

# On Writing for Children

ENID BLYTON

In our September issue this distinguished children's author accepted our invitation to write about her work. This exclusive article should be regarded as supplementary. In it she answers some readers' queries. They will find it encouraging to learn that she had over 500 rejection slips before making any headway at all

*The illustrations were specially drawn by*  
**JOAN CATTLIN**

I HAVE been asked to write a further article on this subject, this time giving a little practical advice. The Editor has been kind enough to give me a few points that he thinks will interest his readers, and I will deal with these.

## Technical Details

There are some important small points to watch when you are writing a story for children. Remember that a long, solid paragraph will put off most young children, so break up your text into good short paragraphs. This applies even to writers for adults. We all know what an effort it is to wade through a page containing only one enormously long paragraph.

Have plenty of dialogue. Children like this—they are all "Alices" in this way—you remember how Alice-in-Wonderland looked at the book her elder sister was reading and didn't like it because it had no "conversations"? Dialogue makes a page look attractive and interesting.

You will find also that you can use dialogue to tell quite a large part of your story, and this is very much more dramatic and exciting than mere description. For instance, a child sails her

boat, overbalances and falls into the water, watched by children nearby. Here is one way of telling the episode:

Mary took her gay little boat to the river side. She bent down to sail it and suddenly overbalanced. The other children ran up, shouting.

And now here is a way of telling the same episode in dialogue, bringing to your readers a clear picture of the happening, coloured by the emotion of the dialogue:

"Look at my gay little boat!" Mary cried to Peter and Jane. "I'm going to sail it. Watch me put it on the water—there, see how beautifully she sails! She's bobbing up and down, she's—"

"Mary! Don't bend over so far! You'll fall in!" shouted Peter.

But he was too late. There was a loud splash! "She's in!" cried Jane. "Oh, look—she's gone right under! She'll be drowned! Quick, let's go to her!"

They ran at top speed. "Mary, Mary! Catch hold!" yelled Peter. "Oh, help, somebody! Mary's in the river!"

It takes longer to tell, but that doesn't matter. The whole scene has been brought to life by the quick dialogue, and the child-reader's imagination is caught and held.

Children nowadays do not like lengthy "descriptions" of scenery or states of mind, so leave them out. Sir Walter Scott lived in a



*Alice-in-Wonderland looked at the book her elder sister was reading.*

more leisurely age, when his long descriptions were enjoyed because there was all the time in the world to wade through them! But the tempo of life has changed, and neither adults nor children can be bothered to read long (and often boring) descriptions. The slickness of the cinema and the radio has sent them completely out of fashion—so, if you want to describe a sunset, do so in a few good and vividly chosen words, but don't devote a whole page to poetic outpourings.

## Plot

Be original in your plot and your characters. I once judged a children's-story competition written by adults, and nine out of ten wrote about two children who went to a fairy ball, ate off toadstools and danced in a fairy ring and went home again. Just the kind of thing that children don't like! They like originality, humour, lifelike characterization (very important, this) and their interest

must be gripped or they will not read on.

We can't wonder at the children liking only really interesting, exciting tales nowadays—writers have to compete with media that present a whole story either in vivid spoken words, complete with "noises off" (the radio), or with the cinema, which presents the story in moving picture as well as with dialogue and "noises off"—and now television with its intimacy has arrived! How much more competent and quick-moving our tales must be if we are going to expect the children to enjoy them through their imagination with no extraneous help of spoken dialogue, movement and appropriate sounds! Herein lies the reason why so many of the classics are outmoded—they are not geared



*"Look at my gay little boat!" Mary cried to Peter and Jane.*

to the modern tempo of life. It is not that they are not good—it is merely that they are not written for these fast-moving days.

I need hardly point out that over-sophistication, facetiousness or “writing down” are all detested by children. Be natural and easy and unaffected, just as you would be (or should be) when *talking* to children.

