

## **The Blyton enigma: Changing perspectives on children's popular culture**

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One of the most lucrative publishing sensations in the UK during the mid-2010s has been the parody children's book. The cycle began in 2014 when an artist, Miriam Elia, produced *We Go To the Gallery*. A small, card-bound book of 20 double-page spreads, it was initially intended as an independently published art project. The book is a kind of spoof or parody of the massively successful 1960s series for beginning readers, Ladybird Books: it appears under the imprint 'Dung Beetle'. Each page shows 'mummy' and her two children John and Susan as they encounter the works at a contemporary art gallery. At the bottom of the page, in the manner familiar from the original Ladybirds, are three 'new words' to add to the reader's vocabulary – although in this case they include words like 'violate', 'feminist' and 'hegemony'.

*We Go To the Gallery* is to some extent a parody of the Ladybird Books: the illustrations are in the same bland realist style, and the dialogues are highly stilted. Mummy is relentlessly patronising and pedagogical, and John and Susan are clean, well-behaved and obedient. The book presents an orderly image of middle-class family life that seems strikingly old fashioned – and of course much of the humour derives from the contrast between this and the contemporary, 'adult' material they encounter in the gallery. However, the book's primary target is not so much the original Ladybirds, but the pretentiousness and fashionable nihilism of the art world itself.

Miriam Elia was eventually threatened with legal action by Penguin Books, the multinational publisher that owns the copyright on the original Ladybird series. She responded by creating a new set of images, entitled *We Sue An Artist*, distributed via Twitter. However, not long afterwards, Penguin began releasing its own Ladybird spoofs targeted at adult readers. There are now several series of these books, many of which have appeared in the bestseller lists. The Ladybird 'Book Of...' series includes such modish contemporary topics as the Mid-Life Crisis, the Hipster, the Sickie and the Zombie Apocalypse; while another series of Ladybird 'How It Works' books includes the Nerd, the Baby and the Student.

Other publishers quickly jumped onto the bandwagon, recycling other popular series from the same historical period, including I-Spy, Mr. Men, Haynes Explains and Mills and Boon Modern Girl's Guides. There are also one-off adult parodies of some of the most popular children's books of the past several decades, including *The Very Hungover Caterpillar*, *Alice in Brexitland* and *The Teenager Who Came To Tea*; and well as adult colouring books (*The Mindless Violence Colouring Book*) and cut-out books (*Let's Dress Jeremy Corbyn*). While many of these books parody the fleeting fashions and bizarre rituals of modern life, very few of them have the satirical cutting edge of Miriam Elia's original. The humour derives primarily from the self-conscious

anachronism, as contemporary concerns (social media, therapy, youth culture, dieting) are rendered in imagery from much earlier – and perhaps more innocent – times. As reviews on Amazon suggest, most of the readers of these books recall the originals with some affection: despite the parody, there is also an element of nostalgia in play here.

Among the first of these parody series was one based on Enid Blyton's Famous Five books. Written by Bruno Vincent, a former publisher and bookseller, at least thirteen such titles were published in 2016 and 2017. At around 100 pages each, these books are significantly longer than those in the other parody series, although the formula is basically the same. Aspects of modern life (especially affecting readers in their twenties and thirties) are parodied, in this case using the original characters and illustrations. Thus, we have titles like *Five Go On A Strategy Awayday*, *Five Go Gluten Free*, *Five Get on the Property Ladder* and *Five Get Gran Online*. 1.7 million copies of these books had reportedly been sold by the end of 2017; and perhaps the biggest seller, *Five on Brexit Island*, sold a quarter of a million in 2016 alone.

### **The troubling success of Enid Blyton**

I will return to these books towards the end of this essay, since my focus here is primarily on the author of the originals, Enid Blyton – and more specifically on the changing ways in which her work has been critically received and understood. Until J.K. Rowling, Blyton was without doubt the most popular children's author of all time. Born in 1897, she trained as a teacher at a college run by the National Froebel Union, following a loosely 'progressive' or 'child-centred' teaching method. After a short career as a kindergarten teacher, she married a publisher's editor, and soon began writing full-time. Although most of her earliest publications were aimed at teachers, she also began writing books to be read by children in schools, and by the late 1930s was writing directly and almost exclusively for the children's market.

Blyton was astonishingly prolific: she reportedly wrote more than 10,000 words a day, and produced more than 600 titles in her lifetime. In the 1950s, her most productive period, she frequently completed a book a week, achieving a record 69 separate titles in 1955. At the same time, she was writing and publishing a weekly magazine, *Sunny Stories*, which ran for more than 30 years until 1959.

Blyton was also phenomenally popular, and remains so. Estimates vary, but it is likely that her books have sold more than 500 million copies worldwide. Her work has been translated into more than 90 languages, and at one time she was the third-ranking most translated author in the world. Almost 50 years after her death, her popularity continues: in 2008, the BBC reported that she was still generating book sales in the UK of £7.5 million annually, and in 2016, she came second only to Roald Dahl as the most borrowed 'classic' author in UK libraries, beating Dickens, Shakespeare and Agatha Christie. Her books have been adapted for the stage and screen many times over the years. There is a strong Blyton fan culture, both online and offline, which appeals not just to ageing adults, but to children as well.

The first Famous Five book, *Five On A Treasure Island*, was published in 1942. The Five were originally intended as a series of six, but their popularity led to new titles

appearing more or less annually until 1963. This will be my main focus of attention here, but it's important to note that it was only one of several Blyton series, which covered a range of age groups and fictional genres. Perhaps her most successful series was Noddy, aimed at younger readers; but for older children, there were series like *The Secret Seven*, *Malory Towers*, *The Naughtiest Girl*, and the *Adventure* books. In addition to the non-fictional titles and the versions of myths and bible stories which she produced before the Second World War, Blyton published books in almost all the main genres of children's fiction: holiday adventures, mysteries, school stories, child detective books, and many others.

Blyton was an assiduous promoter of her work, not least with children. She received hundreds of fan letters every week, which she appears to have answered personally. She also ran children's clubs, which in the late 1950s had a membership of around half a million; and she made a great deal of her work with children's charities. However, Blyton was also a determined and even calculating businesswoman. She was fiercely protective of her reputation and her brand. She liked to retain control of the entire publication process, and drove very hard deals with her publishers. By the late 1950s, she was at the centre of an enormous marketing enterprise: her annual income was reported to be more than £100,000, around £2.5 million in today's money. Even at this time, more than 50 companies were dealing with non-book merchandising relating to the Noddy books alone: there was Noddy soap, toy figures, pajamas, toothpaste, cards and games, puzzles and jigsaws, and a whole range of other products. An extensive collection of Blyton merchandise is still in production – although today much of this is clearly targeted at the nostalgia market.

Blyton is sometimes referred to as the 'English Disney', although she saw herself as taking a stand against the encroachment of American culture – and indeed against the work of Disney in particular. Even so, there are some striking similarities here, not only in the scale and character of their business operations, but also in their view of childhood. Most significantly in terms of my interests here, both have attracted a similar amount of critical condemnation.

### **The Blyton enigma?**

Blyton's very popularity, and her prolific output, made her a regular target for criticism. In her early career, before the War, she enjoyed a fairly good reputation as an educational writer – an image she attempted to sustain throughout her life. However, as she began to write more directly for the children's market, and as her success grew in the 1940s and 1950s, her work was frequently reviled and ridiculed by teachers, librarians and critics. Blyton's most prolific period was one in which children's publishing was moving into a new age of mass production, with the end of wartime paper shortages and eventually (by the beginning of the 1960s) with the advent of inexpensive paperbacks. Meanwhile, children's librarianship began to develop as a specialised field, with its own professional associations; and serious critics started to turn their attention to children's literature. By the end of the 1950s, critical attacks on Blyton were beginning to appear in reputable journals, and there were stories of her books being 'banned' by librarians, teachers and middle-class parents – although (as we shall see) these stories were possibly somewhat overplayed.

