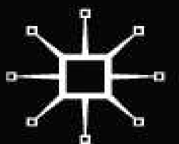
Enid Blyton

A Literary Life

Andrew Maunder



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Andrew Maunder

Enid Blyton
A Literary Life

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For Brian and Elizabeth Maunder

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Andrew Maunder

Abbreviations

Novels and Story Collections

AF *The Adventurous Four* (London: Newnes, 1941)
AWC *Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (London: Newnes, 1937)
CD *Circus Days Again* (London: Newnes, 1942)
CK *The Children of Kidillin* (London: Newnes, 1940)
CStC *Claudine at St. Clare's* (London: Methuen, 1944)
FBH *Five Go to Billycock Hill* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957)
FC *Five Go Off in a Caravan* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946)
FFF *Five on Finniston Farm* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960)
FFStC *Fifth Formers of St. Clares* (London: Methuen, 1945)
FRT *Five Run Away Together* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1944)
FTI *Five on a Treasure Island* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1942)
FTMT *First Term at Malory Towers* (London: Methuen, 1946)
HC *House-at-the-Corner* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947)
HC *Hurrah for the Circus!* (London: Newnes, 1939)
IA *The Island of Adventure* (London: Macmillan, 1944)
IFMT *In the Fifth at Malory Towers* (London: Newnes, 1950)
LTMT *Last Term at Malory Towers* (London: Methuen, 1951)
MDC *The Mystery of the Disappearing Cat* (London: Methuen, 1944)
MFT *The Magic Faraway Tree* (London: Newnes 1943)
MTC *The Mystery of Tally-Ho Cottage* (London: Methuen, 1954)
NGS *The Naughtiest Girl in the School* (London: Newnes, 1940)
RA *The River of Adventure* (London: Macmillan, 1955)
RoM *The Rockingdown Mystery* (London: Collins 1949)
RuM *The Rubabdub Mystery* (London: Collins 1952)
SBB *The Six Bad Boys* (London: Lutterworth, 1951)

SC *Six Cousins at Mistletoe Farm* (London: Evans, 1948)

SCA *Six Cousins Again* (London: Evans Bros 1950)

SI *The Secret Island* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1938)

SK *The Secret of Killimooin* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1943)

SM *The Secret Mountain* (1941; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947)

SSD *Shadow, The Sheep-Dog* (London: Newnes, 1942)

SSS *Shock for the Secret Seven* (Leicester: Brockhampton Press, 1961)

TCSS *Three Cheers Secret Seven* (Leicester Brockhampton Press, 1956)

TStC *The Twins at St. Clare's* (London Methuen, 1941)

TYMT *Third Year at Malory Towers* (London: Methuen, 1948)

UF *Upper Fourth at Malory Towers* (London: Methuen, 1949)

Plays

FF *Famous Five Adventure*. British Library Add Mss, Lord Chamberlain's Collection of Plays. 1955/67

NT *Noddy in Toyland*. British Library Add Mss, Lord Chamberlain's Collection of Plays. 1954/17

Six *Six Enid Blyton Plays* (London: Methuen, 1935)

Poetry

CW *Child Whispers* (London: J. Saville, 1922)

RF *Real Fairies* (London: J. Saville, 1923)

Magazines

EBM *Enid Blyton's Magazine* (London: Evans)

SS *Sunny Stories* (London: Newnes)

TW *Teacher's World* (London: Evans)

Non-fiction

CL *A Complete List of Books: Enid Blyton* (Edinburgh: John Menzies, 1951)

D

Diaries. Seven Stories, National Centre for Children's Literature collection EB/02/01/01-EB/01/01/23

Mac The Archives of Macmillan and Company. Special Correspondence: Enid Blyton. British Library. Add Ms: 89262/1/5; 89262/1/6; 89262/1/7; 89262/1/8

SML *The Story of My Life* (London: Pitkins, 1952)

Secondary Sources

Smallwood Imogen Smallwood, *A Childhood at Green Hedges* (London: Methuen, 1989)

Stoney Barbara Stoney, *Enid Blyton* (1974; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992)

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1. Introduction

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On Friday 3 January 1969, there was a memorial service for Enid Blyton at St James-in-the Fields, the fashionable Anglican church in London's Piccadilly. Blyton, who had died the previous November aged seventy-one, had been a novelist, poet, magazine editor and teacher who, despite an unremarkable background, had become, as *The Times* noted, 'the most successful and most controversial children's author of the postwar period'. She was also one of the wealthiest and one of 'the most productive' with 'over 400 titles…to her name'.[1] Amongst those paying respects were Blyton's daughters, Gillian and Imogen, her grandchildren, her agent George Greenfield, and a small collection of those who had worked with and, in many cases, done rather well out of, Blyton during the course of her long career. These included her dubious business manager, Eric Rogers, who ran the company responsible for administering her work. There were also representatives of the many charities with which Blyton had been involved: the Sunshine Fund for Blind Babies and Young People, the Friends of the Centre for Spastic Children and the 'Busy Bees', the children's arm of the People's Dispensary for Sick Children for whom Blyton had been 'Queen Bee'. The tributes were led by publisher Paul Hodder-Williams whose company Hodder and Stoughton published the Famous Five, as well as many other books by Blyton. He spoke of Blyton's 'strength and vitality', her 'sympathetic nature', but above all her 'gift of storytelling' which had brought her 'friends in every corner of the world - children of all nationalities and of all backgrounds over several generations'. But Hodder-Williams expressed the sentiments shared by some of those who knew Blyton when he hinted that she was a complicated woman who 'did not have a happy or safe childhood', whose desire to write

became a ‘compulsion’ and who—so Hodder-Williams noted—‘retained throughout her life a childlike wonder at her own success’.[2] Such comments seem patronising but Hodder-Williams had liked Blyton and explained privately that he had taken his speech as an opportunity to ‘counteract some of the rather churlish things’ which had been said about Blyton in the years prior to her death.[3] For a writer who disliked ‘unpleasantness’ some of them had been decidedly unpleasant.

Were she around today, Enid Blyton would be horrified at the interest which her personal life continues to generate while also being pleased but not surprised (she always had full confidence in her own appeal) that sales of her books remain at levels anyone would envy. In 2009 it was reported that they were still selling 11 million copies a year —more than J.K. Rowling.[4] By 2019 total sales of Blyton’s books were reckoned to have reached 600 million.[5] Meanwhile, claims for her influence (she also liked being thought influential) continue to appear in a multitude of settings. Alongside Winnie-the-Pooh and Peter Rabbit, Blyton’s characters have long been seen as part of Britain’s ‘national myth’.[6] In 1997 as a tribute to a writer who, according to its official statement, retained a ‘timeless appeal and magic’, the British Post Office issued commemorative stamps featuring scenes from Blyton’s most popular series: the Famous Five, Noddy, the Secret Seven, the Magic Faraway Tree and the Malory Towers school stories.[7] In a 2015 poll to ‘find’ the fifty most ‘inspiring’ Britons of all time, Blyton was ranked nineteenth, sandwiched between Agatha Christie (eighteenth) and Queen Victoria (twentieth). Florence Nightingale and Winston Churchill came first and second.[8] The following year there was Gemma Whelan’s turn as a singing and dancing Enid Blyton in CBBC’s *Horrible Histories* ‘Staggering Storytellers Song’ (2016). Parodying the hit ‘Black Magic’ made famous by the group Little Mix, the sketch co-opts Blyton onto a team of other ‘sisters’—Malorie Blackman, Beatrix Potter and Jacqueline Wilson—a preternaturally gifted girl-group of storytellers who rap and twerk as they celebrate their powers of making books ‘fly off the shelves’.[9] Blyton has her feet in other camps, too: holiday companies offer breaks in ‘Enid Blyton’s Dorset’, including trips to Corfe Castle (claimed as the inspiration for the Famous Five’s Kirrin Island) and Swanage, where Blyton holidayed and in 1950 bought the Isle of

