

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The Web

Something rather interesting is happening in British young adult fiction. Since the mid-1980s there's been a resurgence in British sf talent, largely led by the magazine *Interzone*. These newly established writers include Paul McAuley, Stephen Baxter, Ian MacLeod, Eric Brown, Ian McDonald, Nichola Griffith ... the list goes on and on. And now some of these writers are moving into young adult fiction.

In 1997, Orion announced a new series of young adult novels to be published under their Dolphin paperback imprint (and already a further series has been commissioned). Editor Simon Spanton gathered together six authors and between them they developed the shared scenario of *The Web*. Of the authors listed below, only Stephen Bowkett had an established track record in children's fiction (although admittedly Eric Brown's first publication was a children's play); at least one -- Stephen Baxter -- has gone on to sell further young adult novels. All are leading lights in the new generation of sf and fantasy writers. Of course, the aim of the series is to sell books to 10-14 year-olds, but the choice of authors makes the project an intriguing phenomenon for all those readers who have encountered these writers through their adult fiction.

Although *infinity plus* is primarily concerned with adult fiction, we've reviewed all six *Web* novels here due to the authors involved -- four are *infinity plus* contributors, after all. So do the books have any appeal beyond the target audience? Read the reviews to find out more.

The year is 2027. There's a black US president, a black pope, a US-EU-China moonbase. The Internet has evolved into the Web, a virtual reality communications network that spans the globe. The children of the world are the ones most comfortable with the Web, and the ones who get most fun from it. There is, though, increasing unease that the Web is too ubiquitous, too easy...

The books in the first series are:

Gulliverzone (July 1997) by Stephen Baxter, author of *The Time Ships*, *Voyage* and others.

Dreamcastle (July 1997) by Stephen Bowkett, author of *Frontiersville High*, *Panic Station* and others.

Untouchable (October 1997) by Eric Brown, author of *Engineman*, *Blue Shifting* and others.

Spiderbite (October 1997) by Graham Joyce, author of *Dreamside*, *Dark Sister* and others.

Lightstorm (February 1998) by Peter F Hamilton, author of *Mindstar Rising*, *The Reality Dysfunction* and others.

Sorceress (February 1998) by Maggie Furey, author of *Aurian*, *Dhiammara* and others.

The Web series: various authors (Dolphin, £3.50 each, pb 1997/98).

Graham Joyce

Graham Joyce quit his executive job to concentrate on writing, living in a beach shack on the Greek island of Lesbos with a colony of scorpions (the setting for *House Of Lost Dreams*). He sold his first novel while still in Greece and travelled in Israel and Egypt on the proceeds. He returned to Leicester, England, after a year.

He is the author of six novels:

Dreamside (1991) - dealing with the subject of lucid dreaming, Joyce's first novel concerns four characters haunted by psychological experiments conducted while they were students.

Dark Sister (1992) - a novel of contemporary witchcraft, exploring the relationship between witchcraft and feminism.

House Of Lost Dreams (1993) - returns to Greece to analyse a disintegrating relationship against the backdrop of the superstitious and the supernatural.

Requiem (1995) - continues the trajectory by setting an atmospheric suspense story in modern Jerusalem, dealing with the roots of myth and the power of sexuality.

The Tooth Fairy (1996, reviewed by Jason Gould) - this represents something of a departure in that it dispenses with exotic settings and offers a rites of passage novel set in the industrial Midlands,

though its suspenseful and at times supernatural mood suggest a development of what has gone before.

The Stormwatcher (1998, an extract is available elsewhere in infinity plus) - set in France, the story of a girl knowing beyond her years.

Graham Joyce is a three-times winner of the British Fantasy Society's August Derleth Award, for *Dark Sister*, *Requiem* and *The Tooth Fairy*. *Requiem* was short-listed for the 1996 World Fantasy award. He has also published a novel in the children's Web series, *Spiderbite* (1997, reviewed by Nick Gifford). His short stories have appeared in several anthologies, and his novels have been widely translated.

He currently teaches Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University. He still lives in Leicester with his wife and daughter.

The Web: Spiderbite, Graham Joyce, October 1997.

In the shared future of this multi-author series, children spend much of their spare time, and most of their school time, in the virtual reality world of the Web. Large sectors of Webworld are devoted to education: history, for example, really comes to life when you can talk with a virtual ancient Roman, or investigate Old England in person. These Edutainment sectors of the Web are carefully managed to create safe and stimulating environments for children to explore. There should be no secrets in Edutainment -- that's the whole point.

