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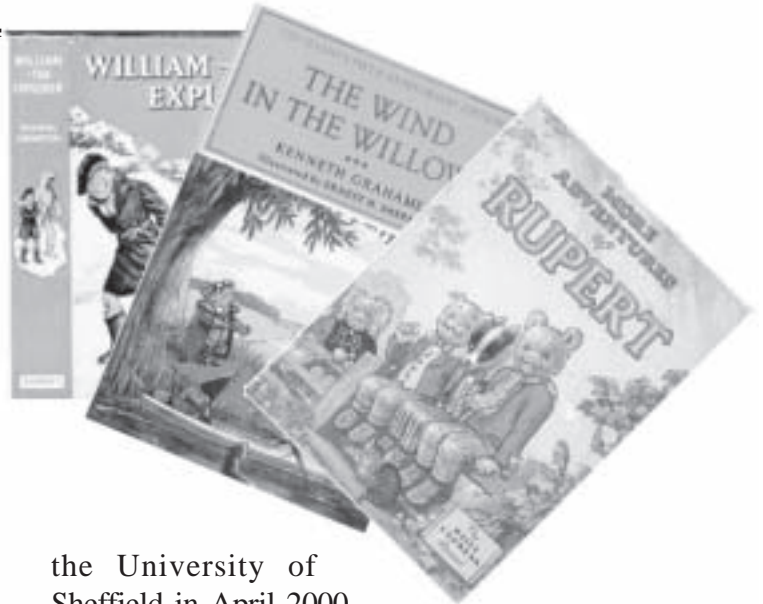
# ***RUPERT and the Critics***

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## ***How to "critique" Rupert?***

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It's always been a source of frustration to me that Rupert is not taken more "seriously" by the *literati* ... but then I also find it both annoying and incomprehensible that many "real" critics regard *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* as anything other than great and important books. Somehow a book that hit readers of the 1960s like a hurricane, is read and re-read by millions and still sets the standard for adult faery



the University of Sheffield in April 2000 and now in the *Followers'* library. Geoff's work concentrated on Rupert's place in the cultural landscape of his time. In his closing chapters, Geoff takes a final, tantalising look at "establishing a proper critical paradigm for children's literature" (I include Rupert, although some argue that Rupert is "story-telling using pictures" - not literature. I think that Rupert deserves to be called "illustrated children's literature" ... over to you for some debate!). That is where I come in - to suggest real, practical alternatives to the false criteria used by the literary establishment. To be sure, much of the literary posturing about "great books" is simply "The Emperor's New Clothes" - one wag once suggested that the



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*Alfred Bestall (above) and C. S. Lewis (right) - both of whom have received occasionally unfair treatment from the "literati"*

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story is not quite good enough. Similarly, a series of books that brings children (and adults!) back to reading books, on paper, long before any whiff of a Hollywood movie, is dismissed as derivative, shallow, etc. by those who know what a good book really is (Not!). My latent desire to stir this issue up was further provoked by Geoff Laidler's BA honours dissertation "*The Bear Facts : A Cultural Studies Reading of Rupert Bear*", submitted to



definition of an award-winning book was one that no-one ever reads! That's obviously a little strong and it's more constructive for us to suggest viable alternatives. We have in the past touched peripherally on this issue - in Mary Cadogan's article on *Rupert as a Folk-Hero* (NN27), where Mary looks at Rupert in the context of other children's characters. Mary's later piece in NN39 (*Rupert - The Key Piece in the Jigsaw*) describes the qualities in Rupert that make him special to her and made his role in the development of her imagination important. This article takes a first step in trying to pull this all together and asking "what it is in general that makes a children's book good", and "how does Rupert match up?"

It is not worth dwelling on what real literary critics use as a critical paradigm - other than to note that criteria such as dense and clever use of language, depth of character portrayal and interesting exposition of the political realities of the time are not likely to be good benchmarks for illustrated children's books! Instead, let us look at what could be useful traits that would make for a good children's illustrated book ... and let us start with the premise that "good" means that:-

- a) It stimulates children's imaginations
- b) Children are likely to read it in its entirety
- c) Children are likely to re-read it
- d) Adults can enjoy it with, or even in parallel with, their children
- e) It is likely to encourage children to read other, possibly more challenging, books
- f) It is likely to make children think constructively about life, the environment, science, people and the universe - in particular about their own relationships with these.

