You Girls Stay Here

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Gender Roles in Popular British Children's Adventure Fiction, 1930-70

By

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To my mother, who taught me to read and introduced me to so many of these authors

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INTRODUCTION

During the twentieth century, critics tended to treat children's literature like adult literature in terms of what they expected of it. Frank Eyre's *British Children's Books in the Twentieth Century*, for example, is very clear and informative, but I was greatly disappointed, to say the least, by his summing up of children's adventure books in the first half of the century:

> "A few authors overcame these difficulties and produced books that have stood the test of time, but the majority were produced by writers who were either under-paid hacks or over-paid formula-mongers. The commercial and practical difficulties of the period created an infertile soil for the growth of the genuine writer for children." (Eyre 1972, 78)

There is a kind of intellectual snobbery about this.

John Rowe Townsend in 1990 never even mentioned popular writers for girls Elinor Brent-Dyer, Elsie Oxenham or Dorita Fairlie Bruce (his chapter on school stories is mostly about boys), and generally seemed to feel that the period 1915-45 was a poor one for children's literature, too many potential authors having been killed in the Great War; he devoted a mere thirty seven pages to that period, as compared with a hundred and sixty to that following, up to 1989. Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig in *You're a Brick, Angela*! did cover popular girls' stories, but were generally extremely negative in their judgements on Angela Brazil and the above three; reading their later book *Women and Children First*, which looks at fictional portrayals of women and children in the two world wars, I found their criteria for determining what was "literature" and what was merely fiction very subjective. Yet Harry Hendrick in his 1997 study of *Children, childhood and English society 1880-1990* quoted Townsend's judgement of "second, third and tenth rate school and adventure stories" (Hendrick 1997, 87) as if that were the last word on the subject.

To my mind, children's fiction should be judged by children; if they like it, it's good, in the sense that it fulfils its purpose. And to be frank, if it manages to be good literature, as determined by adult critics, as well, that is pretty rare. It is true that others have advocated this way of assessing the quality of children's literature (Grenby and Reynolds 2011). Yet I am not

sure that anyone has gone so far as to say the opposite, that if most children's reaction is “that's boring”, then a book is NOT good literature, no matter what the adult critics may say, although Peter Hunt comes fairly close when he says “We might well argue ... *real* children's books are the ones read *only* by children - ones that do *not* have anything to say to adults, and which are not, therefore, subject to adult judgements.” (Hunt 2009, 21).

All in all, it seemed to me more valid, as well as more enjoyable, to examine popular fiction. At the very least, these are the books which parents and schoolteachers bought for children at the time. With the advent of (cheaper) paperbacks, in particular, they are also the books which children bought for themselves. Popular fiction, because by definition it is more widely read than other books, critically acclaimed or otherwise, represents the principal models provided for children to emulate. One of the criticisms levelled against such books is that they reflected prevailing attitudes and beliefs. Is a good book necessarily one which challenges prevailing morality and mores? Good literature is intended to make the reader think, so perhaps. However, I would take issue with the view that if a book does not challenge society in any way it must be badly written, which does seem an assumption by many literary critics. I also feel that in reading a book written for an earlier generation, one should not assume that if it falls short of what is currently an acceptable view of society, that means it must have done so when it was written. Such a book may contain elements distasteful to many modern readers, but should like or dislike come into it? If you read with your mind already made up, you will see what you expect to see.

I also feel that some surveys of children's literature cover so many texts that, inevitably, they skim the surface of some of the authors. An example would be Gillian Avery's very good *Childhood's Pattern* (1975), which many later critics refer to. On pages 241-2 she says of Biggles:

> “He is square-chinned, grey-eyed; he speaks laconically, nods curtly, his face is usually expressionless. Here is the boy's ideal, a man of deeds, not words, and no silly nonsense about him thinking.”

Here is a description of Biggles from *The Rescue Flight*, set during World War I:

> “Slight in build, his features were as delicate as those of a girl, as were his hands, which fidgeted continually with the throat fastening of his tunic. His deep-set hazel eyes were never still, yet held a quality of humour that

> seemed out of place in a pale face upon which the strain of war, and the sight of sudden death, had already graven little lines (28)."

It is true that in at least one book he has grey eyes, and he often speaks curtly−Monty Python sent that up years ago−but he certainly thinks, and he is no simple stereotyped hero.

For these various reasons, I wanted to take a look for myself at some of the books I loved as a child. I read most of them over and over (twenty or thirty times at least), and they must have had some impact on my view of life. At the time the only aspect I was aware of having appropriated was the concept of "honour" as expressed in both girls' and boys' school stories, and in the *Beau Geste* trilogy which I also loved. If the authors I read most were indeed sexist, racist and middle-class, I should have imbibed these attitudes. Gender continuing to be a contentious subject well into the twenty-first century, I decided I wanted to examine some of these books as an adult, setting them in their historical context, and see how gender roles were actually portrayed in them, rather than relying on my memory and the somewhat sweeping generalisations of many critics. As Eyre (1972, 27) pointed out, "By 1950 British children's books were entering a new phase…Almost overnight writers who had seemed on a pinnacle of commercial success became disreputable." It is largely such authors in whom I am interested.

