THE SPECTATOR

meticulous drawings. I believe that he once worked for Mad magazine but his children's drawings, like those of Peet, are mostly of animals. The supreme writer-illustrators of this Renaissance, however, are Judy Brook and Graham Oakley, both very English and very interested in mice. (Third place goes to Mary Rayner and her thoroughly modern pig family, much harrassed by the mysterious Mrs Wolf.) Before going inttp rhapsodies over them, though, I would like to see how the villains, Bright Badly-Drawn and Social Comment are getting on as the Eighties begin. Roger Hargreaves's banal Mister Men books are popular eye-catchers, often bought or borrowed, but seldom remembered. Social Comment is now chiefly confined to the efforts of one Michael Foreman, a favourite of librarians, who display his works prominently but seldom have to stamp them.

Foreman's illustrations for Kurt Baumann's Micky's Kitchen Contest have unconscious humour, for his Micky is the archetypal modern brat, the blue dungareed podgy-faced mop-haired child of trendy parents, complete with vacuous whine of 'Why should I?' Baumann's whole story revolves around Father doing the washing up, presumably while Ms Mother is at work. Washing-up fathers are creeping insidiously into children's fiction, with a laborious lack of comment, not to mention lack of mother. The message hammered home by this devious attempt at brainwashing is not that Dad should help Mum, but that men do housework, and women, wearing trousers, go out to work. I have even seen a book that featured a female koala bear, wearing spiky glasses, who drove home from her job as (probably) a fashien editor just as Father Bear finished the housework. Children, especially if their mothers do go out to work, like home life to be portrayed as cosy. Nothing could be bleaker than a Dad in an apron, both in life and in art.

Worse is to come, for Foreman is not only an advocate of Women's Lib but something of a Maoist, if All the King's Horses is anything to go by. The blurb of this very unsatisfactory story of a virago princess who beats up her suitors and then rides away across a washily psychedelic Mongolia mentions the author's affection for China. Foreman's grinning demon of a Chinese 'king' suggests that he could make a living painting propaganda posters for the land he loves, showing noble peasants and evil landlords in the new style of Chinese art.

Let us turn to happier things. Judy Brook's stories of Tim and Helen Mouse and of a farmer and his wife and animals, are worlds away from nasty trendiness — to be exact, near East Meon, a tiny village in Hampshire. Daring adventures, superbly cosy households and hearthsides and glorious views of an idealised Hampshire, are portrayed both in vivid illustrations and text of pleasing simplicity that encourages reading. A genuine understanding and love of children, free of condescension and full of delight in pleasing them, wafts from the pages as if in summer breezes from the bare green downs and slender trees of her landscapes. Judy Brook's mice are field mice who live out of doors, and her humans all live in farm houses or labourers' cottages. In her two books on the Noah's Ark story, her comfortably stout farmer and his kindly bun-haired wife appear as a Hampshire Mr and Mrs Noah and their ark is a floating farm whose snugness contrasts agreeably with the rainy world outside. Clearly Miss Brook is an expert naturalist, for her rescued animals are drawn in great detail, and can be recognised down to the smallest bird. Some, such as hyraxes and pangolins, are seldom shown in children's books. Judy Brook can paint brightly where it is necessary, but favours soft soothing colours for most of her country scenes. I particular ly like the way her fieldside footpaths dip up and down the hilly landscape, appearing and reappearing.

To judge by the writing, Graham Oakley's picture stories of the quaint and ridiculous town of Wortlethorpe, its benign and scholarly vicar, his cat Samson and the horde of pampered church mice led by Arthur and Humphrey, are for older children and grown ups. Yet the pictures, often combining beauty and comic genius, are so appealing that four-year-olds can enjoy the books, provided that the readeraloud simplifies the narrative. Mr Oakley's humour is subtle, using understatement, and sometimes he lets a picture tell a story, a device that small children starting to read cannot understand. They cannot always trust their eyes, and need explanations to reassure them that things are what they seem to be. Good-humoured satire in every picture seems aimed at the grown up readeraloud — note the various shop signs, newspaper headings and digs at the small town mentality. I suggest that Graham Oakley is himself a clergyman with a nottoo-demanding living, for every book must take at least a year to draw and paint. His crowd scenes show a keen eye for fashions and foibles, and his churchyard scenes are noteworthy for the skilful way he paints the weathering, flaky stones. New comic details are noticed every time you pick up one of his books, but Oakley is not a man for all tastes, and