

# THE FILMS WHICH CHILDREN LIKE

## -Are Not Always The Films Which Adults Think They Like

THE subject of films for children is always being discussed, and particularly at the moment in New Zealand. Readers will therefore be interested in this talk in the "Art For Everyone" series given on a recent Sunday evening in the BBC's Pacific Service by MARY FIELD, who is now director of the Children's Film Department of Gaumont-British, but who is also known as the co-author of the Pelican book, "Cine-Biology," and as the director of the "Secrets of Life" films. Until recently Russia was the only country in the world making films designed specially for children, but Britain is now making more and more. Miss Field tells us here about some of the difficulties that have been overcome and about some of the popular theories concerning children's film-going that have been exploded.

ONE of the most important things to remember when you are making films for children is that children form a very critical audience. Films are a part of the culture to which they are born. They accept films just as they accept aeroplanes, telephones, and wireless. In some parts of the world, of course, films are almost the only form of public entertainment, so they take the place of the theatre and the concert hall. It's true, then, that films form the chief contact which many millions of people have with the arts, so we cannot afford to neglect the film in relation to the child.

### Children's Cinema Clubs

For many years teachers and welfare workers have thought that children should not attend adult films which are not suited to them. But special exhibitions of adult films which seemed harmless to children have never proved a sustained success. The reason was simple. The films were advertised as being good for children, so naturally enough the children preferred to stay away. But just before the war in England the film industry set to work to remove children from the adult audiences. With sound psychology two of the big circuits founded children's cinema clubs. You could attend the Saturday morning club meetings only if you were a member—non-members were left outside. As a result, membership filled the theatre to capacity, and attendance was regular. Now more than 400,000 children attend cinema club meetings every Saturday

morning in England. These clubs are non-profit making, the members enjoying other activities beside cinema-going. There are cricket teams and football teams, swimming clubs, orchestras, concert parties, stamp clubs, model-making clubs, debating clubs, dramatic societies, even bands attached to the clubs. This movement has developed all over Britain in spite of war conditions and the blitzing of big towns. Membership is limited to children between the ages of seven and fourteen, and the clubs are playing an important part in their lives, since very few other club facilities are provided for children under the age of fourteen.

### What to Put On?

But the problem for the organisers was, and is, what films to put on. There are very few films suitable for child audiences, and relatively few that are harmless. Most films for grown-ups are definitely not suitable, if not harmful, for children. So about a year ago, J. Arthur Rank, the chairman of both the Odeon and Gaumont circuits, the pioneers of the Club movement, decided that special entertainment films must be made for children. He set up a Children's Film Department entrusted with this production.

So we began making the first entertainment films to be produced entirely for children. We experimented with two short story films, a cartoon, a major film, and a topical film, which is coming out once a month and is called "Our Club Magazine." It was a bad time to start, for most of the film technicians were in the Services, and the war had produced a great shortage of film staff and studios. Still, we thought it better to make some pictures and to get them into the club entertainments, so we could learn by trial and error what the children's taste in films really is.

### Mother's Darlings Aren't Popular

We found that they take the greatest pleasure in watching stories of very ordinary children in very ordinary British scenes. Between the ages of seven and fourteen we find the children are realists in their film-going. They don't want to see heroes and heroines in very beautiful homes or very modern schools, but in the kind of kitchens and classrooms they are used to themselves. Nor do children like the kind of child actor who is attractive to adults. They like ordinary, clean, rather pudding-faced

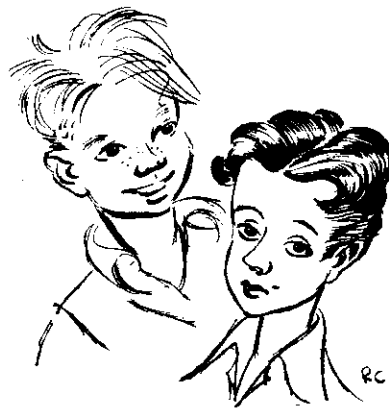


little boys and girls; too glamorous a child on the films is apt to be branded as a show-off.

Once they've identified themselves with the characters in a film the members of a child audience are extremely curious and want to see everything that is going on on the screen. This means they want many more close-ups in their films than grown-up audiences do. They want to see what coin is offered as a reward, they want to know what's in a handbag, or what's written in a letter, and if the story is set at a school sports

of the commentary to write his reply in very much better verse.

One thing we've learnt very clearly from observing children's reactions and studying their written criticisms—that is to pay very little attention to adult criticism of films made for children. It's the criticism of the children that matters and they like their stories constructed somewhat differently from those that suit grown-up taste. Children like their stories to be moral. They like black to be black and white to be white, and they demand that good shall triumph and that the bad boy or girl shall be punished. Nor is it sufficient to intimate that the evil-doer will eventually get his deserts. The children want to see what's coming to the criminals and to judge for themselves whether the punishment is suitable and sufficient. They have no objection to moralising that makes grown-up critics wriggle in their seats, and they will cheer a chase across a town to restore a lost purse with the same enthusiasm as they would cheer the sheriff riding down a horse-thief. But in all their pictures they do like action and suspense.



Ordinariness is preferred to glamour

### Craftsmanship Must Come First

We must remember that the children have already had their taste formed by the ordinary grown-up picture, and being as conservative in their film-going as they are in most other things, they would not appreciate a sudden, radical change in their films. So we are prepared to follow a very long-term policy. Gradually we hope to improve the content of the films, while keeping to the present accepted form. Then in about five years when our present audience has grown away from us we shall hope to introduce more far-reaching changes.

Most people are interested to know who selects the stories for these films. The responsibility of selecting entertainment for so large a proportion of British children is too great to rest upon one group of people. There exists, therefore, an advisory council on children's entertainment films. On this sit representatives of Government departments and all the national organisations that are interested in the leisure time of children. This council has been kept small enough to really be active and practical. It advises on stories and the treatment of action and it views and approves the films when they are completed.

After our initial experimental films we are now making two serial stories, as the children are particularly fond of them.

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"... Demand that good shall triumph"