This book presents the results of that study. I have chosen to look at adventure stories because they mostly involve both girls and boys, and many of them were aimed at both genders rather than only one. Also, by their very nature they provide opportunities for action and danger which may (or may not) be used by the author to distinguish the genders. I have not included historical adventures, such as those by Geoffrey Trease, or Rosemary Sutcliff, because if they are true to their period they would necessarily give little weight to female characters, although I have read a few in order to gain that perspective. Nor have I considered the very considerable array of fantasy adventures for which British authors were justly famous, as I felt this would have made this study too unwieldy, although I was tempted to include the Narnia books as otherwise very much fitting my criteria, being a short series involving both boys and girls.

I am focusing on the period long derided by critics, although recently there have been some reappraisals (Ray 1982; Reynolds 2016). All the authors selected feature white middle-class protagonists: while it is understandable that later critics were concerned that children's literature did not reflect the diversity of British society, in fact this makes a focus on gender more meaningful. In today's Britain, class and ethnicity interact with gender to create a complex web of cultural identities; the culture

represented in these books is more homogeneous, and gender may more easily be isolated as a factor.

Chapter one gives brief information about the authors I have chosen to study and my rationale for choosing the particular books I have looked at. Chapter two then outlines the development of gendered children's literature up to World War One, and some of the socio-cultural changes during the lifetimes of the authors studied, such as the impact of feminism and changing views of childhood, in order to set a context for the study. The themes which emerged from the primary texts were: female agency or share of the action; types of activities and skills assigned to the different genders; adult gender roles; leadership and power relations; courage and sensitivity. These are examined in chapters three to seven. Then, since I am by training a linguist, chapter eight analyses some of the language used by and about the two genders. Finally chapter nine examines the concept of gender identity and how these books might have contributed to its development in their readers.

CHAPTER ONE

WHO, WHAT AND WHY?
AN OUTLINE OF THE AUTHORS AND TEXTS IN THIS STUDY

Whilst I have tried to take into account a wide range of authors, I chiefly considered: Arthur Ransome, Captain W.E. Johns, M.E. Atkinson, Enid Blyton, Gwendoline Courtney, Malcolm Saville and Elinor Brent-Dyer. Because I wanted to see what large numbers of children were reading, I have focused on popular authors rather than on authors acclaimed by the critics, although Ransome is both, in fact. In the case of Brent-Dyer I was not looking at the girls' school stories for which she is best known, except for purposes of comparison, but at her adventure stories involving both boys and girls. With Johns, I was interested to compare the *Biggles* books for boys with the *Worrals* books for girls; Cadogan and Craig (1992) acknowledge that the latter have some superficial feminist remarks but otherwise dismiss them. Since Johns' protagonists are adult, I thought it would be useful to include not only the *Lone Pine* books by Malcolm Saville but also his *Marston Baines* series with older characters. Overall, I wanted approximately equal numbers of texts by male and female writers, and some texts by writers who also wrote in other genres or for two different readerships, to enable comparisons. These principal primary texts comprise 126 books, 65 by female and 61 by male authors (see Appendix A for a full list).

I have concentrated largely on "series" books, with some or all of the same characters running through several volumes, partly to see if there was any development in the author's ideas or portrayal of gender over a long period of time. Although the critics include the 1920s as part of the doldrums of children's literature, these various series did not begin until 1930 or later, so that is where my focus begins. And by the early 1960s, the critics are agreed that a "second golden age" of children's literature had begun (Eyre as mentioned in the introduction placed it as early as 1950: Eyre 1972, 27), but since several of these authors were producing work in

their main series during the 1960s, I have chosen to end my study in 1970. I was born in 1962, so it makes sense to continue into my lifetime.

Below is a brief outline of the work of each of the above authors, which is intended to serve both as an introduction for any reader not familiar with them, and an explanation as to why each has been included. I have arranged them in chronological order of first publication studied, and noted the time span of the books of each author which I have studied. These books vary considerably in the nature of "adventure", and I have outlined this for each author. If one were to include only tales with danger to life, involving guns and serious villains like smugglers or spies, some of these authors would have to be omitted; I have looked at some books which are more family adventure than thriller, but which were identified in the blurb and / or in the constant use of the word "adventure" as adventure genre.

