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BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

by Sumana Saparamadu

Sumana Saparamadu a graduate of the University of Ceylon with a first class honours degree has been writing books for children since 1957. She's also a regular reviewer of children's books. A working journalist from 1955, she's currently the editor of *Tharuni* and *Athuru Mithuru* a children's weekly.

Many think that tuition and television have weaned children from books, putting an end to leisure-time reading. Tuition, the drag that begins at year 3 in school, has indeed deprived most children of a very pleasant and profitable pastime, for their out-of-school hours are taken by treks to and from "classes". But this is not so in the case of television. On the contrary, teledramas have kindled in many children a desire to read the story enacted on the TV screen. A classic case in point is *Amba Yaluwo*. Another was *Hath Pana*.

Children who master the art of silent reading very early and cultivate the reading habit, read *Hath Pana* and *Amba Yaluwo* and go on to *Madol Duwa* prime favourites - before they leave primary school, despite the egging on by parents to put story books aside and concentrate on the grade 5 scholarship exam.

What of the average child?

What do they read?

What books are there for the under 12s?

How accessible are they to the average child?

Ilangaratna's books including *Amba Yaluwo*, and Wickramasinghe's *Madol Duwa* belong to the category of juvenile literature, which

is outside my purview. I shall confine myself to books in Sinhala for children under twelve.

Under 12 is a wide age group in reading skills, as varied as the backgrounds the children come from. This group can be sub-divided roughly into three groups: from 3-5 years, 5-8 years and 8-12 years, with much over lapping.

In Sri Lanka, children are initiated into reading - අකුරු කියවනවා before they complete the 4th year.

3-5 years is the age of the picture-book, from the initiation into letters until the child starts formal schooling, and the biggest lacuna is here. The only picture books available are the හෝඩි පොත් - elementary readers - which teach rather than entertain the child.

Recently when I was browsing in the children's section of a leading bookshop, I heard a well-dressed man who seemed to be in his mid-thirties asking a sales girl for picture-books - පින්තූර පොත්. The salesgirl was puzzled for a moment, and when the man explained that he was looking for books for his little child, the girl replied: "These are all story-books හෝඩි පොත් (primers) are on the counter over there".

The only picture books she knew were, obviously, readers for beginners with pictures and words printed in large type. That was to be expected for there are hardly any books of the kind that, that particular father was looking for.

There are no books for that age in a child's life when the parent can sit him on the lap and read the rhymes and jingles, pointing to the pictures in the book and keep him interested, may be, for half an hour. At this age - three plus - the child is already familiar with some of the rhymes and may even be able to repeat the odd phrase.

The only book I was able to pick up from a mound of books, at that bookshop, that came anywhere near a picture-book was Surangani Ellawala's *Tikiri Liya*. The illustrations are animated and the colours bright and gay, with the text, reduced to the bare minimum, set in a type large enough for a little child to decipher. She should have done away with the story of *Bandalage Hava*, and had only the verse, as with *Tikiriliya* and මල්ලිපි මමයි. The book is priced at Rs. 19.50. Alas!

It is surprising and deplorable that no publishing house has considered it worth spending on an illustrated book of rhymes, jingles and "raban pada" etc. which are plentiful in our oral heritage.

චූටිගේ සෙල්ලමිගේ (Chuti's Playhouse) written and illustrated by Sybil Wettasinghe was a delightful book for the pre-school child. Published in the mid sixties it has long been out-of-print, not because it has had its day, but for reasons of copy right. Some of her verses like කලු මාමගෙ කලු ගොනා have gone out of the playhouse into the national heritage of children's rhymes.

I have seen it published in a children's weekly with no mention of the author, whose name has passed into oblivion as the verses passed from mouth to mouth. Ms. Wettasinghe can take comfort from the knowledge that she has enriched our heritage of oral literature.

The lacuna of picture-books intersepered with rhymes and jingles, and tiny tales for tiny tots, is slightly - very slightly - filled by the weeklies for the pre-school child. But these weeklies are an ill-as-



taken to the song අකුරු මැකී නෑ.

