



Writer Reply: Henrietta Branford

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Henrietta Branford explains why writers need good teachers...

Why do writers need good teachers as much as teachers need good writers?

Henrietta Branford explains...

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`One grey morning the first snow began to

fall in the Valley of the Moomins. It fell

softly and quietly, and in a few hours

everything was white ... Soon

Moominhouse would be nothing but a big,

round snowball. The clocks stopped

ticking one by one. Winter had come.'

Thus begins my favourite Moomintroll book. There's a map with their house on, the two floors drawn separately so you see where everybody's bedroom is, and Chapter One starts with a picture of Moomintroll and Snufkin sitting on the bridge. A few words underneath tell you what's coming next - five small clouds unexpectedly appear, then Hemulen finds himself a new hobby; that sort of thing.

This whole book is written, illustrated, and designed in a way that's truly inviting: *`Come in,'* it says, 'explore, see what you make of all this snow!' (I wrote to Tove Jansson when I was little and she answered in careful printing, in English, with lavish illustrations. I remember feeling rather narked because she seemed to know the Moomins better than I did.)

Fred Inglis in **The Promise of Happiness** says that we write and teach literature because we want children 'to live well, to know and tell the truth', and certain books seem likely to help them do this. I like a bit of dross, who doesn't, and I wouldn't deny it to my children either, but I agree with Fred Inglis. Books which call you into a deeply imagined and well-constructed new world are beyond price; they open doors and windows in your life which, if you're lucky, stay permanently ajar. Not only books, of course: music, rock-climbing, a walk in the woods all quicken the spirit. Television

has its uses. But books are so handy, so cheap, so portable somehow. They're one of the most available sources of growth and pleasure that we have at our disposal, a human artefact that can delight and dumbfound us without our having to set foot outside the house. That for me is reason enough for writers to write them and teachers to labour to make them accessible to roomfuls of children.

So how can most children find their way to books, living as they do in a profoundly unbookish culture? Not the way I did, surely. I must have been unusually lucky. Education in a more formal sense didn't touch me. I didn't let it. But I was read to, by my mother and by the headmaster of my boarding school, who allowed me to lie under the piano combing my hair while he read **Great Expectations** and **The Mayor of Casterbridge** alternately. Most children, I suspect, must come to books, if they do, in less indulgent ways. Our education experience in Britain is both narrower and shorter than that of our more liberal European neighbours. School anyway is not the best place for books: they should be read in privacy, in the airing-cupboard (if yours is large enough), or by torchlight under the blankets. But for lots of children school is the only place where books are available. I'm amazed that it's possible, in the burly-burly of the classroom, to make books come alive for children, but I know that if large numbers of teachers weren't doing it successfully, even Roald Dahl wouldn't sell like he does, and the rest of us wouldn't stand a chance.

There are writers who write dull books and get them published by the cartload and some who write nasty, boring books and win prizes. And there are teachers who don't belong in classrooms, whose beggarly practice it will take government legislation in the form of the National Curriculum to shift.

Yet there are others who read aloud well-chosen, lively stories doing all the voices; who knowingly encourage the sort of chaotic and unbridled assemblies that result from studying the work of certain poets; those teachers welcome children into the heart and start of education. They, like most good writers, are in the business of seduction, trying to make a habitat in which children can grow and stretch and open and enjoy and rest. If I could court my readers as lusciously as Enobarbus describing Cleopatra's progress down the Nile, I would still need those teachers to be there, in the leaky, overcrowded classrooms, making welcome their motley Monday morning classes. However well a writer writes, for many children it will always be teachers who make safe the place where it feels right to imagine. Chris Zajac in Tracy Kidder's **Among Schoolchildren** should have the last word in any discussion of this process: welcoming a shy child on her first day she says 'I like having you here, Juanita. Do you like being here?'

Henrietta Branford is the author of **Royal Blunder**, Doubleday, 0 385 40034 9, £6.95; **Young Corgi**, 0 552 52713 0, £2.50 pbk.

There are eight Moomintroll titles available in paperback from Puffin.

The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction is published by Cambridge (0 521 27070 7) at £11.95.

Among Schoolchildren is published by Picador (0 330 31817 8) at £5.99 - see Ed's page of **BfK 69**(July 91) where it got a very enthusiastic review.

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