Purbeck Golf Club. Theatregoers have been able to debate the playwright Michael Frayn's representation of a certain Enid Blyton (poet) who appears in his 1987 play *Balmoral* (revived by the Peter Hall Company (2009)) exiled along with other middle-brow 1930s authors to a commune following a communist revolution. More recently there has been Glyn Maxwell's stage adaption, *The Secret Seven* (Storyhouse Theatre, Chester, 2017), Emma Rice's acclaimed theatre production based on the Malory Towers stories (2019) and Canadian television's, *Malory Towers* (2020). More than fifty years after her death, 'the great Enid', as publisher Harold Raymond mockingly termed her in 1957, remains very much part of the cultural landscape.[10]

These are not, however, the only guises under which Blyton appears. Indeed, in thinking about contemporary perceptions of Blyton it is difficult to ignore the extent to which the author and her universe have increasingly been invoked in ways that are *un*flattering. In 2009 the BBC portrayed Blyton's life on screen in *Enid*, part of a string of one-off film dramatisations about prominent British figures or 'national treasures' which involved digging up secrets at odds with their public image: Margaret Thatcher, Frankie Howerd, Hattie Jacques, Barbara Cartland and Fanny Cradock all featured. In keeping with the series, the filmmakers came at Blyton from an unexpected direction, one that she would not have liked. Not only was there something sharp-edged about Enid Blyton who appeared on screen but, as portrayed by Helena Bonham Carter, she was characterised by her cruelty and her frozen emotional development. The film drew heavily on *A Childhood at Green Hedges* (1989), a memoir by Blyton's younger daughter, Imogen Smallwood, who while not unappreciative of her mother's achievements made the point that living with Blyton was not always the joyous experience one might have expected. The slow realisation on the part of the young Imogen that she was actually related to the woman with the typewriter who preferred to keep her confined in the nursery has since been repeated many times in television documentaries packaged up with allegations from other sources to do with Blyton's meanness (a sick gardener being charged for a basket of fruit), supposedly 'shocking' sexual adventures (nude mixed tennis; a lesbian affair) and a more general sense that Blyton must have had something to hide. For all her talent and enterprise, it has, thanks to various

"exposés", been increasingly popular to cast Blyton as a tyrant who could be ruthless and self-serving: a vindictive hypocrite whose 'real' personality was far from being the straightforward, kindly person she pretended to be in public. '"I was attracted to the role because she was bonkers"', explained Bonham Carter to *The Daily Mail*. '"She was an emotional mess and quite barking mad…She was allergic to reality - if there was something she didn't like then she either ignored it or re-wrote her life"'. Unsurprisingly the idea of Britain's most successful children's author functioning somewhere between chaos and restraint was taken up by the media and Bonham Carter's performance gained her a good deal of praise. Enid Blyton was 'appealing and appalling' and Bonham Carter relished the chance to act out the less heroic bits of the subject's life.[11] What Blyton did *not* appear to be was a role model or 'foremother' for living women of the kind feminist film-makers and biographers have often looked for.[12] A similar point was made again in 2014 when Julia Davis took on the role of Enid Blyton in *Psychobitches*, Sky Arts' comedy sketch show that sees some of history's most (in)famous women psychoanalysed by a therapist and in which saying the unsayable is part of the package. In keeping with the rest of the series, the scriptwriters did not shirk in depicting as their subject as a tightly wound collection of neuroses and prejudices. When Davis's chain-smoking Blyton began a diatribe against goblins ('crafty', 'uxorious', 'insular') and extended it to incorporate Jews it was assumed that viewers did not need to have it explained to them.[13] Blyton's racism and the moral failure it encompasses was shared by many writers of her generation but it has been mentioned repeatedly since her death as the thing which defines her.

In thinking about Blyton's life, such representations have proved important because they mirror what Angela V. John has noted as a tendency in biographical studies 'to reduce the subject to hero or villain status' and recent accounts of Blyton have veered towards the latter.[14] Suffice to say, such tags are difficult to shake off. Sales of Blyton's books remain strong, but her reputation has taken a hit. Even as her supporters champion Blyton's cultural significance, they too cannot help sounding a little bit apologetic as if she is beyond what is acceptable. Blyton, in spite of her influence on twentieth-century reading habits, tends to be seen as a xenophobic 'little Englander' and

this, together with her occasional snobbishness, has been held up as the reasons why her books should be consigned to the dustbin. In 2019 it was precisely this sense of Blyton that lay behind the Royal Mint's decision not to issue a commemorative coin in her honour. Accompanying this is an appropriation of Blyton as a symbolic figure, someone whose work and vision are not to be taken seriously. When, in 2015, the Green Party published their manifesto in readiness for the General Election, Boyd Tonkin was struck by how the 'utopia' it evoked was full of fantastical vintage detail: a Green government would provide 'a fortnight's camping holiday in Cornwall with cheap train tickets and a pre-Beeching rail network'. During the rest of the year, the focus would be on 'low-key, small-scale community life'. This 'numbing dose of nostalgia' and the vision of Britain it presented was 'pure Enid Blyton', comforting but simplistic.[15] Tonkin's analysis had the effect not only of skewering the Greens but of reminding people—if they didn't know already—that Blyton was pretty low level—facile and not very realistic. It's an idea political sketch writers, in particular, have long been prone to take up. In 2012's 'Lashings of enthusiasm for Uniting the Kingdom', Ann Treneman's attention was taken by the 'perky' but, as she saw it, politically inexperienced, Tory transport minister Justine Greening, her 'bobbed hair swinging', and 'as wholesome as if she had escaped from an Enid Blyton book'.[16] That there is an Enid Blyton 'look' was likewise apparent on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee which took place in the same year. The televised celebrations were the cue for massed ranks of television presenters 'with preternaturally bright eyes and jingling voices reading autocues that sound[ed] like they were written by Enid Blyton'.[17] It was not a compliment. Nor do sportsmen escape. It seemed to *The Independent's* Stephen Brenkley, who was in sarcastic mood in 2012, that the England cricket team, after a day trying to read their Pakistan opponents (without much success) had made 'progress from Janet and John but only as far as, say, Enid Blyton's less cerebral works'. The intellectually-limited players worked 'doggedly without supplying firm evidence that they quite understood what they were dealing with'.[18]

Conversely, it says a lot about British media outlets that for some of them there is still something idyllic and magical about the Blyton world. It formed part of Matthew Dennison's tribute published in *The Daily*

