



Classics in Short No.39: Mr Gumpy's Outing

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Brian Alderson on John Burningham's **Mr Gumpy's Outing**.

Who is this engaging figure with his coat buttoned up the wrong way?<!--break-->

It is Mr Gumpy. Let us join him for ...

Ah ? the calamities and triumphs

of those caught up in nursery rigmaroles. What violence must be done that the old woman may get her pig over a stile. What frenzied events precede the nuptials of the forlorn maiden and the man all tattered and torn. And at the end of ?Titty Mouse and Tatty Mouse? there is ruination all round.

It is a long tradition

(the Opies point to equivalences between our nineteenth-century Old Woman and her Pig and some verses in a sixteenth-century edition of the Haggadah) and the simple pleasure of hearing cumulative texts unwind is easy to comprehend ? rather like that laborious carpet-game of standing up a serpentine row of playing-cards and causing them to collapse *seriatim*.

Thus,

John Burningham was employing a well-loved formula when he composed **Mr Gumpy's Outing** in 1970. One by one children and animals pile into Mr G's boat, each in turn being commanded to behave. (Telling the tale to children in England and America I have found ? as, no doubt, has everyone else ? that one of its great moments is when the pig is allowed to board with the words ?Very well, but don't muck about.?) Of course they do not behave: ?The goat kicked, the calf trampled...? and the chain unwinds... ?and into the water they fell.?

Such a simple climax,

so perfectly judged, and then followed by the happy outcome when they all walk back across the sunlit fields for tea at Mr G's place. It was a sumptuous meal and when they leave for home the moon is up and they are bidden to ?Come for a ride another day.?

This is indeed a story for telling.

John Burningham gives you the words and they fall naturally into the traditional pattern. But of course it's a story to look at too (preferably in printings in the original size: more or less ten inches square). There is an almost haphazard

spontaneity about the illustrations, with little of the narrative detail that might have been given in a traditional picture book, and, indeed, one of the virtues of the drawing is the extreme sketchiness with which the characters are delineated. You may interpret their almost vacuous expressions how you will. As they take their places in the punt you get a full-scale colour portrait of each on the right-hand page, but with inconsequential variations in graphic style ? sometimes pretty coloured pen or pencil work (Mr Gumpy on the first page, or the flapping hens), sometimes with hefty doses of colour (crayon, watercolour, and what looks like acrylic for the cat with its speculative stare). On the left-hand page though, in more orderly fashion, you get sepia pen drawings as Mr Gumpy poles his punt through the pastoral landscape with his growing company of voyagers.

The varied music

of these turning pages has its own purpose. For with the capsizing boat the rhythm changes. The upset is portrayed in a magnificent dynamic double-page colour illustration, which is balanced two pages later by the peaceable feast. Everybody scoffs tea and cake, too full for words, before the final, single-page, moonlit valediction. The exigencies of the 32-page picture book are perfectly exploited.

The magic of this performance

(could it ever be illustrated by anyone else?) is perhaps best shown by comparing it with its lesser-known sequel: **Mr Gumpy's Motor Car** (Cape, 1973). Here the gang is all awaiting the ride, promised for ?another day?, in our hero's old jalopy (?It will be a squash? says he) and they take to the cart-track across the fields. Rain falls however and they have much ado pushing the car out of the mud.

It is a picture book superior to most.

Its text and graphic character are as endearing as those of the **Outing**, but they cannot help having the factitious qualities of a sequel. The bright spontaneity of its predecessor is gone and it relies for its full effect on the pleasure we have in renewing old acquaintanceships. What's more, there's no bun-fight at the end.

STOP PRESS: Kibroth-Hattaavah

Two readers have kindly written to identify this reference in Dean Farrar's **Eric**, mentioned in our last. Both seem to be more familiar with the Internet than with Old Testament exegesis so readers must make what they can of this dark passage about ?the graves of those taken in lust? in **Numbers** xi.34. To relish the full implication of the phrase you probably need to be a Victorian clergyman.

The illustrations are taken from the Red Fox edition (which *is* more or less ten inches square), 0 09 940879 1, £5.99 pbk.

This year is the fortieth anniversary of the publication of **Borka**, John Burningham's first book. Brian Alderson will be writing a celebratory article for a later issue of **BfK** this year.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times**.

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