



## Editorial ? March 1996

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[97](#) [2]

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News and comment from the Editor.

### Following the Fattest Puffin

**Kaye Webb**

**26th January 1914 - 16th January 1996**

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An obituary in the **Guardian**, the **Telegraph**, **The Times**, the **Independent** - and even the **Daily Mail**? This is a rare accolade for someone whose work lay mainly in children?s books. Add to this heartfelt tributes from within the trade by the likes of Michael Bond, Raymond Briggs and Alan Garner and the recipient begins to take on heroic, even legendary, proportions. Kaye Webb, who died just a few days short of her eighty-second birthday, richly deserved such attention and such status. She was, quite simply, larger than life... much, much more than ?the fattest Puffin?, which is how she described herself.

By now the facts of her career are pretty well-known: the early years in journalism, following in her parents? footsteps; the three failed marriages - including the last, to Ronald Searle, from which she never fully recovered; her dazzling success after she?d succeeded Eleanor Graham as editor of Britain?s first children?s paperback list; her crucial contributions to the Children?s Book Circle and the Federation of Children?s Book Groups. She won the Eleanor Farjeon Award in 1969, was made an MBE in 1974 and became one of the first women directors in British publishing. Between her first Puffin - **The Hobbit** in 1961 - and her last - **I Like This Poem** in 1979 - she presided over a quadrupling in Puffin sales, set up the redoubtable Puffin Club and enhanced the list?s reputation with books like **A Dog So Small**, **A Wizard of Earthsea**, **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** and **Watership Down**. ?My business life has worked out beautifully, with perfect timing,? she once commented. Typically, however, she went on to remark, ?my private life has been the reverse?.

Kaye Webb, then... publisher extraordinary. That her success was brought about despite life-long pain from arthritis is not the least of her achievements. No wonder the **Daily Telegraph**, after a characteristic sideswipe at contemporary reading-habits, declared in a leading article, ?We need a new Kaye Webb, 50 years younger?.

Well, yes. The dynamism, the dedication, the ceaseless demand for excellence in all its forms is as desirable today as it always was... but it?s hard to believe that Kaye herself would be entirely comfortable with the ?spin? the **Daily Telegraph** puts on the compliments it pays her. For a start, her business acumen notwithstanding, she was motivated by a love of books rather than sales-figures. ?In an ideal world,? she declared, ?no one would try to make money out of children?s books. We are making literature human beings.? She had an unstuffy sense of fun, too - as many a Puffin Club member, or Puffin author, will testify. Also, she knew how fortunate she was to have been in just the right place at just the right time... a time of confidence, of expansion, of resources for reading which, if not limitless (when are they

ever that?), were nonetheless *available*.

It's very different nowadays. A 32-year-old Kaye Webb would find herself in circumstances of diminishing public provision; of ever-increasing competition from a whole range of alternative attention-catchers; of a National Curriculum that's actually reduced the time assigned to Literacy; and of a market system, post NBA, of somewhat dubious efficacy. Altogether, contemporary Kayes-in-waiting will need to be the fittest and fleetest as well as fattest... so only giants need apply.

Enjoy the issue!

*A tribute to Kaye Webb presented by Chris Powling will be broadcast on 'Treasure Islands', BBC Radio 4, Wednesday 27th March at 2.45 pm.*

*The following review was received at the **BfK** office the week before Kaye Webb died:*

## **Family Tree**

Edited by Kaye Webb, Puffin, 0 14 034833 6, £4.99

An important anthology from someone who placed books at the centre of her life. Highly entertaining, this careful compilation also provides a unique glimpse at family portrayed in quality children's fiction by renowned authors - E Nesbit, Noel Streatfeild, Eve Garnett, Mrs Molesworth, Louisa May Alcott, Russell Hoban, Charlotte Brontë... et al. (Actually, had original publication dates of the stories been included it would have proved even more relevant and interesting.)

This will whet the appetite to read particular titles and authors in many nine-year-olds - though the print is a bit small. There's comfort, too, for older readers when childhood perfection has dimmed and the faults and quirks of one's own and associated families must be faced. Any sensitive adolescent, literature student, librarian or social historian will find this work invaluable. So will all childhood-celebrating adults who revel in re-reading snippets from long established favourites.

Thank you, Kaye Webb. **Gill Roberts**

Page Number:

3

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