



Series Titles ? July 1993

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[Steve Rosson](#) [1]

[81](#) [2]

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Other Articles

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This is the story of two interesting newcomers and some reliable old favourites.

From Puffin come the first four titles in their 'ready, steady, read!' series aimed at 4-7 year-olds. Stapled paperbacks are the order of the day here and I particularly liked **Cyril's Cat** by Shoo Rayner (0 14 0361413, £3.50). Cyril is a lively old codger with an amiable pet cat named Charlie whose main aim in life is to find somewhere comfy to sleep. In both stories Charlie is at first discomfited but all is well in the end. Large, clear print and plenty of big pictures make this a terrific book for sharing with beginner readers.

Shoo Rayner features in the second new series, too, as the illustrator of Rose Impey's first four 'Animal Crackers' from Orchard Books, who claim to be trying to fill a 'black hole that currently exists for 5-7 year-olds'. The best of these is **A Birthday for Bluebell** (185213 455 0, £5.99). 'You're only as old as you feel' they say and this is certainly true for Bluebell. Life is great fun for the oldest cow in the world as she flies in Concorde at 73, hot air balloons at 74 and does a parachute jump at 75 but disaster strikes when she is given a TV set for her 77th birthday. She decides to slow down as she is now *old*; but her worried friends contrive a suitably happy ending and Bluebell looks forward to a spot of wind-surfing. The story progresses via narrative, speech bubbles and documents so there's much to look at and draw to the reader's attention and, of course, the moral is a sound one. Look out for the witty touches on the cover. The paperback is due in August.

The integration of text and illustration has been a feature of a number of series and it's particularly well used in Robin Kingsland's **Zoldo the Magnificent** (Viking 'Kites', 0 670 83600 1, £5.50). Plenty of witty wordplay and inventive page design in this tale of Windrush Gussett aka the magician Zoldo the Magnificent, his search for the Mysterious Hat Man who makes the most amazing Magic Top Hats in the world and his tangling with Milo Drumgooley the bungling jewel thief.

Moving up the age-range we come to **Cat's Eyes** (Hamish Hamilton 'Antelope', 0 241 13178 2, £4.99) by Narinder Dhami. Tony's life is doubly miserable as his pet cat is very ill and he's being bullied at school by the dreadful Grabber Dawkins. The decline and eventual death of Sam the cat is sensitively handled and the school scenes have the ring of truth. If the finding of the black stray, her help in the defeat of Dawkins and her adoption by Tony and family are a mite predictable, the story never flags, the dialogue is lively and the villain is the sort of nasty little so-and-so that many readers will know and loathe.

Dear old Mr Majeika has been with us for some time now and is one of the old favourites I mentioned at the start. The title story in **Mr Majeika and the School Inspector** (Viking 'Kites', 0 670 84738 0, £5.50) offers us a fable of our

times. Postlethwaite the inspector arrives with a large black book (surely in the interests of verisimilitude it should be a ring binder?) with the title 'Official Curriculum. What Is To Be Taught In Schools As Decided By The People In Charge. Nothing Else May Be Taught By Order.' Mr Majeika's magic finally saves the day and Postlethwaite is sent away a gibbering wreck. I dare you to be using it in a lesson when your school is inspected. (This title is also out in Young Puffin, 0 14 036288 6, at £2.99 pbk).

Heinemann's 'Superchamps' are for older readers, tend to avoid the zany humour of some of the other series and are often of a more serious tone. Valley Road Primary in Robert Westall's **Size Twelve** (0 434 97683 0, £4.99) is the pits. Situated next to the chemical works with decrepit buildings, disaffected staff, an ineffectual head and seriously tough kids, it would undoubtedly come bottom of any of The Grand Panjandrum's league tables. The black cat who finds his way into this hell hole is adopted by Taffy Thomas, the second worst boy in the school, and a remarkable change takes place in the school as the cat has a talismanic effect and the children at last find something to take an interest in. The possibility of supernatural powers is only hinted at in the last few pages but Size Twelve (from his big feet) has left his mark on Valley Road and things will not be allowed to slip back to their previous state. I can see this being very popular; especially with boys who'd like to think they're tough. Difficult to see them understanding the reference to Pamella Bordes though!

Cats seem to be prowling in everywhere At the moment and next door's moggy plays an important part in Jan Mark's **All the Kings and Queens** (Heinemann 'Superchamps', 0 434 97665 2, £4.99). The difficult topic of senile dementia runs through the book as Ken's great grandma begins to confuse him with her own long-dead brother of the same name killed in the Great War, and continually refers to a picture of him with 'all the Kings and Queens of Europe'. The mystery is eventually solved (thanks to the cat) by the finding of a long-hidden newspaper cutting. Much to think about here - relations between the generations, ageing, approaching death, our family links with the past - yet all handled with a deft touch.

Page Number:

8

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