### Children of Other Lands

Do children of other lands like the same stories as ours do? Yes, definitely. A good story is always a good story, no matter whether it is read by our children, Australians, Chinese or German;

but it has to be a *good* story, and it should have children as the chief characters. It is easy for any child to identify himself with a child, even an alien child—but impossible for him to imagine himself a foreign adult. Children don't understand the workings of the adult mind. Nor should they.

My own books are translated into almost every European language. In addition, children in Iceland, Bantu children, Malaysians, Indonesians, Chinese—Americans, Canadians, Australians—all have my books, and, apparently, all find in them the same enjoyment that British children do.

I remember having an interesting letter from the librarian of the famous Raffles Library in Singapore, telling me that four different nationalities of children borrowed my books there. Later I had letters from these children of many nations, and all of them

said more or less the same things about the same books—it was obvious that a foreign upbringing made no difference at all—the Malay child, the Chinese, the Indian and the European were all of one mind about the stories they loved. It is not really difficult to find the common denominator of childhood in the telling of stories, and it is good to know that it is possible to bring British ways and ideas and ideals to many foreign races by way of books for their children.



*The hedgehog getting excited when the television televises beetles.*

### Are Children's Stories Read by Grown-ups?

This is a point that has been raised, and I

imagine that it means “read by grown-ups for their own pleasure” as distinct from reading them aloud to young children.

A really good children's story is always enjoyed by adults who have much to do with children, because a good tale gives them a real insight into their own children's minds. Very often, too, an adult will read a child's nature-book, because, if he knows little about nature, the simple, lucid way in which the facts are presented for the child-mind make an ideal introduction for an enquiring adult. Also, quite apart from these two reasons, many adults find enormous pleasure in children's books if they are good ones—I can read *Alice in Wonderland* with great pleasure!

### Who Buys Children's Books—Parents or Child?

This is another point very easy to answer. Both buy the books, of

course—but note how times are changing! The adult, if really intelligent, will come armed with a list of the books the child has said he hasn't got and would like, and will not buy haphazard nearly so often as he did. The child knows not only the books he wants—he knows the authors he likes too, and will go to any amount of pains to track down a book he yearns for. Children save up for and *buy* a very large number of their books—they are to be encouraged in this, for, unlike most adults, they would rather *possess* a book than borrow it. I have many times seen dozens of books belonging to one child, and in some cases well over a hundred—and how they read and re-read the ones they love!

I consider one reason for the failure of the Children's Book Tallies idea to be the fact that children suddenly realized that whereas a book cost only four shillings in *money*, it cost five shillings in *tallies* (these cost sevenpence halfpenny, but were only sixpence in purchasing value), and to a child an extra shilling is a lot. Children are realists, and they don't see why they should have to save up an extra shilling to buy a book with tallies when they can get it for a shilling less in money. Once this idea dawned on them the tallies were finished—and yet they were quite a good idea in many ways.

### Are Our Own Children

### Interested in Books About Children of Other Lands?

Yes, definitely—with a most important proviso: the story must be first class, and the different scenes and customs must be explained simply and interestingly. Otherwise it will be one more book put down unread.

### Can We Introduce Modern Inventions Into Children's Literature—for instance, can an animal character spend his evenings watching television?

I don't see why not! Animals do watch television. My cat does, every evening we have it on. I could write a most amusing story about it with my cat as chief character—or Brer Rabbit, or Mr. Prickles the Hedgehog or any animal I chose. As long as the story is good and the fantasy keeps within credible bounds and has touches of authentic detail, such as the hedgehog getting excited when the television televises *beetles*, there's no reason against it—except, of course, the fact that the majority of the country's children do not yet see television, and therefore the writer would be limiting the number of interested readers unnecessarily.

I have again come to the end of my space before I have answered some of the points raised for my comments, but I hope those I have dealt with have been satisfactorily cleared up. Alas—like all writers—I could go on for ever!

### Take My Tip . . .

. . . By KEITH WATERHOUSE

*Never screw a piece of paper up before throwing it into the waste-paper basket. Get into the habit of just dropping it into the basket unfolded. It is not unknown for a writer to throw the wrong sheet away!*