Express in 2017 to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the first appearance of the Famous Five. Noting that 'British readers buy one of Enid Blyton's books every minute', Dennison extolled the lost world inhabited by Blyton's child adventurers and their dog: 'freedom and lots and lots of fresh air' coupled with 'unspoilt beaches' and 'rolling green countryside'. Such a 'magical' kinship with nature was not something that many of today's children would ever experience.[19] This vision of Blyton as someone associated with the unspoilt glories of the precious English countryside is her acceptable face. When the COVID-19 epidemic arrived in Britain in early 2020, it appeared as if Blyton's time had come again as travel writers, unable to go abroad, evoked her in extolling the benefits of 'wholesome' camping and kayaking in Britain: 'How to have an Enid Blyton summer: jolly outdoor adventures for all the family' was the tagline deployed by *The Daily Telegraph* in June 2020.[20] Amongst all this, definite patterns have emerged. Most obviously it is that in Britain it can be quite difficult to close one's eyes and ears to all this (often lazy) referencing of Enid Blyton and her characters. But it is also the case that Blyton has been—and continues to be—so much a part of the cultural landscape that the assumption is always that readers will 'get' the reference. This is so much so that Blyton's most famous characters, the Famous Five, are even evoked to illustrate scientific debates down to whether the reason the Five had so much energy was because their sugar intake (via the 'lashings' of ginger beer) caused them to be hyperactive.[21]

I cite this long list of examples because one of the issues considered in this book about Blyton's literary life and career is her reception history and her meaning for different generations of readers—from the 1920s to the 2000s. Despite—or perhaps because of—the 'old-fashioned' attitudes, there is a sense in the minds of many people that Blyton's stories contain a timeless appeal. There is also an idea that her works are infinitely adaptable and accommodating. While one section of current critical opinion presents (and defends) Blyton's works as historical curiosities 'of their time', another cites Blyton and her 'dreamscape' as a way of speaking to the anxieties and desires of the twenty-first century. In 2019 when she was publicising her much-admired stage production based on the Malory Towers books, the theatre director Emma Rice was quoted as saying that Blyton's

schoolgirls are positive role models for today's anxious children: 'strong female characters' driven by their nascent 'feminism'.[22] Such a stance echoes the one taken in the *Horrible Histories* sketch cited above in which Blyton and her fellow authors are billed as '(s)heroes' who wanted more than being told 'cooking was all we could do'.

But are Blyton's characters really models for today?How does Blyton belong to us? What meanings do her stories carry? What is her significance? Answers to these questions fluctuate considerably. There is Blyton the publishing phenomenon who is taken as embodying children's literature, at least as it existed in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. There is another Blyton who is spoken of in pejorative terms with a feeling that she is not altogether a good thing for children's literature, a writer of 'stubby prose' who has long been regarded with derision by people who worry about what children read.[23] This is the Blyton whose stories have long been likened to sweets; in other words as examples of the kinds of things children shouldn't be given—and prompts the idea that if anything is to be learnt from her life and career, it is that to be a successful writer does not depend on being good at writing. There is also, as we have seen, Blyton the racist reactionary whose stories articulate bigoted fears of people of different races and creeds. Then there is a writer who deals in hope and aspiration and has always given her readers 'furniture for dreams' as Alan Coren put it.[24] It is this Blyton, for example, who garners support from readers (later writers) who grew up in the grey Britain of the 1940s and 1950s. She forms part of what Nicholas Saunders has termed the 'memory bridge' connecting successive generations to their pasts and also to each other.[25] 'Blyton taught me what books could do', recalls Susan Hill (b.1940) of her time growing up in Scarborough. 'Yes, her prose is bland….But Blyton had the secret, the knack…Enid Blyton excited us…'.[26] Ian McEwan, born in Leicester in 1948, has explained how by the age of eleven he had read 'probably every word that Enid Blyton had written to date'.[27] Most strikingly perhaps, the former Labour Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, born in 1950 into poverty in Notting Hill, writes affectionately in his memoir *This Boy* (2013) of the 'wonderful escapism' and the 'genuine comfort' which 'Blyton-land' provided in 'dark days'.[28] Whatever one's take on

her it is certainly true is that these different views of Blyton—both woman and writer—have set the terms for a critical debate that is still being played out.

Who Was Enid Blyton?

Who was Enid Blyton and how might we approach her literary life? It is true that despite being the subject of a fair amount of biographical investigation including books and television and radio documentaries—and despite the existence of letters and some diaries—the person who was Enid Blyton remains an indeterminate and often obscured figure. This is so much so that it has become usual to preface accounts of her life with the provisos that she was 'reticent', 'secretive' or even an 'enigma'. Her early life has proved particularly challenging, a period about which Blyton appears to have been prone to distorting.

The different phases of Blyton's life will be examined in detail in later chapters but it is worth briefly introducing the key points. What do we know about her? She was born Enid Mary Blyton in a flat above a shop at 354 Lordship Lane, East Dulwich, South London, on 11 August 1897 where her father, Thomas Carey Blyton (1870–1920), worked for his family's wholesale cloth business (the 1901 census describes him as a mantle manufacturer/tailor). Her mother Theresa (née Harrison, 1874–1950) devoted herself to household matters—and the bringing up of the children who followed Enid: two boys, Hanly (b.1899) and Carey (b.1903). Soon after Enid's birth, the family moved to a semi-detached house in Chaffinch Road in the suburb of Beckenham, Kent, where their neighbours were a mixture of clerks, builders, cab drivers and fishmongers. The remainder of Enid's childhood would be spent in the town, although the family moved several times. The 1911 census shows them at a larger house at 31 Clock House Road, a more middle-class street (the census gives the occupations of these neighbours variously as bank and civil service clerks, and insurance agents). By this time, the family was able to afford a live-in servant, an indicator of their aspirations to gentility. By all accounts Thomas Blyton was a lively personality and the focal point of his young daughter's emotional life and early education, taking her for nature rambles and encouraging her to read.[29] The young Enid was devasted in 1910 when her father left to set up home with another woman, Florence Delattre, with whom he had two further children, Florence and Gebir.

Although Blyton maintained some contact with her father, meeting him at his office in London, the family home in Beckenham became a much less congenial place. The standard account is that as an offshoot of her father's departure, Blyton had turned against Theresa Blyton, an antagonism exacerbated by the latter's apparently limited interests: housework, penny-pinching and respectability. Barbara Stoney has constructed an environment which provoked the young Enid to outbursts of temper and violence, constantly disappearing upstairs to write her diaries and poems, or escaping to the house of a friend's aunt, Mabel Attenborough. It was Attenborough who seems to have helped encourage the belief that Enid was destined for better things than Beckenham, who took the honorary title, 'Mums', and in whose family home the eighteen-year-old Blyton chose to live as a lodger rather than remaining with her mother and brothers. In Theresa Blyton's defence, we might say that her irritation is not difficult to understand. Rather than Enid's spending her time reading or scribbling in her small box bedroom, Hanly Blyton recalled how 'not unnaturally her mother thought that she would be better occupied coming down and doing some domestic work which of course was expected of a girl in those days'.[30] The relationship between exasperated mother and ambitious daughter did not improve, at least on Enid's part, and from the time she left home in 1915 to the time of Theresa Blyton's death in 1950, the two women had limited contact. Blyton did not attend her mother's funeral.

