

Tell us a snorey  
By Francesca Simon

Janet and John have come out of retirement to help a new generation of young readers. But is revamping this joyless series really such a good idea, asks children's author Francesca Simon.

I learned to read on Janet and John's American counterparts - Dick and Jane, and their dog Spot. This was in the early 60s, and these dour books did the deed tediously and joylessly.

See Spot. See Spot run. Run Spot run. My heart sinks just writing the sentences.

No one who had to read those phrases over and over and over as I did could ever forget them. Like a bad pop lyric they echo round your head, all that seeing and running - a strange, stilted, dreary 50s world of prissy children, perfect parents, and hyperactive dogs. And God forbid there should be characters, or a joke or a rhyme. Learning to read was a serious business - and don't you forget it. And woe betide the slow learner. My husband couldn't read until he was 8 or 9, yet was stuck with Janet and John regardless.

In the bad old days, apart from the immortal Dr Seuss, there wasn't much around for beginning readers. So I am bemused that at a time of renaissance in children's literature, when witty, delightful books for children are plentiful, the Janet and John primers are being re-issued. Why?

So parents who endured them the first time round can inflict them on their own kids? To me, it's like choosing to eat Spam and wear crimplene when you can enjoy caviar and sport cashmere. But don't worry, these "classic characters for today's kids" have been updated.

See Dad. See Dad mop. Mop Dad mop. See Mum. See Mum saw. Saw Mum saw.

All right, I made that up. But believe me, the problem with Dick and Jane wasn't the fact that Mom was stapled to her pinny. It was the artificial, stilted language, the goody-goody kids, the complete absence of life and fun as we know it. I'm all for simplicity and repetition - you only have to look at Allan Ahlberg's brilliant Red Nose Readers to see what magic he can create using single words and phrases.

Putting in a few black faces, and dressing Janet and John in clumpy shoes, has not stopped the re-written and re-illustrated books being plodding and monotonous. The Parent's Guide which accompanies the relaunched books suggests asking your child "Who is your favourite character?" These aren't characters. They're stick figures in a dull reading scheme.

I still remember the first real book my parents gave me: The Pancake. It had a mottled purple cover, and it was filled with stories. They were simple, they were repetitive, but they were real, entertaining stories. It was marvellous - my reward for the months spent learning how letters and sounds fit together. Until then, I don't think I realised that books were meant to be fun.

I learned to read on Dick and Jane: I did not become a reader. That was thanks to Enid Blyton, PL Travers, Andrew Lang's wonderful fairytale books, Tintin, Edward Eager's magic books, and Beverly Cleary. I read with great passion and intensity, and I read everything: comic books, biographies, magazines, fiction. I came downstairs every morning with my nose mysteriously smudged blue (from the not-quite dry ink on the pages I would smell at night, I later realised).

Every parent knows learning to read is often a chore, like memorising times tables. It takes forever, progress is fitful, and - for the children - it can be hard to see the point. That is, until they find something they actually want to read. My son learned to read at seven only because he wanted to decipher Monopoly Chance and Community Chest cards. My younger brother finally bothered to learn because his passion was coins, and he needed to read coin catalogues.

So my firm belief is that children should read whatever interests them: football magazines, comics, games manuals. Obviously, as a fiction writer for children, I would rather they read fiction, and preferably mine. My own son loved Asterix, Tintin, role-playing books, and fantasy novels such as the Brian Jacques Redwall series. I've never been much of a fantasy fan, so we compromised.

I read to him books I loved - Mary Poppins, Winnie the Pooh, Little House in the Big Woods, Greek and Norse myths, and anything by Roald Dahl, Quentin Blake, Anthony Browne, Michael Rosen, Jack Prelutsky, Phillip Pullman. He read comics, Horrible Histories and computer game manuals on his own. But I am happy that he enjoys reading. So what if our tastes diverge?

Adults are allowed to read for pleasure; children are supposed to read to learn. Worse still, anxious parents push kids to read harder and harder books. I remember all the parental playground moans that the books their kids were given to read were "too easy". The teachers would protest that the children had chosen the books themselves. No matter: a book that is too easy is a bad book. Children rarely get to enjoy the reading stage they are at. Give them something harder. Harder! Make them learn. Make them sweat.

Here is the next target for the bedtime core curriculum. I've seen well-meaning parents drag kids away from the picture book section in bookshops because the books are no longer "age-appropriate". Where's the pleasure here? My son's teenage babysitter has read picture books all her life. She's now at Cambridge University, so I hardly think she was stunted intellectually by reading "beneath" her.

Another way we punish children for their progress is to stop reading to them the moment they can read for themselves. I find this very sad. There's such a huge gap between what young children are able to read, and what they can enjoy. Reading to them keeps them in contact with a voice, as well as reminding them again and again: reading is a joy, an entry into different, magical worlds. I remember reading Swallows and Amazons to my son, and struggling through a page of mysterious sailing terms. Finally, I stopped and asked if he minded not understanding. No, he said: he liked hearing the words.

In fairness, I should point out that first readers are incredibly difficult to write for. My own Horrid Henry books started as a failed attempt to write one. I just couldn't do it: I couldn't strip my words down sufficiently and still tell a fun story. It is a very tricky skill to acquire (hats off, again, to Allan Ahlberg and Colin McNaughton).

I am always flattered and delighted when parents tell me that the Horrid Henry books are the first ones that their children read voluntarily. Just as adults like reading about outsiders and people who break free from convention, so kids get a thrill from a child who acts impulsively and never worries about the consequences. If Henry sees a door marked "No Entry", he barges through it. He's greedy, he's aggressive, he's anarchic: the imp inside everyone. Kids enjoy characters who have emotions they recognise.

While Henry disrupts the established order, the younger brother he hates, Perfect Peter (Janet and John's direct descendent) is an exaggerated version of the impeccably behaved child parents think they want. I particularly enjoy writing honestly about sibling rivalry - I'm the eldest of four - and looking coolly at parents from a child's point of view.

I walk a tightrope with Horrid Henry's subversiveness. We invest children's books with tremendous power to influence, and many adults seriously believe that giving children books about idealised families such as Janet and John's will make their children grow up to be just like them. As if.

But if you enjoyed Janet and John, by all means enjoy them with your kids. They'll pick up your enthusiasm and that's vital. I'm afraid I could only share them the way my husband shares boarding-school horror stories with our son: see how I suffered.

Run Spot run. As far away as you can.