



## Editorial ? May 1994

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News and comment from the Editor.

### On My Right

Yes, I adored **Just William**. And certainly I thought **Treasure Island** was wonderful (though a bit wordy). As for **The Hobbit**, terrific - especially the chapters about Gollum and Smaug. However, my favourite book at primary school, the one I used to put back on the classroom shelf behind the other books so it would be there, ready for me, when I wanted to borrow it again, i.e. next week, was a boxing story called **On My Right**. Between the ages of nine and eleven, I read it 22 times. I know this because I kept careful count.

**On My Right** was a great disappointment to Miss Bowe, my classteacher, who knew me to be a Good Reader and had been particularly proud of my struggles with Jim Hawkins, Blind Pew, Long John Silver et al. 'What do you see in it, Chris?' she often asked me.

I couldn't say. Something inside me simply chimed with this blow-by-blow account of a young man's rise to boxing stardom. Even then, I'm pretty sure, I had few illusions about the quality of the book's writing which - at any rate compared with Crompton, Stevenson and Tolkien - managed to be both plodding and over-excited. Wasn't it a touch like Blyton, to be honest, another author whom Miss Bowe permitted in her classroom only through gritted teeth? Anyway, who cared? For whatever reason, **On My Right** was my book.

In recent years, as the books we make available for children have fallen increasingly under the sway of those whose prime concern is with notches on a cultural totem pole (a pole pre-designed by them, naturally), **On My Right** has loomed larger and larger in my thoughts about what, fundamentally, brings children to the reading of books as a continuing, pleasurable habit. At some point, I'm sure, an essential aspect is that chiming I mentioned - a correspondence between a particular reader and a particular title, or titles, or even a whole genre, that's too personal to be predicted but once it's come about brings a permanent ring of truth to the whole activity.

Of course, nothing in principle disqualifies a classic text from such a revelation. Nor is this one aspect, in itself, sufficient for a proper pedagogy of reading. But I am quite certain it's necessary - and calls for the sort of approach advocated by Margery Fisher who argued that the Classics 'should be tossed to children as interesting food to be sampled not virtuously but as sandwiches whose fillings might surprise them'. Miss Bowe, bless her, let me sample the sandwiches between meals at a time when the most important item on my menu was a book whose plot, characters and style were so nondescript they've been wiped from my mind ever since. I couldn't even recall, if I ever registered it in the first place, who wrote **On My Right**.

That is, I couldn't till a couple of months ago. That's when, care of a student of mine called Martyn Fearn, I received a note from Waterstone's Booksearch Limited with the information: 'Kenyon - On My Right (re. Boxing) price £12.50 plus £2.50 for postage & packing'. One 'phone-call, followed by a fortnight's turn-around, and it was mine: **On My Right**

, by James W Kenyon, part of Thomas Nelson's Apex Series, no year of publication given, but luckily dated in an epigraph as `Xmas 1951'. Thanks Martin! I felt as if part of my childhood had been disinterred.

More than I realised, in fact. For the details of the book certainly check out with my vague memories - of a narrative much closer to my `other' reading, **The Wizard** and **The Hotspur**, than books proper. Admittedly, the plot is more cunning and better paced than I remembered but my hunch, outlined in umpteen seminars over the years, that part of the book's attraction for me was the way in which its hero's career, fight by fight, seemed to prefigure my own career, exam by exam, as prophesied (at length) by Miss Bowe ... well, that stays pretty intact. But what rocks me to my socks, here in 1994, is a sub-plot I'd forgotten completely. This concerns the parent who died before Jerry Webb, future champion, was born and about whom his surviving parent, from sheer pain, never speaks till the secret is finally revealed to Jerry deep in the story.

How could I have overlooked this?

For I had a parent, who died in childbirth, about whom my surviving parent, from sheer pain, never spoke. In my case, aided and abetted by my beady-eyed twin brother, I'd half-rumbled the secret already through a cautious investigation of family photographs ... but we had to keep this to ourselves for another five years till at last we were taken into my father's, and step-mother's, confidence. No wonder I returned to **On My Right** so obsessively.

Of course, such an oddball case proves nothing. Some might argue, and in the light of my forty-year memory-lapse I'm not sure I'd disagree, that it belongs less to the psychology of reading than to its psycho-pathology. What fascinates me, though, is that the first book which forced me to behave as if it were literature - that is, it compelled me to constant re-reading - couldn't possibly have been foretold even by the redoubtable Miss Bowe. What a pity that SCAA's Advisory Committee for English, which is about to inflict its latest little list of required reading on us all, no longer trusts teachers like her.

Oh . . . the rest of this magazine. It's **BfK**'s traditional Spring picture book issue so the sandwiches and other food we toss your way are exceptionally multi-coloured.

Enjoy! And be surprised ...

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