1996

What Would Daddy Have Done? Overt and Covert Constructions of Masculinity in Twentieth Century Children's Literature

Peter Hunt

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Hunt, Peter, What Would Daddy Have Done? Overt and Covert Constructions of Masculinity in Twentieth Century Children's Literature, Kunapipi, 18(1), 1996.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol18/iss1/9

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
What Would Daddy Have Done? Overt and Covert Constructions of Masculinity in Twentieth Century Children's Literature

Abstract
An axiom: children's books are different from adults' books; they do different things, in different ways, to a different audience. And yet, until recently, the theory and criticism of children's books has treated them as if they were the same. The reasons for this are obvious: in a literary/cultural matrix which is structured like the traditional family/empire, males are powerful, women dominated, and children both invisible and manipulated;1 consequently, children's literature criticism has behaved as if it were the dominant WASP male criticism. It has, in theory, aspired to the universal; in practice, it has courted universities, performed at MLA, produced journals published by major universities (Yale, Johns Hopkins). It has, in short, had to adopt strategies to circumvent the imperialist hegemony of white male criticism. The original summary for this paper reflected this:
What Would Daddy Have Done? Overt and Covert Constructions of Masculinity in Twentieth Century Children’s Literature

An axiom: children’s books are different from adults’ books; they do different things, in different ways, to a different audience. And yet, until recently, the theory and criticism of children’s books has treated them as if they were the same. The reasons for this are obvious: in a literary/cultural matrix which is structured like the traditional family/empire, males are powerful, women dominated, and children both invisible and manipulated; consequently, children’s literature criticism has behaved as if it were the dominant WASP male criticism. It has, in theory, aspired to the universal; in practice, it has courted universities, performed at MLA, produced journals published by major universities (Yale, Johns Hopkins). It has, in short, had to adopt strategies to circumvent the imperialist hegemony of white male criticism. The original summary for this paper reflected this:

The most potent cultural codifications may well not be the most overt. Children’s literature, in the area of gender, is both very potent as a societal influence and very revealing as to the nature of the society. On the one hand it tends to show society as it wishes to be and to be seen; in retrospect, it often shows a less acceptable face – time (or a new reading) shows that society’s subconscious through its children’s books. Although often radical in form and apparently subversive, twentieth century children’s literature has also been deeply conservative; in particular, its long ‘shelf-life’, and its transmission through education systems and families (as much as through the general culture) preserves and passes on cultural assumptions that are, on the surface, obsolete.

On reflection, I felt that this was not true to the way in which children’s literature criticism is developing: the proposition simply could not be put in those terms. Rather than using ‘macro’ criticism, it is turning towards ‘micro’ criticism – predicated on the principle that what matters is one reading by one reader at one time: that this has always been all we have, but that this simple, obvious fact has been obscured (for educators at almost all levels) by the necessities of
academic survival. (There is brilliant support for this view in John Harwood's *Eliot to Derrida: The Poverty of Interpretation*).

I have recently been to conferences of children's literature 'practitioners', who are constantly in touch with readers, constantly confronting the problem of meaning made in other people's heads. They find much of deconstruction and reader response/reception theory blindingly obvious, and 'interpretation' – as commonly practised – rather curious. For if we concede, as we must, a plurality of meanings controlled as much by the skills and knowledge of the reader as of the text, we cannot prioritise (as we do, incessantly) the reading of one person – that is, the critic or the historian (or, occasionally, the teacher).

Thus this paper seemed to me to have an untenable title, as it appeared to be predicated on the premise of a meaning inscribed in, inherent in the text, rather than an infinitely fluid set of meanings being constructed in partnership with readers; and it implied just such a dominant, more 'correct' reading, by the critic. The question forced upon one is: what is interesting about children's literature and gender? Is it what we – as a specialist group – read in the texts; or what, say, a child in 1906 read in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, or what a child in 1995 reads in *Puck*? (Bearing in mind that our definition of a child and childhood has changed generally and radically in those eighty-nine years – and, indeed, changes from child to child, day to day, house to house).

In short, the original – conventional – idea of this paper had to be revised in the light of the fact that children's literature criticism has learned the error of other people's ways.

And so I would like this to be a transitional paper, three papers in one, in which I would like to move from, as it were, generalist criticism to *childist* criticism in the form of three readings of the title: a conventional reading; a revisionist reading; and, thirdly, a radical reading, a cline, from the many to the one.