I propose these as a list of criteria against which children's books can be judged. It would be good to hear fellow *Followers'* views on this list. Is it correct? Is it complete? Answers on a postcard ... In the meantime, what should we look for - and how does Rupert stand up to scrutiny? We need not think too long about (a) above - as Rupert's world is one of the most imaginative



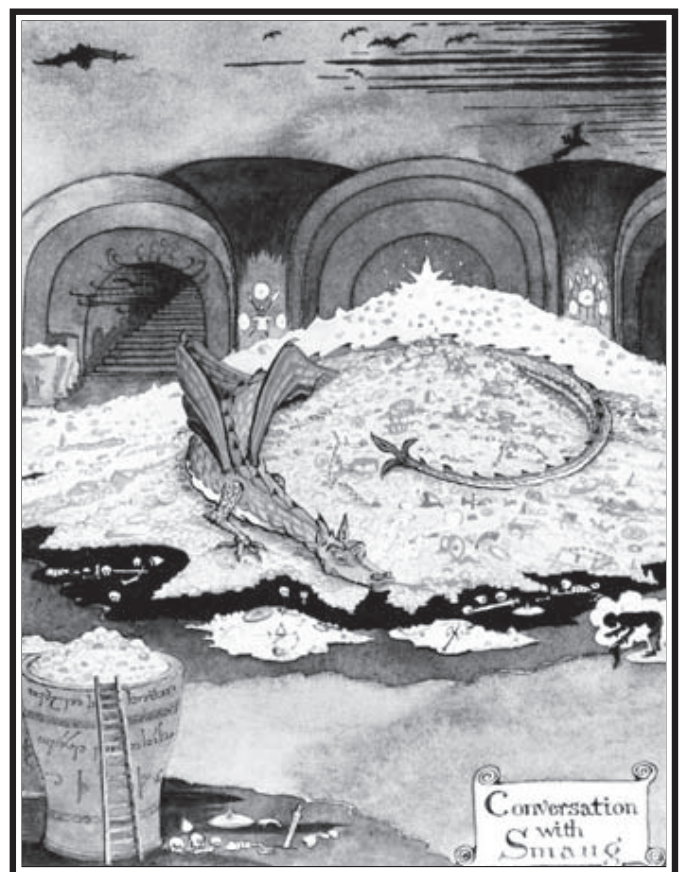
The new Annual - with multiple versions of the same story, to allow enjoyment at many levels, now a time-honoured Rupert tradition.

places imaginable. On the other issues, however, here are a few thoughts to start off what will hopefully be a long-running, controversial and positive *Nutwood Newsletter* debate. I will leave this deliberately incomplete to try to stir others into later action.

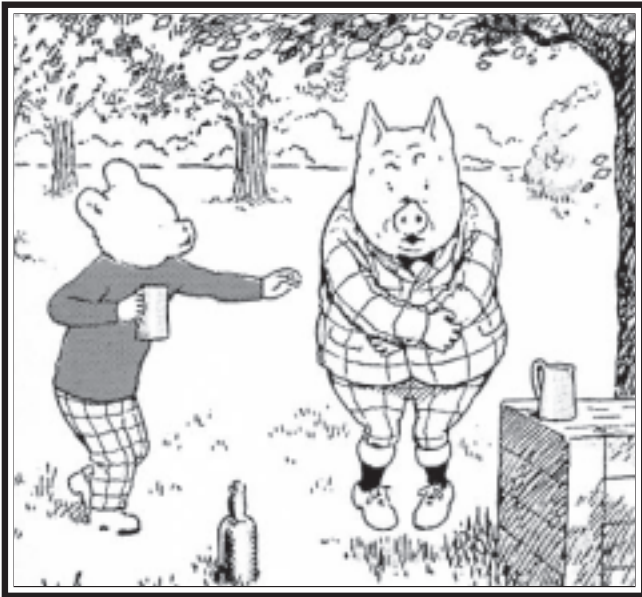
### Clarity of character:-

Children identify with characters in books - perhaps more directly than do adults. Most adults tend to look into a book, relatively dispassionately, while children become Bilbo Baggins, fighting Smaug, Just William, up to his ears in mischief, or Harry Potter, swooping down to win the day at Quidditch. It is therefore vital that characters, good and bad, are identifiable as such. Clearly

