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The Right to Read: Children's Rights and Children's Publishing in Britain

Lucy Pearson

- 1 “CENSORED”, a 1967 piece in the *Daily Mail* reported; “Sir Allen orders the Puffin Club to drop psychedelic”.¹ The details of the case rather belied the breathless tone: in fact, the word had appeared only on some draft advertising materials, and Allen Lane’s statement on the matter was rather more off-the-cuff than the title implies. Nevertheless, the fact that this rather trivial incident merited any press coverage at all suggests that a sense that the cultural revolution of the sixties was incompatible with the world of children’s books – or at least with the wholesome “butter and eggs” image of a mainstream publisher like Puffin.² This impression is borne out by the complaint of critic and author Aidan Chambers in 1969 that the prestigious Carnegie Medal prized books “unremarkable for anything in the slightest ‘questionable’ in thought, word or deed”.³ If these two incidents suggest that mainstream children’s literature was isolated from some of the wider cultural changes of the period, then locating the “spirit of the sixties” in British children’s literature poses problems from another direction: not because there was too little change during this period, but because there was too much. There is a consensus among children’s literature scholars that the sixties were part of a “golden age” of British children’s literature: a period of expansion and innovation, the beginning of which is sometimes located as early as 1950 with the publication of texts like C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and which is generally agreed to have lasted until at least the early seventies, when recession began to take its toll on the publishing industry.⁴ In the context of almost three decades of radical change in children’s books, it is difficult to make a claim for the unique contribution of the sixties. Taking Arthur Marwick’s notion of a “long sixties”, however, it is possible to see that the decade *does* stand out for the “unprecedented interaction and acceleration” of movements which had begun in the 1950s and would continue to unfold into the 1970s.⁵ If the 1960s did not see a full-blown revolution in children’s books, then 1968 certainly marked the beginnings of a revolt. Two events in this year signalled the changes that were to come: the publication of Leila Berg’s polemical work of journalism *Risinghill: Death of a Comprehensive School*, and the launch of her new series for young readers, *Nippers*.

- 2 *Nippers* was commissioned by Macmillan Education as a competitor to reading schemes such as Ladybird's Key Words, which has gained a reputation as the epitome of conventional culture. Built around the notion of introducing children to a pre-defined set of "the most commonly used English words", the Key Words books prioritised the principle of repetition over interests of plot or linguistic interest.⁶ In *We Have Fun*, for example, we are told: "Peter and Jane go into the sweet shop. Pat is in the shop. Jane and Peter have some sweets. Pat has a sweet." The accompanying illustration depicts Peter and Jane as clean, well-dressed, and well-behaved; their smiles indicate they may indeed be having fun, but it is difficult to imagine that child readers of the series felt the same way. Although it was widely adopted by schools, by the end of the 1960s the scheme was attracting criticisms for its approach to the teaching of reading, and for its exclusive representation of a white, middle-class, heteronormative world.⁷ Macmillan Education were among the first publishers to respond to demands for a different type of reading book, and first approached Leila Berg as editor for their proposed new series of "supplementary readers for primary schools" in 1966.⁸ The first *Nippers* were launched in 1968, followed in 1972 by a series of *Little Nippers* for nursery-age children.⁹ Approximately a hundred titles were published across the two series, about a quarter of which were penned by Berg herself. Other *Nippers* authors included Janet MacNeill, a notable librarian activist; poet Charles Causley; Joan Eadlington, best-known for her *Jonny Briggs* series (1977-1991); and pioneering West Indian writer and teacher Beryl Gilroy.
- 3 The series eschewed most of the core characteristics of Ladybird's scheme: authors were asked to use natural language rather than drawing from a defined vocabulary list, and there was no structured progression through the series. An advertising brochure gave an intended age range for each grade, but the books themselves were distinguished only by coloured logos – red for the simplest stories, through orange, yellow, and green, with blue reserved for longer narratives with relatively complex text – with no written information about the intended reader. In fact, advertising for the series emphasised that they were "not designed as a reading scheme", but were rather a "collection of story books for enjoyment".¹⁰ Illustrations were more varied and informal in style than those of the Ladybird Books: illustrators included the notable graphic designer and illustrator George Him; the landscape artist and children's book illustrator Trevor Stubley; and Richard Rose and Mary Dinsdale, both of whom were well-established in the field of magazine illustration as well as children's books. In content, too, the books reflected a far more diverse range of childhood experience than the Key Words scheme, portraying the language and lives of (mostly) urban working-class children from across the UK. The series is frequently cited as an example of the move towards more realistic children's fiction taking place over this period, but has until recently received little detailed scrutiny.¹¹ By reading *Nippers* in the context of Berg's work on Raisinghill, however, it is possible to see how the counter-cultural movements of the sixties intersected with and influenced the development of British children's literature.
- 4 In many respects, Leila Berg was a natural choice for Macmillan Education's proposed new series. She had been writing for children for two decades, and specialised in books for the very young: her *Little Pete* stories first appeared on the BBC Radio programme for under-fives *Listen With Mother*. She also had editorial experience, having worked first at Methuen (1958-1960) and then at Nelson, where she edited the education imprint Salamander (1965). Nevertheless, she was initially reluctant to accept Macmillan's invitation, and agreed only on the proviso that they agree that what she proposed to