So why has Conrad found a part of the Ancient Greece sector where access is forbidden? Every time he tries to get into the Labyrinth a dog-sized security spider attacks him, ejecting him from the Web. These spiders are meant to keep people out of high security areas, or to keep children out of adult-only areas. There's no reason why Conrad should have found one where he has. At first, his friends, Chloë and Paddy, don't believe him. When they go with him to the Labyrinth entrance, Conrad is the only one to be attacked by -- or even to see -- the spider.

The kids' attempts to investigate the mystery begin to have repercussions in the real world. Why is Conrad's father suddenly desperate to recover his son's high-tech Web-suit? Who are the strange, too-happy people they find in the Labyrinth and in their dreams? Who is the mysterious Ariadne, who says she wants only to help them?

Joyce has turned in a terrific, high-paced romp as his contribution to the Web series. The plot -- only slightly undermined at times by the Boys' Own DIY techno-wizardry of the children -- is neatly constructed, building relentlessly to a climax that recapitulates the consensus plot-rationale of the series without being formulaic or predictable. Probably the most accomplished performance of the series to date. *Review by Nick Gifford.*

Links:

www.mailbox.co.uk/orion/the-web.htm

www.iplus.zetnet.co.uk/a2z.htm

Starter:

Make Your Way with English 1(new edition): Compact unit 3

Make Your Way With English 1 (old edition): Unit 6

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Web-speak

The teacher should inform pupils that the book they are going to read contains a lot of Web-related vocabulary, which is summarised at the end of each book. He should emphasise that it is very important for them to know at least some of these words, so that reading can be done more fluently. The following activities will enable pupils to deal with the new words more easily.

A. The teacher introduces the book *The Web: Spiderbite* to the class. He should outline the situational background (see *background material*) and also read the first chapter (4 pages) to the pupils. This will not only arouse interest, but also show them that there is some vocabulary they have never heard of.

B. Pupils can now discuss how they think about the book after having had the first chapter read out to them. Then the teacher hands out the *Example* text, which one pupil reads out aloud.

C. Going through the text line by line, each web-speak word should be explained by the pupils. Those that cannot be guessed correctly, should be left without explanation. After that the vocabulary sheet is supplied (if all pupils have a copy of the book, this isn't really necessary), and pupils try to 'translate' the text into Standard English. Each group presents its translation to the class.

D. Pupils form pairs and work out a dialogue comparing computer related items. (games, internet sites, etc.) Then they try to translate it into web-speak. Some examples are presented to the class. (The best text should be rewarded in some way.)

E. (optional homework) Pupils write a text about an everyday situation of about 100 words, at least using 10 web-speak words. (The best text should be rewarded in some way.)

EXAMPLE

Your cocoon's a mess, your one-mip, basement-level egg is giving you grief. Your whole day has gone down the plug. There's only one thing for it: Take a stroll down the strands of Webtown amongst the phreaks and ultra-vets, sample the venomous virtual reality adventures on offer. But there's a price to pay: Take on an avatar and you can forget who you are, fall under the spell of the Sorceress. Hit that wipeout and the cyberats and spiders will be the least of your problem ... (taken from: www.mailbox.co.uk/orion/the-web.htm)

WEB-SPEAK (a selection)

avatar: Personas in the Web that are representations of real people.

basement-level: Of the lowest level possible. Often used as an insult.

bat: The moment of transition into the Web or between sites - as in 'do a bat'. Its slang use has extended to the everyday world. 'Bat' is used instead of 'come in'-'take a bat' is a dismissal.

cocoon: A secret refuge. Also your bed or own room.

cog: Incredibly boring or dull. Initially specific to the UK and America this slang is now in use world wide. (from *Common or Garden spider*)

cyberat: A Web construct. A descendent of computer viruses, that infests the Web programs.

down the plug: A disaster, as in 'We're down the plug'.

egg: A younger sibling or annoying hanger-on. Even in the first sense this is always meant nastily.

eight: good

gag: Someone, or something, you don't like very much, whom you consider to be stupid. (from *Glove or Glasses*)

mip: Measure for computer power.

one-mip: Of limited worth or intelligence, as in a 'one-mip mind'.

phase: A person you meet in the Web who is not real; someone created by the software of a particular site or game.

phreak: Someone who is fanatical about virtual reality experiences in the Web.