The conventional reading would have to be based on Jeffrey Richards's excellent *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature*. Richards summarises the progress of imperialism, and its relation to gender, as the empire changed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

evangelism [and] the commercial and cultural imperialism [of the mid-century] ... gave way in the last decades of the nineteenth century ... to aggressive militarism ... as the evangelical impulse itself became secularised and fed into full-blown imperialism, which became in many ways a new religion blended of the Protestant work-ethic and the public school code. But in the inter-war years the empire changed again [and was] seen as a bulwark of peace ... What remains constant is the concept of manliness.4

Richards suggests, and I see no reason to disagree with him, that the older definition of masculinity – courage and endurance *plus* brutality –
was replaced with 'muscular Christianity' and the concept of the chivalric gentleman. The imperial idea was, in short, based on codes of 'proper' behaviour (as well as an innate sense of superiority). It was inculcated in the public schools, and (although this seems to be at least symbiotic) into public school fiction.

It was read at every level of society and provided the dominant image of manliness. There has always been an alternative view of manliness, based on how much you can drink and how tough you are. It is racist, sexist, chauvinist, thuggish and hedonistic, but from the 1830s to the 1960s it remained a submerged and dissident view. In the 1960s it emerged to challenge and eventually eclipse the previously dominant model of masculinity - gentlemanship. But by then the Empire had largely ceased to exist and the genres of imperial adventure and public school fiction which had sustained and justified it had undergone a similar eclipse.5

That seems to me to be substantially sound; through the lens of children's literature, it appears that as the Empire contracted, so the constructions of masculinity that it involved contracted with it. The idea of chivalry-plus-endurance was gradually eroded: the elements of machismo began to dominate.

However, this broad picture can obviously be refined.

Firstly, there is clearly a distinction to be made between mainstream and popular writing. Popular literature - the books and comics that replaced the 'penny dreadfuls' and not-so-dreadfuls, and which were read by the masses - sustained older, imperialist-masculine attitudes. Geoffrey Trease, for example, noted that - 'A new story in 1920 or 1930 tended to be a fossil in which one could trace the essential characteristics of one written in 1880 or 1890'.6 George Orwell (Horizon, March 1940) famously attacked boys' fiction for 'being sodden in the worst illusions of 1910'.

Fossilised illusions they may have been, but they were potent nonetheless. They defined gender not only for children, but for adults: rather, they defined gender for children through backward-looking adults. And, of course, these books and magazines survive: thus Biggles Defies the Swastika is still in print and on tape, and War Picture Library and its siblings are still published in great numbers. (Of course, there could be a good deal of debate as to who reads these texts).

Secondly, there has not been a simple replacement of imperialist-masculine ideas with thuggery. The chivalric is preserved - and not necessarily with an increase in the 'macho' - in the 'Star Wars' series (which are themselves predicated on imperialism) and the 'Sword and Sorcery' books (which are predicated on romantic/Arthurian ideas). The thuggery may now dominate, of course - one thinks of Judge Dredd - and yet the 'newer' construction of the caring, artistic, sensitive male has established a presence, as in Watership Down, Disney's Beauty and the Beast or Dodie Smith's The One Hundred and One Dalmatians -
and even *Star Wars*.

Equally, thirdly, the class divisions are not quite straightforward. Jeffrey Richards cites the public-school-educated, middle-class Fred Inglis and the working-class Bill Naughton and Robert Roberts as responding to the same imperialistic male images. This is precisely as one might expect: the macho male is admired at both ends of the class/political spectrum, where power is an issue: the 'new man' subsists in the middle-class middle – and his model is found in the middle-class, mainstream children's book.

The situation is further complicated by the dominance (certainly since the 1950s) of that very mainstream, by women as writers, publishers, educators, and parents, with whatever that implies – and what it generally seems to imply is balance, and the validation of a particular kind of masculinity.

Finally, children's books have always involved a certain (large) element of social engineering, and so 'political correctness' has accelerated the change from imperialistic concepts of the male to, as it were, female concepts of the male.

Thus the conventional reading: that imperialistic constructions of gender have survived in mainstream children's literature until very recently – and still survive in popular literature. One might call in evidence important and characteristic twentieth-century writers: Kipling, Ransome, Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Blyton, W. E. Johns. In them, the masculine inscribed by imperialism seems to be sustained.