attempt was “something revolutionary in school readers”.¹² Berg also warned that they might be embarrassed by her forthcoming book on Raisinghill, which was “likely to infuriate many important people in education”.¹³ Undeterred by these warnings, Macmillan Education editor Michael Wace agreed to Berg’s proposed vision for the series. It is possible that he was reassured by the fact that although Berg had long been involved in radical politics – her first job was as a writer for the *Communist Daily Worker* – this had not been at the forefront of her early stories for children, which Karen Sands-O’Connor describes as “extraordinarily conventional”.¹⁴ It is more probable, however, that Berg’s progressive politics were part of the appeal for Wace, who was also responsible for launching an innovative new series for teenagers, *Topliner*. He had recruited Aidan Chambers to edit the new series on the strength of a polemical article about “reluctant” teenage readers in which Chambers had strongly criticised the existing literature available for this age group.¹⁵ If Wace was seeking radical thinkers, then his invitation to Leila Berg was well-timed: in the mid 1960s her political concerns and her ideas about children’s books were becoming much more closely entwined. Vital to this, I argue, was Berg’s involvement in the campaign around Raisinghill.

- 5 Raisinghill was a London co-educational comprehensive school, established in 1960 as an amalgamation of four pre-existing schools. Comprehensive schools were intended to produce a more egalitarian education system, replacing the old system of grammar schools and secondary moderns (which educated those who failed the selective “eleven-plus” exam) with a single school for students of all abilities. Given the relative novelty of the comprehensive model, which did not become national policy until 1965, some controversy was perhaps inevitable; it seems Raisinghill also became the focal point for an ideological battle following political changes in London County Council (which had authority over the school).¹⁶ This was not mitigated by the determination of its head, Michael Duane, to institute what David Limond sums up as “a wide-ranging programme of pastoral care, pupil democracy, frank sexual education, close cooperation with parents, reformative rather than punitive discipline (strictly non-corporal), promotion of creativity and multi-culturalism”.¹⁷ Dogged from the outset by anxieties about “delinquent” pupils, and following a series of conflicts with both the education authority at London County Council and some of its own staff (Berg characterises this as effectively a coup), the school was closed in 1965. Duane’s approach had been sufficiently popular, however, that the closure was effected in the face of considerable opposition from Raisinghill children and families. Berg became closely involved with this dispute, which received a good deal of press attention, and documented it first in articles for *The Guardian* and then in *Raisinghill: Death of a Comprehensive School* (1968). The book paints a vivid picture of the social deprivation in the Raisinghill area, which she characterises as “one of the dirtiest, ugliest, most despised parts of London”.¹⁸ Against this background she depicts Duane as a humanitarian and anti-authoritarian figure hampered by the hostility of both teachers and local authorities. Her account is unashamedly partisan, and did not go unchallenged; what is significant for an understanding of *Nippers*, however, is what it reveals about Berg’s understanding of childhood and education at this period.¹⁹
- 6 Berg’s sympathy for Duane’s cause reflected a much more longstanding commitment to progressive education: she cites formative encounters in her late teens with the work of Soviet educationalist Anton Marachenko, and educational psychologist and psychoanalyst Susan Isaacs (both are named in the dedication to *Raisinghill*). She credits Isaacs’ account of the social development of children at Malting House nursery school with initiating her

“careful observation of small children and [her] respect and appreciation of them”, something which was a hallmark of Berg’s writing for children and would become integral to *Nippers*.²⁰ Through Risinghill, Berg had the opportunity to see these philosophies put into practice, an experience which she found inspirational, despite its ultimate failure. Indeed, her sense that “even as the school began to blossom it was already marked for cutting down” served to intensify her passionate critique of “the traditionalists, disciplinarians, authoritarians” and her belief in the need for radical change.²¹ Berg’s involvement with the Risinghill campaign also brought her into closer contact with Duane and other radical thinkers on education, including A.S. Neill, headmaster of Summerhill School (Britain’s best-known experimental school), and John Holt, the author of the influential book *How Children Fail* (1963).²² Her intellectual collaboration with this group continued for the rest of her career: in 1968, as she was on the verge of launching *Nippers*, she hosted a discussion on education with these three and the Scottish educationalist and campaigner against corporal punishment Robert Mackenzie.²³ *Risinghill* thus situates the *Nippers* within a wider context of radical thought about childhood and education.

- 7 One of the most vivid themes of *Risinghill* is the appalling living conditions of the urban poor: the “rotten gutted houses with rotting gutted cars outside”, “stinking rat-ridden houses”, lacking bathrooms or proper electricity.²⁴ Berg connects this physical deprivation with cultural and linguistic deprivation: the children raised in these settings are “met with tight-lipped silence or told ‘Shut up!’ and clouted” when they attempt to communicate; they are sent to understaffed nursery schools or “imprisoned in flats as conducive to creative spontaneous chatter, to the actions that flow from words or lead into them, as a jail”.²⁵ These observations were not new to Berg, who had herself grown up in a deprived area of Salford. What is key, however, is her account of Michael Duane’s approach to teaching these children at Risinghill, which included rather than excluded the social context in which they lived. He recruited teachers from the same ethnic backgrounds as the students, including Greek and Turkish teachers who could speak to students and their families in their own languages.²⁶ He also brought the family into the physical space of the school. Berg comments that “to see their parents and the family babies ‘included’ in the head’s study was wonderfully good for the children [...] it was a wonderful social education to experience their school as the place where other people came for help, advice and information, and to play their own part in this”.²⁷ This model of inclusive education was therefore at the forefront of her mind when she was approached by Macmillan: in *Nippers* she saw the opportunity to develop a literature which could function in a similar way.
- 8 Berg’s belief in a connection between inclusion and the reading experience is made explicit in a 1967 article. Writing of her vision of a nursery-school classroom in which mothers and grandmothers would be welcomed to share books with children, she points out that this is an experience which many middle-class children enjoy at home: “Reading has never been for them an alien academic subject, a cold technique; by the time they come to school it is part of their personal, cherished identity, part of ‘I know I am lovable because you love me’”. Berg contrasts this with the experience of a child from a bookless home who comes “stone-cold to reading”, and argues that the gulf between these two experiences is widened by the content of the books themselves:

We give him readers where [...] the whole family sits down to have breakfast at a snowy damask-clothed table, all properly dressed and calm, and full of polite grammatically correct, griefless, angerless, joyless, lifeless conversation. What sort

of people are these? Nobody has to clock on [to work], in the readers. The alienation is complete.²⁸

- 9 By the time she wrote this article, Macmillan's invitation had provided Berg with an opportunity to address this alienation. Her approach to doing so was the same as Michael Duane's at Risinghill: by inviting children and their families in. In a literary context, this meant offering more social realism. Throughout the sixties, fantasy had been seen as a means of allowing children to deal with complex ideas and problems in the abstract. In her briefing to potential *Nippers* authors, Berg rejected the notion that this could be a substitute for books which reflected children's real lives, arguing "Fantasy can be fine, important and enriching [...] provided it is rooted on a firm grasp of reality, a firm belief in your own identity, and a firm confidence that you are worthwhile." In order to provide these foundations it was necessary to "write about our children in primary readers as they really are".²⁹ *Nippers* authors were invited to do just this.
- 10 The kind of audience Leila Berg sought to represent "as they really are" in *Nippers* is indicated in one of the early working titles for the series: *Latchkey Books*.³⁰ The books reflected the lives of working-class children, predominately – though not exclusively – the urban poor who were most likely to be "latchkey kids" who returned to empty houses while their parents were at work.³¹ The household depicted in one of Berg's first titles for the series, *Fish and Chips for Supper* (1968), was explicitly modelled on one of the houses she had described in *Risinghill*, with its leaking roof and staircase "festooned in washing".³² Other books featured terraced mining cottages (Helen Solomon, *Billy Finds a Pigeon*, 1971), newly built tower blocks (Petronella Breinburg, *Tiger, Paleface and Me*, 1976), and flats in sub-divided Victorian houses (Janet MacNeil, *The Family Upstairs*, 1973). Denise Robertson's *The New Bath* (1970) centres around the excitement of having an indoor bathroom installed; the family in Beryl Gilroy's *A Visitor from Home* (1973) have an indoor bathroom, but it is shared with other families in their bedsit. Families are frequently shown sharing meals, but these are not the orderly meals enjoyed by Ladybird's Peter and Jane: in Leila Berg's *Tracy's Story* (1972), for example, Richard Rose depicts a flustered-looking mum presiding over a crowded table and wearing a pinny and turban. Similarly, a trip to the seaside is taken not in Daddy's car, but in a coach organised by the workingmen's club (Helen Solomon, *A Present From the Seaside*, 1972). In an attempt to make the series as representative as possible, Berg recruited writers from all over the country, and encouraged them to use the natural speech of the communities they were writing about. This is particularly evident in the range of names used for mothers in the books: Janet McNeill's London family have a Mum (*The Family Upstairs*, 1973) but Helen Solomon's Lancashire mining community have a Mom; the Welsh family in Irma Chilton's *The Lamb* (1973) and the North East family in Denise Robertson's *The New Pet* (1973) both have Mams; while Beryl Gilroy's West Indian family (*Knock at Mrs Herb's*, 1973; *A Visitor from Home*) have a Mammy. Although in general the language of the books does not deviate significantly from standard English, these details were intended to create a link between the language of home and that of school and thus reduce the alienating experience of education.
- 11 The social realism of *Nippers* was not confined to language and setting: many of the plots were inherently linked with the realities of working-class life. J.L. Carr's *The Red Windcheater* centres around the question of whether a "Dutch auction" will produce a coat to rival the longed-for red windcheater the protagonist's mother is unable to afford for her.³³ In *Fish and Chips for Supper*, Leila Berg applies the traditional form of the cumulative

tale to a slum setting: after dad refuses to get out of bed because a leak falls on his head, the children must urge him to get up in order to produce the chain of events (going to work, paying the electric bill, fixing the leak) which will end with them having fish and chips for supper. In her account of the initial development of the books, Berg reports the almost hysterical laughter of the children to whom she read the sample stories, which she described as “the laughter of acceptance, of recognition”.³⁴ She saw “this startled joyful recognition of phrases and situations” as a process which “turn[ed] books into friends, and [made] the whole process of learning to read *affectionate*”: she hoped for *Nippers* to achieve this goal for as many children as possible.³⁵

