

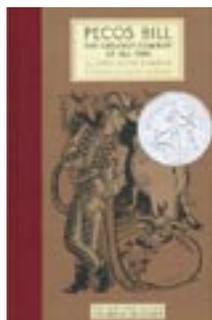
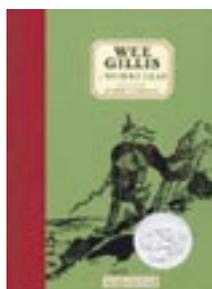
Pleasure rather than Obligation -

The New York Review Children's Collection

S ometime in the late 1980s, Jason Epstein, one of the founders of *The New York Review of Books*, came up with the idea of the *Reader's Catalog*, a sort of grandiose mail-order listing of "the 40,000 Best Books in Print". Fully annotated and categorised, it's not surprising that it weighed in at about the same bulk as a couple of big-city telephone directories. The only fly in the ointment was that between the appearance of the first and second editions 15,000 of the 40,000 listed books disappeared, went out of print. This prompted one of those light-bulb moments. "We began to think," said *New York Review* publisher Rea S. Hederman, "about how many books we admired [and] would like to see *back* in print."

The NYRB Classics series was launched in 1999. With now over 250 titles in print, it's a determinedly eclectic mix of fiction and non-fiction from a diversity of eras and areas, including a number of titles that should bring blushes to the cheeks of some negligent UK publishers. In the words of Tom Junod in *Esquire* magazine, the series "replicates the experience of finding a forgotten book in some crowded, aromatic warren in a small college town." Furthermore, he notes acutely, it specialises "in pleasures rather than obligations."

The same goes for its junior partner, The New York Review Children's Collection, which began publishing in 2003. With its avowed intent of "rewarding" readers with the return into print of their favourite books, the choice of titles ensures that this series, too, ranks pleasure way ahead of obligatory literary forelock-tugging. And, in so doing, it manages to shake down, brush off and generally redefine and refresh that seductive and often deceptive word "classic" (with a satisfyingly democratic lower case "c" in the publicity material), and conferring that status on, to pick from the list at random, Rumer Godden's *The Mouse Wife*, Ruth Krauss's *The Backward Day*, Munro Leaf's *Wee Gillis*, James Cloyd Bowman's *Pecos Bill: The Greatest Cowboy of All Time*, Penelope Farmer's *Charlotte Sometimes* and Dino Buzzati's *The Bears' Famous Invasion of Sicily*. A mix of the familiar and – especially for UK readers perhaps – the not so: the pleasure of discovery being one of the joys of the New York Review Children's Collection.

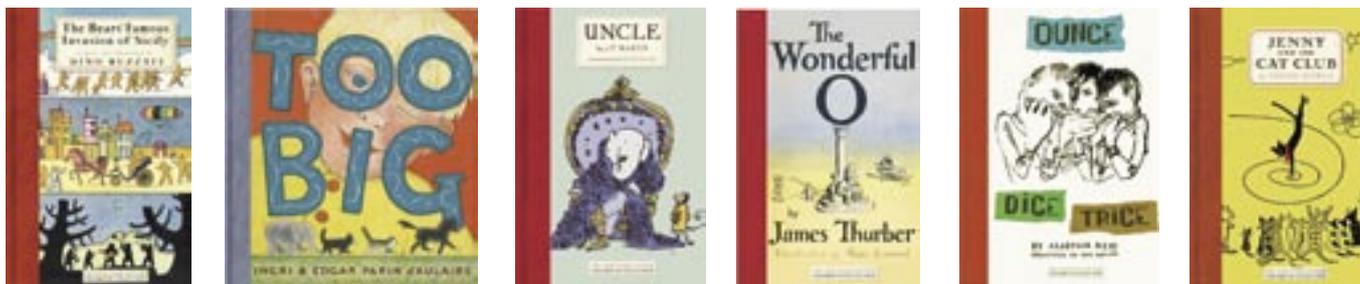


Edwin Frank, who edits both the Children's Collection and the NYRB Classics, an admirable combination of roles that acknowledges the often disregarded consanguinity between children's and adult books, said in an email:

*I confess I don't have a checklist by which to evaluate candidates for the Children's Collection. My criteria are flexible, subject to change when I'm won over by a book. Some history might help to explain. We started by re-printing books for relatively mature readers – Sheila Burnford's *Bel Ria: Dog of War*, which is as much for adults as children, is an example – but then we found Eleanor Averill's charming *Jenny* and the *Cat Club* series, one of which I'd read to my daughter when she was little, but which I had no idea was so extensive, and that got us into doing picture books. Then, thanks to Michael Chabon [author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, etc], we hit upon the d'Aulaires' wonderful and lavishly illustrated *Book of Norse Myths*, and we found ourselves doing picture books in a very big way ...*

The quality of production and presentation are additional attractions. Unlike the adult series, which, although handsome enough, are published in paperback, the children's reissues are robust hardbacks with coloured illustrated covers and distinctive red or blue cloth spines. They're good to look at; sit nicely in the hand; substantial; sturdy; with no sign of skimping; made to last. "The parents and grandparents who'll be buying most of them," Edwin Frank explained in an interview with a *Washington Post* writer, "tend to value quality and permanence."

I sampled five contrasting books from the list. *Too Big*, a picture book by Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire about a boy who outgrows the things he wants to do but dreams of when he's older and even bigger. *Uncle*, an eccentric novel of Goon-like humour and exaggeration by J. P. Martin, an English Methodist minister, with illustrations by Quentin Blake. *The Wonderful O*, the great humorist James Thurber's semantically virtuosic tale of pirates, treasure, love, liberty, humour and the joy of language, illustrated by Marc Simont. *Ounce Dice Trice* by Alistair Reid, with drawings by Ben Shahn: an 'odd collection of words and names, to amuse and amaze you' is what it says and what you get. My favourite, because our son enjoyed them as bedtime stories, *Jenny and the*



Cat Club, written and illustrated by Esther Averill, the delightful adventures of a group of night-prowling cats in Greenwich Village.

The *New York Review of Books* has long been established as a “powerful brand”, strong enough for its book publishing operations to be launched without outside funding; the “modest investments” required came from the magazine’s profits. In the words of Rea Hederman, “It’s essentially always been self-supporting.” When it

comes to resources and backing, UK publishers such as Barn Owl Books* and Jane Nissen Books, who share the same philosophy as the NYRB people and indefatigably republish books they believe deserve to be considered by new generations of readers, cannot help but suffer by comparison. And what chance is there of any home-grown literary magazine deigning – let alone having the wherewithal– to undertake a similar children’s book project?

Chris Stephenson

* Recently acquired by Frances Lincoln

NOW DON'T GET ME WRONG... Chris Powling

Number 30: *Literacy Lite*

...it’s hardly a revelation that there are two competing ways to conceptualise literacy:

- as a skill-based activity which demands discipline, practice and repetition.
- as a means of making the world meaningful...with motivation and appropriate materials at a premium.

Most of us recognise that young learners are best served by some combination of both approaches (though not necessarily in that order). If only the now defunct National Literacy Strategy had been as open-minded. Its relentless prioritising of the first, by way of drilling, testing and ‘texts’, so undermined the second that reading and writing for the sheer fun of it has become an endangered activity in the nation’s primary classrooms. Similarly endangered are those crucial supports for pleasure and the making of meaning... *books*.

At which point, enter Sir Jim Rose. Surely the appropriate sections in his ‘Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum’ (Crown copyright 2009) would set out to correct this imbalance? Well, so they do...up to a point. For instance, at long last there’s welcome acknowledgement that Speaking and Listening is hugely important for children in its own right as well as underpinning their encounters with the

other modes of language. Even more welcome is the daring recommendation that “children should work with writers, playwrights and poets in and beyond the classroom.”

Wow!

Unfortunately, the impression this may give of a fresh, more exciting pedagogy is soon dispelled. In the ‘drafts for consultation’ the attention given to drills-and-skills exceeds meaning-making by a ratio of about ten to one. Equally disappointing is Sir Jim’s singling out of a particularly high-achieving school in terms that suggest the National Literacy Strategy at its most rigid. In fact, the Review as a whole shows a clear preference for the word ‘text’ (fifteen mentions) over ‘literature’ (three mentions) and ‘books’ (two mentions). Not for Sir Jim, apparently, the observation of a friend of mine that “kids lose themselves in a book not a text...and that’s where they find themselves, too.” Yet what better motivation could they possibly have to produce their own writing?

That’s if there are books available, of course. The most conspicuous absence of the lot from Sir Jim’s ruminations on Literacy is the word ‘library’. It gets no mention at all - not local library, not school’s library service, not school library, not classroom library. With spending cuts looming, is he trying to tell us something?