For many of her critics, Blyton's success is frequently seen as a kind of enigma. This was perhaps most forcefully expressed by the children's writer Edward Blishen in 1974, in a review of her official biography: behind the story of Blyton's success, he argued,

*... lies the paradox, still puzzling, that someone who almost never displayed verbal originality, who falsified the moral texture of things and seems certainly to have written out of an arrested and evasive imagination, should have claimed a larger and more devoted audience than almost any other writer who ever lived.*

The article in which I found this quotation is entitled 'The Blyton enigma'; and for its author, the psychologist Nicholas Tucker, Blyton's popularity is clearly a puzzle that needs to be explained. Why was Blyton so successful, despite her apparently obvious shortcomings? Why, against adult advice, did children so obstinately choose to read her? Tucker considers various explanations, and finds some answers in Blyton's very productivity – in the fact that her books were so accessible and so aggressively marketed. However, he also suggests that her books are 'child-centred', both in terms of how they represent children and in terms of their style and approach. She presents children with a 'flattering and jolly picture of themselves' – albeit, Tucker argues, one that is ultimately superficial and false.

As we shall see, recent critics have generally been more charitable, but there seems to be a recurring need to explain the apparent enigma of Blyton's popularity. The titles of two of the books I will be referring to here clearly reflect this: Sheila Ray's *The Blyton Phenomenon: The Controversy Surrounding the World's Most Successful Children's Writer* (1982) and David Rudd's *Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature* (2000). The terms in which this enigma is presented have evolved over time. In Rudd's book, for example, the question is more to do with politics than with literary quality, as it was for Blishen:

*Why does a writer accused of being landlocked in an outmoded age, of being middle-class, snobbish, sexist, racist, colonialist and so on, continue to fascinate in our multicultural world?*

Tucker's argument about 'child-centredness' is one to which I shall return, but my primary aim here is not to solve the Blyton enigma. In my view, Blyton's appeal to children isn't particularly hard to explain – although it is obviously likely to be different for different readers. What is in some respects more enigmatic is the critical reception she received; and it is this, rather than Blyton's work itself, that is my primary focus in this essay.

In the following sections, I want to trace the evolution of Blyton's critical reception chronologically, across five approximate historical phases. I will be looking primarily at critical writing, but also at various revisions, reworkings and adaptations of her work that have appeared over the years. I begin by looking at the criticisms of Blyton's *literary quality*, exemplified by the earlier quotation from Blishen, which were most forcibly expressed in the 1960s. Moving into the 1970s, the criticism focuses on the more *political and ideological* issues identified in David Rudd's question above. However, by the time we reach the 1990s, the negative criticism begins to abate. In a

third phase, Blyton's work is reinvented through the lens of adult nostalgia as a form of *cultural heritage*. Meanwhile, critics also begin to view Blyton from a more *child-centred* perspective, not least in the light of emerging arguments about children's rights. Finally, by the 2010s, we reach the more ironic *postmodern* position, represented by the parody books with which this essay began. I will take each of these in turn; although as I shall indicate, these different positions overlap and inform each other, in ways that are not necessarily apparent to those who take them up.

Self-evidently, these are all adult responses to – or indeed constructions of – 'Enid Blyton'. They focus on different aspects of her work, but they also reflect the changing concerns of their own times. In this sense, they probably tell us more about changing critical perspectives on childhood and popular culture than they do about Blyton's work itself. My aim here is not to demonstrate that Blyton's books are in fact 'high quality' literature, rather than disposable rubbish; nor am I seeking to exonerate her from charges of sexism, racism, conservatism, or any other –ism. Rather, I want to look at what is at stake in these adult criticisms – both the older, more negative ones and the more positive (or at least ambivalent) ones that have emerged more recently. I want to explore what motivates such criticisms, and the assumptions on which they are based. I am particularly interested in how these various critics imagine child readers, and the effects that reading (or consuming cultural texts more broadly) is likely to have upon them. Ultimately, my key interest is not so much in children themselves, but in *adult* readers – and in how adults read things that are not actually intended for them.

### **Talking trash: literary perspectives**

Passing criticisms of Blyton's 'mediocrity' as a writer can be found as early as the late 1940s, but they began to gather pace in the early 1950s. At that time, much of the concern about children's reading focused on so-called 'horror comics' imported from the USA. As Martin Barker has described, these comics were the focus of a concerted public campaign, which eventually resulted in the passing of the Children and Young People (Harmful Publications) Act in 1955. In this context, the work of writers like Blyton could well have been seen as a wholesome antidote to such harmful alien influences – and indeed, Blyton herself was keen to present it in this way.

Yet as the market in children's books expanded during the 1950s and 1960s, attention focused not so much on the distinction between books and other (allegedly more harmful) media, but on the nature of the books themselves. Press reports about the 'banning' of Enid Blyton's work by librarians began to appear in the late 1950s, and gathered pace in the 1960s. In her book *The Blyton Phenomenon*, Sheila Ray (a librarian herself) traces the evidence for this in some detail, and remains somewhat sceptical. It wasn't until 1963 that the first well-documented evidence of a ban – or at least of librarians refusing to purchase Blyton's books – can be identified in the UK, beginning in St. Pancras in London, and then apparently extending to Birmingham and Nottingham. Ray argues that the sheer quantity of Blyton's output posed problems for librarians: they had to be selective in their purchases, not least in the interests of stocking a range of authors. While the librarians involved in such 'bans' were certainly critical of Blyton (along with other

popular children's authors such as Richmal Crompton and W.E. Johns), their main concern was as much to do with retaining a balanced and diverse stock. Meanwhile, other librarians were wary of the charge of censorship, and of snobbery; while some argued that there was little justice in singling out Blyton, given that there were so many other 'bad' books on their shelves.

Ray argues that these stories about bans in libraries were featured because they made sensational and entertaining copy for newspapers. While Blyton herself was clearly angered by them, her publishers might well have realized that a shortage of her books in libraries would have driven sales to individual children. As Ray indicates, such stories could still be found in the late 1970s, although a growing panic about levels of illiteracy had contributed to a relaxation in attitudes. By this point, some teachers and librarians had come to regard Blyton as a kind of gateway drug: any reading was better than none at all, and Blyton was seen to be particularly useful for engaging reluctant readers.

Nevertheless, there is good evidence of bans elsewhere. Papers released in 2009 showed that the BBC operated an effective ban – by simply ignoring Blyton's work, and rejecting her proposals for radio adaptations – for several decades. Memos from BBC executives described her books as lacking in 'literary value', as 'second rate', 'small beer' and 'mediocre'. Meanwhile, publishers seeking to establish a reputation for 'quality', like Puffin (the children's brand of Penguin) and Bodley Head, took pride in proclaiming that they did not include Blyton titles on their lists. Blyton was excluded from lists of recommended reading published by national Library Associations, and by the National Book League. Meanwhile, in a 1975 Schools Council report on children's reading, led by the critic Frank Whitehead, Blyton was unquestioningly dumped into the category of 'non-quality' books.

The attitudes of parents are harder to document, but there is little doubt that (as Nicolas Tucker suggests) middle-class parents at the time tended to prefer more 'demanding' literature. Nevertheless, their children almost certainly read Blyton, and may even have seen it as a variety of 'forbidden fruit'. By the early 1960s, when Armada began to publish cheap paperback editions of Blyton and other popular writers – books that children could easily afford to buy with their own pocket money – adults generally had much less say in the selection of children's reading.

