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Rise, Shine.., it's picture book time.

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Chris Powling takes his pick from the Spring lists.

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Every year I vow I won't be *surprised*. Zing and zip, who needs it? Greenery-yallery, what again? This time I'll be cool, detached, objective . . . and each Spring, I forget. Mind you, the books don't help. Like Spring itself, they refuse to advance and merely be recognised - they have a first-ever, hot-off-the-press. ink-barely-dry feel about them.

And they know at once when they've been picked up by a sucker. So here, for what it's worth, is an appraisal that's nothing like the beady-eyed lit-crit exercise I always intend. As usual, it's offered more in the spirit of Mole sniffing the air, intoxicated by his first encounter with Ratty...

The Lamb and the Butterfly

Arnold Sundgaard and Eric Carle, Hodder & Stoughton, 0 340 49580, £6.95

A book so traditional in its feel and format that it's easy to overlook the fact that Eric Carle himself invented this particular tradition: a combination of acrylic painting and collage that eerily mimics Child Art at a more sophisticated level. The pictures suit the story perfectly and the story seems custom-built for the pictures - a mutual rap between a stay-at-home lamb and a flyaway butterfly in which the pep and rhythm of Arnold Sundgaard's text threatens to break into rhyme at any moment.

We're Going on a Bear Hunt

Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury. Walker, ((7445 1135 6. £8.95

Tradition again, but so freshly interpreted by both author and illustrator it's as if we're encountering it for the first time. Mike Rosen's words belong to Everykid as do Helen Oxenbury's pictures - the epic made domestic as Dad plus Offspring find the hear they're looking for and have to make a snappy, Goldilocksian tactical retreat. Line drawings alternate with full-colour spreads in a layout that shows the Walker design department as its brilliant best.

Ernest and Celestine at the Circus

Gabrielle Vincent, Julia MacRae, 0 862(13 388 8, £6.95

Two old favourites in such good form they give favouritism a good name. What is it that makes this grumpy, lumpy hear and moody little mouse-ette so *exquisite*? Well, Gabrielle Vincent's way with line-and-wash for a start - here prompting her odd couple into professional clowning as the circus hits town and E and C hit the circus. The pictures are

so deft, so understated, they might have been done on the back of an envelope. Some envelope.

Knickerless Nicola

Kara May and Dotty Weir, Macmillan, 0 333 47576 3, £5.95

As aptly named an illustrator as you're likely to find since Dotty Weir's heroine is much given to just that - doffing her knickers at every opportunity. Kara May's splendidly un-twee storyline, with splendidly un-twee pictures to match, contains a glorious joke and a curious omission. The former is Mum's Worst Moment which comes, hilariously, when Nicola decides to go straight (and knickered) in future. The latter is the lack of reference to any little-boy-ish interest in her cavortings. Or aren't they envisaged as amongst the book's readership'?

Hasn't He Grown?

John Talbot, Andersen, ((86264 232 9, £5.95

Distinctive draughtmanship and distinctive humour from an illustrator who seems to be doing a hit of growing himself - in his professional stature, that is. In each spread the picture parodies the text with a deadly eye for the cliches of parental conversation. Two Mums gossip about their youngsters who are depicted acting out every remark with remorselessly literal drollness as when 'he's practically eating us out of house and home' captions a double-spread of a muchmunched dwelling. The idea is simple enough, but followed through with a wit and inventiveness that suggests **Don't Go Near the Water, Shirley** in reverse. Only Burningham, in fact, could match it ...

The Park in the Dark

Martin Waddell and Barbara Firth, Walker, ((7445 0716 2, £6.95

or Barbara Firth, perhaps, when she's teamed with Martin Waddell. Remember **Can't You Sleep Little Bear?** Who could forget it? As one of the best picture books of 1988, it became at once an almost Impossible Act to Follow in 1989 even by this hugely talented pair. So let it be said at the outset that this book isn't of the same quality ... in my view it's even *better*. Mind you, it's unlikely to be as popular. The softness at the centre of Little Bear guaranteed a warm response. Here both words and pictures have a toughness, an originality, that's much harder to take to hut, once absorbed have a resonance and power that's even harder to shake off.