- 12 The majority of the *Nippers* stories were humorous, and the illustrations lively and appealing. However, in sharp contrast to earlier books depicting working-class lives such as Eve Garnett’s *The Family from One-End Street* (1937), they did not smooth over conflict and difficulty. The American educationalist John Holt – another figure with whom Leila Berg had come into contact through her work on *Risinghill* – had emphasised the alienating experience of education in his influential book *How Children Fail* (1963). Holt argued that children “learn early in life that for unknown reasons they must not talk about a large part of what they think and feel, are most interested in and worried about”.³⁶ Children’s books obeyed similar proscriptions: writing just a few years before the launch of *Nippers*, Gillian Avery had complained that writers for children omitted “all unpleasant traits in a child’s personality; all crudity and coarseness” and that this policy usually also extended to their parents: “Family relationships are smooth, mother is always right, father never irks his sons”.³⁷ Holt connected the erasure of real experience to educational difficulties, arguing that children are unable to learn because they are unable to connect their school experience meaningfully with the rest of their lived experience. He encouraged a culture of openness, a policy which is reflected in *Nippers*, where children are frequently argumentative, unruly, and dirty, and parents – though mostly loving – are far from perfect. In *A Red Windcheater*, the reason that the protagonist has been unable to obtain the eponymous windcheater is that her father has gambled away the money her mother had saved to buy clothes with. Mary Cockett’s Frankie is stricken when he accidentally posts his pound note because “He could not face the shouting – and being called lazy and good-for-nothing and useless”.³⁸ One of the striking things about the inclusion of such details in *Nippers* is that although they are often integral to the plot, they are not treated as problems which must be solved by the end of the story but simply as aspects of the child’s lived experience. Frankie’s fears about his mother’s reaction to the loss of the pound note, for example, are resolved not by any change in her behaviour, but by the intervention of a kindly teacher who helps Frankie retrieve the money before his mother discovers its loss. In *Risinghill*, Leila Berg observes that whatever the efforts of schools, it is impossible to change the environment children have come from, asking “Is all we can do to teach them to say ‘Bother this frightful life’ instead of ‘Sod this fucking life?’”.³⁹ *Nippers* represent an implicit answer to this question: they suggest that one possible response is to validate rather than denying the child’s experiences, even those which are undesirable.
- 13 In seeking to represent the reality of contemporary life in Britain, *Nippers* intersected with another key movement of the sixties: civil rights. The passing of the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 reflected an acknowledgement both of the problem of racism in British society and the responsibility of the state in mitigating it. The acts established legal protection from discrimination in the spheres of housing, education and

employment. Black activists, however, were also directing their attention to education and cultural representation, in part because Commonwealth immigrants who had been educated in a British tradition found that they were nevertheless not guaranteed a warm welcome in Britain itself.⁴⁰ These activists identified the alienating qualities of education as aspects of systemic racism: Bernard Coard's influential pamphlet critiquing the use of IQ tests and their inbuilt cultural biases, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System* (1971), called for education, books and toys to give West Indian children "a sense of identity, pride and belonging".⁴¹ Leila Berg's aims in *Nippers* were clearly aligned with this mission; however, the books published prior to Coard's pamphlet had failed to meet the needs of a Black British audience. Some of the illustrations for the books attempt to reflect the diversity of urban centres – the crowd at the market in Leila Berg's *Julie's Story* (1970) includes a number of black and Asian shoppers – but the protagonists are all white. Berg stated that the omission was a conscious one: the reception of the sample *Nippers* sent out to schools "showed me joltingly that that many heads would find real *white* children difficult enough to accept. I decided regretfully to leave real *non-whites* [...] to the second wave".⁴² When she came to the second wave, however, Berg turned to those already engaged in specialist publishing for Black British audiences for help. Through John la Rose, who had launched the New Beacon bookshop and publishing imprint, she eventually made contact with two West Indian writers: Petronella Breinburg and Beryl Gilroy. Karen Sands-O'Connor, who considers the contribution of *Nippers* to publishing for Black Britons at length, sees the inclusion of these Black writers as instigating "a change in the books, a move towards integration (living peacefully together side by side) rather than assimilation (the minority group being absorbed into the majority)".⁴³ One striking aspect of this is the way racism and the experience of being part of a racial minority is represented as part of the fabric of experience. In Petronella Breinburg's *Tiger, Paleface and Me*, the West Indian father jokes about the fact that they have only been awarded a new flat because his Scottish-sounding surname obscures his race; the (white) removal man clearly shares his satisfaction at having outwitted the authorities but the text does not otherwise explicitly direct the reader to condemn (or support) the racism. The complexities of the West Indian immigrant experience are woven through Beryl Gilroy's *A Visitor from Home*, in which Roy arrives at school tired and irritable because he has been kept up late by his newly-arrived uncle, who has regaled the family with news and stories late into the night. Roy's outburst at school, when he complains that his classmates are picking on him because he is black, appears unjustified (and his teacher's response that "You're picking on me because I'm pink" is jarring), but in the context of the story as a whole it expresses the deeper discomfort arising from Roy's status as a second-generation immigrant.⁴⁴ Roy's uncle is a visitor "from home", but it is London that is home to Roy, who cannot even remember his uncle (or, implicitly, the country he has come from). This discomfort is intensified because of the kind of home that London offers: Roy is disturbed by his uncle's stories because the family are crammed into a bedsit in which cooking, eating and sleeping all take place within a single room. The subtlety of Gilroy's presentation of this theme, however, marks the book out as one which is speaking to readers who have had similar experiences rather than as a consciously "multicultural" book with an assumed white or non-immigrant readership. Karen Sands-O'Connor notes that *Nippers*, like other series produced by white publishers, editors and authors, essentially sought to "assimilate their Black readers into British society", and that this is implicitly a working-class society.⁴⁵ Notwithstanding these shortcomings, *Nippers* did stand out for their

attempts to genuinely represent Black children rather than simply acknowledging their existence.