At this implies, these judgments about taste and value were very much tied up with social class, as well as age. Yet the reasons for banning Blyton were expressed primarily in terms of the apparently objective grounds of literary quality. While some librarians expressed concern about the danger of 'addiction', the main objection was that Blyton was just a poor writer: her plots were contrived and predictable, her characterization was weak, and her language was restricted and unimaginative. Rather than offering the depth and richness of great literature, Blyton's work was merely formulaic trash.

These objections were especially evident among the growing numbers of literary critics and book reviewers who began to address children's literature from the late 1950s. Most reviewers tended to ignore Blyton, despite her popularity: if it was mentioned at all, her name was mainly used as a byword for rubbish. Actual reviews were rare and almost entirely dismissive. Blyton was routinely omitted from the

critical and historical works on children's literature that were beginning to appear, as though she were simply beneath consideration. Some noted critics did engage with Blyton a little more directly, although hardly in detail, and their observations were mostly excoriating. Probably the earliest example can be found in a 'parent's lament' in the upmarket literary magazine *Encounter*, published in 1958. Here, Colin Welch expostulated about Noddy – that 'unnaturally priggish, sanctimonious, witless, spiritless, snivelling, sneaking doll' – and expressed a wider suspicion about the extent of Blyton's industrial-scale productivity. A few years later, the educational writer David Holbrook in *English for Maturity* was condemning her work as 'bloodless and fleshless'; while Margery Fisher, the author of the influential *Intent on Reading*, described Blyton's work as a form of 'slow poison'.

Such criticisms continued until well into the 1970s and beyond. In 1973, the critic Aidan Chambers was complaining about Blyton's 'triviality, linguistically impoverished style, anaemia in plot and characterization, and clichéd, stereotyped ideas'. In a BBC TV programme the following year, Brian Alderson echoed these observations, lamenting Blyton's 'lack of substance' and her failure to develop the child's reading. A few years later, the critic Fred Inglis shame-facedly recalled reading Blyton as a child, accusing her of 'representing the crude moral diagrams and garish fantasies of her readership'. In their book about girls' fiction published in 1976, Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig flay Blyton with a torrent of criticism: her work is crude, commonplace, sentimental and trite; her characters are flat, unmemorable nonentities, and her plots are unrealistic and contrived; her writing is careless, shoddy and undemanding; and she 'writes down' to children, combining a 'specious jollity' with some very simplistic moral values. Cadogan and Craig also add some ideological criticisms into the mix, accusing Blyton of promoting chauvinistic and anti-feminist attitudes – criticisms we will consider in more detail in a later section.

Despite her more distanced account of the controversies surrounding Blyton, Sheila Ray's analysis of her work (published in 1982) is similarly withering. Like many other critics, she contrasts Blyton unfavourably with older 'classic' children's authors, such as A.A. Milne and E. Nesbit. She too largely condemns Blyton's work as bland, simplistic, contrived and stereotypical. She accuses her books of failing to enrich the child's experience or knowledge, or their love of language. Somewhat grudgingly, however, Ray admits that Blyton might help to prepare children – and particularly reluctant readers – for the demands of more serious authors: by successfully giving children what they wanted at a particular stage of their development, she could provide useful 'reading practice' that would eventually lead on to better things.

Although Blyton's reputation in literary circles has begun to recover somewhat in more recent decades, these kinds of criticisms frequently recur. Other children's authors seem particularly keen to differentiate themselves from Blyton's work. In a BBC Radio broadcast in 1997, the writer Jan Mark condemned Blyton's work as empty and meretricious: according to Mark, she had 'no interest in language', and no idea about how to develop stories. More recently, in 2008, Philip Pullman greeted one of Blyton's periodic comebacks with the claim that her work is 'rubbish', by contrast with more literary children's classics:

*The characters are two-dimensional and the stories are mechanically recovered, like mechanically recovered meat. There's no lasting quality in it whatsoever. Take*

*Swallows and Amazons or Tom's Midnight Garden and you can read them for the pleasure in the style. There's no pleasure in reading Enid Blyton's style. There's no sense of delight or joy in the language.*

Meanwhile, in a radio broadcast that same year, Anne Fine (the former Children's Laureate) asserted that Blyton's work was 'not literature': true literature, she argued, would be richer and deeper, with more complex characters and more detailed descriptions, rather than the superficial and obvious approach of Blyton.

Although these criticisms are diverse, their shared concern with literary quality clearly derives from the style of English literary criticism dominated by F.R. Leavis. Leavis himself was primarily concerned to identify and extol the artistic and moral value of what he called the 'great tradition' of English literature: his canon of great authors included Austen, Dickens, Eliot and Conrad, although it took him a little longer to come to terms with modern writers such as D.H. Lawrence. More important in the debate about popular literature, however, was his wife Q.D. Leavis's book *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), a wide-ranging condemnation of the mediocrity of popular taste. The work of the Leavises was a direct influence on several of the critics I have already mentioned, several of whom were their students, including David Holbrook, Fred Inglis and Frank Whitehead.

The Leavisite approach is informed as much by morality as it is by aesthetic (or even linguistic) considerations. The problem with popular literature is that its pleasures are too easily gained. The cheap 'railway novels' available on station bookstalls and the popular journalism Q.D. Leavis was so keen to condemn lacked any moral complexity or 'difficulty': this kind of stuff was just too easy to read. As subsequent critics have argued, the Leavisite approach is overtly and unashamedly elitist: it scarcely conceals its contempt for the ignorant, unwashed masses and the superficial, escapist rubbish they seem to enjoy. Yet there is also a kind of anti-capitalism about this argument as well: Q.D. Leavis's criticism of popular literature was directed at the publishers who produced these popular texts just as much as the readers who were apparently manipulated by them.

Blyton's work represents an obvious target for this kind of criticism. As Robert Druce points out, part of the problem Blyton has posed for her numerous critics has not just been to do with her sheer popularity, but also the industrial scale of her production, and her skill in branding, formatting and promoting her work. As Druce suggests, Blyton would have attracted much less criticism if she had simply published much less.

Yet when it came to children's literature, these arguments also took on a more psychological, developmental tone. Writers like Blyton were condemned because they didn't offer sufficient 'challenge' to younger readers, and failed to 'stretch' their imagination. According to the children's author Geoffrey Trease, Blyton's language was 'drained of all difficulty until it achieved a kind of aesthetic anaemia'. Her books might conceivably help to lead children on to more 'demanding' texts, but they were worthless in themselves. Yet others feared that this kind of literary graduation might never occur: children might not move on to great literature, but to a diet of popular romances, pulp fiction, strip cartoons and trashy newspapers.

## Literary reappraisal

Towards the end of the century, Blyton's work began to be reappraised by critics. I'll consider some of the underlying reasons for this in later sections, although it is notable how much of this reappraisal remained within the terms of the Leavisite tradition. Peter Hunt was one of the earliest critics to adopt this approach. In a 1997 BBC broadcast, for example, he argues that in terms of traditional literary values such as symbolism and moral ambiguity, Blyton is actually a somewhat complex writer. Although her stories might appear simple, he suggests that young people read them in thoughtful and serious ways. In an earlier article (published in 1995), he compares a Blyton story with Kenneth Grahame's accepted classic, *Wind In The Willows*, arguing that it can be read thematically and ideologically – in terms of its symbolism, its narrative voice and its psychological complexities – in much the same literary manner.