As with Little Bear, the theme is both simple and archetypal: fear of the dark. Now, though, there are no caves and cosiness to muffle the confrontation - Me and Loopy and Little Gee, the heroes, are no mere bedtime cuddlies but take on the role of conquistadores of the night when they strike out for the Park, their Eldorado. Of course, they're well aware of the risk involved:

*'There might be
Moon witches
or man-eating trees
or withers that wobble
or old Scrawny Shins
or hairy hobgoblins
or black boggart's knees
in the trees,
or things we can't see
me and Loopy
and Little Gee
all three.'*

So there's a dreadful inevitability about the arrival of the THING as it interrupts the whoopee they're making on the

swings and slides. No wonder they flee lickety-split 'back where we've come from:

*Up to the house
to the stair,
to the bed
where we ought to be
me and Loopy
and Little Gee
safe as can be
all three.'*

Each step of the adventure is followed by Barbara Firth as if the Disney studios at their best were alive and well and operating from her drawing-board. Every close-up, long or middle shot is totally assured in style, fully convincing in the world-of-its-own it creates, and - best of all - completely accessible to any child who cares to encounter it. Her characters, too, are a triumph. There's nothing pretty about them. They're no more glamorised than Laurel and Hardy or The Keystone Cops. *Anyone* can be as attractive as they are which is precisely the point. The Me who accompanies Loopy and Little Gee could be *this* me, the reader. It's *our* adventure into the Park in the Dark that's being plotted by Martin Waddell's muscular, sing-song prose - not so much a quest for enlightenment (painful enough) but the lure of endarkenment, the Unknown. Like the cuddlies, we too would probably end up in a panic-stricken skitter back home hotly pursued by our own horrible imaginings.

Altogether, from its structure as the implied dream of the little girl in bed to particular details like the number of the house - 31 - clearly seen not just from the hallway but in the day-time and night-time exterior views given by the endpapers, everything in the book is consistent, everything works a treat. And I defy anyone to tackle the text without submitting to its sheer speakability, its demand to be read aloud.

Now, and I mean it in the nicest possible way, for a litter of cats...

Go Away, William, Margaret Carter and Carol Wright, Methuen, 0 416 08312 9, £4.95

Tigger and Friends, Dennis Hamley and Meg Rutherford, Deutsch, 0 233 98213 2, £5.95

The Weather Cat, Helen Cresswell and Barbara Walker, Collins, 0 00 197787 3, £3.95

Sid the Kitten, Mark Foreman, Andersen, 0 86264 218 3, £5.95

I Want a Cat, Tony Ross, Andersen, 0 86264 237 X, £5.95

No Room to Swing a Cat, Ralph Steadman, Andersen, 0 86264 2418, £5.95

Cats are a safe bet for picture books. They're good to look at, tend to walk on the wild side of domesticity and, just about everybody wants one, has one or lives next door to one. ' Which also means they're pretty well documented, so new offerings had better be extra special. This batch is distinctly above paw. For the youngest child, Margaret Carter's

Go Away, William explores the theme of the ever-present mog and the upset he can cause - in this case amusingly reported by Carol Wright's charmingly simple illustrations plus some not-so-simple shifts in the text's typography.

Dennis Hamley's **Tigger and Friends** looks at rivalry at its most feline, thanks to Meg Rutherford's wonderfully strokable pictures, but with sibling squabbles hinted at, too. And bless Barbara Walker for bringing a multi-cultural dimension to Helen Cresswell's **The Weather Cat**, gently nudging a familiar plot into less readily familiar territory.

Mark Foreman's **Sid the Kitten** is more ambitious - a seafaring kitten, no less, with a wooden leg in store for him if he sustains encounters as epic as these. The text is lively and unpretentious, but it's the pictures we'll remember: dingy alleyways, the shadowy city waterfront, nastily snout-ish rats and the sort of Sid you'd have to cuddle very carefully indeed. There's a hint of Foreman Pere in the broad sweep yet delicate touch evident here, but also enough energy, and

originality, to make this a splendid and hugely promising debut for Foreman Films.