- 14 In seeking to provide stories which represented working-class lives and language, and some of the more uncomfortable aspects of life, *Nippers* was reproducing for children something akin to the “kitchen sink” realism which had emerged in adult literature during the 1950s. Leila Berg’s desire to represent the child “as they really are” extended beyond this, however, underpinning the qualities of the writing. Her distinctive approach to producing a more representative children’s literature was clearly underpinned by the child-centred approach to education which she had admired in the work of Susan Isaacs and others. The briefing for *Nippers* argued for ‘an affectionate and respectful understanding of the small child – the *essential* child, not merely the child favoured by circumstances’.⁴⁶ Although she rejected the idealised pastoral image of the child which had dominated much children’s literature in the twentieth century, Berg’s vision of the “*essential* child” embraced those aspects of the Romantic tradition which privilege the notion of imagination and play. This child-centred approach is manifested in *Nippers* through a recurrent emphasis on the child’s sensual exploration of the world. In Helen Solomon’s *A Present from the Seaside*, Billy revels in the “shiny silver taps [...] the spurts of clear water” as they “splash around the bowl and gurgle down the drain”.⁴⁷ On the coach to the seaside, “He could feel the hot metal burning through his tee shirt and he could smell chips”.⁴⁸ In both her writing for *Nippers* and her non-fiction writing, Leila Berg emphasises the important of explorative play by juxtaposing it with food. In *Susan’s Story*, the consolations of home after an (abortive) attempt at running away are represented by a plate of freshly-baked rock cakes:

Susan came right inside. She poked a rock cake with her finger. It was hard and crusty and knobbly outside. She bit it. It was soft and yellow and warm. She rolled it over her face. It felt good.⁴⁹

- 15 Susan is realistically rebuked by her mum for “wiping those buns on [her] face”, but the fact that her sensual exploration of the rock cakes takes priority over her hunger positions this exploration as a fundamental need.⁵⁰
- 16 This child-centred view of the world intersected with the emerging environmental movements of the 1960s. Matthew Thomson notes that “The child, and the experience of trying to look at the world through the eyes of the child, provided the perfect figure for launching the new philosophy of landscape and an environmentalism that saw its first principle as one of subjectivity and scale.”⁵¹ Concerns about the encroaching urban environment also intersected with those of the children’s rights movement: the draft Charter of Children’s Rights produced by the Advisory Centre for Education in 1971 called for children’s right for space to play in and to explore physically, both of which were under threat in crowded urban areas where traffic made the streets unsafe to play on.⁵² These issues had long been concerns for Leila Berg: – one of her earliest pieces of political activism had been a petition to her landlords to secure children’s unsupervised access to communal gardens⁵³ – and Thomson cites her book *Look at Kids* as ‘one of the most intriguing statements on the importance of looking at landscape from the perspective of the child’.⁵⁴ Berg’s political concerns with class, power and inclusivity underpin her understanding of place. Reflecting on her intimate knowledge of her street and its inhabitants, she comments:

When, later on, I met rich people, and heard them talk casually but with such a sure love of “our” river and “our” woods, “our” lake and “our” fields, I was shaken. But I

had forgotten “our” street, where, however squalid, grimy, violent, we too had territory.⁵⁵

- 17 Berg had forgotten, she suggests, because “in the meantime I had become dispossessed. All of us, all the millions who never had woods or fields but had the street, have been dispossessed”.⁵⁶ *Nippers* engages in this discourse around childhood and space both directly and indirectly. In *The Red Windcheater*, an old man buys a bicycle because the bell “Sounds like when Gran was a girl [...] When roads were empty and you could play hopscotch and whip-and-top and hit hoops all down the middle of them and never get killed”.⁵⁷ The pathos of the purchase – the man cannot even ride a bike – is an effective critique of the lack of freedom on contemporary urban streets. In other books, the question of urban belonging is approached more obliquely, through an emphasis on children’s intimate knowledge of their surroundings. In Berg’s *Julie’s Story*, eight-year-old Julie makes the walk to the local market on her own, “past the sweet shop [...] past the fire station [...] up to the railings where she always crossed the road”.⁵⁸ Helen Solomon’s Billy makes his independent walk along the street of terraced mining cottages which “all looked alike. There was the yard, the lavatory, and the coal house and the back door”.⁵⁹ These small details help to convey the sense of territory which Berg recollected from her own childhood; they are a small act of resistance against the drive to “keep youth off the streets” she critiques in *Look at Kids*.⁶⁰
- 18 *Nippers* were remarkably successful: more than a quarter of a million were sold within the first year, both to schools and libraries and direct to readers.⁶¹ The enthusiastic reception was tempered, however, by what Berg described as “vociferous anger from a minority”, many of whom wrote to complain about the books.⁶² Complaints ranged from flat denials that any children lived in the conditions depicted in the books – despite the fact that similar conditions had been well-documented in the 1965 Milner Holland Report on London Housing⁶³ – to accusations that they the moral content was “degrading” and that the books conveyed “a wrong sense of values and poor standards of behavior”.⁶⁴ Berg characterised the critics of the series as “authoritarians”, a judgment which certainly seems applicable to the teacher who complained that the “head of the family should not be made the object of criticism”.⁶⁵ If the critics of the series were responding to a sense that it was anti-authoritarian, however, this was not without cause. In fact, it is clear from a conversation Leila Berg convened in 1968 with several of the leading figures in progressive education that the inclusive, child-centred ethos she was adopting in *Nippers* was closely associated with anti-authoritarianism. Michael Duane, A.S. Neill, John Holt and the radical Scottish educationalist Robert Mackenzie convened at Berg’s house for an informal symposium on education, in which Duane complained that teacher trainees – the “successes” of the education system – were “totally psychologically dependent on an authority”.⁶⁶ John Holt connected this dependence on authority to the alienation produced through the education system, which “say[s], in effect, to the child that his experience and his feelings [...] count for nothing”.⁶⁷ The attempt through *Nippers* to validate working-class children’s experiences and feelings was thus inherently anti-authoritarian in spirit. This defiance is evident in Leila Berg’s *Lesley’s Story* (1968), in which Lesley’s attempt to tell a story modelled on the traditional fairy tales she has (presumably) encountered at school is continually interrupted and challenged by her younger brother Jimmy:

“Once upon a time, there was a girl. And she lived in a cottage in a wood.”