Let us begin with Kipling, and I would like to concentrate on what I think is his masterpiece, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), a book which in many ways seems to set the tone for the century.

The empire – both in decline and in danger of decline – is his theme, and his heroes – Sir Richard and Sir Hugh of the new England, and Parnesius and Pertinax of the Roman Empire – exemplify the virtues of friendship, loyalty, honesty and chivalry (together with keeping your wits and your sword sharp). In fact, the whole might be summed up by the poem 'If-' (from the sequel to *Puck, Rewards and Fairies*) with its closing line: '... you'll be a man, my son'.

And that is, of course, a line that nearly crops up in Arthur Ransome's masterpiece, *We Didn't Mean to Go To Sea* (1937), in which the fourteen-year-old John Walker sails a yacht, against the odds, across the North Sea. Here, John is surrogate head of the family, his elder sister is 'mate' and cook, his younger sister a fairly ineffectual (in maritime terms) mystic – and his younger brother an aspiring ship's engineer. John sails always with his father's advice at the back of his mind: 'What was it Daddy had said? "Never be ashamed to reef in the dark"'. When they arrive in Holland, they meet their father (in a rather more subtle and effective encounter than it sounds in summary): Ted Walker is a Commander in the Royal Navy, on his way back from the
outposts of Empire, and he places hands on John’s shoulders and says, ‘You’ll be a seaman yet, my son’. 

(Throughout Ransome’s books there is reference to a literary tradition of the nineteenth century – Richard Jefferies’s Bevis, itself part of the imperial tradition by word and deed, is one of their antecedents).

Ransome structures his families with men in control (even the first expedition onto the lake in Swallows and Amazons (1930) cannot be authorised by Mother alone), and with a manifest destiny to go into the Navy, they behave according to the ‘code’ and maintain England and Empire.

Even the post-second world war retreat into secondary-world fantasy produced work with much the same old message. In Middle Earth, Tolkien’s kings and knights defend their empires by chivalry and mutual support, and a fair amount of macho muscle and (literally) flag-waving.

In popular literature, it is obvious that W. E. Johns’s ‘Biggles’ knows his place in the world of foreigners (on top), that Enid Blyton constantly privileges the male (and not the ‘sensitive’ male) and the middle-class, and that C. S. Lewis is fighting the wars of England once again in Narnia, where the girls may cry, but not onto their bowstrings.

This, then, is children’s literature, lagging, as always, behind adult literature, purveying a masculine image which is apparently outdated, but which in fact helps to perpetuate.

My second reading might be called ‘revisionist’.

Cultural maps always require re-drawing and re-reading, and while it is undoubtedly true that people like Capt. Brereton and Percy F. Westerman continued the gung-ho approach to adventure stories through the 1920s and 1930s (with what now seems appalling taste), in the influential mainstream of children’s literature there are some distinctively different sub-texts to be read.

Here it seems that, after the first world war, what we are seeing is a requiem. Mark Girouard, talking of the horrors of the trenches of the first war, in The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman, observes that the middle classes set out to war with chivalric ideals:

There most of them died; and there chivalry died with them. Or at least it received its death-wound. For it is in fact easy enough to find chivalry at work in the years after the war. In fiction, especially, bands of brothers abounded, chivalrously protecting the weak and doing down villains, under the leadership of Bulldog Drummond, Major-General Hannay, Group Captain Bigglesworth and others. Bertie Wooster continued being doggedly and disastrously chivalrous into the 1960s ... [But] as a dominant code of conduct it never recovered from the great war ... because [the war] helped to produce a world in which the necessary conditions for chivalry were increasingly absent ... Chivalry, along with patriotism, playing the game, and similar concepts became not so much devalued as simply irrelevant.
It is interesting that Girouard’s examples are all books which have slid down the age range towards children’s literature: in short, the use of the chivalric ideal in marginal or marginalised genres — fantasy, comedy, and, most obviously, in children’s literature (itself often escapist and nostalgic for adults) — demonstrates that this side of masculinity was not in step with the times.

Kipling, perhaps surprisingly, can be recruited in support of this: the hooligan-imperialist’s reputation might be reconsidered.