In **I Want a Cat**, Tony Ross settles squarely for being Tony Ross and who will argue with that? Jessy, ragamuffinly Ross-ish, wants a cat - oh, how she wants a cat - but when she gets one the sting is in the tale, rather than the tail. It's a good joke but what counts, as always, is the way Tony Ross tells it . which applies equally to Ralph Steadman's **No Room to Swing a Cat**. Steadman's punchline, when it finally comes, is all the more hilarious for the brilliantly stylish build-up of improbability after improbability signalled from the very first spread. Should the National Curriculum require infants to understand the word `bathos' then teachers need look no further. A lot will be learned as well about how a sparse text, augmented with the most eloquent yet economical of drawings, can lead to an explosion of laughter - in short, the art of the cartoon at its very best. But if we expect any self-respecting Secretary of State to promote an appreciation of that as an Attainment Target we'd better not hold our breath.

As a symbol of Spring, cats and kittens a-frolic are hardly unexpected. But how about arks? To have three on offer at once, with or without Noah, looks less like carelessness than Inside Information. What do publishers know about the coming Summer that we don't?

Noah Built an Ark One Day, Colin and Jacqui Hawkins, Methuen, 0 416 09412 0, £5.95

Norman's Ark, Brian Pilkington, Heinemann, 0 434 95724 0, £5.95 **Rise, Shine!**, Fiona French, Methuen, 0 416 08122 3, £5.95

Between them the Hawkinses and Pilkington span the primary age-range. **Noah Built an Ark One Day** comes at the infant end as a rumbustious comic-between- hard-covers with extra lift-the-flap appeal since readers are invited to guess who's embarking next then check for themselves. Brian Pilkington's **Norman's Ark** updates the story while dryly diminishing its epic scale: the flood's not up to expectations and the vessel is converted into a High Street pet shop - bathos for the juniors, this time? What both books exude is amiability, accessibility and the firm conviction that a good story is susceptible to infinite variation and umpteen re-tellings.

Rise, Shine!, has a further dimension. Taking the words of a traditional spiritual as her text, Fiona French enlarges rather than diminishes. When they approach the Heavenly Gates in the best double-spread in the book, the Children of Her Lord are seen to be representative of humanity at large - Sikhs, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and all, as well as the Jews of the original story. The *best* double-spread, did I say? Well, maybe the second-best. Just before it comes:

*'The animals, the animals
They came out by threesie-threesie
Seems they'd heard about the birds and beesy-beesy
Children of the Lord.'*

You don't have to be Fiona French to make the most of that. But it helps if you are.

Amoko and Efua Bear

Sonia Appiah and Carol Easmon, Deutsch, 0 233 98301 5,;(5.50

A Ghanaian **Dogger**, this. Lost cuddlies are clearly a world-wide phenomenon. The stately formality of Sonia Appiah's prose is caught marvellously by Carol Easmon's lushly statuesque pictures which manage to suggest a context eye-openingly exotic for British readers yet wholly, if brightly, everyday for the participants. You don't have to be black to identify with young Amoko Efua Mould and you don't have to be white to envy her.

Tenrec's Twigs

Bert Kitchen, Lutterworth, 0 7188 2716 3, £6.95

Also pretty exotic. Bert Kitchen's first attempt to provide his sharply observed pictures of lesser-known creatures with a

narrative link ... at least, I assume they're sharply observed. Since he includes creatures like the pangolin, the golden mole, the marabou stork and the milky eagle owl, how would I know? His main character, the Streaked Tenrec, I'd never even heard of. Still, it's a pleasure to meet him amongst others, even if the story - which concerns the reassurance he seeks about his obsessive twig building - does end as a bit of a tease. What is it he's trying to construct? Children, I suspect, will need to know.