However, the leading voice in this critical re-evaluation has been David Rudd. In his book *Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature*, as well as in numerous articles, Rudd directly challenges the main arguments of Blyton's literary (and other) critics. He points out inconsistencies and inaccuracies in their arguments, condemns them for their partial and limited use of evidence, and even notes their grammatical and spelling mistakes. Rudd rejects the claim that Blyton's language is limited and cliché-ridden, that her characters are flat and stereotyped, and that her plots are repetitive and contrived. Significantly, he also challenges the developmental assumptions on which such criticisms are based: he cites a great many writers who recall their childhood enthusiasm for Blyton, and suggests that reading her books does not preclude a later interest in 'great literature'. He also contests the assumption that children's fiction should necessarily always 'stretch' or make great demands of the child reader.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Rudd's argument here is his claim that Blyton belongs more to the tradition of oral storytelling, rather than the written literary one. Within the oral tradition, he argues, the emphasis is not on a polished style, rounded characters and complex themes, but on action – on relating what happened 'then... and then... and then...' Oral storytellers are not expected to be cerebral or introspective in the manner of literary authors, nor are they required to be original. In the oral tradition, stories can draw on other sources, and use language that is simple and repetitive rather than calculated and precise. The oral story is much more improvised and ephemeral: it is told off-the-cuff, as a kind of first draft. The storyteller is not as detached from their story or from their readers as the literary author. In some respects, Rudd's defence of Blyton (like Hunt's) seems to rely on demonstrating her literary quality; yet his argument here also offers a more direct challenge to the basic assumptions of the Leavisite approach.

There is another broader argument here, to which I'll return in a later section. This is the claim that Blyton is a fundamentally 'child-centred' author. Clearly, part of the problem her work poses – especially for traditional literary critics – is that she appeals directly to children themselves. Unlike other 'children's writers' like Grahame or Milne, she does not attempt to write for adults at the same time. Blyton

appears to address children at their own level – although as we'll see, that is not the same as saying that she writes as a child herself.

### **Ideology: race, class and gender**

The literary critique of Blyton's work has continued well into the present, but by the early 1970s it was joined (and to some extent reinforced) by a rather different approach. The focus here was not so much on Blyton's literary failings as on her political or ideological ones. Various examples of her work were accused of racism, sexism and class bias; and as her books were reissued, attempts were made to eradicate these. In this section, I will outline some of the main criticisms, and consider how her defenders – particularly David Rudd – have responded to them. Here again, my aim is not primarily to adjudicate on these claims. Rather, I want to look at some of the assumptions that inform them, particularly about child readers.

Blyton's stories are set in a well-defined, stable moral universe. Distinctions between good and bad are very clearly drawn. It is comparatively rare for characters to change or develop. Characters who initially appear to be bad may turn out to be good, or (less frequently) vice-versa; and occasionally, bad characters will learn the error of their ways, and be redeemed. It is easy to map this morality in fairly absolute, binary terms. The forces of order, on one side, are ranged against those of disorder, on the other. Good characters are polite, clean and reliable; bad characters are nasty, dirty and feckless. And in many cases, these two sides are defined in terms of class and 'race' (or at least nationality).

The main focus of criticism in relation to racism has been the Noddy stories, and specifically the inclusion of the 'golliwog' characters. Bob Dixon, one of Blyton's most powerful critics here, locates the figure of the golliwog in the long tradition of grotesque racial caricature associated with minstrelsy, alongside the black sambo, the merry coon and the pickaninny. In Blyton's 'The Three Golliwogs', for example, the characters are named Golly, Woggie and Nigger, clearly indicating their racial identity. While the golliwogs are often represented as crude figures of fun, they are also seen as 'naughty' – as forces of disruption, and sometimes of evil. In 'Here Comes Noddy Again', for example, the golliwogs steal Noddy's car and clothes, abandoning him naked in the dark forest. Meanwhile, in another Blyton story, 'The Little Black Doll', the lead character literally has to be washed white before she can be accepted by the other toys.

Critics also point to the fact that, in her books for older children, many of the villains are 'foreigners' of various kinds. In the Famous Five books, for example, the nation is often seen to be under threat from alien spies and traitors; while common criminals are sometimes given an ethnic identity (most notably as gypsies), as well as displaying a comical incompetence. Of course, Blyton is by no means alone among children's writers here, and it's important to recall that the first books in this series were written during wartime. More broadly, however, critics argue that her work is informed by a narrow and parochial notion of Englishness – embodied in her romanticized view of the countryside, and her picture of an unchanging, secure pastoral environment (although once more, Blyton is hardly unique in this respect).

On the side of Blyton's defenders, David Rudd deals with this issue at length. Here, as in his response to the literary critics, he points to some striking inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the criticisms, as well as offering contrary evidence (both specific examples and statistical 'head counts'). He disputes the claim that the golliwogs are always shown as bad, arguing that they are often fascinating, transgressive characters. He questions whether child readers will equate golliwogs with black people, and cites some interviews that suggest otherwise; and he questions whether 'race', or even skin colour, is necessarily the key issue at stake here. He also challenges the claim that Blyton's villains are predominantly 'foreigners'.

Similar arguments apply to social class. Here, Blyton is routinely accused of a kind of class snobbery. Her own background was certainly middle-class (although by no means affluent), and her success as a writer eventually enabled her to live in a large country house, insulated from the poverty and social unrest of the wider contemporary world. Her own political beliefs were rarely apparent, but it would not be unfair to characterize her as a traditional suburban conservative. Her books for older children largely feature privately educated, upper-middle-class children living in relatively privileged circumstances. Many of her leading characters – such as the children in the Famous Five – are themselves dismissive and patronizing towards the 'lower orders'. Working-class children are often represented as smelly and dirty, as well as dishonest, vulgar and stupid: they are 'dirty ragamuffins' and 'forlorn waifs', only one step above animals. Like the character of Jo (who features in several books in the series), they have to be ritually washed and scrubbed before they can enter the world of the Five, or be morally redeemed. Meanwhile, many of Blyton's adult criminal characters are implicitly working-class, and they are often held up to ridicule (not least by being given absurd names). According to the critics, Blyton's world is one in which social hierarchy is taken as a given; and greater wealth and social status often seem to equate with greater moral virtue.

Again, Rudd disputes many of these arguments. He shows that Blyton's bad or criminal characters are by no means all working class. It is even possible, as the critic E.W. Hildick suggests, that teachers and librarians detested Blyton precisely because of 'the discomfiting accuracy with which she reflects some of the nastier traits of the children of the middle class'. However, it is doubtful whether this would have been Blyton's preferred response: the Famous Five may appear to the modern reader to be priggish snobs, but the few working-class characters and 'foreigners' who appear in the books are undoubtedly seen through their eyes.

Gender is arguably a more complex issue here. Several of Blyton's series – such as Malory Towers – take place in an almost exclusively female world; and in some respects, they might be seen to offer images of female competence and empowerment. However, much of the critical discussion here has focused on the character of George from The Famous Five. Interestingly, George is frequently named as children's favourite Blyton character. It seems she was also Blyton's own favourite, and may even have been based on herself. George is a tomboy, who refuses to be addressed by her real name of Georgina. She has short hair and dresses like a boy, and is more competent than the leading male characters (Julian and Dick) when it comes to physical tasks like rowing, swimming and climbing.

According to Dixon, George's tomboyishness is not seen in a positive light: she is merely suffering from a kind of 'castration complex'. She frequently expresses the wish to be a boy, and is sometimes ridiculed by the other characters on these grounds. For Craig and Cadogan, George is condemned to be a 'pretend boy', who will only ever be 'as good as...' For these and other critics, Blyton's characterization of George amounts to a kind of anti-feminist propaganda.

Yet George can clearly be read in a very different way, as a kind of role model: although she increasingly defers to the boys (particularly the older Julian) as the series proceeds, she is competent, physically strong and assertive, and often takes matters into her own hands. She is also the owner of Timmy the dog, the fifth member of the group, who frequently plays a vital role in their adventures. George might well be seen as a representation of female power and agency; although the fact that she can only do so by refusing a female identity and taking on the characteristics of a boy might be seen to reinforce a 'heteronormative' view.