"baddies" can turn out to be "goodies" in the end (and *vice versa*) but characters that are ambiguous or sloppily demarcated simply will not do. The *Nutwooders* fit the bill well. Rupert is full of fun, vitality, adventure and



Bilbo and Smaug - as drawn by Tolkien himself, for "The Hobbit"

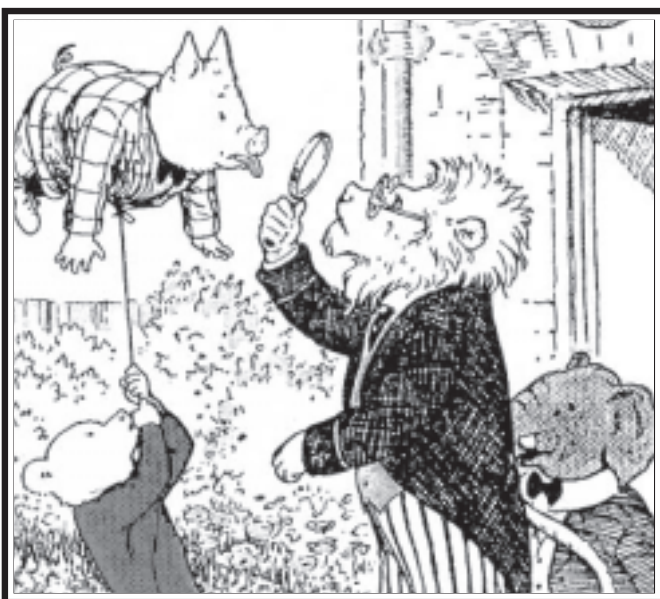


*Who ate all the pies? Well, Podgy drank the dodgy lemonade ....*

courage. Podgy is a lazy glutton with a good heart. The Old Professor is a font of wisdom given to creating mishaps when inventions go awry. Occasional smugglers, pirates and robbers are identifiably bad and represent the dangers that the outside world can present unambiguously. All are clear, concise expressions of identifiable characters, each with a very definite role to play. Many, especially Rupert himself, are examples of characters who could be role models. Hopefully, Podgy Pig does not attract too much of this sort of attention!

### **Pace**

is important in many forms of adult novel - the story must keep moving to retain the reader's attention. Thomas Hardy got away with a serious lack of pace - taking several pages to describe Bathsheba Everdene's feminine



*.... another mishap for the Old Professor requiring Dr. Lion's cure. Who said Pigs couldn't fly!*

charms, for example! Rupert readers would be unlikely to value such a description of Rupert's left ear. Rupert stories, like Harry Potter's and those written by, for example, Alan Garner, don't hang around. Excitement, change of scene, cliff-hanging action are all par for the course. However, this exciting pace is not achieved by sacrificing all feel for place, time and personality. Joanna Rowling's characters and places are real and well-



described. Alan Garner's Alderley Edge is spine-chillingly threatening. Rupert stories contain little descriptive writing - because the description is in the extraordinary illustrations. Here we have the first departure from the norm with respect to illustrated stories. The illustrations are an inextricable element of the story-telling process. In Rupert stories, they carry both the personalities and the places and their quality is of paramount importance. While Rupert is no mere cartoon, we must find some way to include quality of illustration as a criterion for his genre - illustrated children's literature.

## Humour

It would be patronising to consider that books had to be "funny" to hold children's attention. However, an element of humour (even black humour - look at Roald Dahl's extraordinary creations!) helps to keep a young reader reading. Edith Nesbit's books are not "funny ha ha" - but there is an element of oddness about the Psammead, for example, that raises a smile and stops the books from becoming solemn, and therefore "hard work". Rupert is not often overtly funny - but comic situations do occur (especially when Podgy gets involved) and juxtapositions of odd story elements occur all over the place. There are peculiar and often comical characters such as Spelies, Raggety, Odemedod and the Mulp Gulper. Silly things happen from time to time. Podgy becomes very large, Mrs. Bear has a fit of disco-dancing, Podgy floats like a balloon, Rupert dons magical boots and bounces around like a thing demented. Occasionally, a joke is had at someone's expense. Podgy is, once again, often at the bottom of it, although Bill Badger also has a tendency to practical joking. All of this gently amusing stuff adds lightness and balances Annuals that often include rather scary stories. As a passing comment on this, Winnie the Pooh is humorous, but many of the subtle jokes are aimed over the head of the child to the adult that is reading the story out loud.