Realworld: The world outside the Web. Sometimes used in a derogatory way.

scuttle: Leave the Web and return to Realworld.

six: Bad (an insect has six legs)

slows, the: The feeling that time has slowed down after experiencing the faster time of the Web.

spider: A web construct. Appearing in varying sizes and guises, these are used to pass on warnings or information on the Web and are often dangerous. The word is also commonly applied to teachers or parents.

spin in: To enter the Web or a Web site.

spin out: To leave the Web or a Web site.

strand: A gap between rows of skyscrapers in Webtown. A street, road or journey.

The Web: The Internet of 2027.

ultra-vet: Veterans of any game or site.

venomous: Excellent

Websuit: The all over body suit lined with receptors which when worn by Web users allows them to experience the full physical illusion of virtual reality.

Webtown: A virtual city through which different parts of The Web are entered through a series of brick-like blocks.

widow: Adjective; excellent; the term comes from the Black Widow, a particularly poisonous spider.

wipeout: To be comprehensively beaten in a Web game or to come out worse in any Web situation.

2. *The World Wide Web Digital Education Network* (Authentically English, Issue 4, 1996)

This article provides information on an educational internet-site. Although it was written in 1996, the facts given represent what the internet today can offer for pupils, students or teachers. Reading the article for extracting particular informational items will help pupils to get a better picture of the present situation. On the other hand, it gives a lot of internet-links, that can be used for further use at school and at home. Pupils will also get used to specific internet related vocabulary, which will not only help them when having to work with the internet, but it will also provide some theoretical background for reading *The Web*. Today's possibilities concerning education combined with the use of the internet could be one main point to focus on, when reading *Spiderbite*.

I have decided on taking only the first four paragraphs because the article is quite difficult to read, and it would also consume too much time to work out the whole text in class. Anyway, the information given in this section should be enough to be able to compare the Web to the internet.

A. Read paragraphs 1-5 aloud. After each paragraph pupils call out words related to the internet. Teacher notes words on transparency foil. (*World Wide Web, web-site, web design, host service, update, commercial site, newsletter format, 3-D buttons, graphics box, database, e-mail, web link, internet search page, web developers, software*) The vocabulary will be discussed after the whole text has been read. The teacher covers the list so that only one word is visible, and pupils can guess - if they don't know yet - what the word means. New words should be written down by the pupils.

B. After having read the paragraphs aloud, pupils should again read the text silently and at the same time underline informational units which they believe to be important. When they are finished, they can answer the following questions:

1. Why is the DEN web-site interesting for international educators?
2. What does the front page look like? Give details.
3. What advantages do subscribers of the DEN have?
4. What is free in the DEN?
5. How are international education organisations featured?
6. List the information presented especially for students.

C. Since every school is connected to the internet, and hardly any pupil has no access to a PC, it would be interesting to find out, how pupils use the computer for learning activities. First pupils should brainstorm in groups, how they use their PC for education and take notes. Then each group presents their findings, which could be discussed in class.

WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Character portraits

Pupils should be able to extract particular information from a text. This activity will help to develop this skill. It is also important that they learn to deal with more extensive texts than newspaper articles or short literary texts, where information is densely packed into a few pages.

There are three main characters: Conrad, Chlo and Paddy, who should be described by all means. This could be done at an early stage, since there is a lot of information on them in the first few chapters (I would suggest Chapters 1 - 6). Portraying the Sorceress and Ariadne should be delayed to a later date, because most information on them is presented at the end of the book.

A. Pupils should work out a certain way, in which they want to present the main characteristics. This can be done in groups. The easiest way would be if they first concentrated on how they would present themselves; along with that they can note several categories, like age, character, hobbies, family, appearance, likes and dislikes, etc. These should then be discussed in class.

B. Pupils should form groups (if there are not enough pupils in class, forming pairs would also do as well) again, so that three groups work on one character. The first has to work out the appearance and the second describes the figure's character. The third group concentrates on all other categories on the form. Having finished each group introduces its findings to the class. These should then be discussed.

C. The result could then be documented on posters, which for example look like 'wanted' circulars, containing a drawing and a short description of the character.



2. Role play

With this activity pupils can practice their communication skills. For most pupils it is easier to communicate openly if they can take over the role of another person, so that they do not have to talk about themselves or make up arguments reflecting their opinions. Nevertheless, the communicative basis remains the same with this activity: finding arguments for and against a topic, and expressing them verbally.

I. Six people will take part in this discussion: Chlo's parents, Paddy's parents, Conrad's mother and an officer of the Web Regulation Force.

II. The situation: The children's parents have been called into the office of the Web Regulation Force to discuss why Chlo and Paddy had fallen into a coma. The date of this meeting is after Conrad had visited his friends. (Chapter 12)

III. Role Cards.

Chlo's mother

She thinks that there should be more security programs installed on the Web. She blames the Web-police for not being efficient enough to stop things like this happening. She isn't really well informed about the possibilities in the Web.
She dislikes Conrad personally.

