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Opening Extract from...

So Much to Tell

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1: The Time Capsule

First came the Penguin. Penguin Books was launched by Allen Lane in 1935 with the aim of making literature affordable by anybody with sixpence to spend. With their orange covers and distinctive modern design, Penguins were an immediate hit. When the war came, despite severe paper rationing which meant that books were pulped and re-pulped, and with half their staff away in the forces, Penguin published 600 titles. The pages were of thin, greyish, straw-based paper, stapled together because of the shortage of machinery and manpower in the printing industry. But Penguins were pocket-sized and portable, and became a national institution, essential to servicemen with hours to while away in camps, barracks and troopships, to volunteer fire-watchers, and to civilians huddled in air-raid shelters. The bombs of the Blitz destroyed millions of books in publishers' offices – six million were lost one night in 1940 when Paternoster Row was struck – but the war encouraged the reading habit.

Practical books sold best: titles like *Keeping Poultry and Rabbits on Scraps*. *Aircraft Recognition* by R. A. Saville-Sneath remained the all-time bestselling Penguin, until *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960.

Penguin's founding genius, Allen Lane, had left school at sixteen and joined his uncle John's publishing firm, the Bodley Head. He was still a bachelor at thirty-eight when his friend Noel Carrington (brother of the Bloomsbury artist Dora, and a father of three) dreamed up a series of low-priced books that would gratify a child's need for information, with colour illustrations, which Carrington had pioneered. Lane displayed 'a childlike

enthusiasm' for Carrington's picture-books and distributed them as Puffin Picture Books in 1940. The four titles were *War on Land*, *War at Sea*, *War in the Air* and *On the Farm* – ideal for children being evacuated from cities to the countryside.

As it happened, Lane had already discussed a children's list with Eleanor Graham. She had written four children's books, including *The Children Who Lived in a Barn*, had reinvented the children's department at Bumpus Books, and reviewed for the *Sunday Times*. Lane and Eleanor both remembered, from their childhoods, W. T. Stead's 'Books for the Bairns'. Stead, the great Victorian crusading journalist, wanted to see every child provided with books that reflected Christian values, devotion to the monarchy and goodwill to all. The first Book for the Bairns was *Aesop's Fables*, which was published in 1896 and was an instant success, selling 150,000 a month. It was followed by *Brer Rabbit*, *Mother Goose*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Great Events in British History*. In his prefaces, Stead delivered homilies, such as 'Try to love the boy or girl you dislike most and crush the nasty feeling of grudging envy, for LOVE is the Good Fairy of Life.'

In 1940, during an air raid, Eleanor Graham took the Underground from her office at the Board of Trade to Hounslow West station. She was driven to Silverbeck, Allen Lane's William IV mansion in Middlesex, two miles from the Penguin office at Harmondsworth, an area of decaying farms and market gardens. Having supplied librarians for years, Eleanor knew what children liked to read. Lane had decided on the name of 'Puffin' for Penguin's junior imprint. The penguin was a bird that had both dignity and gaiety; the puffin was short and round and comically top-heavy, like a child's toy. Puffins, Lane agreed with Eleanor, should not just reprint traditional classics, but find the best new fiction, history and poetry. Noel Carrington had already bought the first fictional Puffin Picture Book, *Orlando's Evening Out*, by

Kathleen Hale, and Eleanor now set about acquiring full-length fiction for Puffins.

‘Probably if it had not been for whooping-cough, John and Susan would never have seen the scarecrow who stood in the middle of Ten-acre field.’ So began the very first Puffin novel: *Wörzel Gummidge*, by Barbara Euphan Todd, in 1941. Along with the tale of the talking scarecrow they published *Cornish Adventure* by Derek McCulloch (Uncle Mac of *Children’s Hour* on the wireless), *The Cuckoo Clock* by Mrs Molesworth (a Victorian tale of lonely little Griselda, sent to live with two old aunts), *Garram the Hunter* by Herbert Best (an African adventure story) and *Smoky*, ‘the story of a cow horse’ by a former cattle-rustler, Will James.

These were not Eleanor’s first choices. But librarians and schoolteachers were snooty about paperbacks. Nor did hardback publishers thrill to the idea of cheap editions, on inferior paper, with an advert for Kiltie Shoes on the back. They were reluctant to sub-lease rights to their established titles, just as they had initially resisted Penguins. Jonathan Cape refused to release Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons*, or Hugh Lofting’s *Dr Dolittle*.

But by dedication, persistence and gentle persuasion, Eleanor built up a children’s paperback library. Two decades later there were 150 Puffin story books, including *Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild, *The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm* by Norman Hunter, and *The Family from One End Street* by Eve Garnett. When Eleanor retired in 1961, her baton passed to a woman who blew into the children’s book scene like a tornado: the former journalist Kaye Webb.

