rather sulky sister Emily, who has gone off with the Green Witch of Greenwich, the Wool Witch of Woolwich, the Old Witch of Aldwich and the Dull Witch of Dulwich. They are assisted along the way by a group of highly suspect Weighing Machines, who are in fact Boggarts bewitched by The Evil Green Witch when they tried to steal her green glass eye, the remaining vestige of her magic powers. I'm sure it would serialise well for bedtime story sessions or for the Junior school classroom in the latter years.

My second choice is

Ann Phillips' **The Multiplying Glass**, Oxford, 0 19 271455 4, £5.95

where the magic is a more salutary experience. When the wing mirror presents Elizabeth with her two other selves, Liz the worse and Lisa the better, she sees at first only the exciting possibilities of her discovery. However, when Liz gains control of the glass and incarcerates Elizabeth in a disused grotto, then she comes to realise those unavoidable aspects of her own character that she finds hardest to face. The complicated powers of the glass take some sorting out but once mastered make for a very rewarding and entertaining read for early secondary readers.

Unfortunately the magic doesn't remain with most youngsters for ever and realism intrudes more and more so that many teenagers soon prefer non-fiction to fiction.

**You Never Knew Her As I Did**, Mollie Hunter. Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10643 5. £5.25

is a very acceptable blend of both. Mary Queen of Scots' imprisonment in Lochleven Castle is told in historically correct terms but as seen through the eyes of the illegitimate son of the Douglas household. Will, who falls under the spell of that charismatic Queen and is instrumental to her escape plans, benefiting the Lady no doubt, put profiting the Knave equally, who finds a *raison d'etre* far exceeding that of the household bastard, midway between Lord and Serf and in neither camp of both. Mollie Hunter's clear, fast-moving prose style and her astute portrayal of roguish Will makes this a highly acceptable novel that both instructs and gives flight to the imagination. I reckon terms of History lessons should be based on such stuff!

Happy Christmas.

**David Bennett**, an ex-librarian, is Head of English in a Nottinghamshire secondary school and a tireless promoter of books and school bookshops. Aside from that he likes to read, dig the garden and go to quiet places with his wife, two sons and the dog.

**Steve Bowles** picks paperbacks for teachers

As a child, I was always particularly disappointed if someone gave me a book as a present and, although as a callow youth I went through my concerned -uncle phase, inflicting paperbacks on my brothers' and sisters' numerous brood, I've grown beyond that now. Now I don't give them anything.

My recommendations, therefore, are for adults. More specifically, for teachers. They are all books which I think kids will enjoy but, at Christmas, I would only give them to the exceptionally bookish. And to teachers. (Both ways, I've a nice let-out because the rest of my family is quite normal. More or less.)

Secondary English Departments should club together and buy Robert Leeson's **Grange Hill** books for the Headmaster.

Now that Lions have tastefully gift-boxed them, they'll look nice amongst his Folio- Society-bound wooden blocks and he'll appreciate them when he needs to impress one of those trendy HMIs who drop in from time to time.

Any colleague who reveres Naughton's hoary old **Goalkeeper's Revenge** must be given a copy of

Chris Powling's **Daredevils or Scaredycats**, Lions, 0 00 671897 3, 95p

to bring them into the twentieth century. Admittedly, the opening stories lean a little towards the old school but, at its best - **Mad Eric, Thingy** - this book could do wonders for language work at top junior/ lower secondary level.

Some schools will have a member of staff who deserves something a bit special and, for them

John Branfield's **The Fox in Winter**, Lions, 0 00 671932 5, £1.00

is the book. This is the touching story of a teenage girl's relationship with an old man she meets through her district-nurse mother and one of this year's more hopeful signs was to see it listed as a runner-up for the Carnegie alongside Jan Needle's **A Sense of Shame** (Deutsch). It's true that Dickinson's **City of Gold** eventually topped the heap but at least the whole Carnegie business showed signs of returning to sanity after last year's descent into **Tulku**.

Another secondary title that you might buy is

**Tex**, S.E. Hinton, Lions, 0 00 671763 2, 95p

especially if you work in a department that's a little slow on the uptake. A copy for everybody - with a specially-prepared document inside the Head of Department's copy to explain how it might profitably be used in a CSE course. If *you* are the H.o.D., then you'll need to prepare several copies of the document, persuasively written, to show that **Joby** and **Of Mice and Men** aren't the last word in teenage fiction.

