

For Younger Readers—I

The Big Six. By Arthur Ransome. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)

The Seasons and the Gardener. By H. E. Bates. (Cambridge University Press. 6s.)

Caravan Island. By E. H. Young. (Black. 7s. 6d.)

The Curious Lobster and The Curious Lobster's Island. By Richard W. Hatch. (Cape. 7s. 6d. each.)

Because of Batty's Boots. By Ruth Clark. (Dent. 6s.)

Baltic Spy. By Carola Oman. (Pitman. 3s. 6d.)

Kings and Queens. By Eleanor and Herbert Farjeon. (Dent. 6s.)

THE children's book business remains a muddle. Last spring, through the enterprise of one individual, a meeting was convened at which publishers, children's librarians, authors, teachers, and reviewers were given a long-needed chance to pool their understanding. The really valuable contributions came from the librarians, who substantiated what some of us have been saying for years: namely, that apart from books for very young children, there is no system and precious little sense. Publishers are working in darkness, undecided whether they are aiming at the grown-up who buys the book or the child who reads it, knowing little of children and what they like, and, in common with the majority of authors, ludicrously underestimating the child's intelligence at any age between eight and seventeen. They were splendid women, those librarians. They spoke vigorously, from the heart. One of our most experienced reviewers confirmed every word they said, and the teachers weighed in too.

After this it will seem a contradiction to praise a batch of excellent books for children; but the reader must remember that they are hand-picked from scores, if not from hundreds. The good writer for children sticks out a mile. He or she respects children, enjoys what they enjoy, is actively interested in the story, loves incidental detail, and never writes down. Mr. Arthur Ransome, our Children's Author No. 1, has all these qualities, and adds to them a vivid charm, and a mastery of the technique children love best. He has no scruples against giving instruction, but it is always a necessary part of the story, and he always

assumes an active and enquiring intelligence in his readers. "Pete had a loose tooth, and could not keep his tongue from jiggling it," is the opening sentence of *The Big Six*, in which the *Death and Glory* "unlike any other boat on the river," voyaged adventurously on the Norfolk Broads. A fish's funeral, an inn called 'The Roaring Donkey,' the escape of the boat from *force majeure*, the lore of birds and animals—do you know what happens if you show a nursing ferret your closed fist?—and clearly drawn characters, go to make up a small work of art.

I do not know if Mr. H. E. Bates has written for children before, but he will certainly be asked to do so again. He is frankly didactic, but gives in full seriousness and honesty the detailed information about gardens, and beasts, and flowers, which children will find satisfying. He knows and loves what he is talking about. In one or two places he is over-anxious, and presses ideas instead of facts; but this is an excellent piece of work, and Mr. C. F. Tunnicliffe's drawings suit it most happily. I have set it aside for a nine-year-old. Miss Young is another famous recruit. *Caravan Island* concerns two sets of cousins who begin by hating and come to like one another. The change is wrought by a camping holiday in the Western Isles of Scotland, in charge of an aunt. The characters are admirably drawn, and the incident human and convincing. I did not get the feel of the Western Isles—at least, not my feel of them—but Mr. Walter Hodges obviously did, since his illustrations, particularly the jacket, are magnificent. Miss Young makes the aunt rather bracing, but children will disregard the moral and enjoy the story.

Salute to Mr. Hatch, whose hero, Mr. Lobster, is a creature of great charm and has charming friends. "A home . . . is a place not to be bothered in," he proclaims, and confesses "All my life I have been curious. That is why I know so much." The conflict between caution and curiosity explains his adventures, just as Mr. Bear's temper is kept in check by his wish to be civilised, since he once travelled with a circus. Owl, sculpin, mouse, sea-gull, "permanent partridge," the creatures of Mr. Hatch's world are acceptable to anyone with a sense of humour and an eye for character.

Because of Batty's Boots is a first-rate story for younger children—say, seven to ten—told straight from the horse's mouth—or should it be the bullock's? It is all in the child's world: the loss of the boots, the children clubbing together to meet the situation, the conspiracy, the detective interest, and, crowning pleasure, children doing something effective for grown-ups.

Miss Carola Oman can always be trusted. Her Father Robertson was a spy of gentle and unassuming demeanour, whose duties took him from his Baltic headquarters south to Munich. Recent events have seriously challenged the excitements of the Napoleonic wars, but Miss Oman shows that the changes are in speed and in mechanics, not in humanity. A vigorous, exciting story: nine onwards. The Farjeons' book remains for all ages, and its additional verses are very good indeed.

L. A. G. STRONG.