Ultimately, it could be argued that Blyton is attempting to have her cake and eat it here – especially when we also consider the character of Anne. As Liesel Coetzee suggests, George's image of female agency is contrasted with Anne, who is both smaller and younger than her. Anne is generally submissive and weak. She likes pretty dresses and dolls, and often occupies herself with domestic tasks like cleaning and washing up. George is often contemptuous of such feminine characteristics, although the boys clearly see this as a natural female role. As such, David Rudd suggests, there is at least an ongoing *debate* in these books about the nature of 'gender appropriate' behaviour. Meanwhile, Coetzee argues that Anne also demonstrates a degree of power, at least in her freedom to choose what role she will play in the Five's adventures. Ultimately, Blyton may allow for multiple identifications here: she shows that girls can succeed in a male world, but she also reassures her readers that they do not have to be like George in order to do so.

### **Assuming effects**

As I've said, it's not my aim here to assess the validity of these claims and counter-claims. What I want to identify are the assumptions on both sides. The key issue here is to do with the *effects* of Blyton's work on children's political and ideological beliefs. Dixon in particular makes very strong assertions about effects, with barely any supporting evidence. He accuses Blyton and other children's authors of 'indoctrinating' and inflicting 'psychological damage' – and indeed 'psychological destruction' – on children. In his account, this influence operates on a 'symbolic and unconscious level', and it is particularly powerful when it comes to children. The younger children are, the more 'impressionable' they are. The influence of single, passing instances of racism or sexism may be small, but it builds up over time; and, according to Dixon, 'the more subconscious an influence is, the more dangerous it can be'.

In the case of racism, for example, Dixon argues that this can be damaging for black children as well as white. If black children are unable to see their experiences and cultures reflected in what they read, they will be unable to find anything to identify with. Dixon quotes evidence here from some US and British research pointing to

'self-rejection' among black children; although in fact this evidence doesn't relate to children's reading of books (or indeed their use of any other media).

There's an assumption here that the qualities identified by adult critics – sexism, racism, and so on – will be transferred directly into young readers' minds, albeit often 'unconsciously', without them necessarily being aware of what is happening. This argument depends upon a fairly simplistic notion of cause-and-effect, which has little place for the complexity and diversity of children's responses. It also reflects a view of children in particular as credulous, passive and easily manipulated. It seems to be assumed that children will not read anything other than such books, and that they will never move on to different reading; that they will blindly accept what they read; and that what they read at a very young age will leave an indelible mark on their developing consciousness.

These arguments about media effects have of course been significantly challenged by many researchers since this critical work was written. However, it is worth noting that Blyton herself was very much committed to having an influence on children, albeit one she defined in moral rather than political terms: as she wrote, 'I am out to inculcate decent thinking, loyalty, honesty, kindness, and all the other things children *should* be taught'. She does not seem to have been a passionate evangelical Christian, but she clearly described her values as a result of her 'Christian teaching'. As Dixon points out, she saw herself as 'a teacher and guide... as well as an entertainer and bringer of pleasure'. In a foreword written in 1950, she says:

*A best-selling writer for children (particularly the younger age) wields an enormous influence. I am a mother, and I intend to use that influence wisely, no matter if I am, at times, labelled 'moralist' or even 'preacher'.*

Blyton argues here that moral lessons ('that right is always right') will be more powerful if they are 'intrinsic to the story'; although she occasionally intervenes in her storytelling to address children more directly, and to lay down a firm moral lesson. Even so, she is far from unusual among children's writers in these respects; and of course the fact that she saw herself in this way doesn't necessarily mean that she *did* exercise a powerful hold over children's minds.

It also important to consider where these ideological criticisms might lead. For critics like Dixon, the attack on Blyton obviously forms part of a broader set of political concerns – and in some ways, she makes a very convenient target. Yet as is often the case, it isn't clear what the alternative might be. On the one hand, there is a call for greater realism and accuracy; yet on the other, there is a call for more 'positive images' (for example, of ethnic minorities), which might well be seen as merely another form of stereotyping or misrepresentation.

Even at the time Dixon was writing, in the mid-1970s, Blyton's publishers were already revising her books to conform to contemporary attitudes. Reportedly, there were up to 100 changes made in one Famous Five book alone. Some of this was simply a matter of removing or replacing old-fashioned expressions, or words that had acquired new *double entendres*. In the original books, the Famous Five persistently refer to events as 'queer', for example; and while characters like Fanny and Nobby have been renamed, Dick inexplicably remains. However, there was also

a kind of ideological purification as well. The golliwogs in Noddy were replaced by goblins and teddies, occasionally endangering the coherence of the story. In the Famous Five, pejorative references to George's short hair, and statements about what girls should and shouldn't do, were often removed. As we shall see, family life was also represented as more egalitarian, with boys doing the washing up. This somewhat sanitized approach in turn attracted some criticism, and by 2016 it had largely been abandoned by the new owners of the Enid Blyton estate, the multinational publisher Hachette.

It's also important to note the overlap between this form of criticism and the more literary approach. In the case of Dixon, as well as several of the other critics I have cited, political or ideological criticisms are reinforced by (and feed into) criticisms on the grounds of artistic quality. Dixon, for example, also complains about Blyton's impoverished language and her lack of imagination, the contrivance of her plots and the sloppiness of her writing. He condemns her work, in strongly Leavisite terms, as 'totally undemanding and conventional'. As Rudd points out, ideological criticisms are routinely made of Blyton, yet they are rarely applied to the 'classics' of children's literature (*The Wind in the Willows*, *Peter Pan* or the works of Tolkien, for example), which in some respects appear equally culpable. Despite their claims about Blyton's class snobbery, the critics might justifiably be accused of bias of their own in this respect; and one might even argue that the ideological criticism of Blyton is (at least partly) a rationalization of adult distastes that have other origins.

On the other hand, attempts to exonerate Blyton from blame in these respects are not without their problems either. There is certainly a risk of 'presentism' in these criticisms – that is, of reading texts from the past exclusively from the perspective of the present. One might argue that, in most of these respects, Blyton's work merely reflects the time in which it was created: criticisms that came later (indeed, after Blyton's death in 1968) might be seen as almost anachronistic. One might even suggest that in some cases – such as the portrayal of gender in *The Famous Five* series – the books do not necessarily condone all the behaviour they represent: there is a difference between showing sexism and actually being sexist. And one might even forgive Blyton, as a children's writer, for seeking to provide a degree of escapism and reassurance: she felt very strongly that her books should not focus on suffering, violence or unhappiness.

However, these ideological criticisms do raise concerns that cannot be easily overcome. Defenders of Blyton also make assumptions about how children do or do not interpret her work, but often on the basis of slender evidence (Rudd certainly has some, but his interpretation of it is not always well-founded). It seems unlikely that children themselves would read Blyton's work 'historically', making allowances for the time when it was written. One doesn't have to buy into strong arguments about ideological manipulation in order to accept that there are aspects of her stories that are simply offensive. Merely to show sexism or racism may not necessarily be to condone it; but if it passes without comment, and if it is openly espoused by the leading characters and embedded in the basic narrative of a story, then arguably it is.

Finally, there is little mention by any of Blyton's critics of what might be seen as an equally significant dimension of social power; that is, age itself. While Blyton is

routinely accused of various forms of ideological bias, this is an area in which her politics might possibly be regarded as 'child-centred' and even 'liberationist'. This is an issue to which I will return in a later section.

### **Interlude: *The Comic Strip Presents...***

One of the highlights of the opening night of Britain's fourth terrestrial television channel in 1982 was a half-hour comedy programme entitled *Five Go Mad in Dorset*. Featuring some of the emerging stars of London's post-punk 'alternative' comedy scene, this was a sharp parody of Blyton's original stories, rather than a respectful homage. Set in the 1950s, the programme follows the four children and their dog as they cycle around the countryside foiling a plot by some dastardly thieves. Part of the joke is that the four children are played by adults – and there are several comments, especially about how the leading boy Julian is 'very well developed for a ten-year-old'. In a brilliant *coup de theatre* towards the end, the ultimate villain is revealed to be none other than George's Uncle Quentin, who is played with louche camp by Ronald Allen, one of the stars of the UK's tackiest soap opera, *Crossroads*.