Chlo's father

He thinks that it is all Conrad's fault. He believes that the children had been necro-surfing. He also suspects that the children were up to something illegal. He wants to know what it was. He thinks the Web should only be used for business and school.

Paddy's mother

She knows that her son is experienced in the Web. Due to her job she has to spend a lot of time in the Web. She is well informed about the advantages and disadvantages. She wants to know all the details from Conrad's mother and the Web Regulator.

Paddy's father

He defends the children. He knows how it is to be young and interested in everything dangerous. He knows that in the Web people can't be hurt the way it would be in real life. The web also is the main medium used by the younger generation to communicate or socialise with their friends.

Conrad's mother

She has to defend Conrad, although she doesn't really believe what he said to her. She has to explain why it is difficult to bring up Conrad.

Web Regulator

He is kind of a discussion leader. He wants to find out what happened to the children and has to take care that the topic of the discussion is not neglected.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

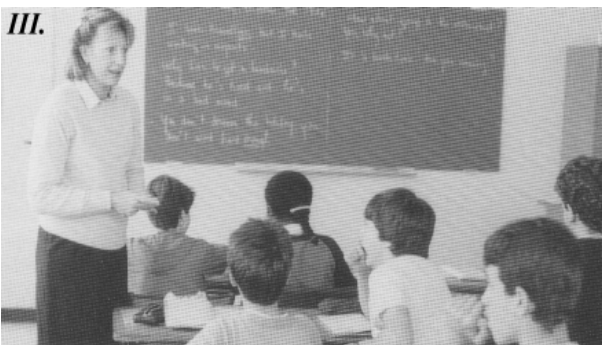
1. Comparing today's school to Web-school

With this activity pupils can summarise the differences between being educated by live teachers and in the Web. The point of view of the writer can either be present or future, listing advantages and disadvantages of each educational system. The text form could either be optional (newspaper article, diary, ...) or given: In this case I would take the text form of an e-mail, since this could be applied to both points of view.

The pupils will be given some pictures showing today's way of education. This activity could be used for tests or homework.

A.a. Choose one of the pictures below. Imagine a context for it- where you took it, got it from, ... - and write an e-mail to a friend of yours, explaining the situation. Try to compare web-school to our school and make sure you explain what you like better. You can also choose the point of view on your own (199.... or 2027) but remember that this will influence the context related with the picture. (At least words)

A.b. One of the photos below illustrates a text comparing Web-school and our school. Choose a suitable text form and decide on your point of view (199..... or 2027). You also have to imagine a context for where the picture was taken, etc. Remember that the point of view you chose will influence the context. (At least words)



2. Developing a web-site

Since nearly every school has its own homepage nowadays, it would be logical to present the book in an adequate way, for it has its background in a highly developed form of internet. This activity can only be done correctly with the help of other teachers, such as arts or computer science; I think that it will be happily accepted because project work seems to be fashionable today.

What is more, it will not be too time consuming, at least for the English teacher, who can do his part of the work as pre-, while- or post-reading activities. Here I will mainly focus on the work of the English teacher.

A. First of all the teachers have to co-ordinate on how this project can be realised, fixing the limits of the work. At this stage it should be considered how detailed the appearance of the web-site can be, taking into consideration the school's computer's powers.

B. The teacher introduces the project to the pupils and they collect ideas on what content features they will emphasise. In arts they can sketch the graphics outline of the web-page and the computer science teacher should inform pupils on how their ideas could be realised with the computers available.

C. One must of the web-page definitely is a summary of the book. (post-reading) This could be done in class by forming groups with each concentrating on only some chapters of the book. The results should then be connected and edited again with participation of the whole class. The best thing to do would be each group writing on transparency foil, because the text could then be made visible as a whole.

D. The web-page should also contain a reference to the author (pre-reading). Some *background material* for this is included, and many more items can be found on the internet.

E. It would also be interesting to work out a personal description of the main characters of the book. The following characters should be described: Conrad, Chlo♣, Paddy, the Sorceress, Ariadne. Here pupils should decide on their own, how to make up the character portraits, the only thing important is that the portraits do not differ too much, meaning that pupils have to come to an agreement on the features that should be presented.

F. Another important detail would be to decide in which way the pupils want to present themselves. The easiest thing is to scan a photograph and comment on it with some explaining sentences, offering important information like age, form, class activities, ...