Arthur Ransome (1884-1967)
Publications 1930-47

Ransome stands out among the authors I have chosen in having been granted various awards such as an honorary Litt. D. and an honorary M.A., and of course winning the inaugural Carnegie Medal for his writing for children (Ransome 1930; Ransome 1976). None of the other writers examined here was as critically acclaimed, and some, as I have mentioned, were quite savagely attacked in the 1960s and '70s. However, Ransome was undoubtedly also popular with children, and as one of the early exponents of the mixed-gender adventure genre, he can hardly be excluded. As a literary critic himself, and for years a professional journalist, with a wide experience of the world (having travelled for the *Manchester Guardian* in Russia, China and Egypt, following a wartime post as a war correspondent on the Russian front), it can be expected that he would write rather differently than a female near-contemporary like Elinor Brent-Dyer, for example. I should note here that he profoundly disagreed with me as regards children's literature, stating in his autobiography: "Any book worth reading by children is also worth reading by grown-up persons" (Ransome 1976, 35). His mother used to read aloud to the family, and only read those books she felt were worthwhile.

I have looked here only at his *Swallows and Amazons* series: twelve books (the thirteenth was unfinished at his death) featuring boys and girls in boats on lakes (Cumbria), rivers (East Anglia) and the sea. We do not have precisely the same group of children in every book, but there is sufficient overlap to get some sense of development. The youngest

children (Roger aged seven in the first book, Bridget aged two) quite clearly grow older, but the ages of the older children are deliberately left vague, and they do not seem to age quite as rapidly, since they (John Walker captain of the *Swallow*, and Nancy Blackett captain of the *Amazon*) must be at least twelve in the first book and should therefore be at least sixteen in the last, where they are still being identified as children, in an age when many left school at fourteen. They do however develop in terms of experience and in what adults trust them with (camping on an island more or less in view of the house in *Swallows and Amazons*; being "marooned" without adult supervision and with the addition of five-year-old Bridget in *Secret Water*).

The adventures in Ransome's books are mostly imaginary. The children engage in holiday activities such as sailing and camping, but dress them up by being pirates and raiding each other's ships, or explorers mapping uncharted territory. They are rarely in serious danger except occasionally when they do something silly like sailing at night or being caught in a fog on a moor. There are no gunrunners or drug smugglers here. The exceptions to this are the two books which are metafictional, telling stories imagined by the child characters of their exploits in foreign lands: *Peter Duck* which takes them treasure hunting in the Caribbean, and *Missee Lee* in which they meet a Chinese pirate. In the former they are shot at and in the latter threatened with beheading. However, since the characters behave much as usual (not unduly heroic, young Roger always hungry and Nancy suffering from seasickness), apart from the exotic setting the metafictional nature of these tales is not, in my view, clearly flagged up and they may well have been read at face value by many children.

Capt. W. E. Johns (1893-1968)
Publications 1932-67

William Earl Johns left school at fourteen and trained in a surveyor's office, but joined up in 1914 and saw the end of the Gallipoli campaign and the equally disastrous one in Salonika before transferring to the Royal Flying Corps with a temporary commission. In fact he saw very little active flying service as he was made an instructor after training, and then two months after going out to France was shot down and taken prisoner. He stayed in the RAF, as it had then become, for several years but eventually set up as an aviation illustrator and in 1932 became editor of a new magazine, *Popular Flying*, where the first *Biggles* stories were serialised. During the 1930s the enormous popular interest in aviation gave

rise to a range of books and periodicals: Johns edited two of the latter until the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Fascism generally caused him to produce outspoken editorials attacking the government's policy of appeasement, resulting in his dismissal. He repudiated accusations of being a warmonger, claiming he hated war but did not want Britain to lose one, or to end up appeasing the Fascists (Berresford Ellis and Williams 1985).

Johns' personal life was also potentially controversial, although he managed to keep it from his public. In 1914 he had married a woman eleven years his senior, who bore him a son, Jack. However, when he returned from the war they became estranged and he eventually formed a liaison with Doris Leigh, who was known thereafter as his wife, while his son became his "nephew". It is not really known whether it was his first wife or her father, a vicar, who opposed a divorce, but Doris' family, though naturally not delighted, accepted the situation and her younger brother trained with Johns as an artist (Berresford Ellis and Williams 1985).

Johns was a prolific writer, producing ninety-six *Biggles* books, eleven *Worrals* books, nine *Gimlet* books (about a group of Commandos), ten science fiction adventures, five *Steeley* books aimed at slightly older readers and quite a number of other novels, including some adult thrillers. For this study I have focused on the first two series mentioned above. Biggles started off as the hero of short stories set in the RFC in World War One, based on Johns' own experiences and those of people he knew. The first stories were collected in book form within a few months, and the next year the first full-length tale came out. Biggles and his cousin Algy, soon joined by the teenage Ginger Hebblethwaite, enjoyed a variety of adventures set in the 1930s, Ginger presumably being introduced to give young readers someone to identify with, once Biggles himself ceased to be a teenager. In the Second War Biggles commanded a special squadron, then post war he and his two friends, augmented by Bertie Lissie from the squadron, formed the Air Police at Scotland Yard. Worrals, alias Flight Officer (later Squadron Officer) Joan Worralson, was created in 1941 at the request of the Air Ministry to aid recruitment to the WAAF. She and her friend Betty "Frecks" Lovell enjoyed six wartime adventures and a further five post-war.