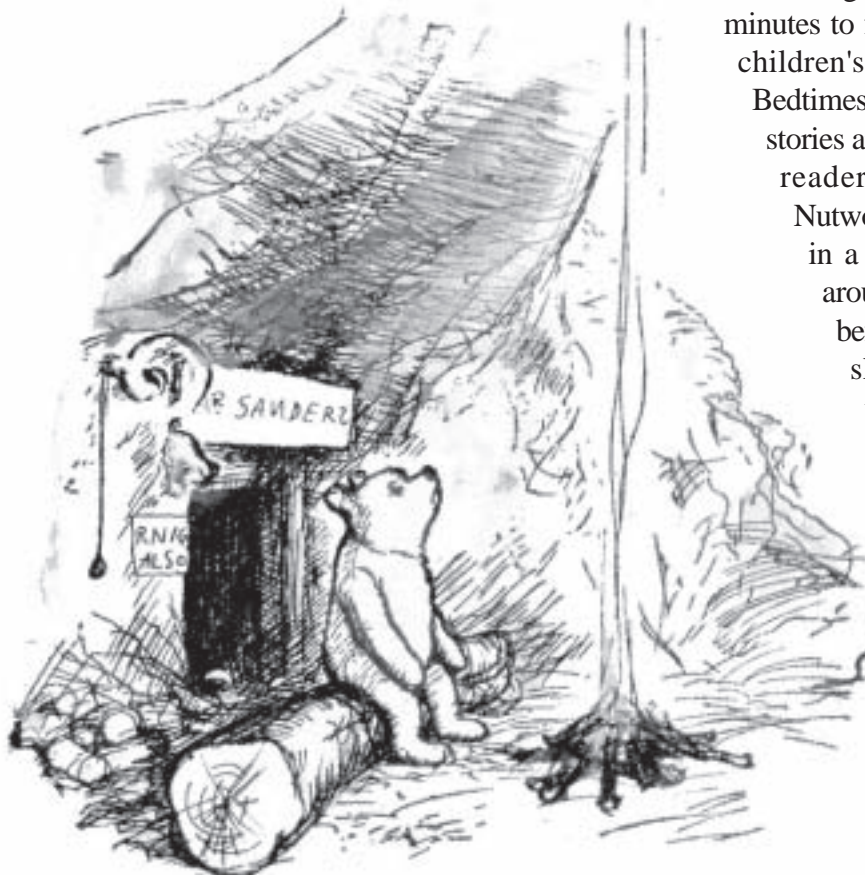


*Weird scenes inside the mulp-mine - and amusingly bizarre Spelies and Mulp Gulper*

While this is good fun and encourages bedtime stories, the more direct humour in Rupert's world is arguably of greater value in terms of helping the younger reader to appreciate humorous writing. In this respect, Rupert is closer to Just William, Harry Potter and even, unfortunately, the egregious Billy Bunter in appealing directly to a child's own sense of the ridiculous.

## Suspense

"Cliff-hangers" grab the attention and force the reader to go on, to stay awake for another 5 minutes to find out what happens. Clearly, in a children's story, too much suspense is bad. Bedtimes are likely to be disrupted, and most stories are therefore short enough to allow the reader to get from "a normal day in Nutwood" at the beginning through "Rupert in a very strange place, with danger all around", to "back safe in Nutwood", all before bedtime! The Rupert storytellers' skill is to build in short, but often terrifying, cliff-hangers that allow the young (or not so young) reader to enjoy the suspense, to be relieved by the rescue and to head for bed with comforting images in the head. The conciseness of Rupert stories encourages young readers to see a whole story through in a single sitting, while the multiple levels of story (from the pictures alone, through the couplets, to the full prose at the foot) leads older readers towards a more

