



Editorial ? September 1995

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News and comment from the Editor.

Author! Author!

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Poetry plus ... plus what, exactly? In the case of this issue, plus articles on illustration, on the current campaign for public libraries, on Lenny Henry's debut as a children's writer - and the inauguration of what's intended to be a regular correspondence page. More than sufficient to start off the new school year, I'd have thought.

Even as we settled on it, though, September's strapline suggested something else. Poetry plus ... *performance*, perhaps? For instance, it's clear from our Authorgraph just how versatile today's poets must be. Gareth Owen gives regular public readings of both his own and other people's work as well as presenting radio programmes and making regular author visits to schools and libraries. In this respect he's little different from any other professional writers for children whether of prose or verse.

Why do they do it?

Well, for three reasons mainly. The first, and let's not be coy about this, is to earn money. After all, authors tend to be paid only twice a year when their Spring and Autumn royalty statements appear. Extra one-off cheques from a parents' association or local amenity budget - however late they are in arriving and by however bureaucratic a route - are a big help in eking out personal finances during the long months in between.

It's hard work, though. Quite apart from the wear and tear of the travel that's involved, there's the 'stranger' factor. Just like an actor or stand-up comic, the author-visitor will almost certainly be meeting most members of any audience for the very first time ... which can be something of a strain on the nerves. An illustrator friend of mine brought this home to me after I'd teased her about taking 'only three lessons a day'. She grinned wily and said 'More like three *assemblies* a day, Chris ... in someone else's school?'

Before professional teachers burst into tears of sympathy, though, I'd better move on smartly to the second reason for making author visits. This is just as simple and just as basic as the first. The downside, not to say backside, of the writerly lot is the need to slave away in solitude for hours on end. Compared with this, a trip to a new place to promote bookish-ness generally, and one's own books in particular, can be enormous FUN.

For the truth is, and I say this with fulsome apologies to any shy and retiring poets and novelists who may read these words, that the link between authors, actors and stand-up comics which I suggested earlier on is much less tenuous than it may appear. Actually, there's more than a bit of 'ham' in many writers.

Take the great Charles Dickens, for example. Just published, with glorious illustrations by Alan Marks (see Shirley

Hughes's article on pages 20-21) is the version of **David Copperfield** which Dickens himself abridged for public reading. It reduces the original novel to a recitation-length of an hour or so - if 'reduced' is quite the right word. Dickens didn't just cut, he re-shaped, re-wrote and learned his new script by heart. Also, as Professor Philip Collins makes clear in his detailed commentary on Dickens's public readings in Britain and America - surely among the first and most famous of all author visits - the theatrical possibilities of such occasions were taken completely seriously. **The New York Times**, of 11th December 1867, was especially impressed with his rendition of the death of Steerforth:

'Here Mr Dickens displayed his dramatic power in a very remarkable manner. The tone in which David, knowing what the answer will be, and yet dreading to hear it, asks, 'Has anybody come ashore?? - strikes to the heart of every person within reach of his voice. And the answer! In the book it is simply 'yes?'; but Mr Dickens, in the person of the old fisherman, does not speak. - he only bows his head; and in that simple action conveys the whole story which the lips cannot speak. Acting more impressive than this we have never witnessed. The whole audience felt its power, and the hush that fell upon the room was for the moment almost painful.'

With Children's Book Week in the offing, the nation's poets, novelists and illustrators had better take note. Or maybe drama lessons.

Of course, and here's my third reason, the pay-off for Dickens's audience was tremendous. According to Professor Collins, *'to hear Dickens read instead of reading the books oneself was like meeting someone instead of getting a letter from him - or like seeing a stereoscopic instead of a two dimensional photograph - or a great painting instead of an engraving of it.'* With suitable technological updating, this might describe the optimum impact of any author visit today.

Mind you, the pay-off for Dickens himself was far from negligible. In Professor Collins's estimate, almost half the £93,000 fortune Dickens left in his will - an enormous sum in those days - was the profit from his readings rather than his writing. Would-be imitators had better watch out, though. In the opinion of most literary historians, it's what killed him in the end.

Enjoy the issue!

Sikes and Nancy and Other Public Readings, by Charles Dickens, edited by Prof. Philip Collins, Oxford, 0 19 281617 9, £5.99

For more information about CHILDREN'S BOOK WEEK, contact Young Book Trust on 0181 870 9055 or 0131 229 3663.

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