I felt it would be fruitful to compare these two series by the same author. They differ from most of the other books in this study in that *Biggles* is aimed only at boys (though girls certainly read him; I inherited my first *Biggles* book from my mother) and the protagonists are all male, and mostly adult, indeed in most of the books professional rather than

amateur adventurers, serving in the air force and then the police. *Worrals*, similarly, is aimed at girls, although the two heroines are always assisted by a number of male characters. The nature of the adventures is much more dramatic than in those series featuring largely children: people are shot and sometimes die, they are attacked by crocodiles and lions, bitten by venomous snakes, threatened with executions and lynch mobs, not to mention natural disasters such as hurricanes and sandstorms; the settings take us to every continent including Antarctica; and the villains, when not the enemy in wartime, are serious criminals or, often, spies.

Since there are eleven *Worrals* books, I decided to study specifically the same number of *Biggles* books, though I have read most of the ninety-six. If we discount one-line appearances of, for example, chambermaids, waitresses and the housekeeper Mrs Symes, only sixteen of the ninety-six *Biggles* books have one or more female characters. From these I selected ten, plus one other for reasons which will become apparent: one set in the First War, five in the 1930s (though two of these were published in 1940), one from the Second War and four Air Police tales. The later books became pretty formulaic so although there are far more of them, I would not in any case have included more than that.

M. E. Atkinson (1899-1974)
Publications 1936-50

Mary Evelyn Atkinson was a fairly prolific writer for children. Her works include several typical genres including pony books and family adventures. Like those of some of the other authors here, they have been severely criticised for being serenely middle-class and not merely ignoring the lower classes or making them amusing caricatures, but actually sneering at them. Possibly this is one reason why her works are more or less unknown to today's children, but more likely in my view is that the adventures are so realistic as to be not terribly exciting to a generation brought up with video games and Harry Potter. With the exception of the occasional moorland fire and swimming accident, most of the adventures occur in the children's heads, but unlike Ransome's children, who knowingly create imaginary worlds, Atkinson's imagine smugglers and villains where there is nothing but a minor mystery. Like Ransome's, her books were published through the war without mentioning the conflict, another source of criticism, but Ransome apparently commented that his publishers wanted him to “Steer clear of the war at all costs”, and this fits with the widespread view at the time that children should be protected from certain subjects, quite apart from the technical difficulties of writing

about current events in book form, given the necessary delay in publication. Clearly some of the other authors here did manage it, however.

Whatever these shortcomings to modern eyes, Atkinson's books were popular in their day: *August Adventure*, the first in the *Lockett* series, was described on its cover by the Yorkshire Post as "Streets ahead of anything in this class besides the Ransome books", and obviously sold well enough for her to produce another thirteen featuring the same group of children. I have focused on this series, which starts with the three Locketts, then aged thirteen, twelve and ten and a half respectively, and their friend Anna and her little brother Robin. The Locketts age gradually throughout the series, as they continue to have an adventure per school holiday, and other friends and rivals are introduced and feature in some of the books. There is an interesting twist in that, although written in the third person, the books are supposedly produced by the Locketts themselves, with the help of a writer aunt. As a result, in the later books they frequently meet people who have read about their adventures.

Enid Blyton (1897-1968)
Publications 1938-63

One cannot look at adventure stories for children without considering Enid Blyton. Not only was she enormously popular in her lifetime, dominating the field of children's literature in the 1940s, when wartime paper shortages meant that many authors struggled while she continued to produce several books a year, but she has continued to be read. Two different TV series were made based on her *Famous Five*, and the current spoofs such as *Five on Brexit Island* suggest many of the adult population of Britain are sufficiently familiar with the characters to appreciate a parody. Yet in the 1960s and '70s critics began to write her off as insufficiently literary, librarians, while perhaps not banning her works as urban myths suggest, at least ceased to encourage children to read them, and we probably all have a friend whose parents forbade her books. Nonetheless in 2009, forty years after her death, Rudd (2009, 168) was able to state she still sold eleven million copies per year and was the only children's author to have outsold J.K. Rowling.