No social changes, or changes in tastes have diminished the popularity of the poems of Munidasa Cumaratunga, Ananda Rajakaruna and the monk-poet S. Mahinda. Their appeal is ageless. If there is any poet in post-independent Sri Lanka whose compositions come anywhere near the poems of these three writers it is W.A. Abeyasinghe. His පුස්තකයක් පුසා in his ගී පිනදු which won the award for the

and illustrated edition of his පුදුරු ගී (poems for tiny-tots) or even of some of his more popular poems like මල්බස and හා හා හරි හාවා.

As a child approaches the day when he/she will light his/her 6th candle, the child wants poems that conjur scenes he/she can see with his/her inward eye and stories that are told quickly with things happening, enabling him/her to race along with the author, chuckling or crying.

The years 5-8 have been described as the "in-between age", when the child has out-grown the picture-book but is not yet ready for the long story.

There are books in plenty for the five to eight year olds but quality is in inverse proportion to quantity. Books for this age-group have become a profitable field for the hack writer and the hack publisher.

The impetus to book publication for this group came with the change of the medium of instruction in the primary classes to Sinhala in 1947. This change created a demand for supplementary readers in Sinhala. It was in response to this growing demand that H.D. Sugathapala, then an assistant teacher at the Royal Primary School, and an inspired educator, brought out කුඩා හොරා (Kuda Hora) to supplement his නව මග readers, which ready opened up a new vista in children's book publication.

Kuda Hora, written and illustrated by Sybil Wettasinghe is a landmark in the history of children's literature (Sinhala), and the watershed in book publication. It set the pattern for children's books for this in-between age. So great was its impact, that 35 years after its publication in 1955, books for the primary school child, come out with



sorted spread of rhymes and stories, words and numerals, purporting to teach the three Rs.

Many books of poems for the pre-school child and the child in the next age group (5-8 years) have been published, but hardly any have seen re-prints. Uninspired, banal versifiers cannot stir a child's imagination and children recognise and reject anything "written down" to them. Some lyric writers have succeeded where the versifier failed. Note how children have

best children's book this year, is a delightful piece, the kind of verse that four and five year olds will love to read aloud and repeat by rote after three or four readings. The illustrations are, alas! beyond the child's level.

Annual poojas are paid to Cumaratunga on his death anniversary and a great tamasha marked his birth centenary (July 1987), but neither his followers nor his heirs, or the Ministry of Cultural Affairs have yet thought of bringing out

rigid uniformity in size, lay-out, appearance, and type of lettering, all conforming to the pattern of Kuda Hora.



Kuda Hora was also a new conception of the children's story-gay, humorous and fun to read. It is the fantastic and improbable happenings that hold the awakening mind in this in-between age, when nothing is impossible, Ms. Wettasinghe's books all have this quality which accounts for the many re-prints. Her උඩ ගිය බො has seen seven re-prints in 10 years.

The International Year of the Child (1979) was a fillip to aspiring-writers, and more books for this age-group have been published in the 80s than in all the 33 years since the switch over to Sinhala in schools. After IYC came a spate of trivial and imitative stories, uninspired, repetitive and boring and shoddy in lay-out and production.

There is an awareness among parents and teachers of the need for more varied and better children's books, and there are no end of seminars and workshops on book production and writing for children. Prizes are offered for the Best Children's Book of the year, awards ranging from the prestigious Sahitya Award of the Ministry of Culture to National Youth Council Awards, Book Council Awards, and awards by publishing companies. The phrase සම්මාන දිනූ 'award winner' is printed on the title page of these books to make them appear to give the best to the child while, in many cases, actually offering the worst.

The 80s brought a flood of the worst and the most tasteless children's story books ever produced in this country. A few exceptions are විකිරි සහ පමයා written by Krishna Tennakoon, and illustrated

by Surangani Ellawala, Hubert Disanayaka's posthumously published හීන් නුවණ and Viraj Abeynayaka's පෙක්කප්පු, the Cultural Council's Award for the 'Best Book' in IYC. Although somewhat didactic-teaching kindness to animals-children will find the unexpected ending most satisfying.

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and the National Book Council buy a certain number of books to help writers meet their printing-costs, but has this aid been an incentive to better writing and better book production? My candid opinion is that it has helped many a hack writer and hack publisher.

Parents, teachers and even writers seem to believe that books are not for pure pleasure, that children's reading material must have a purpose, must improve and uplift. They are unable to accept that an imaginative story could exist entirely on its own, without purpose or moral, that it can be read and enjoyed by children without any detrimental effects.