Let us return to *Puck*. In that book, who are the role models, the really influential men — the men who set the standards, and who seem to be admired by the narrator? They are the Norman knight, de Aquila, the shrewd councillor who thinks ‘for England’, and Kadmiel, the Jew who does everything outside the law and makes the law of England. These men are not Empire builders. Kadmiel, having broken the power of the King, retires:

‘And you? Did you see the signing of the Law at Runnymede?’ said Puck, as Kadmiel laughed noiselessly.

‘Nay. Who am I to meddle with things too high for me? I returned to Bury and lent money on the autumn crops. Why not?’

These men are individualists, new thinkers, outsiders. And the whole book is underpinned by the ageless Hobdens (who have been poachers and hedgers time out of mind), and the amoral, unjudgemental Puck. These figures all look inwards, towards stasis, towards craft and initiation — not out to conquest and Empire.

Even Pertinax and Parnesius, the subalterns on the Roman Wall, who are in direct line to Stalky, are essentially their own men; in their valuing of friendship over power, of integrity over imperialism, of home over empire, they are mavericks. (And Pertinax, in rejecting the ruthless imperialism of Maximus, pleases his father). He is not even part of the imperial power:

‘But you’re a Roman yourself, aren’t you?’ said Una.

‘Ye-es and no. I’m one of a good few thousands who have never seen Rome except in a picture’.

Similarly, Sir Richard is a reluctant conqueror, who would not have been comfortable in a G.A. Henty novel, and his story is about reconciliation and home.

Kipling is celebrating the end of one kind of culture — one kind of masculinity — while celebrating another, that of the craftsman who does not wish to conquer or to fight, but to create and preserve — a point echoed in what is probably the century’s single best children’s book, Alan Garner’s *The Stone Book*.

I would argue that *Puck* is essentially a requiem, an acknowledgement that the days of imperialism are gone, and with them certain
aspects of gender. Dan, the boy at the centre, is not a Bevis – he is a new man, of home and craft: he understands the past only in terms of skill and loyalty – not Empire.

We can even reconsider that hymn to imperialism, ‘If-’: as Kipling (wryly) said,

Among the verses ... was one set called ‘If-’, which escaped from the book, and for a while ran about the world. They were drawn from Jameson’s character [Dr. L. S. Jameson of the 1895 raid] ... Schools, and places where they teach, took them for their suffering Young – which did me no good with the Young when I met them later. (‘Why did you write that stuff? I’ve had to write it out twice as an impot’).14

And Ransome? It is as well to remember that Swallows and Amazons was Ransome’s twenty-ninth book, written after the author had been for several years at the centre of world politics in the Russian Revolution and later in China. I bring up this unfashionable biographical note because his children’s books, despite some superficial imperialistic male features are in fact focused elsewhere. Swallows and Amazons properly belongs with the group of retreatist, quietist post-first world war books like Winnie-the-Pooh, Dr. Dolittle, and the later Masefield: books written, often, by men in retreat from the horrors of war. In the 1920s and 1930s there is hardly a mention in ‘mainstream’ children’s books of the upheavals in Europe and elsewhere.15 Thus Ransome’s books are a recreation of a childhood that emphatically does not value imperialism. His most famous books are all enclosed by the comfortable hills of the Lake District; and where the children venture out, they take with them the security of their ships, or, as in Peter Duck, their attitudes undercut the values of the imperialistic adventure story.

Further, Ransome had little time for class-superiority. For him there were ‘no lower orders’ in the Lake District – no need for domination: like Kipling’s craftsmen, his sailors and fishermen are quietists, outsiders: they share a freemasonry in which child, adult, male, and female, are all equal.16 Thus his alter egos are the studious Dick, or the retired traveller, Uncle Jim; his role models are fishermen and writers and doctors: his imperialist ornithologist in Great Northern? is a villain, his military father figure very much off-stage. (The very existence of this character, biographically speaking, is due to Ransome’s need to lay the ghost of a disapproving father.) 17

In Tolkien’s books, for all the large-screen heroics, who are the heroes? Bilbo is a home-loving, old-England man; Frodo is a mystic non-combatant. Around them, imperial empires rise and fall, sway and totter, and are forgotten: the constructions of masculinity which matter are, like Sam, essentially gentle and home-loving.