It is true that her tales have a more limited vocabulary than most of the others in this study. They lack quotations from the classics and their geographical references are vague. One would not gain much general knowledge from them. Nor are her plotlines particularly probable, especially with protagonists of ten to fourteen or so. However, that raises

two questions: firstly, to what extent are most adult thrillers either realistic or of great literary merit? And secondly, what is the purpose of children's literature? There has been and probably still is considerable debate about this. If you feel that it is to educate, and children should only read carefully-selected texts which develop their vocabulary and steer them towards views acceptable to their (middle-class liberal) parents and teachers, then Blyton probably doesn't fill the bill. If you feel it is more important to get people reading something fun, in the hope they will move on to more serious literature, then she does. I shall not debate this further as it is really a matter of opinion anyway, but it needs to be borne in mind that among the criticisms were racism, class-ism and sexism.

Blyton was a trained teacher who worked both in a school and then with a group of children privately before becoming a full-time author. Her works include many tales for younger children, the school series *St Clare's* and *Malory Towers*, and many non-fiction educational and religious books, but she is probably most famous for her various adventure series, particularly the *Famous Five*. I have looked at that series, the *Adventure* series which starts with *The Island of Adventure*, the *Secret* series (*Secret Island, Secret of Spiggy Holes*) and the *"R" Mysteries* (*Rilloby Fair, Rockingdown* etc.). These all feature either two boys and two girls, or in the case of the *R Mysteries* three and one, of one family or two, aged between ten and fourteen or fifteen (Barney in the *R Mysteries* is probably the oldest). All but the *Adventure* series are set in various parts of rural Britain, never with real place names. They all tend to involve serious criminals such as kidnappers or gun-runners, although no-one ever gets killed or seriously hurt; Barbara Stoney in her biography presents Blyton's view as "The 'best writers for children' did not deal in murders, rapes, violence, blood, torture and ghosts - these things did not belong to the children's world" (Stoney 1986, 148)

Gwendoline Courtney (1911-96)
Publications 1940-56

Unlike most of the other writers studied here, Gwendoline Courtney was neither a teacher nor a journalist. Illness forced her to abandon plans for university, and she worked for her father in his office before the Second World War, then during it in Lord Goodman's office, being the only civilian to work on Operation Overlord. Like many female authors, she never married, living with her sister until the latter died (Cridland and Mackie-Hunter 2004). Her books were all published between 1935 and 1956, although she lived for another forty years, and they contain many of

the elements typical of the period, featuring middle-class families, generally with a servant or two, and children often at boarding schools. However she had an excellent sense of humour which enabled her to portray teasing among her characters very effectively, which in my view sets her apart from many other writers, for children or otherwise.

Gwendoline Courtney published eight "family" stories and seven adventures (one, *Mermaid House*, only in instalment form in the *Salisbury Journal* until Girls Gone By brought it out as a book). Three of the adventures are set in a girls' boarding school: *The Denehurst Secret Service* is a blend of genres, with only six whole and two part chapters of twenty-one actually about the spying, the rest being typical school-story themes, although the *Wild Lorings* books contain very little that is typical of a school story, (nothing about lessons, sport only mentioned as giving some people alibis) and are really thrillers in a school setting. The second *Denehurst* title, *The Grenville Garrison* and *Mermaid House* all involve a mixture of boys and girls, mostly teenagers, (and in fact mostly one family in each case), during the summer holidays, the first being another wartime spy tale, the second a "Ruritania" novel and the last a gang of thieves reminiscent of Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Chudleigh Hold* (see below). Nearly all of the adventure books have equal numbers of boys and girls or more girls (*The Grenville Garrison* is the exception), and this together with the fact that the author is clearly female, that the majority of her books are typical girls' stories, together with the girls' school setting of three of them, suggests the adventures would have chiefly been read by girls rather than boys.

Her books are interesting in the degree of danger they contain: there are guns which do get fired, villains actually get wounded, torture is threatened, a prefect gets bopped over the head and knocked out, in addition to the usual hazards of being captured and tied up. The degree of independence shown by the children in each is more plausible than in Enid Blyton, for instance, since Courtney's protagonists are older, the eldest in each book being generally sixteen or seventeen, the youngest twelve (*Mermaid House*), thirteen (*The Grenville Garrison, Denehurst Secret Service*) or even fourteen (*Wild Lorings*), although obviously the plots are somewhat unlikely. The children mostly win through by quite possible means such as overhearing something crucial and calling on an appropriate adult, or being able to read Morse, only *Grenville Garrison* really departing from this and ending with an armed attack on the "garrison" on its island in the river, which the children hold off until the cavalry arrives. I decided to include her, despite the fact that her books are not a series (although the six include two pairs with the same, or nearly the

same, characters), and she was not very prolific, partly because the ages of her protagonists compare well with Saville's *Lone Pine* series, and partly because she also wrote in the family genre, enabling some comparison there.