Under Kaye Webb’s eighteen-year regime, from 1961 to 1979, Puffin Books really did overturn children’s publishing in terms of sales, enthusiasm and influence. By the end of her time, other publishers had leapt on the bandwagon and started their own children’s paperback imprints. But the brand name of Puffin was the one several generations of children had come to depend on,

and more than 200,000 of them had joined Kaye's pioneering Puffin Club, which brought living authors out of their eeries to meet their readers, and arranged activities and holidays so that they associated books with fun and adventure.

Since the early 1960s, television had become so much part of children's lives that books were under threat of becoming a secondary distraction. Children born in the 1970s were the first generation whose parents had themselves grown up watching television. Infants were now introduced to the screen long before they learned to read print. Literacy itself seemed imperilled, and how to reach the non-reading child became a preoccupation of the 1970s. The moment had come, Kaye Webb decided, to celebrate the mind-expanding, eye-opening world contained in children's books of the past century – while they still read them. Kaye's fiction editor, Jane Nissen, remembered from her American childhood that the New York Natural History Museum had created a 'Time Capsule' in the 1950s. Kaye seized the idea. She would gather the best Puffin books, and record messages from children's authors, and from their devoted readers. These would be buried underground, to be dug up either fifty or 100 years hence: the heirs of the 'Puffin Guardians' would decide which.

Kaye and her team chose 176 of the '*niciest*' children's books to bury: a significant choice of adjective in 1978. Books for children had been published that Kaye did not think particularly nice. At her annual Puffin Exhibition, illustrator Quentin Blake once heard her ask a ten-year-old child what she thought of a new book. Kaye took it back with the words, 'Yes, it's bloody awful, isn't it, darling.' She preferred the canon of classic works she had published because she admired them, by authors she revered. She was not a sociologist who believed books must reflect current society; she was a showman, and the Time Capsule would be her showcase. Books by living authors were inscribed with a message inside, among them Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*, Richard Adams's

Watership Down, Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, Noel Streatfeild's *Ballet Shoes*, Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and K. M. Briggs's *Hobberdy Dick*. Other books, by dead authors, were included to give a complete picture of twentieth-century children's literature: C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, etc. To these were added thousands of messages from members of the Puffin Club, collected at the Puffin Exhibition.

How to preserve the books in the capsule? Microfilm, they were told, would not survive for a century. They consulted Professor Akers of Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, who welcomed the project as an experiment in preservation. Printed pages were copied leaf by leaf, by Xerox on to Archive long-life text. The books were rebound to the original format, their covers re-attached with adhesive of polyvinyl acetate. The books were shrink-wrapped and packed tightly, to be buried in a brick-lined hole, covered with heavy-duty polythene under a layer of concrete 'like a damp-proof course in a house'. As some remarked at the time, Penguin offices were full of books fifty years old, in a state of perfect preservation; but Kaye's capsule would survive even an atomic bomb.

The burial took place in the grounds of Penguin headquarters in Bath Road, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, on 5 August 1978, the occasion recorded at the Science Museum, the V&A, and the British Museum Library. It would be regarded in 2078 as Buried Treasure, said the press release, 'and may even be the means of reviving interest in a skill that, heaven forbid, could have fallen into disuse'.

The day was sunny, and Kaye and her team wore pink tabards with the Puffin logo over their summer frocks. They were preserving, said Kaye, 'a complete and unique record of what the best authors are writing for children nowadays. There . . .

never has been such an inspiring and exciting time for children's literature as the last twenty years. And perhaps it may never be as good again. For who knows what the future holds in store? If by any awful chance writers stopped writing, or stopped writing so well, and children stopped reading, or only read fearful comics or just looked at pictures . . . why then, when this is dug up we might just be the means to revive a lost art!

The astronomer Patrick Moore, a large man with a large personality, performed the burial under a cherry tree on a fake hill. (When people asked Kaye, 'Why him?' her reply was, 'Why not?' He had presented the moon landing on television in 1969; he was a popular figure, eccentric, right-wing, cat-loving, who had been a self-taught authority on outer space at the age of eleven.) Moore drove up from Hampshire despite having just had a car accident. Kaye recalled that his words were 'perfectly judged, instinctively apposite and right' but few in the crowd could hear them, because at the precise moment when Moore lowered the box on a rope down the hole, there was a mighty roar and, as if on cue, Concorde soared overhead. 'Here's the future!' cried Moore.

'It is a pity that none of us who helped put the capsule together will be around for the Great Exhumation in 2078,' Kaye said in her speech. 'Still, it's good to know it will happen, and to think it will make a serious contribution to the future. As the buried messages from the authors have suggested, not to have books to read would be worse than never having tasted chocolate or ice-cream. Let's just hope that the children of the future appreciate that not all buried treasure is gold and precious jewels.'

Penguin's modernist offices were laid out on a campus with Japanese-style courtyards, fountains and Oriental trees. That day it looked like a garden fête, with bunting, stalls and games. You could do face-painting and draw round your friend on the ground, and play 'Pot a Puffin'. The atmosphere was typical of Puffin events, with children flocking round their authors, among

them Nina Bawden, Leon Garfield, Helen Nicoll, Joyce Lankester Brisley, Norman Hunter and Ursula Moray Williams; and at the centre, the magnetic figure of Kaye Webb.