“What’s a cottage?” said Jimmy.

“Oh, you know what a cottage is,” said Lesley. “It’s something in stories. People live

in them.”

“You mean a flat.” said Jimmy.⁶⁸

- 19 Lesley’s attempt to assert her authority by insisting on the model for fiction she has learnt is ultimately undermined when she attempts to demonstrate how a prince might look through a thick hedge and gets her head stuck in the railings. The story subtly indicates to child readers that their lived experience of the world may indeed be more useful than the version of the world they are offered at school.
- 20 Paradoxically, although *Nippers* were both anti-authoritarian in spirit and revolutionary in content, they were also intended to inculcate in children attitudes to reading and education which would assimilate them into the (broadly middle-class) cultural mainstream. It is noticeable that although the series does not shy away from showing adults as lazy, angry, or unfair, these faults are rarely ascribed to teachers. In Denise Robertson’s *The New Pet* (1973), “Brian’s teacher is young and pretty. ‘Pretty nice,’ says Brian, which means she is smashing.” In *The Lost Money*, it is Frankie’s sympathetic teacher who helps him retrieve the posted pound note, while in *A Visitor from Home* the teacher is sympathetic about Roy’s tired outburst at school. Another of Beryl Gilroy’s titles about Roy, *Knock at Mrs Herbs’* (1973), makes the priorities of *Nippers* particularly clear. Roy arrived home to find his mother and baby sister missing. The household has a system of signs to indicate the whereabouts of the inhabitants – for example, a handkerchief tied to the doorknob represents a trip to the launderette – but there is no sign from Roy’s mother. It transpires that she has taken the baby to the hospital, but “we haven’t a sign for the hospital”.⁶⁹ When Roy tells his teacher about this episode the next day, she organises the whole class in making written signs, promising “you’ll never be without a sign again”.⁷⁰ As Karen Sands-O’Connor observes, this “brings Roy into a world of words [...] the *Nippers* did not accept that either the working-class or the Black British communities needed to be nonreading communities.”⁷¹ In fact, there is no logical reason that the pre-written signs from Roy’s class should be more useful than the symbolic system developed by the West Indian household, since there is still no guarantee that a situation will arise for which there is no sign. It is unsurprising that a series which was designed by an education publisher in a school context and intended for use in schools places a heavy emphasis on the value of education; nevertheless, the implicit hierarchy of values here is in tension with the inclusive, anti-authoritarian ethos of *Nippers*.
- 21 The ethos of *Nippers* was not, however, in tension with overall trends in education in this period, notwithstanding the “vociferous minority” of critics. Arthur Marwick contends that the transformation brought about by the sixties was due in part to the fact that there were people in authority “who responded flexibly and tolerantly to counter-cultural demands”.⁷² The existence of *Nippers* owes much to exactly this kind of convergence between counter-cultural ideals and the mainstream. The imprint had after all been solicited by an editor – Michael Wace – working within a well-established mainstream publishing house. As I have suggested, Wace appears to have been encouraged rather than perturbed by Berg’s radical politics; however, there can be no doubt that he was motivated at least in part by the opportunity to capitalise on trends in education policy. A growing emphasis on the cultural needs of working-class and other underprivileged groups had been evident in the Newsom Report (1963) which had addressed the issue of education for “pupils aged 13 to 16 of average and less than average ability”, taking the view that “each is an individual whose spirit needs education as much as his body needs nourishment”.⁷³ The 1967 Plowden Report on “Children and their Primary Schools”, built

on some of the recommendations of the Newsom Report and was to become a touchstone for progressive education in Britain. Drawing heavily on Piaget's theories of child development, it proceeded from the premise that "at the heart of the educational process lies the child", stipulating that educational initiatives must be "in harmony with the nature of the child".⁷⁴ The Plowden Report explicitly addressed the quality of school readers in almost exactly the terms outlined in Leila Berg's briefing on *Nippers*: "The middle class world represented by the text and illustrations is often alien to the children, the characters shadowy, the content babyish, the text pedestrian and lacking in rhythm".⁷⁵ It is difficult to ascertain whether Berg had read the Report before she wrote her briefing on *Nippers*; what is clear, however, is that the Report reflected a wider shift towards the educational philosophies which Berg had espoused for decades. Its publication created a propitious environment for the launch of the series: at least one teacher specifically cited its recommendations as a basis for considering *Nippers*.⁷⁶