Literary history is not as neat as we might wish, and if we can’t re-
read Blyton or Lewis in this way, then we might look to the second most successful children’s writer of all time, whose heroes and heroines are all either victims or guizers: Roald Dahl. The most successful writers of the day, like Ann Fine, or Jan Mark, or Gillian Cross, valorise the female, the balanced – and a construction of masculinity very remote from post-imperialist thuggery (one might think of the actor husband in Ann Fine’s Madame Doubtfire), while my discussions with secondary-school pupils suggest that the historical novel has virtually disappeared from sight.

Even Biggles needs rather more subtle handling than he has often received. It is as well to remember that in his first incarnation Biggles is a sensitive, war weary young veteran – ‘slim, rather below average height, and delicate’ – and that he came from the pen of a man who had been a shot-down fighter pilot and a prisoner of war, and whose interest in the military was one of defence, not expansion. (His later decline is not relevant to this argument: as Margery Fisher observes: ‘Biggles as the enemy of the Hun can be accepted in historical perspective: as the bloodthirsty, self-righteous opponent of thriller-villains, he deserves no critical charity’).

All of that argues, I think, that the majority of mainstream children’s writers, at least from 1918, and arguably since 1900 (with Nesbit, Kipling and Grahame) decisively rejected imperialistic constructions of the male. The first world war may have been the first major influence: it produced a generation of writers, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and beyond, who turned to childhood (and nostalgia) for security, and retreat. Under the guise of protecting (or creating) childhood, they were protecting themselves; in doing so, they created a concept of the children’s book which constructed gender in a way which, at a profound level, rejected the constructions of the past. These constructions have persisted, ignoring the second world war, and producing a female dominance of the mainstream, middle-class children’s book.

Thus the imperialist construction of the male in children’s books may have covertly been rejected long before it was overtly rejected, and the books which have been validated by the critical establishment have tended to be those which show the male in retreat – to nostalgia, to security, to a world without women.

I hope that you have found that persuasive, but I fear that we must honestly doubt how far the text of history which you and I have so adultly decoded ever meant any of that to younger readers – or that it could mean any of that to any one child reader now. For in my third reading of the history, I would like to close the gap between the theoretical reader (or the self-confident reader) and the actual readers.

Thus if we generalise about the probable constructions of masculinity resulting from actual readings of children’s (or any) books, then we
might reasonably conclude that it is the covert rather than the overt which will have power. We can recognise and react to (and influence the response to) what is commonly agreed to be an 'incident' in a text: but the subconscious meaning must come more potently from the sub-texts - and those absorbed over a period. Equally, those sub-texts are increasingly not borne by books (and, I would suggest, have very rarely ever been borne predominantly by books).

Affect has to be seen in a vastly complex sociological-historical continuum, and, intractable though it may be, as academic readers we need to consider the virtues of 'micro' readings. Thus, for example, it could be argued that even popular literature has not had the affect that a general deduction might suggest. Did working-class readers of public school books believe them, or actually always see them as other? Were popular war comics read simultaneously as exciting heroics, and as recognised fantasy in a stoic, grittily realistic realisation of actuality? There is plenty of evidence to suggest, for example, that feminists or sociologists do not have to worry about adolescent girls being entrapped or influenced by 'romances': on the whole, even the least articulate can understand that fantasy is fantasy.

But, most fundamentally, what of the characteristics of the way in which children read? They are, by definition, developing readers, inclined to have a freer, if less wide-ranging associative reading strategy (or technique); and they are likely to react against both covert and overt adult constructions of gender (and, indeed, of reality). And thus I would argue that while we as analysts might suggest that there have been certain gender constructs throughout the period, we have to be infinitely careful about deducing anything from our image. For all the long 'shelf-life' of a children's book as object, that 'book' as subject must change; Puck of Pook's Hill, for example, is a different book to a generation deprived of, ignorant of, or, indeed, incredulous of imperial attitudes or gender constructions, and therefore will have quite a different potency for each reader.

And we have to place this in the context of the future. As a generation of children begin to 'surf the internet', their attitudes to text, to gender, to narrative, indeed, to intellectual structures generally will change. As a first step in understanding this, we shall have to take on board the fact that whereas John Walker, in 1930, may well have asked 'What Would Daddy Have Done?', the real answer for several generations of children and adults would now be: 'OK: so we'll do something else!'
NOTES

5. Richards, pp. 6, 7.