Malcolm Saville (1901-1982)
Publications 1943-[78]

Malcolm Saville was a very successful children's author, producing over ninety books, most of which were reprinted and some of which were popularised by Armada's paperback editions. He wrote part-time, with a "day job" in publishing, which gave him insight into the market, but he still came in for criticism in the 1960s and '70s for being "middle-class". This is not the focus of this book, so I shall not consider it in detail. I imagine this impression arose from the fact that some of his protagonists go to boarding school and they mostly come from nice unbroken homes. However, the facts that Tom Ingles in the *Lone Pine* series seems to have left school and be working full-time for his uncle at age fifteen when we first meet him, Jenny Harman's father runs the village shop, and in their London home anyway the Mortons have no maid, cook, gardener etc., make Saville far less middle-class, surely, than some of the other authors in this study. While it is understandable that critics were concerned that children's literature did not reflect the diversity of British society by the 1960s, it is also understandable that writers tend to write about what they know. Daughter of two teachers and university educated myself, I would not feel particularly comfortable writing a novel with a hero from a very different background; I would get too many details wrong, for a start. But this question really lies outside the scope of this book.

I decided to include Saville for the above-mentioned reasons, namely that he was popular with his child readers and that he came in for some flak from the critics, but also because I felt I needed at least three male writers in the study, one aspect of which was to see if there were any differences in the writers' attitudes which could be ascribed to gender rather than individuality. I have studied his twenty *Lone Pine* books, published between 1943 and 1978 (the last couple are admittedly out of the period I had set myself, but most of the series falls within it), and his seven *Marston Baines* books, published 1963 to 1978 (again, the last falls strictly outside the period). The *Lone Pine* series features children aged nine to fifteen (in the first book), who age to become nearly twelve and eighteen respectively in the last, which makes them reasonably comparable with Brent-Dyer and Courtney, and since the young Morton twins play a

large role in every book, it is also possible to compare him with Blyton and Ransome, whose heroes are younger than the older Lone Piners. The *Marston Baines* books are aimed at the Young Adult market, with main characters who at first are students and then starting off on their professional lives, while Baines himself is a middle-aged professional Intelligence agent. This provides two advantages: it is interesting to compare the two series, and it is valuable to have another series with older characters to set against those of Captain Johns.

The adventure in the *Lone Pine* series ranges from quite serious villainy such as attempted wartime sabotage (*Mystery At Witchend* 1943), a gang hijacking lorries (*Man With Three Fingers* 1966) and gunrunners (*Where's My Girl?* 1972) to rather amateurish attempts to find a stolen necklace (*The Secret of the Gorge* 1958) or possible Roman treasure (*Treasure at Amory's* 1964). Note the dates given here are those of first publication (see Appendix A); in some cases I have used other editions and quotations are from those editions (see References: primary texts). The children quite intentionally seek out adventure (the fifth rule of the Lone Pine Club states that it is for "exploring and watching birds and animals and tracking strangers": *Mystery At Witchend,* 59) and are frequently captured and locked up, and occasionally genuinely hurt by the villains.

Danger also comes from a number of natural disasters, generally involving water: high seas break through flood barriers or excessive rain leads to a landslide, or indeed in the first book, the saboteurs succeed in blowing up a reservoir (not strictly natural!). They tend to be in danger of their lives only from the water, while the criminals rarely do more than lock them up; usually they are rescued rather than able to escape by their own ingenuity. Sometimes they are actually rescued by the police! Thus it might be said that, although it is highly improbable that so many adventures would happen to the same group of people, however avidly they sought them, each specific story is reasonably possible. The same cannot really be said of the *Marston Baines* plotlines, which include international anarchist gangs, mysterious new drugs being used to undermine Western society, and the European student activism of the late 1960s being provoked by China. This kind of thing was common in earlier adult thrillers such as those of John Buchan, but by the 1970s writers for adults were becoming more sophisticated (Hammond Innes started publishing in the 1930s, Desmond Bagley in 1963, Frederick Forsyth's *Day of the Jackal* was 1979).

Elinor M. Brent-Dyer (1894-1969)
Publications 1950-55

Gladys Eleanor May Dyer, to give her her baptismal name, was born and brought up in South Shields. She shared Enid Blyton's experience in that her father deserted her mother and the family hid the fact for the sake of respectability, though in Elinor's case when she was probably no more than three. Luckily for the family Mrs Dyer had inherited a small income from her father, and there may have been maintenance payments from her husband as well, so Elinor grew up in a house with a maid. She attended small private schools like so many of her future heroines, worked for a time as a "pupil-teacher", then entered the City of Leeds Training College before continuing as a teacher, still living with her mother and, now, stepfather. In later years she ran her own small school in Herefordshire (McClelland 1981). With this background it is not surprising that the first stories she wrote were girls' school stories, and she is most famous for the *Chalet School* series, which ran to 62 volumes in the Armada paperback versions. Published over four decades, these sold well and continue to sell.

