

The Looking Glass : New Perspectives on Children's Literature

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A Distant Mirror: Are UK Libraries losing the plot.

A Distant Mirror

JOURNAL CONTENT

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All

Are UK Libraries losing the plot?

Ruth Allen

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- [By Author](#)
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During May there has been a flurry of articles in the UK press bewailing the latest loan figures that have come from the Audit Commission (the UK's 'watchdog' for public spending). In a study of the 3,930 libraries in England and Wales that are run by local authorities, they record a 25% drop in borrowing over the past decade. Rather more worrying is their report that book spending has apparently fallen by a third. The arrival of the Internet has been cited as one of the main reasons for these figures, which are being called 'a crisis of confidence' in *The Independent* of 17 May. There is also concern at the spending on 'hi-tech' equipment at the expense of the buildings themselves, many of which are old, and often are no longer in the most convenient place for the public they aim to serve. There has been a large increase in sales of new books, so libraries are 'in danger of becoming a ghetto for the poor' -- thus *The Independent*.

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INFORMATION

- [For Readers](#)
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The latest (June 2002) issue of [Update](#), the monthly magazine of CILIP, the newly combined Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (formerly The Library Association and The Institute of Information Scientists), tells a different story. It carries a full report on *Building Better Libraries* -- the conclusions of the Audit Commission's Best Value library inspectors after their first 36 inspections (www.audit-commission.gov.uk). There is a chart showing what users liked and disliked -- librarians (and ex-librarians) among us will be gratified to

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The explosive child, according to his

learn that the staff are libraries' greatest asset! (Lack of publicity being a point of 'failure'). Visits may be down by 17%, but there has been a growth in reader development and the People's Network (a scheme to get PCs with Internet access into public libraries). Opening hours still need to be more in line with the needs of the community. 'Traditional' services are the ones most in danger -- there is money for new developments and computers, but if books are still the 'core' the money to buy them is a shrinking resource.

Update also celebrates the tenth year of the 'Libraries Change Lives' award; the winner will be announced on 26 June. The shortlist for this includes 'The Big Book Share' -- a scheme allowing fathers, grandfathers, uncles and godfathers in Nottingham Prison to help their children's reading development by reading and recording stories onto tapes they can hand over in special 'family visit sessions'; The Patients Library at the State Hospital, Carstairs, Lanarkshire (Scotland) -- which has helped the mentally-ill patients reduce their social exclusion; and RAYS (The Reading and You Scheme), Calderdale and Kirklees Libraries -- which works with local primary care groups of the National Health Service, using bibliotherapy and informal reading groups to help sufferers of depression, anxiety and stress-related disorders. The winner, announced in the August issue of *Update* was 'The Big Book Share' at Nottingham Prison.

On another page *Update* gives the news that The Reading Agency will come into being in July. This is a merger of three successful reading development agencies (The Reading Partnership, LaunchPad and Well Worth Reading), to be funded by the Arts Council, Southern Arts and CILIP itself. Current projects which will continue include Chatterbox (children's reader groups) YouthBOOX (for teens), The Vital Link (basic skills) and summer reading schemes. The board includes the Director of Libraries & Heritage for Derbyshire, the Director of Marketing at Hodder Children's Books, writers and other library professionals.

This issue of *Update* also gives the shortlists for the 2001 Carnegie and Greenaway Medals, the UK almost-equivalents of the Newbery and Caldecott, decided and awarded each year by the Youth Libraries Group of CILIP.

Carnegie Shortlist:

- Sharon Creech *Love that Dog*;
- Peter Dickinson *The Ropemaker*;
- Eva Ibbotson *Journey to the River Sea*;
- Elizabeth Laird *Jake's Tower*;
- Geraldine McCaughrean *The Kite Rider*;
- Geraldine McCaughrean *Stop the Train*;
- Terry Pratchett *Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents*;
- Virginia Euwer Wolff *True Believer*.

Greenaway Shortlist:

- Jez Alborough *Fix-it Duck*;
- Russell Ayto *The Witch's Children* (author Ursula Jones);
- Nicola Bayley *Katje The Windmill Cat* (author Gretchen Woelfie);
- Caroline Birch *Silver Shoes*;
- Helen Cooper *Tatty Ratty*;
- Charles Fuge *Sometimes I Like to Curl Up in a Ball* (author Vicki Churchill);
- Bob Graham *Let's Get a Pup!*;
- Chris Riddell *Pirate Diary*.

You may well recognise Sharon Creech and Virginia Euwer Wolff as US

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authors among the Carnegie listings, and possibly some of the others? The Greenaway list includes some old favourites -- Nicola Bayley and previous winner Helen Cooper -- as well as newer faces.

The Carnegie Medal was won by Terry Pratchett for *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents*; Geraldine McCaughrean was Highly Commended for *Stop the Train* and Sharon Creech's *Love That Dog* was Commended. Karen Usher, Chair of the judging panel described *The Amazing Maurice...* as 'a brilliant twist on the tale of the Pied Piper that is funny and irreverent, but also dark and subversive'.

Pratchett has made the shortlist before, with *Johnny and the Bomb*, which was Commended for the 1996 Carnegie, and many of his fans would contend that this formal recognition is long overdue. The humour and apparent 'easy read' style of his books belies the very real quality and wit of his writing. Pratchett is interested in the 'narrative impulse' and has dealt with it in several of his 'Discworld' series, as well as using, in this winning title, the idea of a story's own requirement to get itself told - and retold.

The Kate Greenaway Medal was won by Chris Riddell, who is political cartoonist of the Observer, for *Pirate Diary*. It is an information book, the first such for several decades to have won this award, being a fictionalised account of life and adventures on the high seas, written by Richard Platt. Highly Commended were: *Fix-it Duck* by Jez Alborough and Charles Fuge's *Sometimes I Like to Curl Up in a Ball* (with text by Vicki Churchill).

There is a website (www.ckg.org.uk) which is planned as 'a dynamic springboard for interactive debate', and on which some 4000 reviews of the shortlisted titles will be posted. The ceremony to announce the winners and runners-up of both medals was at the British Library on 12 July.

Back to the Press -- *The Independent* on 27 May picks up on its earlier report from the Audit Commission and compares that with a three-month study of the reading habits of 400 adults in Britain. The 'average daily reading' per person breaks down as:

Media	Time per day
Newspapers	17 minutes
Fiction	11 minutes
Online	7 minutes
Non-Fiction	6 minutes
Magazines	5 minutes
Reference	2 minutes

But the paper's Boyd Tonkin looks behind the headline figures and discovers that of the sample (only 200 couples, after all) 40% 'simply don't bother with books.' He expresses the hope that the new Reading Agency will 'promote books in general, rather than (as publishers do) their own titles.'

At least books are in the media at the moment, even without a new Harry Potter in sight!

References

The Independent -- UK daily broadsheet newspaper --

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/>

Library and Information Update -- monthly journal of the UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) -- <http://www.cilip.org.uk/update>

The Observer -- UK Sunday broadsheet newspaper -- <http://www.observer.co.uk/>

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