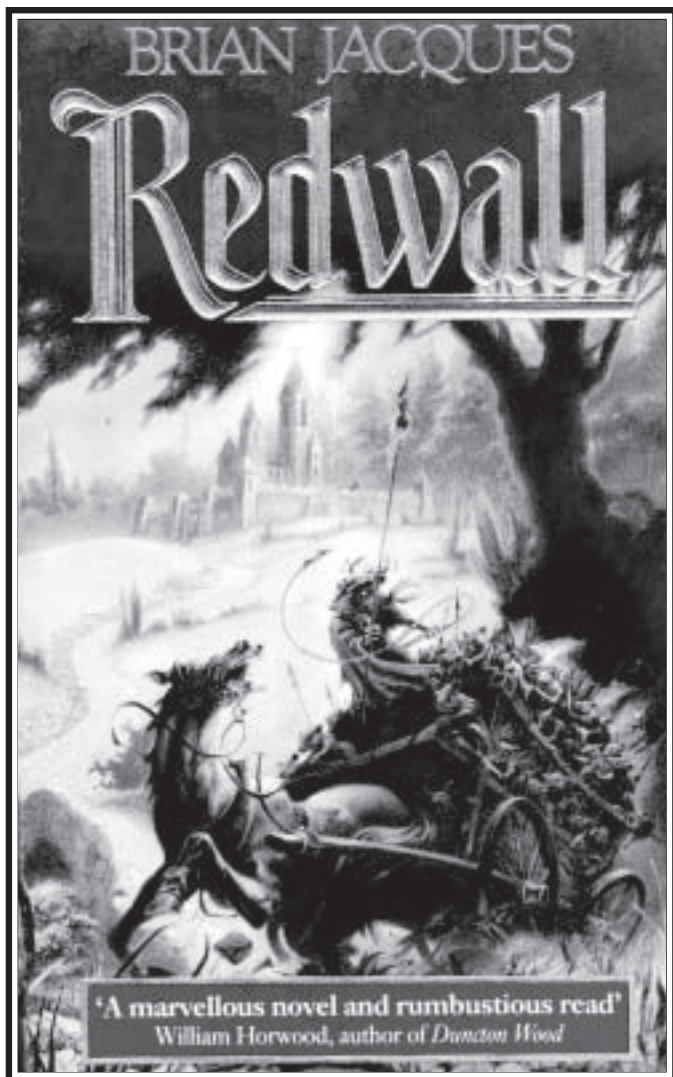


*Adult humour (under the name of Sanders indeed!) in "Winnie the Pooh"*



*Rupert suspended and in great suspense - inside the Lion Rock*

"adult" style of story, with detail in the images supported by the text. This is, perhaps, one of the most appealing aspects of Rupert as a literary entity. One the reader has engaged with the characters and stories through the images, he or she is drawn into a more adult world, where sentences, paragraphs and even some very short



passages of simple descriptive writing occur. This is a small step from Narnia, Hogwarts, Redwall and Deptford, where the writing takes over from the illustrations. Rupert encourages young readers to make this transition in a way that simple cartoons do not.

### **Morals, Social Conscience and "Messages"**

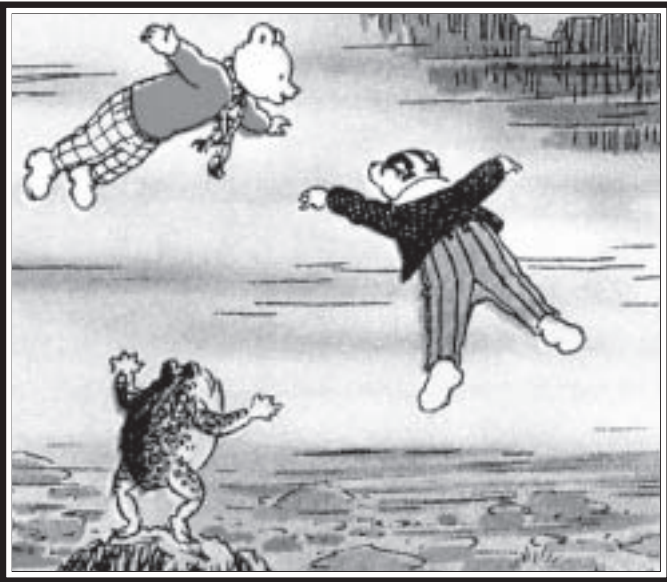
This is a double-edged sword and a critic's response to it is likely to reveal his or her prejudices! At least as many critics reviled C.S. Lewis's Christian message in Narnia as loved and applauded it. Setting that aside, however, books that succeed in placing a moral or similar issue before children without "preaching" are extremely valuable. Realistic stories about Grange Hill pose awkward questions about racism, sexism and the "power structure" of the school playground. Judy Blume goes further and probes teenagers' growing sexuality. Clearly, that's not on the Nutwood agenda, despite Oz magazine's 1970s attempt to put it there! However, the destruction of native deciduous woods most definitely is, as are the