Most of her non-*Chalet School* books were either also school stories or domestic / family stories, clearly aimed at girl readers. However, in the 1950s she also produced five adventure tales, which I felt it would be interesting to compare with her other works. The first of these in reading order is *Chudleigh Hold*, published in 1954 but clearly conceived much earlier, as a boiled-down version appears in *Gay from China at the Chalet School* in 1944. This and *Fardingales* (1950) are a kind of hybrid genre, combining the large families and domestic details of her family books with a thriller plotline pursued by a small number of the characters. These are both set in rural England. *The Susannah Adventure* is a sequel to *Fardingales*, with the same protagonists and a great deal of sailing about the Channel trying to evade the villains, *Condor Crags Adventure* blends these protagonists with two brothers from *Chudleigh Hold*, and is set mainly in South America with adult male heroes, while *Top Secret* abandons all but one of the Chudleigh brothers, who, en route to Australia with some secret papers, has to outwit those who are trying to kill him and seize the papers. Here again the protagonists are chiefly male, the exception being an elderly spinster. My impression is that the first two books were aimed at presenting a new genre to her readership of girls, but the last two have many more characteristics of adventures written for boys.

Almost all these writers were born in late Victorian or Edwardian times. As children, they would have read the books available for children in the 1890s and 1900s (many of which were published considerably earlier than that, of course). Their views and ideals were likely to have been formed, in many cases (Gwendoline Courtney is the real exception) before the First War. The following chapter, therefore, looks at the development of children's fiction prior to the 1920s, by which time most of these writers were adults, with a particular focus on genres aimed at one gender rather than the other. It tries to set this in the wider context of sociocultural changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly ideas about gender and about childhood. Only when we understand the world which formed these writers and the world in which they were living when they wrote can we assess their work effectively.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THEIR SHOES
THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE AUTHORS

"What adults read is their own affair, but what children read is *our* responsibility." These words of Boris Ford, quoted in Rosemary Auchmuty's excellent study of girls' school stories (Auchmuty 1992, 10) reflect a fairly consistent attitude among adult critics of children's literature. Since the development of a literature aimed specifically at children, and indeed earlier, parents, teachers, writers, philosophers and self-declared experts have tended to unite in this, if in nothing else. The development of more liberal views of childhood and the desirability of children being encouraged to evolve in their own way has not necessarily changed this, although childist criticism, taking account of the child-as-reader, has grown as an approach in recent decades. It is widely agreed that the child is father to the man, that events and influences when we are young shape the person we become, and the books we read or have read to us are one of those influences. During the period this book is examining, reading books or magazines was indeed a bigger part of most people's lives than now, since television was in its infancy and video games unknown. In particular, the portrayal of gender roles in early fiction has been shown to be of great importance in the shaping of our gender identity (Foster and Simons 1995).

Why do we have books written for children? What is their primary purpose? There are essentially two possible answers to this question: to give pleasure and entertain, or to educate and instruct. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive, but the weight you give to each will tend to determine how you evaluate a text. If it is popular, it is presumably succeeding in the former goal, but it seems to be the nature of critics to regard the popular with suspicion. If too many people like something, it cannot be good quality. This is a kind of middle-class intellectual snobbery, and I am hardly immune, I confess. When *Star Wars* first came out and there were huge queues outside cinemas, I turned up my nose and refused to go because "real" science fiction was in books, and something

everybody liked couldn't be good. Twenty years later I finally watched the first film on television and discovered it was actually quite good science fiction, although it didn't have any particularly thought-provoking message. Probably most people who watched it just had a jolly good time, but there must by the law of averages have been some who were brought through that enjoyment to more serious science fiction, which examines human society through the lens of the Other, or who perhaps even decided on a career in science. Having fun does not necessarily lead to learning, but without enjoyment learning is that much less likely.

This point has been recognised about children's literature. Instructive writers began to coat the medicine of their message in a dollop of jam, and critics began to realise that perhaps any book which encouraged children to read was a good thing. Enid Blyton is one author who has been justified on that account (Ray 1982). It is impossible to ignore her enormous and enduring popularity, but equally it is true that she wrote with quite a limited vocabulary, two-dimensional characters and in a nice, safe world with no sex or violence and very little poverty. These facts led to her being heavily attacked in the 1960s by those who felt children's books should stretch children's minds, and reflect the real world. Either children were discouraged or even forbidden from reading her, or it was permitted with a shrug and the attitude “Oh, well, at least they're reading something. They'll grow out of her and move on to better stuff”. This is perhaps to ignore that Blyton herself fully intended to write as she did. If you look at her books for different age-groups, the vocabulary is as carefully graded as a reader aimed at learners of English as a Foreign Language, and she herself said she concentrated on plot and on giving each character just one or two recognisable traits, and avoided unpleasant issues: her goal was to keep children within their comfort zone, not take them out of it (Stoney 1986). This leads me to the point that the “meaning” of a book is always a blend of the author's intention, the actual text, the reader's interpretation and the context. Since the latter two will change (every reader is different, and the context in which the book was written will be viewed differently by later generations), books change their meaning over time.