Katie's Picture Show

James Mayhew, Orchard, 0 85213 130 6J6.95

Katie's trip round the art gallery gets an added boost when five famous pictures come alive for her - indeed, she's literally absorbed in them. She splashes alongside Constable's **Hay Wain** chats up Ingres' **Madame Moitessier**, shelters beneath **Les Parapluies** de Renoir (which don't help her much when she comes to Rousseau's **Tropical Storm with Tiger**) and vies with the **Dynamic Suprematism** of Malevich! Well might the book warn would-be Katies that in real life art galleries aren't quite like this. James Mayhew's own style just about copes with the demands made on it - but what a splendid reminder of one of the most important functions of picture books: to introduce kids to Art for its own sake.

The Sandhorse

Ann Turnbull and Michael Foreman, Andersen, 0 86264 2310, £6.95

More Art for its own sake, in this case equine beach sculpture overtaken by the waves and thereby converted into . . . well, 'white horse' breakers naturally. Ann Turnbull's simple, robust language lends needed vigour to what could easily have been more 'side' than sea. Of course, she does have Michael Foreman to help her, labouring with love to depict St Ives not as it is, but as it ought to be. By the end, between them, author and illustrator fashion a tale with more than a touch of authentic Andersen magic.

The Story of a Farm

John S Goodall, Deutsch, 0 233 98295 7, £5.95

No wordless books are more eloquent than John S Goodall's. This one spans seven hundred years, from swine-herds to cream teas, as each spread meticulously plots the progress of a particular dwelling - interleaved with half-spreads to assist the melding of one age into another. Progress? More an endless adjustment of detail, you feel. Whether milkmaids or landgirls, hunting to hounds or an agricultural show, the changes are fixed exactly by the artist's crayon and wash.

There could be no better time-line for Juniors with a relish for social history - or for creating that relish. Rumour has it that John Goodall was eighty last year. This must surely be a rumour spread by rivals who hope he's slowing up.

Colm of the Islands

Rosemary Harris and Pauline Baynes, Walker, 0 7445 07(X) 6, £8.95

A home-grown folklore hero with the panache of Sinbad but a more winning way with animals - not least an otter, a golden eagle and a salmon. That's Colm. Rosemary Harris tells his tale stylishly and with vigour. So does Pauline Baynes, her pictures as bright and rich as an illuminated scroll. There are a lot of them, too, carrying the narrative so successfully that the words - especially in the undersea episodes - are almost an optional extra.

Easter

Jan Pienkowski, Heinemann, 0 434 95659 7, £6.95

No, not eggs and bunnies but the central mystery of the Christian church unabridged, undiluted and unashamed. The words are from all four gospels of the King James Version. The pictures are from Jan Pienkowski. Using montage, and silhouette, exploiting unusual angles and rich backgrounds, offsetting the sombreness of the story in the main frame by a luxurious burgeoning of leaf and berry and flower across the rest of the page, he manages to persuade us that every other version we've ever seen is either pallid, pretentious or hopelessly fussy. What even the great paintings of the Renaissance do I hear you object? Well, yes. Even those while we're turning *these* pages. For here is a succession of images we recognise from centuries past but in a form our century has made its own: the strip cartoon. So bold, sumptuous and beautifully produced is this book I'd recommend every copy be chained to a lectern instantly.

And, finally, back to the beginning...

Quentin Blake's ABC

Quentin Blake, Jonathan Cape, 0 224 02617 8, £6.95

A is for Another ABC, you think - till the brisk, Blake magic takes over. The design is disarmingly straightforward, the pictures as witty and fresh as ever and the letter-defining text nimble and unhackneyed:

*'W is for Watch
we can hear the tick-tocks.
X is the ending
for Jack-in-the-boX.'*

with an Xtremely scared Granny on the receiving end. Quentin Blake treats all the traps as no traps at all, merely opportunities to be inventive. And so he is, splendidly, but always within a child's scope. What's that? How does he ... ? Oh, yes. No problem:

*'Y is for Yak
he's our hairiest friend.
Z is for Zippers
That's all
That's the end.'*

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