

BACK

# Lucy Mangan

## How do you choose books for children?

I was invited to a meeting of the Booktrust charity this week, to add what minimal help I could to a discussion of which children's books might be suitable for inclusion in its Letterbox scheme. This is a scheme under which looked-after children (as children in care are now known, though if the Conservatives are back in by the time you read this, I presume all this politically incorrect nonsense will have been swept away and we can get back to calling them Drains On The State and cursing them for their idiocy in choosing not to go to Eton) receive six-monthly parcels of books designed to ameliorate some of the social and cultural deprivations brought about by their circumstances and, almost more importantly, to try to show that reading can be fun, a source of real and lasting pleasure, and not the painful grind it may appear to be in school.

So far, the scheme has been aimed at younger children, but this year it is being extended to 11- to 13-year-olds. So we sat there, sifting through the embarrassment of riches that is past and current children's literature, and trying to see it from a new perspective. Should the happy ending of *The Railway Children* - wrongfully imprisoned father restored to the family - rule it in or out? Is that inspiring false hope in children with absent parents or providing a welcome dose of escapism? Is *The Secret Garden* too girly, or might the rage of the uprooted Mary provide a point of identification for displaced readers of either sex? If you didn't have an adult to whom you could refer for further information or clarification, would you be glad of a nonfiction book about X, Y or Z, or would you be frustrated?

Then there are the "external"



children at whom the scheme is aimed.

Looked-after children frequently have a lower reading age than their actual age, so there needs to be a delicate balance struck in providing books that are "easy", but not insultingly so. As the months go by, the hope is that more challenging books can be sent out, but again with the hope of stoking an appetite, not force-feeding knowledge.

Foster parents themselves are often intimidated by the thought of reading to their children, so a book that is familiar from their childhoods or from television has something in its favour. In above-averagely chaotic lives, short chapters are a distinct advantage. These considerations don't dominate, but they are added to the mix.

And what do you do about the fact that girls will read "boys' books" more readily than vice versa? Do you take advantage of this - especially because boys often read less and are further behind their chronological age than girls are - and put a few more boy-friendly books in there? Or do you maintain an even split and hope that privacy, and the pleasure of a present, will help the boys overcome their prejudices?

I didn't do much, occasionally proffering such vitally nuanced criticisms as, "I love that one!" or, "I hate that one!" - and marvelled at the skill and sensitivity that the people who spend their lives working with children brought to the task. They juggled a million considerations (as, I imagine, those in all the myriad manifestations of the caring professions do) - short-term, long-term, practical and idealistic, personal and ideological - with dexterity and grace, and it was beautiful to watch.

It will give me something good to remember if and when the dark blue cloud settles over us all once more.

considerations, if you like. Should the overwhelming popularity and, therefore, relative availability - via school libraries or friends - of some books (Jacqueline Wilson, Harry Potter and so on) mean that they should be left out? A children's librarian on the panel pointed out that possession of your own copy of such a book frequently functions as a badge of belonging, which is, perhaps, particularly valuable to the

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