I am concerned here to look at the texts for what they say and don't say about gender in the light of present-day feminist expectations, but also to look at the world in which they were written, and even further back, the world in which their authors grew up. I feel that some criticisms of the period are based on unreasonable expectations; we cannot expect someone writing in the 1930s to see the world as we do today, or even as the most progressive thinkers in their own day did. And perhaps by focusing on how they fell short of what we would consider acceptable ideas about

gender, we fail to see the places where they did *not* fall short. As Johnson once wrote: "To judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time," (quoted in Grenby and Reynolds 2011, 102). In this chapter I shall begin by outlining some of the changes in the status of women and ideas about gender; move on to ideas about childhood and the status of children; then give a brief overview of the development of children's literature as a genre and how it reflected attitudes to both women and childhood; and finally put this together and examine the context in which my selected authors were growing up and that in which they were writing.

The "little woman" to the "modern woman"

Most human societies have been and are patriarchies: that is, women have been excluded from political authority, from cultural authority (including education), have been exploited economically and, often, sexually (LeGates 2001). Philosophy and religion bring forward arguments to support this: the ancient Greeks explained that female biology made women less intelligent and therefore less able for public life, while the Abrahamic religions hark back to Eve and original sin. In the modern West, science has taken the place of religion and been invoked to demonstrate that women are less intelligent because they have, on average, smaller brains (nineteenth century), or more recently that men and women have different brains and therefore should have different roles, based on brain scan images whose significance is as yet little understood, plus a lot of preconceptions (Fine 2011). This isn't just about women, of course: if women have their assigned role, then so do men, and they may be equally uncomfortable with it. However, because patriarchy privileges men even if it also restricts them, until very recently it is feminism which has had the loudest voice on gender issues.

There are many different shades of feminism, but one great distinction may be identified: between the liberal or equal-rights feminists, who originated in the eighteenth century and gained strength in the nineteenth, and who stress the similarity (equality) of the genders; and the cultural or maternal feminists, who emphasise the differences and celebrate feminine values over the male ones of traditional societies. This is not the place to go into the various feminist movements in any detail, but we need to bear this distinction in mind and not simply assume that for an author to uphold feminist values s/he must assign equal and similar roles to male and female characters, which I feel is how feminism has largely been rewritten in the popular mind.

Some cultures stress the role of the father as the head of the family, but Victorian Britain saw women as the heart of a family, and as families were the bridge between the individual and society, woman's role was crucial. The negative side of this view was that it emphasised woman's role as a mother at the expense of her individuality, but the positive side was that it gave weight to arguments in favour of female education, since an educated woman could better prepare her children for their future role in the world. In 1850 Frances Buss established the North London Collegiate School for Girls, and in 1858 Dorothea Beale became the principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College, a post she retained until shortly before her death in 1906. During the 1870s the High School Movement for Girls spread rapidly, and at Cambridge and Oxford the first women's colleges were founded in 1872 and 1878 respectively, although it was decades before women were actually allowed to graduate with a degree. Girls' schools, instead of concentrating on social skills like sketching and playing the piano, began to teach geography, maths and science, although most female educators recognised the different roles girls and boys would play in the future and did not advocate total parity. There was also a strong class bias, which I shall return to.

Not only were Miss Buss and Miss Beale enormously influential in developing standards of excellence in girls' education, in 1865 they joined leading feminists in a women's discussion group called the Kensington Society, and a year later the London Suffrage Committee which petitioned Parliament to grant women the vote. Women's suffrage has been viewed as the most radical idea put forward by early feminists (LeGates 2001, 222); it certainly aroused fierce opposition. Later in the twentieth century some felt that it had taken up a disproportionate amount of time, when there were other aspects of women's lives to worry about, but if the traditional division between the sexes is that women belong to the private, domestic sphere and men to the public, it is understandable that a move to give women a public role would be deeply controversial. Most Western governments finally extended suffrage to women in the aftermath of World War One: Denmark in 1915, the Soviet Union in 1917, Germany, Austria and Great Britain in 1918, the US and Belgium in 1920, although in Britain the extension only applied to married women over thirty, the rest having to wait another ten years.

While the vote might be regarded as a landmark, other things were probably having greater impact on individual women's lives. The 1882 Married Women's Property Act ended the legal assumption that a wife had no separate existence from her husband, enabling married women to own land and property (and also making them responsible for their own debts).