As a small gift for teachers who're enlightened enough to run a wide-ranging class library at top junior/lower secondary level, there's

**The Magnet Book of Strange Tales**, ed. Jean Russell, 0 416 21190 9, £1.00

This might be doubly welcomed because - if they flick through it before dropping it into the book box - they might find three or four useful read-alouds to spice up their lessons. Class library users will no doubt grab it for its cover and then be further amazed to find it's a book of supernatural stories that they can actually read. And if you can rise to two paperbacks, there's another child-orientated ghost book compiled by Barbara Ireson,

**Spooky Stories 3**, Carousel, 0 552 52140 X, 85p

though I should point out - just in case it's one of your performance pieces for virtuoso public display - that this has Philippa Pearce's **Shadow Cage** alongside the obligatory Palmer/Lloyd and Joan Aiken.

The new Lions catalogue (got yours yet?) informs me that there's been a crafty reprint of the John Yeoman/Quentin Blake comic fantasy

**The Boy Who Sprouted Antlers**, 0 00 671116 2, 85p

which I thought had disappeared for good. If you've got into kids' books since this was last in the shops, then don't just leave it to Santa, make sure someone buys you this for the 25th. If they insist that you have tooth--rotters or after-shave, then buy one for yourself.

Lastly, in case you hadn't noticed, Hippo have brought out

**Love You, Hate You, Just Don't Know**, ed. Josie Karavasil, 0 590 70079 0, 90p

This isn't, as you might think from the title, about teaching - it's a collection of stories for teenagers. Marion Rachel Stewart's **A Mother's Fondness** is getting to be fairly well-known amongst English teachers now - I've even seen it in a course book! - but anyone who hasn't come across it yet will thank you for a copy of this book. There are a couple of others that teachers will enjoy too (Westall, Jan Mark) and even more that kids will approve. Another Hippo cover, unfortunately, but who looks at the wrapping when it's Christmas? Happy humbugs!

**Steve Bowles** was until recently a secondary English teacher, and co-producer of *Reviewsheet* until it ceased publication. He is now writing full-time, and his third book has just been published. Steve lives in Essex.

**Pat Triggs** tries to find a perfect match

If, like me, you've decided that books are the thing to give - the pleasure and challenge lies in finding just the right book for each person.

This year I'm buying two copies of

**The Mother Goose Book**, illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen, Beaver, 0 600 20478 2, £1.95

now in large format paperback and encouraging prolific giving. One is for two friends with a new baby - and a reawakened interest in nursery rhymes. This collection is great for checking the half-remembered and extending the repertoire, and the illustrations with their muted colours, the layout and the design make this book a pleasure in itself. The other copy is going to a rising five who is enough at home with books to enjoy searching the crowded pages, 'reading' the pictures and sharing the experience with his parents.

**A Pet for Mrs Arbuckle**, Gwenda Smyth and Ann James, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10543 9, £4.25

is for a six-year-old with a sense of humour and a ginger cat (although it will appeal to many outside this limited category). Mr Arbuckle 'didn't need much looking after and he watched the football on TV instead of listening.' So Mrs Arbuckle advertises for a pet and travels to eleven different countries to interview applicants for the job. With her goes the gingernut cat from down the street just to see she doesn't make a mistake. The repetitive pattern of the story, the jolly get-up-and-go Mrs A. who emerges from words and pictures and a very characterful cat combine to make this a very appealing and satisfactory book.

Also to a cat-loving family goes

**The Patchwork Cat**, Nicola Bayley and William Mayne, Cape, 0 224 01925 2, £3.95

This time the cat is Tabby and her moods and movements are beautifully caught in Nicola Bayley's detailed paintings. Mayne's story of Tabby's adventures saving her patchwork quilt from the rubbish is simply and vividly told. Children who grow familiar with the story will find it good for early reading.

Others going it alone, especially long-suffering brothers of obstreperous younger sisters, should be pleased to find

**Stanley and Rhoda**, Rosemary Wells, Picture Lions, 0 00 661807 3, 90p

in their stockings. As these three hilarious short stories unfold, the changing expressions on Stanley's furry bespectacled face tell a story all their own. It's Rosemary Wells' special talent to make an apparently simple book reverberate with meanings (**Noisy Nora** (Picture Lions) and **Morris's Disappearing Bag** (Puffin) are also well to the top of my stocking possibles list).

Words and pictures work together in an essential combination in

**The Church Mice at Christmas**, Graham Oakley, Macmillan Picturemacs, 0 333 32483 8, £1.50

This is going to all those eleven-and-up-year-olds who have discovered (via Fungus the Bogeyman) that not all picture books are meant for infants. Arthur and Humphrey, leaders of mice, with the long-suffering but unenthusiastic co-operation of church cat Sampson, decide the mice must have a Christmas party. The words, and more especially the pictures, are packed with jokes and sly references for the alert and discerning. A very sophisticated seasonal offering.