### *A DEEPER MAGIC*



*Deeper (Christian allegorical) magic from Narnia*

problems experienced by newcomers such as Ottoline, the exploitation of Little Yum the baby Yeti and the consequences of Podgy's many minor misdemeanours. The message is never "heavy", the solutions never stray into the realms of religious belief, but Rupert stories introduce children to the idea that a good story can be **about** something that matters, while still being both good fun and gripping. There are many examples of Rupert stories that draw the reader into understanding of his or her own place in a relationship (with others or with the environment). Arguably, Rupert stories achieve this more than many, for a wider age range, as they provide several routes to "becoming" Rupert Bear, or Podgy Pig, or even the Old Professor. This encourages subconscious (or even conscious) examination of how **we** would react to circumstances that are threatening, alarming, or to friends who are behaving oddly, or even badly. Rupert's reactions are generally exemplary - but



*Tigerlily's spell causes havoc - again!*

Podgy, Tigerlily, Ferdie and Freddie and others offer a route to the self-knowledge and resultant self-understanding that comes from thinking "I've done that .... I've played a trick that went wrong", or "I've told fibs, just like Podgy - and it backfired on me too!".

### **Adult Appeal**

As *Followers*, we are perhaps a little biased here! However, standing back as far as I can, Rupert books appeal to many parents for all the reasons above, that make them good books for children to read. However, few adults are not drawn to the exquisite artwork. Most enjoy the same fast-moving, scene-changing aspects as do the children. Adults often find amusement in the adult characters - the avuncular Mr. Bear, the bumbling and accident-prone Old Professor, the sage-like Wise Old Goat and the Sage of Um's loopy antics in an umbrella. Dads often speculate as to how the inventions work, what the fine old car is and whether Rupert is on a 1952 Vincent Black Lightning or a more prosaic Honda



*An early, and typically sagacious, Wise Old Goat*

motorbike. Mums must find Mrs. Bear's cosy domesticity a little claustrophobic now, and Mr Bear is certainly not a "new man" - but nostalgia is a powerful thing. It is particularly strong when it offers a world that never really was. Adults can escape into Nutwood along with their children, for only slightly different reasons. A modicum of escapism is no bad thing. When it is shared between parent and child, it is a thing to treasure. Who can resist the temptation to allow the idyllic nature of Rupert's Christmas to make our own imperfect celebrations more real. Just as Tolkien's Treebeard makes all trees more alive, Rupert's Nutwood makes all homes more welcoming, comfortable and reassuring.



*An impossibly idyllic family Christmas scene in Nutwood - but doesn't it give us all something to aspire to, something to dream about, and something whose memory makes a real Christmas a little more Christmassy?*

### **Time to pause ...**

I said I'd stop before I finished - so I will. It's your turn now. I would argue that, going back to my list of criteria, Rupert stories are "god" children's literature - and I would cite the arguments above in support. I would not claim that all Rupert stories are equally good. There have been a few clunkers over the years. However, the sub-created world, the characters and most particularly the illustrations set Rupert books apart and make them worthy of serious and positive critical comment, by a set of standards appropriate to the genre.

Over to you ... have I got the criteria (a) to (f) right? Have I missed some? Can you find better, or more precise examples of where they are found in Rupert stories? I am looking forward to your responses.

*Alan Murray*

*(with thanks to Mary Cadogan for comments)*