By this time, the young Enid had also begun her education and from 1907 attended St Christopher's School for girls. Her drive and determination led to her becoming head girl, captain of tennis and lacrosse. Blyton's classmate—and sometime collaborator—Phyllis Chase, recalled her as being 'awfully good-natured…brilliant… sickening… quite good at art…[T]here was nothing she didn't excel at'.[31] But Blyton's favourite subject remained English; she thrived on essay-writing and 'composition' and she remembered that as she grew older she continued to 'read a great deal' (*SML*, 68). Blyton and her classmates studied passages from Shakespeare and the Bible, and memorised poems for recitation. It was a challenge Blyton met easily and she retained the ability to quote what she had learned long after. The young Blyton was also a talented pianist and her parents had plans for their daughter to follow in the footsteps of an aunt, May Crossland, a

professional musician, and enter the Guildhall School of Music. In an interview broadcast on the BBC radio programme, *Home for the Day* in 1963, Blyton, then aged sixty-five, remembered how 'at six years old, I had to begin to learn to play the piano and all through my childhood there was practice, practice, practice, till I was in my teens and I was doing four hours a day…[I]f you have to work at something that you have really no desire to achieve anything great in, it becomes a terrible bore'.[32] Blyton did not take up her place at music college. She discovered a love of teaching after helping her friend Ida Hunt at a Sunday school. Consequently, Blyton seems to have fixed upon the idea that training for the latter would help her achieve her ambition to write (this was true as it turned out). By the time she left St Christopher's in 1916 to take up a place on a Froebel course at Ipswich High School, the teenage Enid had transformed into a vivacious and striking young woman, standing five feet, four inches, somewhat sheltered (as most girls of her class were) but in her own words 'headstrong' and full of 'independence', possessing an irrepressible sense of her artistic destiny (*SML*, 77). 'I knew what I ought to do. I knew it without a single doubt. I wanted to be a writer for children' was how she remembered this period (*SML*, 75).

The socio-economic status of the Blyton family meant that Enid was obliged to earn her living. The women who had lived in her street as a teenager were variously dressmakers, shop assistants and clerks but Blyton, clever and ambitious, aimed higher. When in 1918 she graduated from her teacher-training course she dutifully obtained a teaching post at a small private boys' school, Bickley Park, in Bromley, followed eighteen months later by a post as governess to the Thompson family who lived at 'Southernhay', in Hook Road, Surbiton, a role she held for the next four years. It was here that she ran what she later described as her own school but was really Blyton teaching classes made up of seven or eight of the neighbours' children (all under ten years of age) alongside the Thompson boys (David, Brian, Peter and John). By all accounts, Blyton was an engaging teacher able to establish a rapport with her pupils. One recalled her '"deep, throaty laugh"' and willingness to have fun despite the full curriculum she imposed (Stoney, 42). Blyton also studied her pupils, as well as testing out stories, poems and plays on them, which she continually to tried to get

published. Her schoolfriend, Phyllis Chase, illustrated many of them. Together and individually they had pieces accepted sporadically but in 1922 their careers got a boost when *Teacher's World* began taking their work. The magazine spotted Blyton's potential and offered her a weekly column (1923–1945). In 1922 Blyton's first book of poetry, *Child Whispers* appeared.

In 1924 Blyton's professional and personal life took an unexpected direction when she had her first emotional meetings with the man who would become her husband and mentor, Hugh Pollock (1888–1971), a book editor at the important publishing firm George Newnes Ltd. Pollock, charming and worldly, appreciated hero-worship and in Blyton, a young woman who was perhaps likely to form passionate attachments to dynamic, older creative men, he found a perfect (and seemingly willing) candidate—and one who was beginning to make a name for herself. When, in August 1924, the couple were married, they moved into a flat in Chelsea. Blyton, who had relinquished her teaching post, wrote full-time. She was partly guided in her choice of projects by her husband and, in 1926, took on the editorship of *Sunny Stories,* which she would supply single-handedly with material for the next twenty-seven years (to 1953). That same year the couple moved to 'Elfin Cottage', Beckenham, and in 1929 to 'Old Thatch' in Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, where their two daughters were born: Gillian in 1931; Imogen in 1935.

This part of Blyton's life is where we have a lot more information about her, partly because of her diaries and (from the early 1940s) letters. She and her husband established what witnesses described as 'an ideal partnership', which depended on Blyton's compulsion to write being given free rein.[33] Somehow Blyton also found time to make an active social life for herself, a comfortable whirl of cocktail parties, bridge, tennis and later golf. Hugh Pollock also moved in influential circles and knew some of the most eminent writers and politicians of the time, including Winston Churchill, whose books he helped edit. But when in 1938 the family moved again—to 'Green Hedges', a large house in Beaconsfield—the marriage was under strain, compounded by the outbreak of war in 1939 and Pollock's enlisting in his old regiment, the Royal Scots Fusiliers in 1941. The marriage did not survive and Blyton divorced Pollock in 1942. By this time she had

begun a relationship with Kenneth Darrell Waters (1892–1967) whom she married the following year. Blyton's daughters were encouraged to regard Waters as their father. This was also the period in which Blyton appeared most 'Stakhanovite', as some observers described her immense productivity (the term took its name from Aleksei Stakhanov, a coal miner in communist Russia who was lauded as a hero by the state for vastly exceeding his quota). Thirty or more books a year were not unusual. It was partly this over-production that made her the perfect candidate for the critical disdain directed at her at the end of her career.

It is here that we get most sightings of her, for example via George Greenfield (1917?–2000) who, in 1953, became her agent (prior to this she dealt with business matters herself). Greenfield was part of the John Fahquarson Agency; his other clients included the mountaineer, Edmund Hillary, the plastic surgeon Harold Gilles and the showjumper Pat Smythe. He was used to dealing with successful people with large egos. When Greenfield met Blyton, she was in 'her full stride', and the agent who liked and became protective of his client recalled her as 'a professional to her fingertips, friendly – when things went well – and tough as a dried pemmican underneath it all'. As he noted, '[h]er idea was to catch them [children] young and keep them enthralled as they grew older'. What Greenfield also realised was that Blyton the person (as opposed to 'Enid Blyton' the literary character) was not the naïve figure people liked to imagine from her writings and manner: 'She knew exactly what she was doing', he recalled. As a worker she was 'indefatigable'; she was assiduous in keeping in touch with her publishers and readers.[34] She did not appear charismatic at public appearances but she could silence a room of children and keep them entertained effortlessly.

