



suffices, especially for children. It is therefore reassuring to see that such fine books continue to be published. ■

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Spiders need friends too

Jeremy N. McNeil

In October, the first world environmental championships for young researchers brought 143 participants from 73 countries to the finals at EXPO 2000 in Hanover. WYRE — Worldwide Young Researchers for the Environment — was a joint initiative of Stiftung Jugend forscht, the organization that runs Germany's annual youth science contest, and the Deutsche Bank. It had a considerable variety of subject matter, evidenced by titles such as "Baby salamanders in danger", "Where plants still eat meat", "Day-trippers and flying mammals", "Plastics from kitchen waste", and "Making quarries green again". However, all participants had two things in

profoundly mixed blessings of science and technology, it is surely worth the effort. Are today's children not, after all, repeatedly exposed to examples of this in daily life?

Despite my reservations, these new books all deserve a wide readership. Learning about science and technology only online or solely through visits to interactive exhibits hardly

common; their dedication to improving their local environment and the belief that all individuals, including children, could make a difference.

The majority of participants indicated that their interest in environmental problems stemmed from a parent or teacher, who not only served as a resource person but also directed them to the appropriate reading material. Here are six books in the environmental field which I believe meet the need to stimulate these fertile young minds. This opinion is shared by my 12-year-old assistant Lara Cusson, whose rankings out of 10 are included at the end of each section.

Each Living Thing is an excellent book for pre-school children, underlining the importance of actually respecting all living creatures. This is very cleverly done using examples such as insects, snakes and jellyfish, species normally eliciting an 'ugh!' reaction. The illustrations are excellent and lend themselves to 'what else do you see?' questions. (9/10)

Wild and Free, also aimed at younger children, discusses species in danger of extinction, each of which is rather successfully associated with a child from the country of origin. For example, Chen the Chinese boy does not want a world without pandas and would like to see them living wild and free. The illustrations are very good, and at the end

Presents you may want to read as well

Usborne Guide to e-mail

by Mark Wallace & Philippa Wingate
Usborne: 2000. £6.99

How to Build a Robot

by Clive Gifford
Oxford University Press: 2000. £3.99

Crashing Computers

by Michael Coleman
Scholastic: 1999. £3.99

How the Future Began

by Clive Gifford
Kingfisher: 2000. £9.99, \$15.95

Terminal Chic

by Chloë Rayban
Bodley Head: 2000. £10.99

Tim Brosnan

Years ago my father bought me a train set for Christmas, which he then monopolized. It was ostensibly bought for me, but in reality for himself. I thought of this when reading the *Usborne Guide to e-mail*, which is a clear, well-written account of how to use Outlook Express and six other e-mail packages. My co-reviewers Chris and Juliette (both aged 11) read this with interest, Chris saying that it was good and that he had learnt "one or two new things, although most of the stuff we have done in school". And there is the point: it contains little that most British children will not meet at school — but a lot that

their less computer-literate parents will not know. Conclusion: pretend to buy this for your children — but read it yourself. (age 10+)

There is a brand of paint in Britain that sells itself on the slogan "Does exactly what it says on the tin". I wish this were true of *How to Build a Robot*. Chris and Juliette both picked this up, intrigued by the promise on the cover that it is a "DIY guide to building a walking, talking, thinking robot". After a few seconds browsing they discarded it. Not really surprising, as the book is a set of recycled 'home experiments' which does not begin to do what it says on the cover.

Conclusion: not what it says on the tin. (age 9+)

In contrast, *Crashing Computers* was a great hit with both children. They have a collection of the same publisher's 'Horrible Histories' and 'Horrible Science', which they love, so they fought over who should read it first — Juliette won and hid it in her bedroom. I was forced to go to a local bookshop to buy another copy. Sitting there among the publisher's myriad other volumes, it was as easy to spot as a clone in the Borg Collective. It is worth the effort to dig it out — but be prepared to be assimilated to the series! *Crashing Computers* uses an engaging combination of fact and humour to tell the story of computers past, present and future — how they work, what they can do and the (often hilarious) ways humans have interacted with them.

Conclusion: entertaining, exciting and informative. Find it and buy it. (age 9+)

None of the three books mentioned so far looks like a Christmas present. They are not big or glossy and would not therefore immediately appeal to a prospective buyer. Two books that do meet these criteria are *How the Future Began* and *Terminal Chic*. They both deal with the future, but in very different ways.

How the Future Began is glossy, packed with pictures and might appeal to aunts or uncles looking for something for their nephew or niece. But would they read it? Both Chris and Juliette glanced at it, but it failed to capture their attention. I think this is because it talks at children rather than to them. This book is the antithesis of *Crashing Computers* — it is more likely to be bought but less likely to be read and enjoyed. Conclusion: would adorn a bookshelf. (age 8+)

Terminal Chic is a science-fiction book for teenage girls, telling the story of an 18-year-old transported into the year 3001. It imaginatively contrasts life now and in the year 3001, engaging the reader's imagination in a way that *How the Future Began* never does.