The twenty Puffin Guardians who attended received a certificate from Patrick Moore ('towering above us like a colossus, and heartily shaking our hands') and solemnly committed themselves to guarding the contents of the box, promising to appoint their children or grandchildren as heirs. Principal Guardian was Sir Allen Lane's granddaughter Zoë Teale, aged ten (who was to publish her first novel in 1995). The youngest was 'Chico', the baby son of Alison Rosenberg, designer of Puffin exhibitions. There was also Nina Bawden's nine-year-old granddaughter Jessica, and Puffineers Paul Godfrey (future playwright), Alison Cartledge, Philip Geddes and Vivien Moir, who had travelled with her grandmother from the west coast of Scotland.

One of the Guardians' promises was that whenever the Capsule is unsealed, it will be 'in the presence of distinguished authorities in the world of Children's Literature'. Among the messages in the books inside the exhumed capsule, they would find:

***Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce:**

Like the old woman in this story, I stretch out my hand to touch the children of the future: for a moment I touch you with these words of mine.

I send you my love. Neighbourly love is what, now, we need much, much more of: I wish you may have it.

I wish you happiness.

Do you still read books? I hope so. I wish you that joy, among many others.

***Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild:**

Imagine: this was written for you by an author old enough to remember Queen Victoria's coffin drawn by a steam train.

***Warrior Scarlet* by Rosemary Sutcliff:**

Dear children

It seems odd to be writing this to you, who will not be born for another ninety years or so. Odd but nice.

I wonder what your world is like, and I hope that by reading the books and letters and such like things that we in 1978 are sending to you, you will come to know a little more what our world is like, and the things in it that we think are worth sending on to you. My love to you all, Rosemary Sutcliff.

***Borka – the Adventures of a Goose with No Feathers*
by John Burningham:**

I hope the grass is still green and the birds are singing.

You are probably blaming our generation for mucking up your world. Sorry. Try to make a better job of it than we did. Best wishes from the past. John Burningham.

***The Seas of Morning* by Geoffrey Trease:**

Were we so quaint, in nineteen seventy-eight?
We too had friends, and fun. We drank and ate.
One thing we much enjoyed was called a book.
You don't know what that was? Here – have a look!

***The Adventures of Robin Hood* by Roger Lancelyn Green:**

I pray that, were I able to be with you in 2078, I could say, with Shakespeare –

‘Oh wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,

That has such people in it!’

***Silly Verse for Kids* by Spike Milligan:**

To tomorrow's children –

I think the world population (if there's no war) will be massive.
I did warn people when I was alive. I hope your world is tolerable.
Live – Light – Peace
Spike Milligan, July 1978.

***The Puffin Book of Magic Verse*, edited by Charles Causley:**

Life is magic,
Love is a spell;
Guard both well.

***The Dolphin Crossing* by Jill Paton Walsh:**

Whatever the most dangerous crossing in your time may be, I wish you may set out bravely, and safely return.

Kaye herself wrote a message inside *The Crack-a-Joke Book*: 'This was the 1,000th Puffin to be published while I was the Editor in charge. We wanted to create something very special which would make children laugh, but also help other children who were having a bad time.

'In the years before 1978 and in this year too, all sorts of dreadful disasters have happened in different parts of the world. People, and their children, have been made homeless and hungry, because of physical disasters, like floods, fires, earthquakes and stupid wars. So people from countries all round the world united to rush aid to them when things were desperate. One of the charities formed was called OXFAM, and we are specially proud because we sold so many copies of this book that we were able to give nearly £10,000 to them to pay for things like food and blankets.

'I wonder whether you will be doing the same sort of things in 2078. Although it would be wonderful to think that a hundred years from now all such problems will have disappeared.

'I wonder, too, whether you will be laughing at the same sort of jokes. I wish I could be there to see you open this book and

start telling them to each other, but whatever happens, this and all the other books in this special legacy we have left you have been chosen with our love and wishes for your happiness.’

Today, thirty-two years on, the Time Capsule’s voice already belongs to another era, before the computer revolution. It is no longer entombed at Harmondsworth, as the old offices were razed to the ground in 2003. The Capsule was lifted and transported (unopened) in 2005 to the Centre for Children’s Books at Felling, near Newcastle upon Tyne, to be part of its treasury of children’s book archives.

What would Victorian writers have written, in messages to future children? They might have conjured up a world in which change would mean improvement, progress, invention, better education, and alleviation of poverty and misery. The Queen’s Silver Jubilee Year of 1978, despite street-parties and jamborees across the land, was a more sceptical time. There was high inflation, high unemployment, a plethora of strikes, international unrest and a widespread sense of disillusion.

The writers’ messages of 1978 mostly recognize this. They did not seem to cherish a hope that the future might really be an improvement on the present. But they managed to voice a wary confidence that children, at least, arriving in the world not knowing what terrible things can happen, would continue to possess an inborn capacity for love, friendship and goodness.