In the late 1950s, Blyton's health began to fail and it has been suggested that she was a victim of dementia from the early 1960s. Although her workload remained spectacular by most people's standards, her pace slowed. She toiled at the writing and editing of her biggest project of the decade, *Enid Blyton's Magazine* (launched in 1953) but was forced to close it down in 1959. Blyton's last adventure story, *Fun for the Secret Seven,* was written in early 1963. This was the same year that the twenty-first Famous Five title, *Five Are Together*

Again, was published—also the last in the series. In 1967, Kenneth Waters died, leaving Blyton to be cared for by domestic staff. By this time, her memory had visibly started to fail and to observers like George Greenfield, she seemed to live in the past. In September 1968, Blyton was admitted to a Hampstead nursing home where she died aged seventy-one on 28 November. The obituaries were respectful, although their writers invariably suggested that it had been enough for Blyton to have been in the right place at the right time—and to have a knack for connecting with children. What the obituaries also noted was that while Blyton had been a public figure for more than forty years, many aspects of her life and personality remained unanswered. As *The Times* noted, the author herself had 'over the years' become 'as cagey as Marie Corelli about herself and her affairs'.[35] The newspaper's older readers would presumably have recognised the reference to Corelli (1855–1924), the bestselling novelist of the generation of writers just prior to Blyton's own, whose expertise in self-presentation and promotion but also obfuscation, hiding the truth about her origins was legendary. Was it the case, asked *The Guardian*, that Enid Blyton with her 'easy popularity' and her determination to avoid anything 'sordid' had had a life which was, well, sordid?[36] These questions continue to be asked today. Why was Blyton driven to write so much—what lay behind her apparently uncontrolled outpourings? Did she have a double life? Did she have a love affair with another woman? Was she a monster? I cite these questions not because they are the most useful ones to ask but because they are examples of the speculation Blyton's life often provokes, much of it tied up with the dissonance between her public image as a kindly auntie and the more complicated woman underneath. Since Blyton's death, a good deal of biographical information about her has come to light thanks to works by Barbara Stoney, Imogen Smallwood, Tony Summerfield, Duncan McLaren and David Rudd (amongst others). It is clear, however, that there is more to be discovered about Blyton's life and career.

Studying Blyton

There have been many different approaches to Enid Blyton and Chapter 2 surveys some of them. The present book is based on three main assumptions. The first is that although it would be misleading to offer an account of Enid Blyton's life and work without talking about her most famous series: the Famous Five, the 'Noddy' books, the Secret Seven and Malory Towers, Blyton's achievements as a writer do not rest solely on these works. As we shall see, Blyton had a long career as a poet, journalist, playwright, magazine editor and a storyteller (her phrase for herself). It began during the First World War and continued until—or even—after her death in 1968. While it is impossible to do justice to all her writing, one of the aims of this book is to reveal something of Blyton's diversity in terms of genre, form and subject matter, thereby suggesting that she is not as easy to sum up as she first seems and is certainly more complex and thoughtful than she is given credit for being. It is also worth noting that one of the reasons why Blyton is rarely treated as a serious writer is because there is an assumption that she is too popular to be good. She is an example of a bestselling author who achieved her status because of 'popular consent', as Mortimer Adler puts it. Blyton was not the choice of 'a special elite'. She was also a writer for children, an occupation which has traditionally brought with it its own 'stigma'.[37]

The second main assumption is that Blyton's achievements as a professional writer are deserving of more attention than they have received. Blyton's knowledge of the publishing industry and its workings were a central part of her career. She was interested in the fabric of her books, their illustrations, their covers, their typography, but also in their price and their marketing and in ways they reached the public in Britain or abroad via magazine or newspaper, serialisation, reprint, broadcast. As her career progressed, she looked to new ways to sell what she had written and sought to adapt stories for the theatre. A focus on Blyton's professional life thus seems appropriate. In the early 1970s when discussions about a biography of Blyton started to circulate, one reason why publisher Paul Hodder-Williams was sceptical was that it seemed that her personal life had been largely

uneventful. As he explained: 'she [Blyton] devoted her whole free time to her writing, so that the story of her life is so often the story of the stories, poems, nature study articles etc. on which she was working'.[38] This was not strictly true, of course. However, it was the case that Blyton kept people at arm's length partly so she could focus on being a professional wordsmith. 'I am a very busy person' she told the illustrator Marjorie Davies, adopting the regal tone she sometimes deployed. 'I do not like working with anyone slack'.[39] The overriding impression, of course, is often that Blyton *never* stopped working. Her fiction, too, is full of people working. Thus, one of the concerns of the present book is also work—the importance of work but also the pressure of work.

As we shall also see, one of the things that makes Blyton so hard for biographers—and even her family—to follow (in the sense of understanding the 'real' woman beneath) was the ways she compartmentalised her life or 'lives' as she put it (Mac, 11 January 1950). There are tensions between different versions of Blyton—the dynamic, ambitious writer who wielded considerable power in a male world but who also espoused the values of home and husband. For thirty years she lived in Beaconsfield, a town in the Home Counties, where she was seen proudly adopting—and enjoying—a domestic, feminine lifestyle, attending to her flowers and organising meals. Yet while she lived this largely private life, she also cultivated a uniquely close relationship with her readers. She gave generously to charities, particularly those connected to children and animals, but she could be mean-spirited, and one of her daughters felt neglected. Like other celebrated exponents of writing for children—Rudyard Kipling, Kenneth Graeme—she has been labelled emotionally immature and 'child-like' and this has been given as a reason for her success, but she was also, as her daughter Imogen recalled, 'incredibly, beautifully organised and controlled, self-controlled and very happy like that'.[40] At the height of her career, she could also feel torn between the competing demands on her time and the different obligations she put herself under. Blyton was a housewife and mother, but her life was also about her work; the next book and the next project.

The third assumption governing this book is that the responses of Blyton's own contemporaries to her and, the twentieth-century

historical and literary contexts and conditions in which she published her works, are central to any understanding of them. Blyton's life coincided with some of the major transformations not only in publishing, but also of British society more generally; hers is what Barbara Caine has described as 'the capacity of an individual life to reflect broad historical change'.[41] During Blyton's seventy-one years she lived through the First World War, the economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of Fascism, the Second World War, the emergence of the welfare state and the dawn of the 'swinging sixties'. So, this book argues for the significance of the initial contexts of Blyton's work, as a writer who (surprisingly) can seem much more socially, politically and culturally engaged than is often imagined—and also more sensitive—something which becomes more noticeable when we are willing to move beyond the realms of Noddy et al. and admit the existence of other fictional, dramatic, poetic and journalistic work. The potential of this approach is described in more detail in Chapter 2. There are still difficulties in 'knowing' Blyton but what such investigations also reveal is the tension noted earlier, between different versions of Blyton the writer—between the Blyton who can seem modern and 'relevant' to the twenty-first century and the Blyton whose varied output is bound up in specific historical circumstances and the middle-class, Anglo-centric attitudes which Blyton carried around with her.

This book will also suggest that Blyton is occasionally a more complex writer than she appears. Although she is popularly remembered as a conservative who possessed 'outsize social prejudices', as Nicholas Tucker puts it, one of the characteristics of some of her writing is its polyphony and its potential to resist fixed readings.[42] Despite Blyton's obvious conformity and place within the culture of her time, her writings—and also her life and career—are interesting for the ways in which they can sometimes be read as entering into a challenging relationship with the cultural values they appear to propagate so happily. Blyton's stories seem to encourage conformity, but themes of transgression, rebellion and secrecy also appear, alongside a fascination with disguise, escape, and alternative selves and choices. Blyton's adoption of a pseudonym 'Mary Pollock' for

some of her works perhaps also suggests her own interest in assuming another identity.

