



Politics and Children's Stories Part 2

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Jessica Yates' selection of books with political themes.

Part 2 of **Jessica Yates'** selection of stories with political themes

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Part Two of this selection takes political fiction with a real-life setting through the Second World War, and the beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, to multi-ethnic Britain and international terrorism/guerilla warfare. I have, however, left out several relevant books by Mildred Taylor and Jan Needle, because they were annotated by Judith Elkin in her Lifelines series last year (see **BfK** 22).

Then I have chosen a few fantasy and science fiction novels from the many available, and concluded the list with three picture-books. Again, I have omitted books recently well-publicised in **Books for Keeps**, such as **When the Wind Blows**, **Brother in the Land**, and **The Butter Battle Book**.

In making my selection I have looked for balanced presentation of complex issues; and although I have tried to provide for younger readers, most of these books are for more experienced readers who should, one hopes, bring some knowledge of life, current events and other reading to these novels.

The Thirties and the Second World War

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit - (1971)

Judith Kerr, Collins, 0 00 184913 1, £5.50; Fontana Lions, 0 00 670801 3, £1.25

The well-known, autobiographical story of Anna's escape from Nazi Germany. Her father, a Jewish intellectual, was a double marked man. The story continues with **The Other Way Round** (Collins and Fontana Lions) in which the family copes with life in wartime England. Anna, as schoolgirl and student, adapts far better than her parents, who cannot find suitable employment.

The Machine Gunners - (1975)

Robert Westall, Macmillan, 1975, 0 333 18644 3, £4.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.0973 X, £1.25 M Books, 0 333 27868 2, £1.75

A Tyneside gang's passion for collecting war souvenirs gets out of hand when they salvage a machine gun and plan to shoot down German planes. Against this misguided enthusiasm is set the story of a captured German parachutist who becomes their prisoner and friend. To protect the secret of the gun and the German, Chas McGill has to confront the

violent school bully, who, it seems, can only be defeated by superior violence. Carnegie Medal, 1975

Mischling, Second Degree - (1978)

Ilse Koehn, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 89861 7, £4.95; Puffin Plus, 0 14 03.1356 7, £1.75 Collins Cascades, 0 00 330001 3, £1.95

Another autobiographical novel. Ilse Koehn's parents divorce to protect her, and her part-Jewish ancestry remains a secret. Thus, like other German girls, she joins the Hitler youth, and is evacuated to Czechoslovakia. Returning to Berlin when the war is nearly over, she undergoes the horrors of 'liberation' by the Red Army, out to rape and pillage. This book corrects the stereotyped view of Germans as Nazis, showing how many were terrorised into keeping silent, and how many opposed Hitler and the war.

Contemporary Settings

Under Goliath - (1977)

Peter Carter, OUP, 0 19 271405 8, £3.75; Puffin, 0 14 03.1132 7, £1.25

An uneasy friendship between a Protestant and a Catholic boy ends in the riots of August 1969, when the current Troubles in Northern Ireland began. Here is a book which does not take sides, but describes the idealism and bigotry in each community. The narrative told by Alan, the Protestant, effectively conveys the idiom of Northern Irish speech. ('Goliath' is the nickname for the largest crane in the Belfast shipyards.)

Come to Mecca and other stories - (1978)

Farrukh Dhondy, Collins, 0 00 184134 3, £4.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 671519 2, £1 Collins Cascades, 0 00 330006 4, £1.35

In this collection Dhondy examines situations familiar to Black and Asian youth: a strike at a garment factory and opportunist extreme-left involvement; female unemployment leading to prostitution; the Notting Hill Carnival; the persecution of Asians in the East End; and the development of a reggae poet/DJ in the style of Linton Kwesi Johnson. Noteworthy, however, is the humour in these stories, as well as the authentic dialogue, whether the story deals with Asians, West Indians or Cockneys. Other Award, 1979; Collins/Fontana Multi-Ethnic Book Award, 1978.

A Kind of Wild Justice - (1978)

Bernard Ashley, OUP, 0 19 271417 1, £5.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.1262 5, £1.50; Heinemann New Windmills, 0 435 12249 5, £1.90

The Bradshaw brothers, two East End crooks, effectively control their neighbourhood. Ronnie Webster's father is arrested after driving a getaway car, and his mother promptly walks out of home. Alone in the world, and virtually illiterate, Ronnie nevertheless manages to get his revenge on the Bradshaws and secure his father's release. A sub-plot tells of Manjit Mirza, Ronnie's reading-partner in school, anxiously awaiting her father's (illegal) arrival in Britain. This is being fixed by the Bradshaws Ronnie's success in nailing them means that Manjit will not see her father - for many years, at least.