- 22 The fact that *Nippers* was not simply an isolated initiative, but was part of a more wide-ranging cultural movement, helped to ensure that the series and Leila Berg herself had a lasting legacy. The children's rights movement continued to gather momentum in the first part of the 1970s, with the aid of Leila Berg herself: along with Michael Duane, John Holt and A.S. Neill, she sat on the editorial advisory committee for the periodical *Children's Rights* (launched in 1971) and contributed to a ground-breaking collection, *Children's Rights* (1971). Their efforts helped to inspire Rosemary Stones and Andrew Mann, who founded the Children's Rights Workshop in 1973. Children's books were a key focus for the CRW: they launched the *Children's Book Bulletin* for news of progressive moves in children's literature, as well as a series of pamphlets on issues including racism, sexism and class in children's literature.⁷⁷ In 1975, they also launched the Other Award, which sought to celebrate books which offered "a wider and more accurate representation of human experience and situations".⁷⁸ These developments were not confined to specialist publishing, but were increasingly present in the literary mainstream: the same year that the Other Award was established, the winner of the prestigious Carnegie Medal was Robert Westall's *The Machine Gunners* (1975). *The Machine Gunners*, which was published by the main children's imprint at Macmillan, depicts working-class children who not only speak in dialect and swear, but whose "bad behavior" extends to concealing both a machine gun and a German pilot. Both in its desire to reflect working-class life authentically, and in its concern with questions of children's agency, access to space, and community, it is a close cousin of *Nippers*. Another novel about World War 2, Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War* (1973), also shows an affinity to Berg's approach with its emphasis on the sensual and emotional impressions of childhood. The series also had some direct descendants: several *Nippers* authors went on to greater prominence as writers for children. Joan Eadlington's *Jonny Briggs* stories would become well-known in the 1980s through a successful BBC television adaptation, while another *Nippers* author, Jacqueline Wilson, would go on to become one of the UK's most successful writer of realistic fiction for children and young people. Wilson published only one book for *Nippers* – *Ricky's Birthday*, (1973) was her first book for children – but she credits the series with confirming her sense of the possibilities for children's books. Recognising *Nippers* as "just [her] sort of territory" she went on to make that territory her own: to date she has published over 100 books and is one of the most heavily borrowed authors in UK public libraries.⁷⁹ The fact that several *Nippers* titles received foreign editions – with translations into Swedish, Danish, French and Dutch – suggests

that the series also aligned with some of the new publishing developments elsewhere in Europe, forming part of the broader “68 moment” in children’s literature.

- 23 *Nippers* was not in itself responsible for the shift towards more daring, socially realist literature in the 1970s, but it was in the vanguard of this movement. The series exemplifies the significance of 1968 as a flashpoint moment: like many other radical thinkers of the period, Leila Berg did not emerge from nowhere at the end of the sixties. On the contrary, it was her decades of political activism and lifelong interest in progressive education which enabled her to seize the opportunity represented in *Nippers* and produce a genuinely radical initiative.

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NOTES

1. Charles Greville, "CENSORED: Sir Allen orders the Puffin Club to drop psychedelic", *Daily Mail*, Monday February 27, 1967, p. 4.
2. See Lucy Pearson, *The making of modern children's literature in Britain: publishing and criticism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 73-118 for details on Puffin's reputation as a "quality" publisher.
3. Aidan Chambers, *The reluctant reader*, London, The Pergamon Press, 1969, p. 67.
4. The problems of periodisation are apparent in the lack of consensus about the exact start and end points of this "golden age". See Pearson, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-13.
5. Arthur Marwick, *The sixties: cultural revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958 - c.1974*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 7.
6. Lorraine Johnson and Brian Alderson, "Learning to read", *The Ladybird story: children's books for everyone*, London, The British Library, 2014, p. 100.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 104-121.
8. Leila Berg, *Reading and loving*, London, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1977, p. 83.
9. The first *Nippers* are dated 1968; however, it seems that while samples were sent to schools in this year, the series did not actually formally launch until the beginning of 1969.
10. Macmillan Education, "Nippers and new Little Nippers", advertising brochure (c. 1972), LB/06/01/04/02, p. 4. Leila Berg Collection, Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books.
11. Karen Sands-O'Connor has recently begun to address this gap: she devotes a whole chapter to Leila Berg and *Nippers* in her groundbreaking work *Children's book publishing for the Black British child*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, where she considers the series' contribution to writing by and about Black and Minority Ethnic groups.
12. Leila Berg, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Karen Sands-O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
15. See Pearson, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-168.
16. Leila Berg, *Risinghill: death of a comprehensive school*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, p. 118.
17. David Limond, "Risinghill and the Ecology of Fear", *Educational Review*, 54:2 (2002), p. 165-172, p. 166. Limond is critical of the polemical tone of Berg's account of Risinghill, but this summary of Duane's approach aligns with the substance of her account.
18. Leila Berg, *op. cit.*, p.8.
19. A review in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* at the time of publication gives a good picture of the disputes over Berg's account in *Risinghill*. David Limond has scrutinised Risinghill and Michael Duane in some depth. See M. Brearley, "Review: Risinghill: Death of a Comprehensive School by Leila Berg", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 16:3 (October 1968), p. 346-347; David Limond, "Risinghill and the Ecology of Fear", *op. cit.*; David Limond, "Risinghill Revised", *History of Education*, 31:6, 2002, p. 611-622.
20. Leila Berg, "Moving towards self-government", in *Children's rights: towards the liberation of the child*, ed. Julian Hall, London, Panther Books, 1972, pp. 9-53, p. 24.
21. Leila Berg, *Risinghill*, *op. cit.*, p. 117; *ibid.*, p. 65.
22. Leila Berg, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
23. Berg made a transcript of this conversation with a view to publication, and it has therefore been preserved. "Record of a conversation" (September 1968), LBe/2, Papers of Leila Berg, Institute of Education, University of London.
24. Leila Berg, *op. cit.*, p. 44; *ibid.*, p. 45.