And so the books produced at workshops, and by writers who have participated in workshops and seminars, lack the basic ingredient of a children's story- its readability. A child will read and re-read his favourite books and with each fresh reading his delight is increased instead of dulled.

Who buys these books anyway? Not children. Children never buy books. Do kids have the Rs. 20/- now necessary to pay for a 16 page or 20 page book? These are parent-oriented and teacher-oriented books. The adults are taken in by the large type, the colours, the 'be

good-do good' message and the complete absence of dread and fear.

Parents, grand-parents, aunts and uncles give these book as gifts- books that instruct them in rites they already know, and repeat for children their routines- getting dressed, going to school etc, books that tell simple-minded tales and stories that anthropomorphize animals in maudlin ways. No horror, no wonder, no fantasy.

But the child is enticed by the comics- the චිත්‍ර කථා, sneaked into the home by older siblings, which fulfill their thirst for adventure, terror, danger, suspense, fear and fancy. These චිත්‍ර කථා are alas, accompanied by sadism and worse, by ghastly writing.

By the time the child has passed his 8th year, if no well-written exciting books have been given him/ her, he/she, soon becomes a voracious reader of comics- චිත්‍ර කථා.

There are fewer but better books for the last group 8-12 years - fewer because it is not as easy to write a story that runs into 40 or 48 pages as it is to hash up something to fill 12, or 16 pages. So, only these with a love and flair for writing have attempted the longer story.

In an essay such as this written at very short notice, and in the span allowed, one cannot do more than call attention to outstanding books the writer can recall.

One that stands out, in narration, illustration and production, among the books of the 80s, is සුදු අලියා by E. Galloluwa.

Lal Premanath de Mel's වන දරුවෝ is available but not Father

Don Peter's වනගත දරුවෝ a book greatly in demand but, for some unknown reason, not re-printed. Rowen de Costa's කම්බිලි කොටියා published 30 years ago has seen many reprints, the latest with a jazzed up cover and colour illustrations, Although the title page says it is for grades 2 and 3 , it is one of the better books for children in grades 5 and 6.

Cumaratunge wrote his හත් පණ මගුල් කෑම and හීන් සැරය for children in grades 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Children who attended Sinhala schools in the thirties, apparently had the ability to read and the capacity absorb and enjoy what they were offered at those particular age-levels, but not the modern child. There is too much 'play-way' in his learning. So they will have to wait until they are in the sixth or seventh year in school, to read these classics

More that sixty years have passed since Cumaratunge wrote these three stories for children, and they still remain the high water - mark in our children's literature. Animal characters have always been a part of the Sinhala child's world of fancy

viz හාවයි නරියයි, නරි බෑනා etc. Cumaratunge went further, anthropomorphazising animals as no folk tale has done. මගුල් කෑම and හීන් සැරය are on par with Kenneth Graham's 'Wind in the Willows', a world classic.

This then is the standard of the books for sale to day, and the ubiquity of dull, shoddy books, prevents parents and children becoming aware of the good books that have always been available.

How accessible are books to the child who wants to read? Parents will buy books if they are not so highly priced. Witness the rush to bookshops in September-Sahitya Month-when books are offered at discount prices. Publishers maintain that with the high cost of paper and the 40% discount demanded by bookshops, it is impossible to price even a 16 page book at less than Rs. 18 or Rs. 20 to-day.

In the bigger schools children have a regular 'library period'. Libraries do exist in rural schools but the present writer's observation is that many Headmasters and Headmistresses are more concerned about the audit checks when they will be answerable for missing books than

with inculcating the reading habit in children.

Why do publishers bring out books so dull in content and shoddy in make-up? Often the text submitted by an aspiring writer and accepted by a publisher, is passed on to the printer for setting. The printer does it his own way or as his fancy dictates, with no thought of the age-group it is intended for.

Ambitious writers are in a hurry to get their books printed and published, and to keep printing costs down, reduce the number of illustrations to the minimum.

When a reviewer comments on the book's unsuitability for children of that particular age group, the writer is piqued: 'a jealous rival has written this review or got it written'.

The lack of unbiased and intelligent reviewing has been one of the principle barriers to better books, to any improvement in the selection of reading material and the production of books for children. It is also one of the main reasons why many parents remain unaware of the better books for the sons and daughters. ■