The Seventh Raven - (1981)

Peter Dickinson, Gollancz, 0 575 02960 9, £5.95; Puffin Plus, 0 14 03.1506 3, £1.50

This takes the real-life situation of a children's opera with a cast of 100, adds to the cast the son of the Mattean ambassador, and breaks up the dress rehearsal when four guerrillas from this imaginary South American state burst in and take everyone hostage. They want Juan, who was playing the part of 'the seventh raven', but is now disguised in a girl's costume by the resourceful wardrobe mistress. But as a life-long socialist, isn't she betraying the Cause? The guerrillas accuse the upper-middle-class community of wasting time on musical pursuits when they could be campaigning against fascism; Dickinson represents all points of view and refuses to indict the bourgeoisie.

After the First Death - (1979)

Robert Cormier, Gollancz, 0 575 02665 0, £5.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 671705 5, £1.25

No list of political fiction for the young would be complete without at least one from Robert Cormier, who has shed a murky light on the underside of American society: the pressures, compromises and illegalities behind the democratic facade. In **After the First Death**, terrorists - or freedom fighters - hold a bus of young children hostage. The US General, an expert in counter-intelligence, sends his son to negotiate. The son is tortured and gives away information, just as the General calculated, knowing his son's weaknesses. After the siege is over and brave youngsters have died, the General himself will meet a worse fate.

Rainbows of the Gutter - (1983)

Rukshana Smith, Bodley Head Paperback Originals, 0 370 30526 4, £3.50

This book challenges us with an indictment of British society as seen from its Black immigrant community. The reviewers were highly critical: 'unconvincing ... melodramatic ... superficial' (School Librarian) and it was not included in either the teenage or the multicultural section of Signal Review 2 for 1983. I prefer the comments from the Other Award shortlist 'A naive but angrily written novel of contemporary Black lives'. I consider this the most partisan book on my list. There is little story, apart from the education and first working years of the hero, but it always engaged my interest, with its persistent criticism of the state of Britain today. Rukshana Smith has also written Sumitra's Story (Bodley Head) about an Asian girl who feels she cannot continue to observe the traditional way of life, and secretly leaves home.

Fantasy and Science Fiction

The Chronicles of Narnia - (1950-56)

C.S. Lewis, Collins and Bodley Head (hardback) Fontana Lions

Like it or not, the Narnian chronicles are frequently our children's first introduction to many political ideas. The kingdom (anathema to republicans!) is usually under threat from invasion by witches or the quasi-Arabian Calormenes. Dictatorship, slavery, indoctrination, religious persecution, guerrilla warfare, secret police, turning-to-stone, and even a weapon of total destruction (the Deplorable Word) - are all found in the Chronicles. Added to that the explicitly Christian content, and one can see why the books have come under fire from left-wing critics. Will they continue to be chosen as class readers in multi-faith schools? I will continue to recommend them for their exciting plots, concept of moral responsibility and awareness of our literary heritage, as well as, politically, their anti-totalitarian stance.

The Borribles - (1976)

Michael de Larrabeiti, Bodley Head, 0 370 10898 1, £2.95 Piccolo, 0 330 26857 0, £1.50

and

The Borribles Go for Broke - (1981)

Bodley Head, 0 370 30413 6, £3.75; Piccolo, 0 330 28176 3, £1.50

Books for Keep has praised this saga before (Issue 18). It is a major work of fantasy, located not in Wales or Narnia, but in the inner city. A group of Borribles, 12-year-old dropouts and school truants who never grow up, set out to Rumbledom to wipe out the Rumble High Command in single combat. Returning with the Rumble Treasure Chest, they are trapped by Flinthead, a dictator who has converted the Wendles of Wandsworth to a militaristic society. In the second book Flinthead's tyranny is broken and he meets a gory end. The saga is political both internally, in its theme of conflict, invasion and survival, and as a literary work parodying the 'nicer' children's classics, especially *The Wombles*, *The Hobbit* and *Peter Pan*.