The Comic Strip's parody reflects both the ideological and the literary criticisms of Blyton that I have discussed thus far. The plot is absurdly contrived, and full of improbable coincidences; the children are constantly worried that something 'queer' is going on. As in the originals, their adventures are regularly interrupted by lavish meals consisting of the same menu of cold meat and salad with 'lashings of ginger beer'. Anne is described as 'a proper little housewife', and at one point is seen sweeping up the campsite; while George is dismissed by the boys as merely a 'dyke'. While George appears to enjoy being 'licked' by her dog, Dick and Julian are also a little more than fraternal. When the children's new friend Toby is kidnapped, they suggest that 'it serves him right for being nouveau riche... and Jewish'. The criminals are bungling Cockney stereotypes, whose dialogue consists only of lines like 'blah blah stolen plans, blah blah top secret'. In the conclusion, as Uncle Quentin is apprehended, he reveals that he is in fact 'a screaming homosexual' and that his wife Fanny is 'an unrelenting nymphomaniac'.

A follow-up, *Five Go Mad on Mescaline*, appeared a year later. Here the children meet an appalling American, Mr. Budweiser, who is busily buying up examples of English heritage, along with his son Willy. The plot in this instance is to do with drug dealing. Dick is kidnapped and becomes a drugged-up hippy; and the ultimate villain, Doctor Love, is revealed to be none other than Uncle Quentin, who has escaped from prison (and once again confesses to being an 'outrageous homosexual'). If the formula is very much the same, the satire here is equally sharp. The children have highly affected posh accents, and their conservative views seem to extend to sympathizing with the Nazis. Julian is again depicted as 'extraordinarily fit' – a quality he puts down to 'compulsory sports and a decent private education'. Anne, meanwhile, is described by the boys as a 'prick teaser'.

Unlike the books with which this essay began, the Comic Strip films are very clearly a parody of Blyton's work itself. Aside from satirizing their racism, sexism and class bias, the childish innocence of the originals is disrupted by the constant sexual innuendos and references. To some extent, the programmes reflect how much views

of children's authors such as Blyton had changed over the preceding decades – although, as I go on to consider in the following sections, a recovery of Blyton's reputation would shortly follow...

### **From modernization to heritage culture**

Attempts to modernize Blyton's work were already under way in the 1970s. Aside from the publishers' editing of the books, another indication of this was the first television adaptation of the Famous Five series, broadcast by Southern TV (a commercial channel) in 1978-79. Shot on film in 26 episodes, this was apparently the most expensive children's television series to date at the time. Judging from comments on YouTube and on Blyton fan sites, it still seems to carry considerable nostalgic appeal for older enthusiasts: it merited a release on DVD as a 'Complete Collectors Edition' in 2012, and is frequently described as 'classic' by its fans. Yet the series shows its age almost more than the originals. The title sequence is accompanied by a bouncy 1970s pop song, and the cheesy incidental music (along with the flared trousers and dubious haircuts) are decidedly of their era. The adventures take place in rural settings, but the children now ride racing bikes and use modern(-ish) technology. The children are not obviously marked as middle- or upper-class, and the gender distinctions are also somewhat muted.

Updating and ideologically cleansing Blyton's work may have been one option, but by the 1980s, an alternative approach was beginning to appear. Blyton's books began to be rehabilitated as part of the wider 'heritage culture' that became popular at the time. At the end of her 1982 book *The Blyton Phenomenon*, Sheila Ray notes that Blyton is already starting to be added to the list of 'classic' children's authors. As we have seen, more recent surveys of children's reading unquestioningly use this term to describe her. One can now buy the 'Complete Classic Edition' of the 21 Famous Five books, with facsimile original covers, at a retail price of over £100. This is only one of several Blyton series to be reissued in this form. To be sure, this is partly about the length of time for which the books' popularity has lasted. Blyton has acquired the patina of history. As the publisher's blurb for these editions runs: 'Having celebrated 70 fabulous years in 2012, it's clear the Five are here to stay for a long time to come'. Reviews on Amazon suggest that these books are being bought by older people for their grandchildren, although Blyton's continuing popularity among children themselves should not be underestimated.

A further indication of this is the more recent series of *The Famous Five*, produced by Tyne Tees TV (another commercial channel) in the mid-1990s. (It is notable that the BBC continues to avoid Blyton.) Again, there were 26 episodes, covering all 21 books, broadcast in two series between 1995 and 1999. However, unlike in the 1970s adaptation, these series have the original period setting, although there is some limited modernization here. The children no longer use words like 'golly!' or 'queer'; Aunt Fanny has become Aunt Frances; and the boys are shown doing domestic tasks (although the same cannot be said for Uncle Quentin). Anne remains somewhat ineffectual, but George appears to have become a stronger character. Nevertheless, this 1990s adaptation is overtly 'retro' in a way that the 1970s series is not. The adventures take place in picturesque pastoral settings, accompanied by lyrical classical-style music. Particularly notable here is the children's extensive

wardrobe of mid-century designer knitwear – indeed, so extensive that the continuity editor seems to have allowed them to wear several different outfits in the same scene.

As such, the series might be seen to offer a reassuring form of escapism; yet, after the Comic Strip, it is hard to read it entirely literally. The dialogue is leaden and stilted; the children are sickeningly goody-goody and appallingly clean; and the villains (many, though by no means all, either working-class or foreign) are grotesquely evil. Many of the plots contain elements that can only be played as pantomime or farce. Although he is unfortunately not portrayed by Ronald Allen from *Crossroads*, Uncle Quentin is presented as a professorial stereotype that verges on the camp. Of course, this is very much my own subjective response: it reflects my own distaste for costume drama, and perhaps a recent overdose of the Famous Five.

Yet this recovery of Blyton's work as a form of 'heritage culture' can be seen as symptomatic of the times. Of course, there is a long history here, but in the 1980s there was a remarkable turn to the historical past in popular culture, and in tourism, museums and visitor attractions. Robert Hewison's book *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, published in 1987, offered a powerful critique of this tendency. Hewison was scathing about what he saw as the sanitization and commercialization of the past, and the exploitation of nostalgia for an imaginary golden age. As the subtitle of his book suggests, Hewison saw the rise of the heritage industry as a symptom of Britain's economic decline, at a time of deindustrialization and globalization. The need to reinforce a threatened sense of national identity (and especially a particular version of 'Englishness') became a key theme, both in politics – in the resurgent conservatism of Margaret Thatcher and her successor John Major – and in popular culture. And yet, as John Corner and Sylvia Harvey noted at the time, these cosy, nostalgic images of rural England sat awkwardly alongside stories of aggressive enterprise and rampant capitalism. Meanwhile, others – such as the historian Raphael Samuel – argued that heritage culture had a democratizing potential, especially if it focused on the lives of ordinary people. Nevertheless, there is a fine line between the conservation of the past and its reinvention: heritage is not simply given, but actively constructed and produced.

It would be wrong to overplay Blyton's ascent to 'classic' status. For most critics, she remains well outside the canon of great British children's literature. Even today, she rarely figures in critical and historical texts in the field (she gains one passing mention in the monumental *Crosscurrents of Children's Literature*, published in 2007, for example). By comparison, J.K. Rowling, an equally popular author, has attracted much more attention from serious critics, and much more quickly.

