



Talking Point - Strike a Blow for Quality

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Talking Point

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Faced with kids reading the endless juvenile `sleuth' series, I'll support "quantity before quality" and, like all good liberals, feel confident that few will want the **Hardy Boys** forever. But isn't it time we moved nearer to "quantity *and* quality"? I'm bothered by our paperback publishers' increasing investment in such series at the expense of readable and decently-written fiction, which is thereby consigned to oblivion soon after hardback publication. It's even more frustrating when really useful paperbacks do appear, only to be crowded off bookshop shelves by the eternally-spawning pap that's so convenient for the "fast-buck" cynics of the book trade - sales reps, wholesalers and chain stores.

To hinder their progress, we could treat this mind-rot (?) like responsible parents confronting commercially-packaged tooth-rot. But limiting consumption presupposes nourishing *and equally appetising* alternatives and choosing these means attempting to work out what hooks certain kids on pulps. It isn't, for example, that they're especially easy to read. Though not infallible, readability tests give some indication of a text's difficulty and, using two different formulae, several randomly- chosen passages from representative titles show "reading ages" up to 15.5 - even lowest scores exceed 10. This makes them *at least as* difficult as many good quality paperbacks on the market. The pulps just keep within the range of 9-13s, their main audience, by employing a very high proportion of dialogue, which usually lowers "reading age". But other novels with lots of chat can give much lower scores. Compare **Grange Hill for Sale** where comparable passages often have "reading ages" around 8 or 9 (same tests) - greater relevance, easier reading *and* better literature! Conversely, Magnet's new junk series, **The Crisp Twins**, has relatively small chunks of dialogue and passages with scores of 13.5-15.5 are common. All pulps' vocabulary tends to be formal or old-fashioned and dated syntax/stilted speech patterns can stop weaker readers using context to tackle unfamiliar words. This factor meets some objections to readability tests which admittedly don't pay any attention to meaning.

Because almost everything is told through conversation, it's difficult to sum up past events briefly or make full use of bridging paragraphs to cover passage of time and shift of scene. Consequently, a continuous flow of trivia for the characters to discuss as they inch the story along is vital. This means something's always happening - a plus bolstered still further by making characters dramatically over-react - but it also stretches the books (170+ pages is usual) thereby decreasing their usefulness from a "quantity before quality" viewpoint. (Again the **Grange Hill** books, 120+ pages, win hands down.) The reverse side of this "continuous action" coin, however, is that very little of it has any real significance in the story, much is repetitive and the dramatic climaxes which by tradition close each chapter are generally resolved on the next page. The spurious nature of the action could explain the fact that- in my secondary school experience, at least- the books tend to appeal to particular types of kids: quiet, earnest, undemanding - average ability girls, higher

ability boys - never those I'd call "reluctant readers" and seldom the 'wery voracious' either.

Julia Dobson, author of the **Crisp Twins**, doesn't emulate her mentors in every department. Her stories start much more slowly and don't employ phoney dramatic high-points - the action hangs together, making them qualitatively a step up from Dixon, Keene and co. The smaller proportion of dialogue allows a more appropriate length (\pm 120 pages). Nevertheless, such minor improvements don't make the books welcome. They're poorly written - and the absence of the "continuous action" mirage could prove fatal when kids get hold of them. They're not so much better than the oldies that they warrant the effort of establishing them in lieu: the similarly flawed **Jill Graham** books (Piccolo) certainly seem to have nose-dived.

Armada's dated but simple melodramatic covers complement their series well and, along with standardised mock-Gothic titles, are obviously effective in grabbing readers and creating a brand image. For what they are, they're sufficiently well-drawn - more than you can say for Methuen's **Crisp Twins** efforts. The four new **Bobbsey Twins** books from Carousel (up-dated, Anglicised, badly edited) which are aimed at a younger age group-the twins (two sets!) are twelve and six - also look dreadful and, additionally, exhibit a particularly grotty glue job - reading them is noisier than eating a bag of crisps. Sparrow have a good cover style for their new attempt to cash in, **The Dana Girls** 'from the author of the **Nancy Drew** books', but they haven't yet adopted one super-scary incident as the central focus.

Other things play a part in such success as these books achieve: extreme simplicity of character: short chapters; even, some would say, wish-fulfilment Adventure storylines (eg. Sam and Abi Crisp helping K.G., their journalist father, to capture ivory poachers in Kenya and smugglers of antiquities in Egypt) and exotic, get-away-from-everyday locations, although the overwhelming popularity of **Grange Hill** argues strongly against this. But there's nothing which can't be found in other, better novels. So their trump card is possibly the security which a series affords. the knowledge that another from the same factory guarantees an identical experience. That kids don't regularly find enjoyable reading elsewhere, that they need to resort to these series, says volumes about the past service they've received from so-called professionals - writers, publishers, teachers, booksellers, reviewers, librarians. The first nail in the pulps' coffin - better matching of books to kids - is surely within reach. Will it once again prove too much work to pick it up and find the hammer?

The Ivory Poachers

(a Crisp Twins Adventure),

Julia Dobson, Magnet. 0 416 24210 3, 90p

The Tomb Robbers

(a Crisp Twins Adventure),

Julia Dobson, Magnet, 0 416 24200 6, 90p

(both titles also in hardback, £3.50)

Mystery of the Stone Tiger

(a Dana Girls Mystery),

Carolyn Keene, Sparrow, 0 09 926290 8, 95p

The Riddle of the Frozen Fountain

(a Dana Girls Mystery),

Carolyn Keene. Sparrow, 0 09 926430 7, 95p

Secret in the Pirate's Cave

(The Bobbsey Twins 2),

Laura Lee Hope, Carousel, 0 552 52134 5, 85p

Grange Hill for Sale

Robert Leeson, Lions, 0 00 671813 2, 85p

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