The Prince in Waiting trilogy - (1970-72)

John Christopher, Puffin, 1983, 0 14 03.1654 X, £2.95

In a future Britain after a series of geophysical disasters, the inhabitants have regressed to a mediaeval-style, machine-hating society of city-states. Mutants, or 'polymufs', form a slave class, women are subordinate to men, and men gain status through skill in fighting and hunting. A priest class, the Seers, commands worship of the 'Spirits', and Christianity just about survives as the faith of the poorest. Luke, heir to the Princedom of Winchester, describes his rise to power, guided by the Seers, who turn out not to be priests, but scientists faking the magic tricks which deceive the people. Luke is to be their tool to reunite Britain as one kingdom and restore civilisation, but their plans go wrong. A gripping story of political manipulation, and the qualities needed for leadership.

Z for Zachariah - (1975)

Robert C. O'Brien, Gollancz, 0 575 03378 9, £6.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 671081 6, £1; Heinemann New Windmills, 0 435 12211 8, £1.65

O'Brien reverses the conventions of the SF last-man-on-earth story. We expect to read the coming-together of an unlikely couple in order to repopulate the earth. Instead, the girl says no. She won't mate with this flawed, murdering Zachariah who would rape her to make sure of her, and away she goes into the nuclear wasteland, where she may find other survivors. A book that questions sex-roles as well as warning against nuclear war.

Futuretrack 5 - (1983)

Robert Westall, Kestrel, 1983, 0 7226 5880 X, £5.95 Scheduled for Puffin Plus next spring

In this world of the 21st century, after some unexplained international crisis, Britain is virtually on her own, and has become a police state. Everyone is labelled, either a Tech (the rulers), Est (Establishment - the rich), Unnem (Unemployed) or Paramil (the police). Henry Kitson qualifies as a Tech, but rebels and joins the Unnems in their reservations, where they spend their time in gambling, motor-bike racing, whoring and fighting, and life is short. Discovering that no dictator but a powerful computer is in charge, carrying out the extermination of the Unnems and any protesters, he plans to wreck its circuits or change its 'mind'. If Henry succeeds in mastering the computer, he will acquire ultimate power - will he reform society without being corrupted himself? Other SF novels using the concept a stratified and heavily controlled society are John Christopher's **The Guardians** (Puffin) and Ann Schlee's **The Vandal** (Magnet).

Picture Books

The Lorax - (1972)

Dr. Seuss, Collins, 0 00 195458 X, £4.95

A boy wanders into a murky, derelict part of town and hears the story of the Once-ler. Suddenly pages become colourful, and the landscape full of trees, water, swans, bears and fish, living in harmony. When the Onceler, a travelling pedlar, arrives, he starts to cut down the Truffula Trees to make (useless) Thneeds. The Lorax, a tree spirit, expostulates with him as the trees fall, a factory is built, and the bears, swans and fish all migrate for lack of food, water and clean air. The Once-ler refuses to listen, but when the last tree falls, cloud-pollution settles permanently over the area, and the Lorax departs. The Once-ler now gives the boy the very last Truffula seed.

'Grow a forest. Protect it from axes

that hack.

Then the Lorax

and all of his friends

may come back.'

Dinosaurs and all that Rubbish - (1972)

Michael Foreman, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 02234 7, £4.25 Puffin, 0 14 050 098 7, £1.25

This could be a sequel to **The Lorax**. Man flies to the stars, leaving behind an Earth totally polluted by the factories needed to build the space-rocket. Dinosaurs awaken, tidy up the earth, and a green paradise returns. So does Man, who has found nothing in space worth the journey. Now Man must promise to live in harmony with nature.

See also Foreman's **War and Peas** (Hamish Hamilton) a fable about the world food problem.

Bear Goes to Town - (1982)

Anthony Browne, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10817 9, £4.50 Sparrow, 0 09 932040 1, £1.60

This is a sequel to **Bear Hunt**. Bear has a magic pencil with which he draws his way out of trouble. Bear makes friends with Cat, but Cat is captured by a man in uniform with a skull-badge. When Bear goes to the rescue, he finds other animals trapped by the swastika-shaped guards, and with his magic pencil he saves them all, except for the sheep who refuses to leave. Is this 'about' vivisection, or eating meat, or is it an allegory of Auschwitz? Vegetarian parents will approve, but although the wordage is brief, I'm inclined to recommend it for the 7+ age-group, rather than the 4-7's suggested by the publisher's catalogue.

Jessica Yates was librarian in an ILEA secondary school for ten years. She reviews and contributes to British Book News, Contact, the TES, the School Librarian and other journals. Since 1982 she has combined work as a freelance with being a mother.

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