In a book of this length focused on someone who wrote so much it is necessary to be selective and in deciding what issues and texts to concentrate on, notice has been taken of David Rudd's observation that '[t]here are in fact a number of "Blytons" out there, just as there are different versions of her most famous characters' and it is impossible to capture all of them.[43] The chapters which follow are broadly chronological and discuss selected issues in relation to Blyton's life and a range of different writings produced at different points in her career. By its very nature, a study of this kind dealing with such numerous, varied and multivalent texts (the work of a person who was herself complicated and contradictory) can only offer a partial view, but the discussions offered here of particular series, novels and poems are intended to whet the reader's appetite. Of the texts chosen, some like *The Famous Five* (1942–1963) and the *St Clare's* series (1941–1945) have been the focus of a good deal of criticism, particularly as examples of genre fiction; others like *The Adventurous Four* (1940), *House-at-the-Corner* (1947), *Six Cousins at Mistletoe Farm* (1948) and *The Six Bad Boys* (1951) have received very little attention.

Chapter 2 traces some of the developments in Blyton's critical fortunes and explores some of the ways in which critics have sought to explain Blyton the person and her work. Chapters 3 and 4 consider the early part of Blyton's career in the 1920s and 1930s; they trace the emergence of what would become recognisably Blyton subjects—fantasy, animals, adventures, circuses—as well as looking at some of the ways in which Blyton as a writer within the literary marketplace also works within the narrative structures and traditions peculiar to different fictional sub-genres of her day. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 demonstrate some of the ways in which Blyton's texts engage with issues which had special relevance in the period in which she was at her most dominant, 1939–1955: the Second World War, nationhood and Englishness, empire, juvenile delinquency, the family. Read alongside these contexts, these works begin to take on new dimensions, emerging as records of social crisis and but also resolutions. Chapter 9 continues this theme by considering Blyton's stance in relation to debates surrounding women's roles and the extent to which her stories

can be said to dramatise some of the feminist arguments of their day as well as embodying a conservative viewpoint. Chapter 10 considers Blyton’s thorny reputation in the 1950s and her creation of another popular but highly controversial (and, some would argue, idiotic) series, *Noddy in Toyland*. Chapter 11 looks at Blyton’s forays into television but more especially theatre—and the success of her stage adaptations in the 1950s of the Noddy stories and of the Famous Five adventures. Chapter 12, ‘Final Years’ looks at Blyton’s work leading up to her death in 1968. The intention is that what emerges is an Enid Blyton who is more varied, more impressive, more creative and socially aware than many critics have allowed for.

Notes

1. Unsigned Article, ‘Miss Enid Blyton: Froebel Teacher Who Became Best-Selling Children’s Author’, *The Times* (29 November 1968), 12.
2. Paul Hodder-Williams, ‘Enid Blyton Memorial Service’, London Metropolitan Archives/Hodder and Stoughton Archives, M.16352A. See also Paul Hodder-Williams, ‘Enid in Toyland’, *Sunday Telegraph* (1 December 1968), 15.
3. Paul Hodder-Williams to George Greenfield, 8 January 1969, London Metropolitan Archives/Hodder and Stoughton Archives, M.16352A.
4. David Rudd, ‘In Defence of the Indefensible? Some Grounds for Enid Blyton’s Appeal’, in *Children’s Literature: Approaches and Territories*, eds. Janet Maybin and Nicola J. Watson (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 168–82 (168).
5. Joe Sommerlad,‘World Book Day:10 Best Children’s Books by Enid Blyton’, *The Independent* (7 March 2019). https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/world-book-day-enid-blyton-books-best-series-famous-five-secret-seven-a8810566.html. Accessed 26 June 2021.
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11. Lisa Seward, ‘Naked Tennis, a Lesbian Affair with the Nanny: There Was More to Enid Blyton than Midnight Feasts and Ginger Beer: New TV Drama Reveals Her as a Barking-Mad Adulterous Bully’, *Daily Mail* (13 November 2009), 63.

12. Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 226.

13. Jeremy Dyson (dir.), ‘Enid Blyton’, *Psychobitches* Series 1: 2, Tiger Aspect Productions/Sky Arts, 6 June 2013. https://youtu.be/nX3LPe9jd7U. Accessed 13 March 2021.

14. Angela V. John, *Turning the Tide: The Life of Lady Rhonda* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), 20.

15. Boyd Tonkin, ‘Britain Was at Its Best in…?: Each Party Has a Different Take’, *The Independent* (17 April 2015), 36.

16. Ann Treneman, ‘Lashings of Enthusiasm for Uniting the Kingdom’, *The Times* (13 January 2012), 15.

17. Harriet Walker, ‘Duty Keeps Calling’, *The Independent* (6 June

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26. Susan Hill, *Howard’s End Is on the Landing* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 24.
27. Ian McEwan, ‘An Only Childhood’, *The Observer* (31 January 1982),

28. 41.

Alan, Johnson, *This Boy. A Memoir of Childhood* (London: Corgi, 2014), 118.

29. Whether Thomas Blyton was, as he seems to have claimed, a published author remains less clear. There is no evidence to back up a story which Blyton trotted out in a *Daily Express* interview in 1952 that her father's literary work appeared alongside that of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley in the celebrated avant-garde magazine, *The Yellow Book,* in the 1890s. See Nancy Spain, 'Saturday Outing with Nancy Spain', *The Daily Express* (27 September 1952), 4.

30. Hanly Blyton quoted in *A Child-like Person*, dir. Roger Thompson BBC Radio 4 (19 August 1975), 07.33. https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/a-childlike-person/zvvt8xs. Accessed 14 March 2021.

31. Phyllis Chase quoted in *A Child-like Person*, 06.35–06.45.

32. *Home for the Day: Enid Blyton*. Interview with Marjorie Anderson, BBC Light Programme 13 January 1963, 00.58–01.18. https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/home-for-the-day--enid-blyton/zvy6kmn. Accessed 1 March 2021.

