



# Teenage Fiction - another uninspired year

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[18](#) [2]

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An alternative view of 1982 from **Steve Bowles**.

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The Young Observer/Rank Organisation film prize is intended to encourage writers and publishers to provide a wide range of reader material for the teenage market. According to the judge for 1982 the standard of entries was 'extremely high'. They awarded *two* first prizes, typed as 'popular classics, to be read again and again'.

Do English teachers in secondary schools trying hard to turn pupils who *can* read into ones who do read, and desperate for books to help them, take such an optimistic view?

We asked **Steve Bowles** to look through last year's hardbacks.

From where I stand it was an uninspired year. Another uninspired year. Every aspect of the children's book world seems to conspire against the publication of books which capture the imagination of the vast majority of secondary school kids. Why when everyone knows how vital title covers and general visual appeal are, is the standard of packaging (with a few notable exceptions) so terrible" Even ignoring that crucial detail, too often the writing itself is badly out-of-touch with the tastes and experiences of the audience.

I was able to find few books of any use in capturing boys or in appealing to girls on the look out for stories to follow the Sweet Dreams series. If the ones I have chosen are 'good'. they are good *of their kind*. In the main you'll find readers for them amongst those who are capable readers and go in for similar stuff already. In conventional school terms the audience for most of them is made up *of some* of those who'll end up taking 'O' levels. Minority stuff. I can see *some* of these titles being of use in school - but only if they appear in attractive paperback editions. Quite apart from the turn-off effect hardbacks have on secondary kids, at these prices no English department can consider short sets or even a one-off for the class library.

## **Nobody's Perfect**

Jacqueline Wilson. Oxford, 0 19 271463 5.£5.95

This is the kind of book which would have appeared in a Pyramid or a Topliner a few years ago. Illogically. I find my eyes being drawn repeatedly to the price tag, matching it against the quality of the writing and frowning. "Illogically", because it's one of the more readable books here, dealing with conflict with mother and step-father, sibling rivalry, a blind date, the beginnings of love and Sandra's search for her real father. As usual, one wishes for writers and editors who recognise that those reading books at this level will not, by and large, react when reference is made to Spare Rib, Laura Ashley, Durer, the Brontes etc. etc. The ultra-tame "daring bits" seem forced, too, but it'll meet with some approval despite its flaws.

## **Tiger Eyes**

Judy Blume, Heinemann, 0 434 92885 2, £4.95

Judy Blume's rapport with her audience is kids' book folk-lore and, though it's 200+ pages. there's no reason why her new one shouldn't prove popular too. Davey's father, a small shopkeeper, is shot dead by an unidentified robber and the novel chronicles the way the family adjusts, helped - and hindered - by a year's stay with Davey's ultra-cautious Aunt and Uncle. Not one of the author's best but, like **Deenie**, it'll be particularly useful at the upper end of the Blume range - Davey has her 16th birthday in the book. Side issues include romance with an outdoors type, a friend with a drink problem plus the usual family wrangles.

## **Buddy**

Nigel Hinton, Dent. 0 460 06089 9. £5.95

This is one of the more interesting teenage novels to emerge recently. Aesthetically speaking, it's a little cluttered: Buddy's problems at home and school begin to expand into "spooky house" and (abortive) "boy hero catches villains" stuff. But this produces the variety lacking in the author's worthy but rather intense and ponderous **Collision Course** where the central character's agonising dominates. There's an interesting jacket (despite the - cost-cutting? - absence of full colour) but the sooner a paperback arrives, the better.

## **Piggy in the Middle**

Jan Needle. Deutsch, 0 233 97481 4, £3.95 (paperback)

Sandra's life-long desire to be a policewoman dims as she sees her superiors breaking the rules to pin Yusuf Mansoor's murder on his son, Noor Allahi, an acquaintance from school. Her relationship with her journalist boyfriend, who's seeking an NF connection, becomes even more strained and she starts sleeping with an older Jekyll-and-Hyde colleague. It can't end well ... Not as useful as **Sense of Shame** (Lions) but arguably Jan Needle's best book. A writer so prolific isn't likely to produce flawless stories but he makes up in power what he lacks in polish. This mustn't be missed: make an audience for it.

## **The Soutar Retrospective**

Ian Strachan. Oxford. 0 19 271464 3, £5.95

Looking at this book's title. I think someone's crazy -- when is it ever going to get off a library shelf? The story's about Kate's fortnight in Cornwall where her painter-father is setting up an exhibition. She falls for a sexy local job who leads her into some tricky scrapes, ending with a climactic fire. Solid stuff- 170 pages of smallish print -- and ultimately there's little more in it than in **Nobody's Perfect** but. for some, it could be a useful extension of their linguistic experience: there are stylistic flashes which show Ian Strachan to have considerably more flair than most, even if he doesn't appear to know (or care) much about what most kids can read.

## **Friends and Sisters**

Sandy Asher, Gollancz, 0 575 03124 7, £5.50

Coming from America, this has a little more dash and vivacity than most of its British counterparts. It makes a significant addition to the growing pile of novels with which one hopes to extend the depth of teenage girls reading. Till Ruthie arrives, Denise is too intent on solving the world's problems and too out of the boys-and-fashion scene to find friends at school. But Ruthie has to cope with her parents' past in the concentration camps of W.W.II, a never-discussed family secret which nearly destroys her. Quite a bit more dense than Judy Blume then, but one you might try with those

who've liked Deborah Hautzig, Toeckey Jones etc.