However, there is an extensive Blyton fan culture that is very much addressed to this notion of heritage. The Enid Blyton Society, formed in 1995, caters to 'enthusiasts and collectors' with a vast website, an 88-page magazine published three times a year, as well as an annual Enid Blyton Day. The website contains numerous scans of original covers and illustrations, as well as extracts, reviews and other information. It also hosts a forum that has over 4000 members, with almost 300,000 posts to date, as well as an archive and a monthly quiz. This is by no means the only fan site: EnidBlyton.net contains more message boards and reviews, while there are also individual fan sites based in Germany, France, Portugal, Spain and the

Netherlands. Meanwhile, the official website [EnidBlyton.co.uk](http://EnidBlyton.co.uk) sells a range of merchandise, and there is also an extensive market in original books, spin-off titles (not written by Blyton herself), TV annuals, comics, card games, jigsaws, and so forth. It is possible to attend Enid Blyton tours in Cornwall, which reportedly end in a replica 1940s parlour, and until recently there were two 'Ginger Pop' shops selling merchandise and memorabilia. (These shops closed down a few years ago, perhaps partly as a result of the notoriety their owner attracted for selling golliwogs, and her presentation of this issue in terms of 'English freedom'.) Predictably, there is also a small amount of fan fiction, not least 'slash fiction' in which writers imagine sexual encounters between Anne and George, or Julian and Dick (although Timmy the dog has yet to feature, as far as I am aware).

Here again, it is my impression that the fans and followers of this 'classic' version of Blyton (especially in the Enid Blyton Society) are mostly elderly, but they are by no means exclusively so. Here, as in Amazon reviews of the books, many of the participants claim to be children; and they are very widely distributed around the world, as one might expect from the statistics about Blyton translations. In all these respects, there are some striking similarities between Blyton and Rowling, who also offers a particular variant on a staple genre of literary heritage culture, the school story – a genre that, despite its apparent 'Englishness', appears to enjoy global appeal.

### **A child-centred writer?**

As I have mentioned, one of the key claims made by Blyton's defenders is that she is in some respects a 'child-centred' author. This claim begins to appear in the critical debate in the 1990s, and has often been repeated since. Like the other perspectives I have discussed, it also needs to be understood historically: it reflects changing views of the social position of children, as well as changing critical perspectives in literary and cultural analysis at the time. Before moving on to discuss these aspects, however, I want to consider the more biographical and psychological dimensions of this argument.

Some critics have sought to explain the apparent enigma of Blyton's popularity with children by arguing that she remained in some sense a child herself. This argument was first made by the psychologist Michael Woods in an article published in 1969; the article was subsequently republished as an appendix to Blyton's official biography, whose author (at least in her later revised edition) seems to have agreed with it. According to Woods, Blyton was 'really a child at heart, a person who never developed beyond the basic infantile level' – and it was this that enabled her to speak so directly to children. A few years later, in a 1975 BBC Radio broadcast, Blyton's younger daughter Imogen Smallwood echoed this view: 'she was writing as a child... with a child's mind. I don't think she ever grew up.'

Various biographical facts are cited to support this argument. As a child, Blyton had enjoyed a strong relationship with her father, and she seems to have been quite traumatized when he suddenly walked out on the family to live with another woman. Blyton left home as soon as she could, and distanced herself both from her own mother and her younger siblings: she did not attend her mother's funeral some thirty

years later (or indeed her father's either). Meanwhile, when Blyton attempted to have children of her own, she was informed by her doctor that her uterus had not developed beyond that of a 12- or 13-year-old girl – a problem that was corrected by a course of hormone injections. The hypothesis, strongly hinted at by Blyton's biographer Barbara Stoney, is that she was effectively arrested in her emotional development at the point when her father abandoned her.

This version of Blyton is dramatised in the 2009 biopic *Enid*, starring Helena Bonham Carter. It is, to say the least, an unflattering portrait (and was notably produced and broadcast by the BBC). Blyton emerges as a callous and domineering control freak. She manipulates her first husband, a publisher's editor, in order to succeed in her career, and then drives him to drink and eventually dumps him when she finds a better option (a married man). She doesn't appear to care much about her own children, banishing them to the nursery and preferring the company of her pet dog – although she fabricates an image of a happy family life for public consumption. (This account is, it should be said, supported by the memoir written some years later by her daughter, Imogen Smallwood.) In a sense, Blyton is seen to be replaying her own childhood abandonment into the next generation. Her writing offers a means for her to escape or return to an idealized fantasy of the happy childhood she enjoyed before her father left. Her extensive charity work and her close relationship with her child fans are represented, not as evidence of the 'love of children' she frequently professed in radio and television interviews, but as symptoms of some kind of self-centred, pathological repression.

There are reasons to be wary of this psychological explanation, however. Blyton did not display many child-like characteristics in her private life. She seems to have carried on several sexual affairs during her first marriage, including (rumours suggest) one with her children's nanny. However neurotic she may have been, she was a ruthless and highly successful adult businesswoman. She was certainly single-minded about her work, but this is hardly an unusual quality among creative people.

Nevertheless, this view of Blyton as a 'child-centred' writer does find some support, especially among critics who have sought to rehabilitate Blyton, such as Nicholas Tucker and David Rudd. There are two main dimensions to this argument.

Firstly, it is children who dominate the world of Blyton's books – at least those for older children, such as the Famous Five. For the most part, adults are marginal or conveniently absent, often for reasons that are barely explained. Adults undoubtedly provide for children – especially in the form of food – but the best adults are those who keep out of their way, or even abandon them to their own devices. Children are the powerful agents in this world: they initiate the adventures, and the villains they outwit and overcome are almost always adults. In a variety of ways – spying, eavesdropping, finding hidden documents, uncovering secret passages – they gain knowledge about the 'queer' goings-on of the adult world. Meanwhile, in the Famous Five and the Secret Seven series, the leading child characters (Julian and Peter respectively) are sometimes criticized for being too 'goody goody' and adult-like. Both groups are exclusive, internally bonded, child-only groups, which effectively operate as alternative families.

In this respect, the books represent something of the 'lost freedom' that the historian Mathew Thomson has described as characteristic of children's lives in mid-century Britain. The Famous Five, for example, roam unsupervised around the countryside, rarely encountering cars (although significantly, they never go near a town). They have control over the physical space, venturing into some extremely risky situations that would have contemporary Health and Safety inspectors reaching for their clipboards. Yet these risks are only very temporarily threatening: the return to safety and security is never far away.

This claim to child-centredness is apparent not only in terms of the world Blyton represents, but also in her approach to her readers. For the most part, Blyton engages directly with her child readers, making little attempt to appeal to adults. This might be one reason why she is much less popular with adults than children's authors who seek to do both (such as Milne); although this adult disapproval could in turn reinforce the sense of her books as a 'child-only zone', outside of adult control. As Nicholas Tucker suggests, 'her books were child-centred in the same way as comics and annuals – literature without interest for adults, but where the child could reign, unfettered and supreme'. In this sense, applying adult standards of 'literariness' to her books is quite irrelevant.

The other side of this, of course, is that Blyton's value as a marker of childhood may quickly disappear once children decide it is time to move on. Rudd notes how some children abruptly abandon Blyton during early adolescence, and only return to her work much later, with a very different perspective. The adult nostalgia I have identified is obviously not just a nostalgia for one's favourite reading, but also for one's own childhood.

These two sets of claims clearly relate to broader tendencies in thinking about childhood, and about children's literature, that began to emerge around the end of the century. The child-centred world of Blyton's stories reflects an emphasis on children's agency and rights that was a key aspect of the so-called 'new sociology of childhood' that appeared in the 1990s – and which has now to some extent been institutionalized in some of the caring professions. The central emphasis here is on children's autonomy and competence, and their right to have a voice in matters that concern them; but what is often celebrated is children's resistance to adult power, whether in the form of direct challenges or in more covert subversion.