25. Op. cit. p. 11-12.
26. Op. cit., pp. 108-111.
27. Op. cit. p. 92.
28. Leila Berg, "The five-year gap", *The Guardian* (20 November, 1967), p. 6.
29. Leila Berg, *Reading and loving*, op. cit., p. 84.
30. Leila Berg to Michael Wace (December 1967), LB/01/03/17, Leila Berg Collection, Seven Stories: the National Centre for Children's Books.
31. Some of the books do feature children in rural settings: Irma Chilton's *The Lamb* (1973), for example, depicts working life on a Welsh farm.
32. Leila Berg, *Risinghill*, op. cit., p. 48. Berg notes in *Reading and Loving* that this house was the model for the one in *Fish and Chips for Supper* (op. cit., p. 97.)
33. A Dutch auction is an auction – in this case of second-hand goods – in which the seller begins with a high price and names successively lowers prices until someone makes a bid.
34. Leila Berg, *Reading and loving*, op. cit. p. 88.
35. Ibid.
36. John Holt, *How children fail*, London, Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1964, p. 173.
37. Gillian Avery, *Nineteenth Century children: heroes and heroines in English children's stories 1780-1900*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1965, p. 227.
38. Mary Cockett, *The lost money*, ill. Mary Dinsdale, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1968, p.12.
39. Leila Berg, *Risinghill*, op. cit., p. 142.
40. See Karen Sands-O'Connor, op. cit. for a fuller discussion of the discourse around Black British education and the work of Black publishers for children in this period.
41. Bernard Coard, quoted in Karen Sands-O'Connor, op. cit., p. 61.
42. Leila Berg, *Reading and loving*, p. 94.
43. Karen Sands-O'Connor, op. cit., p. 43.
44. Beryl Gilroy, *A visitor from home*, ill. Shyam Varma, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1973, p. 16–17.
45. Op. cit., p. 49.
46. Leila Berg, *reading and loving*, op. cit., p. 84. Emphasis in the original.
47. Helen Solomon, *A present from the seaside*, ill. John Dyke, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1972, p. 4.
48. Op. cit., p. 14.
49. Leila Berg, *Susan's story*, ill. Richard Rose, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1970, p. 15.
50. Berg makes the case for this more explicitly in *Look at Kids*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972, p. 20-21.
51. Matthew Thomson, *Lost freedom: the landscape of the child and the British post-war settlement*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 188.
52. Richard Freeman, "Children's rights in the home, and the Draft Charter of Children's Rights", in *Rights of children: report of the first National Conference on children's rights*, ed. Mark Vaughan, London, National Council for Civil Liberties, 1972, pp. 10-12.
53. See Leila Berg, "Correspondence with Cheapside Land Development Company Ltd" (1942), LBE/01, Papers of Leila Berg, Institute of Education, University of London.
54. Matthew Thomson, op. cit., p. 202-3.
55. Leila Berg, *Look at kids*, op. cit., p. 44.
56. Op. cit. p. 45.
57. J.L. Carr, *The red windcheater*, ill. George Adamson, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1970, p. 18.
58. Leila Berg, *Julie's story*, ill. Richard Rose, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1970, p.1.
59. Helen Solomon, *Billy finds a pigeon*, ill. John Dyke, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1971, p. 3.
60. Leila Berg, *Look at kids*, op. cit., p. 45.
61. Leila Berg, *Reading and loving*, p. 101.
62. Ibid.
63. Milner Holland Report on London Housing, HL Deb 29 March 1965, vol. 264. cc. 836-94

64. Op. cit. pp. 98-99.
65. Ibid.
66. Michael Duane, quoted in transcript of conversation (1968)
67. John Holt, quoted in transcript, p. 5.
68. Leila Berg, *Lesley's Story*, ill. Richard Rose, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1968, p. 3.
69. Beryl Gilroy, *Knock at Mrs Herbs*, ill. Shyam Varma, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1973, p. 19.
70. *Ibid*, p. 23.
71. Karen Sands-O'Connor, op. cit., p. 46.
72. Arthur Marwick, op. cit., p. 13.
73. John Newsom, *Half Our Future*, London, HMSO, 1963, p. v, p. xiv
74. Bridget Plowden, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, London, HMSO, 1967, p.7.
75. *Ibid*, p. 587.
76. Leila Berg, *Reading and loving*, op. cit., p. 98.
77. Lucy Pearson, op. cit., p.49.
78. Rosemary Stones, "13 Other Years: The Other Award 1975-1987", *Books For Keeps*, 53 (November 1988), consulted 6 June 2017. URL: <http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/53/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/awards>.
79. Jacqueline Wilson, in Lucy Pearson, "A Writing Life: Interview with Jacqueline Wilson", *Jacqueline Wilson: A New Casebook*, ed. Lucy Pearson, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 198-212, p. 200.

ABSTRACTS

As protesters filled Paris streets in May '68, across the Channel a quieter revolution was taking place. A radical reshaping of British education during the post-war era laid the way for a new era of progressive thinking about childhood, and turned attention to the question of children's rights. Central to this was the notion of a right to read, and of the right of children to books which recognised the realities of their lives. Leila Berg – activist, author, editor – was at the forefront of this movement with her series of early reader *Nippers*. This paper examines *Nippers* in context, showing how the books brought together a long tradition of activist thought and encapsulated much of the spirit which animated '68 more broadly.

INDEX

Keywords: *Nippers*, Leila Berg, British children's literature, diversity in publishing, social realism in fiction, Risinghill, progressive education

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