33. Dick Hughes quoted in 'A Child-like Person', 15.51.

34. George Greenfield, *A Smattering of Monsters* (1995; London: Little Brown and Company, 1997), 11, 110, 112, 115.

35. Unsigned Article, 'Enid Blyton: Froebel Teacher Who Became Best-Selling Children's Author', 12.

36. Unsigned Article, 'Enid Blyton', *The Guardian* (29 November 1968), 22.

37. Mortimer Adler, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind* (1977; New York: Macmillan, 1988), 320.

38. Paul Hodder-Williams to Michael & Elsie Herron, 26 November 1973, London Metropolitan Archives/Hodder and Stoughton Archives, M.16352A. Williams also advised George Greenfield that a biography would be a terrible idea; prying into Blyton's life would 'only harm her sales & her image'. Paul Hodder-Williams to George Greenfield, nd, 1970, London Metropolitan Archives/Hodder and Stoughton Archives, M.16352A.
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40. Imogen Smallwood, quoted in *The Blyton Legacy* (Seven Stories, 2013), 0.37–1.24. https://youtu.be/lTEjM2xLtTM. Accessed 3 March 2021.
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Enid Blyton's reputation has fluctuated a good deal. At the peak of her career in the 1940s and early 1950s, Blyton was widely regarded as an iconic figure, a 'national institution' and an expert in all things related to children for whom she was an 'idol'.[1] An Enid Blyton book was 'a passport to happiness for millions of children' declared Peter Hawley in 1947. There was also a feeling that the author's vast output and her 'cult of simplicity' had helped change the landscape and possibilities—including commercial ones—of children's literature.[2] 'Enid Blyton is a good thing' explained bookseller John Piper in 1951. 'She keeps children – and their parents - coming into bookshops. She encourages children of *all ages* to read'. It was, he added, 'up to rival authors to write something more entertaining if they want to compete'.[3] The diversity of Blyton's work meant that she was compared to Robert Louis Stevenson, Beatrix Potter, Edith Nesbit and J.M. Barrie. But Blyton was more than a children's writer. She intervened in public debates and was taken seriously by important people. A headline in 1949 yelled 'Working - Mother Plan "Disastrous for Nation" – Authoress', a response to Blyton's much-publicised participation in a campaign to 'safeguard' home life in the face of the Labour government's attempts to encourage more women to take paid work.[4] Yet in the years leading up to and following her death in 1968, Blyton was re-cast a writer of dubious merits and little credibility—'a ruthless writing machine' producing 'easy pap' as David Holloway described her in 1974.[5]

It is not possible to tell the whole story of Blyton's reputation here, but a useful starting point is the publication in the late 1950s and 1960s of a series of attacks by prominent librarians, educationalists and journalists.[6] These helped create a picture of Blyton as a self-important, over-indulged figure who had been given free rein over children's literature for long enough. A notable example of this was Colin Welch's scathing (and supercilious) article, 'Dear Little Noddy' (1958). This attacked Blyton as an ill-qualified 'former school teacher' and self-pronouncing missionary with 'A Message' who was exploiting the nation's families while making herself so rich that she had become 'the highest paid woman in the British Isles'. By this time Blyton's pride in the vast number of books bearing her name was well-known (it was always mentioned in interviews). For Welch, it was something which 'naturally' prompted suspicion and he returned to a rumour which had circulated for some years: whether Blyton wrote all these books herself? If 'yes', how was it possible, given the rapid rate at which they spilled out, that they could be any good? Even if she did write her own books Blyton's lack of intellect was, for Welch, all too obvious, and she would not be worth taking seriously were it not for the fact that children were entranced by her. Much of Welch's ammunition was aimed at Noddy, the wooden nodding boy, whose 'imbecility' he judged 'almost indecent' and who was 'the most egocentric, joyless, snivelling and pious anti-hero in the history of British fiction'. It did not reflect well on anyone, least of all Blyton, that '[i]n this witless, spiritless, snivelling, sneaking doll the children of England are expected to find themselves reflected. From it they are to derive ethical and moral edification'. As a personality, Noddy was 'querulous, irritable and humourless', 'unnaturally priggish' and 'a sneak'. Nor was Blyton redeemed by her writing style which was dependent on dumbing so far down that the reader's abilities were never stretched. The result was that '[b]y putting everything within reach of the child mind', her books 'enervate and cripple it'. Older children fared little better. How was it possible, Welch asked, that 'a diet of Miss Blyton could help with the 11-plus or even with the Cambridge English Tripos'? Welch also included evidence from a town librarian who reported that 'Only not-so-bright children like Enid Blyton'. Faced with this, Welch looked back fondly towards the children's books of the Victorian age which 'often involve

long words and quite complex intellectual and moral problems'.[7] Although it is not difficult to spot Welch's own biases—he is snobbish and has trouble reconciling the fact that a well-paid and influential author can be a woman of lower-middle-class origins—his intentions are clear enough. He seeks to make Blyton look self-serving and third-rate and does so by insulting her and her readers. By emphasising the dangers to a child's education—even if the child is pre-school—Welch is able to present Blyton as a pernicious presence, lacking in subtlety and obsessed by a need to dominate.[8]

Another turning point was the news which reached Britain in 1960 that Blyton's books had been banned from New Zealand's libraries. Whether or not this was a decision influenced (as some claimed) by Welch's article and his argument that Blyton's stories did nothing to help a child's literacy, it was surprising enough to be widely reported. As wags were prone to point out, being banned was a distinction Blyton shared with the 'pornographic' American author Henry Miller. In the years that followed, several municipal libraries in British cities made similar headlines by following suit or adopting a policy of not replacing their stocks of Blyton's books. These decisions were reported melodramatically. 'City turns out Noddy and friends' was how *The Daily Mirror* in 1964 described Nottingham's cruel actions; the city council had 'ordered out' little Noddy as well as 'most other books by their creator' on the grounds of their 'limited appeal'. The paper carried a statement from Kenneth Darrell Waters (who had presumably been rung up at Green Hedges) who told the reporters that '[t]hese librarians don't like books being popular. They try to force the classics on to the children, but the children won't read them'.[9]

It is often assumed that by this point it was the racism in some of Blyton's stories which was being put forward as the reason why she should no longer be read or stocked (see p. 38), Yet in the 1960s it was more often the case that when detractors went after the veteran author the issue was the apparent lack of 'grit' and realism in her stories, and what was seen (unfairly) as her simplistic, pastel-shaded view of children. This is apparent in another take on Blyton: 'Women of Influence', published in 'The Women's Mirror' (part of *The Daily Mirror*) in September 1964. Here, in a rather confused attempt to find out about 'the personalities behind the power', a group of well-known 1960s

women (television producer, Hazel Adair, novelist Barbara Cartland, gossip columnist Betty Kenward, TV cook Fanny Craddock) were quizzed about their views on the modern woman and her opportunities for making a mark. Blyton was also interviewed and was quoted as saying 'I think I've had an influence – as all good teachers have – by bringing out the musical and artistic sense in children, and also their curiosity'. It was familiar Blyton stuff. Then, however, the magazine—rather ungraciously—brought in a psychiatrist who offered a damning assessment. He explained that:

> Enid Blyton's work…reflects the over-feminisation of society. Men come off especially badly in her books. Noddy is an educationally subnormal nit who is easily led astray. His companion, Big Ears, is a ridiculous dwarf. The girls, by comparison, are terribly pretty and rather clever – and there are few, if any witches.
>
> Mothers like the stories and that's why they sell well. They hate to think of their children, especially boys, having violent feelings – but boys need to release aggression.

After this, the article's author, Steve Young, moved onto Barbara Cartland (1901–2000), almost an exact contemporary of Blyton. His verdict was similarly damning: 'Barbara Cartland's novels are a logical progression from Enid Blyton's stories. Love tends to be an anaemic, gutless game that reaches suffocatingly unreal climaxes under a full moon'.[10] The flip side of this was that while such revisionist takes gained some traction with some parents and teachers, they did not really dent Blyton's sales. Her books—like those of Cartland—continued to sell in quantities most writers only dreamt of. In 1967 the paperback reprint of *Five on a Treasure Island* sold 72,688. In 1968 *The Secret Seven* managed 41,250.[11] It was thus a source of considerable irritation to her detractors that the Blyton brand appeared to go from strength to strength; it was as if they were making no impression at all. 'Are your children addicted to Enid Blyton and what, if anything do you do about it?' asked Edward Blishen wearily in 1967.