Into the stockings of lots of eight-year-olds and any of my librarian friends who haven't met it yet goes

**The Great Piratical Rumbustification and The Librarian and the Robbers**, Margaret Mahy, pictures by Quentin Blake, Puffin, 0 14 03.1261 7, 80p

Beneath the sober exterior of many an ordinary grey-haired, distinguished lawyer or businessman lurks a pirate just longing for news of a stolen party. And Orpheus Clinker - with his wooden leg, eye patch, bottle of rum and spotted kerchief - who arrives to babysit for Alpha, Oliver and Omega Terrapin looks just the man to steal one. So begins the first story. In the second, librarian Serena Laburnum proves more than a match for her robber kidnappers. Margaret Mahy's outrageous stories go with a wild and witty swing. Good for reading aloud or alone.

Girls mad about ballet or horses have been traditionally well-served with fiction to feed their passion (even if most of it is pulp). This year two excellently written and very readable novels have appeared with a new obsession, gymnastics, as a background.

**The Fortunate Few**, Tim Kennemore, Faber, 0 571 11732 5, £3.95

is the shorter (107 pages, biggish print). It's set in a future where gymnastics is big business and local teams of young girls attract the kind of support we associate now with football. Success is all that matters and corruption and exploitation are rife. To survive you need to be tough and Jodie Bell (our anti-heroine), well on her way to her first million, is certainly that. Fast-moving, action-packed, it raises the same sort of issues as Cormier's **The Chocolate War** while managing to remain accessible to the less sophisticated reader. Quite a book.

**Comeback**, Marjorie Darke, Kestrel, 0 7226 5743 9, £5.50

The issues here are more personal, although the background (authentic and carefully researched as always with Marjorie Darke) is very definitely the world of gymnasts aspiring to the national team. One of these is Gail Knight, abandoned as a baby and brought up in Council Homes. The story of her bid for recognition is intertwined with her search for her real parents (Can old Emily Box who once knew a suffragette called Bella Knight who was descended from an African ex-slave called Midnight help her? Seasoned Darke readers will get the idea.) and the problems of being part of an emotional triangle with fellow gymnast, Heather, and attractive black Milton. Totally absorbing from page one.

Bright, thoughtful fifteen-year-old girls - like my daughter - currently being exposed to Juliet and Estella as types of O-Level females could well do with being introduced to some of the titles on the excellent Virago paperback list. As well as a wide range of possible female behaviour, they may well find bridges to adult novel reading. I'll be handing out

**My Brilliant Career**, Miles Franklin, Virago, 0 86068 193 9, £2.95

Sixteen-year-old Sybylla Melvyn tells the story of her life in the Australian outback of the 1890s and her refusal to conform to what is expected of a mere woman. Miles Franklin wrote the novel when she was only sixteen and it's full of life and energy. (There's a sequel **My Brilliant Career goes Bung** for those who get hooked.)

and

**Invitation to the Waltz**, Rosamond Lehmann, Virago, 0 86068 202 1, £2.95

Superficially the story of Olivia Curtis, just 17. going to her first big country house dance in 1920 may appear to have little to offer today's young women. But coping, behaving, reacting, responding, surviving in a new situation is fundamentally the same even sixty years on. The first disco may well be as significant a landmark in interior growth for a thoughtful teenager as Olivia's dance was for her. Comparing notes could be interesting.

My final choice is a family present. Homes which relish the very best children's literature has to offer will treasure

**The Hollow Land**, Jane Gardam, Julia MacRae, 0 86203 023 4, £5.25

Nine stories, rich in character and incident, combine to form a mini saga of two families - one local to the Cumbrian fells, one 'incomers' from London. Individually the stories speak easily to young readers: the whole which spans over twenty years, reaching forward to 1999, presents the experienced reader with a pattern of developing relationships and linking incidents which is both satisfying and intriguing. The writing is individual, observant, funny: a celebration of a landscape and its people by someone who clearly loves both.

With apologies for the cliché, this really is a book that lingers in the mind and the imagination. I'm giving it to us.

**Pat Triggs** teaches in the Department of Education at Bristol Polytechnic. She is a past chairman of the Federation of Children's Book Groups and is on the Board of the SBA. Pat is married and has three children.

The books in this feature were selected from this year's hardbacks and in-print paperbacks.

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