### **The Green Behind the Glass**

Adele Geras, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10808 X, £5.25

Eight love stories. None has a really contemporary setting or theme - the modern ones seem to be told through a romantically distancing haze and a couple are period pieces. Still, there are some interesting variations on conventional narrative structures and a couple of neatly ambiguous endings. Those tolerant enough to stand the jacket might enjoy them as a gentle way of passing a couple of hours.

### **The Dark Behind the Curtain**

Gillian Cross, Oxford, 0 19 271457 0, £5.95

A ghost story which revolves around a production of Sweeney Todd. The emotions generated by the production-"activate" the spirits of ill-treated Victorian children and disaster nearly ensues. I can't say I believed in the central relationship between Jackus and the evilly-glittering son of his mother's best friend but, if you're looking for a trad story and don't demand too much realism in the characterization, then you could get into this.

### **Superbike!**

Jamie Brown, Heinemann, 0 434 92995 6. £4.95

Over-long, somewhat flat and predictable but its chances would have soared had it been decently presented (see Scholastic's **Action Books**). Nevertheless, there is more interest in motorbikes amongst boys than in most other subjects dealt with in fiction and this just might take the eye of some who enjoy books too. It's a standard run through a Canadian boy's acquisition and preparation of a racing bike, followed by his first seasons road racing. A little family conflict and romantic interest broaden the appeal.

### **The Wave**

Morta Rhue. Kestrel. 0 7226 5810 9. £4.95

Already reviewed in the last issue of **Books for Keeps** but well worth mentioning again. A fascinating tautly-constructed novelisation of a true incident: a Californian high school teacher starts an experiment to show his history class how the Nazis came to power. **The Wave** - the movement he creates - proves too attractive; its mottoes and salutes quickly dominate the whole school: those who resist are pressured to back down. What can the teacher do? One hundred tense pages - start reading and it's difficult to stop. For once an O. K. cover and you won't have to wait for the paperback. It was published simultaneously. (Puffin Plus, 0 14 03 1522 5, £1.25).

### **School's OK**

ed. Josie Karavasil. Evans, 0 237 45653 2, £4.95

Original short stories, mostly about school though some have only a marginal connection. It is a collection for teachers to note because it contains one really good story, Jan Dean's **Woof**, which you may have heard on BBC Schools. It's a tale of a disturbed boy who upsets teachers by pretending to be a dog- till the brutal, old-school metalwork teacher takes a hand and his oddity begins to manifest itself less obviously but much more destructively. Some others here you could use at a pinch but **Woof** is a must.

### **Ghost After Ghost**

ed. Aidan Chambers, Kestrel, 0 7226 5772 2, £4.95

The standard here is rather better overall and, unusually, this is a hardback that's not painful to look at. It also has **The Haunting of Chas McGill** which, despite its length, strange ending and lack of drama, is one that all users of Westall's **Machine Gunners** ought to know. Several others are worth looking at for their endings. notably Joan Aiken's **Old Fillikin** - interesting to compare with Lance Salway's less accomplished **Such a Sweet Little Girl**. John Gordon's **If She Bends, She Breaks** could also be a useful one to know for reading aloud.

### **War Without Friends**

Evert Hartman, Chatto & Windus, 0 7011 2650 7. £5.50

This novel covers a couple of years in the life of a Dutch boy whose father is in the National Socialist party. The episodes cover attacks by other boys at school, brushes with black marketeers, a narrow escape in a British raid and his attempts to become friendly with a girl in his class. Eventually, of course, he comes to see the Nazis as evil. The problems of covering so much time ultimately defeat Evert Hartman but there are lots of powerful incidents. It could be useful for committed readers interested in the war (fans of Hans Peter Richter's **Friedrich** perhaps). The drab jacket might create considerable selling problems, however.

### **The Isis Pedlar**

Monica Hughes, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 10834 9, £5.25

Monica Hughes is currently a minor cult with my top-band fourth years so this will be welcomed by those who've already taken the other two Isis novels (Magnet). The opening is quite ghastly, with a really crude emphasis on the stage Irishness of the con-man who nearly causes disaster by ignoring the quarantine on Isis. But this shamrock stuff is either played down or else ceases to be noticed in the flow of events. Fans will not be disappointed, certainly.

### **Young Legionary**

Douglas Hill, Gollancz. 0 575 03201 4, £4.95

One of the exceptions which does reach out beyond a small minority of kids although, like all SF. there are limits to its appeal. Douglas Hill has got nearer than most to writing popular genre fiction which is also good quality - in contrast, for example, to the Terrance Dicks/Roy Brown school where the books are readable but so poorly-written as to be something of an insult to kids. The action of these four stories pre-dates that of the **Last Legionary** quartet (Piccolo) and deals with Keill Randor's early years in the Legions of Moros. Like the four novels, they are fast-paced with plenty of violent action. They are to be welcomed as possible ways of extending the novels' audience still further. Any improvement in quality with an SF story usually brings increased difficulty and even Douglas Hill doesn't grab everybody from page one. One of these might be tried as a read-aloud to introduce both this book and the slightly more demanding quartet. For this purpose, I'd suggest **Demolition** in which Oni, the girl who has trained alongside Keill, matches

Page Number:

16

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