Meanwhile, the shift towards a more child-centred approach to children's literature reflects broader developments in academic criticism in the same period. As I have implied, both the literary and the ideological criticisms of Blyton take an implicitly adult perspective: there is very little recognition here of the potential differences between adult and child readers, and no account whatsoever of actual children. In the more recent criticism, it's possible to trace a rather belated discovery of the child reader, both in principle (Tucker, Hunt) and eventually in practice (both Ray and Rudd cite empirical research with children). Rudd quite correctly argues that we cannot make judgments about the effects of a text (or indeed its value) without taking account of the responses of its intended reader – although the difficulties of accessing children's responses are somewhat more complex than he seems to assume.

Nevertheless, there are some broader reasons to be cautious about these claims. Blyton is far from unique among children's writers in excluding or marginalizing adult characters. Her children may resent and seek to evade adult constraints, but they generally obey them: they are almost invariably polite, respectful and well-behaved. Furthermore, one might well argue that Blyton's child-centered world is a kind of *compensatory fantasy* of empowerment: unable to exercise power in their own lives, children are spirited away to a world in which they enjoy absolute sovereignty. The stories present a kind of child-centred utopia from which children might potentially challenge the limitations of the real world; but they also provide a reassuring kind of flattery. In other words, they are little more than a form of escapism or wish-fulfillment.

Equally, I'm not sure that Blyton can be said to take the child's point of view. While her writing may have a somewhat 'limited' vocabulary, it is not the writing of a child. Admittedly, she doesn't try to appeal to adult readers with the kind of knowing irony that is apparent, for example, in Richmal Crompton's *William* books (which I've considered elsewhere). However, she does frequently adopt an adult, almost schoolmistress-like tone. As we have seen, she often emphasizes the need to be generous and 'nice', rather than selfish or boastful. The common criticism of Blyton as condescending and moralistic would seem to contradict the claim that she is somehow 'writing as a child'.

Ultimately, there is a risk that the 'children's rights' approach might remove any grounds for critical judgment: if children like it, if it is popular, then it is automatically OK. Apart from anything else, this ignores the fact that books (or other media) for children are almost exclusively created *by adults* – and that what children 'like' may simply be a function of what is available (and indeed most intensively marketed) to them. There are bound to be limits as to how far adult authors and adult critics can speak for, or on behalf of, children – and the same applies even to adults who seek to defend children's right to read whatever they like.

### **Postmodernism returns**

And so our story returns to the point at which it began. In this final section, I want to briefly revisit the Famous Five parody stories that have appeared in the last few years. These are by no means the first rewrites or continuations of Blyton books that have appeared over the years, but these are probably the first aimed at adults. As I've implied, these books are not so much parodies of Blyton's originals; rather, they use the formula of the originals to satirize various aspects of modern life – albeit in a fairly mild and entertaining way.

The formula itself is certainly familiar. The characters have the same names, although they are no longer children but twenty-something Londoners; and their basic traits are fairly similar (Julian is the arrogant, wannabe leader, Anne is nice but bland, George is forceful and independent, and Dick is greedy and fairly stupid). The structure of the stories is also similar: the Five encounter a problem or puzzle, and through numerous implausible coincidences and discoveries manage to resolve it by the end. The Five are rather less competent, and the narratives rather more aimless than the originals, but perhaps the only significant addition to the formula is a

character called Cousin Rupert, who appears in various guises (an estate agent, a management consultant, a public relations man) in different books. While the Five regard Rupert as loathsome and slimy, he is often (deliberately or not) a critical factor in them solving the problem and coming out on top.

The series is produced with the co-operation of the Enid Blyton Estate, and it is Blyton's characteristic branded signature that appears on the front cover, while the author Bruno Vincent is only named in small type on the back. The books also contain some of the original illustrations by Eileen Soper, albeit with different (and not always relevant) captions. The Blyton Estate retains control: all titles have to be approved by its Trustees, and they will apparently not sanction any 'inappropriate' content that might damage the Blyton brand. The Five cannot be seen doing anything controversial or unduly 'adult', beyond drinking to excess. In these respects, the books are quite a long way from the much more acerbic approach of the Comic Strip films of the 1980s, although some of the latter's influence lives on. The satire of modern life is also relatively bland: most of the targets are easy ones, although there are a few moments of slightly sharper parody – Julian's role in *Five on Brexit Island* has strong echoes of Boris Johnson, for example.

In an interview in 2017, Bruno Vincent explained that he regards the series not as a rejection or parody of Blyton, but on the contrary as respectful, nostalgic and 'unfashionably wholehearted' – although clearly the Enid Blyton Estate would be unlikely to allow anything else (for example, he described how the Estate refused to give him permission to produce a Famous Five horror spoof). Vincent hopes, a little optimistically perhaps, that the books will be seen as 'comic fiction for grown-ups' rather than the more disposable Christmas stocking-fillers that are shelved in the 'humour' sections of bookstores.

Blyton herself would almost certainly have despised these latest versions of the Famous Five, although she would probably have admired the way they have exploited a market opportunity – and their speed and efficiency in doing so. Yet like the earlier takes on Blyton I have discussed in this essay, these books are also decidedly of their historical time. They might very loosely be described as postmodern: they are a kind of pastiche, perhaps more than a parody; they combine 'classic' and contemporary elements; and by portraying young adults in the guise of children, or in the form of a children's book, they gently question notions of maturity. They might even be seen as a reflection on the precarious lives of modern twenty-somethings – the generation that has been variously described as 'Millennials', 'Generation Y' and 'Generation Rent'. Yet they are also highly commercial, calculated products; and they are far from challenging or subversive. Ultimately, they speak of an age where it seemed that nothing was serious, and everything could be treated with knowing irony.

## **Conclusion**

The various criticisms I have discussed in this essay appear at different times, and clearly derive from quite different perspectives. As such, they are bound to reflect different political, cultural and psychological assumptions, both about children and about children's literature. However, they also overlap and inform each other in

some interesting ways. As I have pointed out, the literary criticisms feed into the ideological ones that succeeded them; the ideological criticisms of Blyton's 'outdated' prejudices are noted, but read in a different way, by the heritage approach; the heritage approach, with its nostalgic view of the 'lost freedom' of childhood also feeds into the more child-centred arguments of contemporary critics; and in some respects, all of them are present in more parodic or postmodern readings of Blyton, from the Comic Strip to Bruno Vincent.

Meanwhile, some of the same themes recur throughout these different perspectives, albeit in contradictory ways. To take just one example, let's consider class. The literary criticisms clearly rest on a kind of unstated class bias; the ideological critics take Blyton to task for her own class prejudice, or at least those of her characters; while the various re-makes and rewritings either seek to efface class differences or to exaggerate them for the purposes of satire. So does Blyton merely reinforce class prejudice, or is it actually her critics who are doing this? Does she expose the 'nastier traits of the children of the middle class', or merely reinforce them?

Blyton famously said that she wasn't interested in criticism from anybody over the age of twelve. She dismissed her critics as jealous and ill-informed – pointing out (not without some justification) that few of them had actually read her books. She liked to side with her child readers against what she saw as attacks on 'their' taste. And she tirelessly cultivated her readers – for example through clubs and readings – at times (it is suggested, for example in the BBC film) to the exclusion of her own children.

In my view, the mystery of Blyton's popularity isn't such a great mystery at all. She knew very well what her relatively inexperienced readers wanted: clear writing, without too many difficult words; fast-paced action, rather than tiresome description; clearly defined heroes and villains; adventures that invariably ended well; a degree of excitement, but not too much jeopardy or risk; simple humour and sincerity, rather than adult cleverness; lots of delicious food and cute, intelligent pets; and a degree of escapism rather than too much dreary realism. The enigma, I would suggest, is much more to do with *adults'* confusion and ambivalence. Adults often have so much invested in children's culture that it seems increasingly difficult for them to see it for what it is – and perhaps even to believe that something we can truly call *children's culture* really exists at all.

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