Conclusion: excellent, a teenage Bridget Jones transported into the far future. (age 12+)

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Each Living Thing

by Joanne Ryder, illustrated by Ashley Wolff
Harcourt. 2000. \$16, £13.95

Wild and Free

by Mike Manning & Brita Granström
Watts: 1998. £4.99

Going, Going, Gone

by Barbara Taylor
Oxford University Press: 2000. £5.99

Garbage

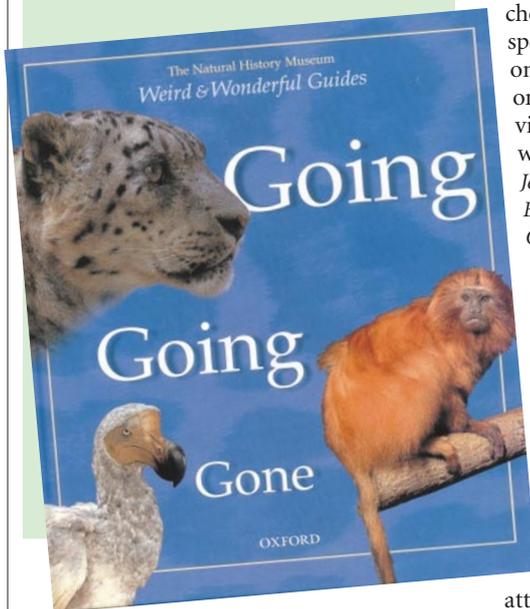
by Robert Maass
Henry Holt: 2000. \$16.95

I Want To Be An Environmentalist

by Stephanie Maze
Harcourt: 2000. \$18 (hbk), \$9 (pbk)

Planet Zoo: One Hundred Animals We Can't Afford to Lose

by Simon Barnes; illustrations by Alan Marks
Orion: 2000. £20



as types of environmentalist, what are the eco-issues, the history of environmentalism and famous environmentalists. This book has a strong US bias, but it contains much useful information, so I would recommend it. (9/10)

Planet Zoo: One Hundred Animals We Can't Afford to Lose (age 12+) offers a brilliant choice of species, from cuddly chimpanzees to the 'who really cares' no-eyed big-eyed wolf spider that's as bizarre as its name. Furthermore, the species occur in a diversity of habitats: marine and terrestrial, tropical to arctic. Each case makes the point that, when considering biodiversity, all species and all habitats matter. At the end are ten conservation success stories, to emphasize that we should not lose faith in our efforts to save endangered species. A nice touch is the choice of *Homo sapiens* as the hundredth species, with a reminder that we are just one species on this planet, interdependent on many others, and that our own survival is dependent on us changing our ways. (10/10)

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The facts of life and death

Andrew Berry

Evaluating the science in a children's book — whether it's right or wrong — is simple. But to determine how attractive or interesting that book is to children you have somehow to acquire a child's perspective. To deal with this, I condemned 15 children's books on various aspects of animal behaviour to the hands of my brood, twins approaching four. Surprisingly, they liked the same two books that had particularly impressed me. The coincidence may, however, be due to a flaw in my experiment. Like the famous 'counting' horse Clever Hans, which picked up inadvertent cues from its owner, my offspring were perhaps sensitive to the 'you'll like this one' cues coming from their father.

The books in question are both by the writer/illustrator team of Karen Wallace and Ross Collins. **Chomp! Munch! Chew!** is "about how animals eat". The other, on animal reproduction, happily lacks a correspondingly graphic title. Both books present a lot of basic biology in an engaging and informative way — although **It Takes Two** never gets down to reproductive nuts and bolts. We are taken on a largely vertebrate-centric tour of the animal kingdom, and introduced to the snapping jaws of a gharial; the nesting habits of weaver-birds; the

nectar-harvesting devices of hummingbirds and hawkmoths; paternal care in sea horses; and the compost-incubation methods of Australian megapodes.

My reasons for liking these books are simple, and apply to children's science books in general. Most importantly, Wallace and Collins do not subscribe to the 'Guinness Book of Records' school of popular science — they present a diversity of behaviours and taxa rather than gee-whizzery. Of course, books are not the only victims of the current belief that science is no longer inherently interesting but has to be presented with highly amplified bells and whistles: many museum displays have become so dumbed down that the underlying science is drowned out in the bell/whistle cacophony. Among the books I looked at, both **I Didn't Know that Wolves Howl at the Moon** and **Zooming and Creeping** insist on addressing the pressing biological issue of what is the fastest flying moth. At least they agree that hawkmoths hold the record, although they present rather different figures, 50 and 39 kilometres per hour, respectively. Do children honestly care about lepidopteran flight velocity? I don't believe they need to view nature as a sort of collection of superheroes — fastest flyers, slickest swimmers, highest jumpers — in order to find it interesting. Perhaps more importantly, a superhero view of the natural world is as misleading as would be a view of our own species based solely on US Olympic sprinter Marion Jones, and leads to disappointment when, later in life, children encounter some real biology.



Chomp! Munch! Chew!

by Karen Wallace and Ross Collins
Franklin Watts: 1999. £10.99

It Takes Two

by Karen Wallace and Ross Collins
Franklin Watts: 1997. £4.99

I Didn't Know that Wolves Howl at the Moon

by Cecilia Fitzsimmons
Watts: 2000. £9.99

Zooming and Creeping

by Barbara Taylor
Oxford University Press: 2000. £5.99

there is a world map showing the location of the countries discussed. (9/10)

Going, Going, Gone addresses the idea of species extinction, aimed at children of 8–12 years. This book contains a lot of good information on subjects such as the appearance of life on Earth, the idea that species have gone extinct in the past, and our ability to gain information about them from the fossil record and from species considered as living fossils. The 'did you know?' and 'true or false?' sections throughout are a definite plus and the illustrations are of high quality (8/10).

Garbage (age 12+) gives an excellent account of the accumulation of garbage and its subsequent treatment using landfills or incinerators. It then gives examples of environmentally sound alternatives for waste recycling, including practical information on composting. The accompanying photographs are really excellent (7/10).

I Want To Be An Environmentalist is one in a series of books that discuss different career paths, aimed at a teenage audience. A diversity of related issues are addressed, such