Whilst there is no single explanation as to why Blyton became so little regarded, it is clear that the decline in her reputation mirrors the

kinds of shifts and changes in taste and understanding that Hans Robert Jauss describes in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982). Using Jauss's framework, the emerging dislike of Blyton can be attributed to a change in the 'horizon of expectations' and an 'altered aesthetic norm' that causes 'the audience [to] experience formerly successful works as outmoded and [to] withdraw its appreciation'.[12] The fact that Blyton's achievements seemed to be reducible to tales about pixies, golliwogs and talking animals made it easy to dismiss her as too banal and too out of date to have any value. Nor did it help that for much of her lifetime she was recognised as the voice of Home Counties England, pouring out 'sub-Ransome' stories in 'endless profusion', all populated by clean-limbed, middle-class children speaking received-pronunciation and attending boarding school, as *The New York Times* reported in 1960.[13] The bias displayed by editors towards such work—especially if ponies made an appearance—was well-known. Blyton benefited from a 'tolerant deafness' on the part of publishers who inhabited a 'self-satisfied…small world' and were happy to have her write the same kinds of stories despite how socially glib and out of touch they were.[14] By the time the slow cultural and political turn begun in the 1960s reached the 1970s Blyton (who had died in 1968) had become an easy person to disparage. 'We do not now want our children to be as Enid Blyton wanted them to be: we do not indeed believe that they are as she said they were', announced the novelist Gillian Tindall in 1974 as she surveyed Blyton's 'priggish, snobbish, mini-folk'. In a demonstration of how the different criticisms which had gathered around Blyton ran into each other, Tindall also explained that Blyton was unsuitable because she had 'the mental outlook and tastes of a particularly unsophisticated nursery governess – as well as some of the abilities'. Blyton's long-running success was largely due to the fact that in her lifetime she had managed to convince everyone that she was both talented and trustworthy by dint of her management of a 'carefully-cultivated public persona'.

Elsewhere a sense of Blyton as what Jane Gallop would call a 'phallic mother' whose influence needed to be shaken off, also took hold, particularly amongst younger writers.[15] In 1962, Alan Garner (b. 1934), author of the acclaimed *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960) was unapologetic in telling interviewers that Blyton made him 'squirm'.[16]

Older writers, meanwhile, had for a long time felt irritation and envy at Blyton's success and, following her death, several were prepared to give vent to their feelings. Alison Uttley, famous for her stories about Little Grey Rabbit, and a neighbour in Beaconsfield, declared that the best place for Blyton's books 'was a sale of work'.[17] Blyton's tendency to hold herself separate, her presentation of herself as superior, not just in what she said, but in her manner was also disliked, as was her sense that she was different from others in the 'special' connection she had achieved with the nation's children. Geoffrey Trease, another for whom the Blyton cult provoked irritation coupled with bewilderment, described Blyton's egotism. For him, one way this manifested itself was in Blyton's dislike of sharing the limelight with other authors and possible rivals. She 'learned that I also was invited', Trease recalled of one literary event, 'and made my removal a condition of her own acceptance. She was almost incredulous, the organisers informed me, when my invitation stood'. Reflecting on Blyton's magnificent career, Trease added that he—rather like Colin Welch and Gillian Tindall—thought her success was a clever con trick: 'Whether or not Enid Blyton knew, as she claimed, exactly what children wanted, she certainly knew how to convince them that it was what she was giving them'.[18] What becomes apparent is that Blyton could simultaneously be an object of irritation and wonderment and the topic of catty comments but as a 'serious' or 'literary' subject she was not very interesting. The idea that anyone would want to write a book about her seemed remote. It was partly what made the publication in 1974 of Barbara Stoney's biography of Blyton all the more surprising.

At the same time, it was also apparent that Blyton was a frustrating figure to categorise because she had clearly done *some* good during her career. Peter Wait, who worked for Methuen, remembered Blyton as '[a] nice little woman…kind and good…a highly competent storyteller, moral, good middle-class moral standards and…she made children want to read books'.[19] Wait's terms of reference sound old-fashioned but his last point is important: Blyton's skill in getting young people of all classes to read on their own, together with her sales and her reach, was simply too powerful to be disregarded. This was partly the image Blyton had constructed of herself in her own lifetime. As M.S. Woods pointed out shrewdly in 1974, her success was the result of 'by-passing

the literary middle-men – the teachers, librarians and critics who aim to shape children's literary tastes – and selling directly to the consumers'.[20] The accessibility of Blyton's stories was also why, in 1960, Walter Allen felt she was such a 'phenomenon', and why, in the 1980s, as discussions about Britain's National Curriculum took place, there were calls led by Roald Dahl for her to be included.[21]

The hard work of Blyton's rehabilitation took a long time. In spite of Dahl's advocacy, it was not until the 1990s that Blyton began to be viewed more favourably by professional critics and her work seen as deserving a 'serious, culturally respectful' reading, as Peter Hunt put it in 1995. For Hunt, attempting to overturn the 'stigma' surrounding children's novels, namely that these are texts 'not capable of being read in what we might call a literary or worthwhile (or intergalactic) way', Blyton was a peculiarly suitable case for treatment. She was still selling more than eight million books a year, most of which were labelled '"trash"'. The central issue for Hunt was the danger of falling into 'the trap' laid by popular ideas of what '"Literature"' and 'literariness' are and the ways in which people are encouraged (wrongly) to regard certain kinds of writing—books for Blyton being a notable example—as '"inferior"' or '"unrewarding…."' Her books never got 'the full "literary" (serious, considered, culturally respectful) reading'. Hunt thus issued a challenge: 'Suppose we approached Blyton with the same reverence, the same expectation of excellence that we do *The Wind in the Willows* - What would we find?' The answer according to Hunt was writing 'which balances dark and light, security and violence, power and helplessness, which explores (often with the crudity and directness of childhood) insider and outsider, and class and race and sexual distinctions'.[22]

Thanks in part to Hunt's encouragement, the easy labelling of Blyton as someone whose strengths were the ability to tell a formulaic, escapist story in 'repetitive prose' has to an extent been slowly broken up.[23] An interest in the historical and cultural frameworks of Blyton's work and its links to a range of contemporary discourses has formed the basis of criticism by David Rudd, David Buckingham, Philip Gillett and Fred Inglis—the last arguing that Blyton was an 'agent of culture' whose writing sought to pass on a particular sense of 'Englishness'.[24] The emergence in the 1990s of critics interested in gender and identity

politics as they are played out in Blyton's stories added to the number of critical positions. Some, like Catherine Belsey, who in 1998 analysed Daphne Du Maurier's romance *Frenchman's Creek* (1941) alongside *Five on a Treasure Island* (1942), sought to suggest that Blyton was more radical than might be assumed. What messages, Belsey asked, did these texts—judged 'a waste of time' by 'serious' critics—send to their readers? Did the adventures of 'tom-boy', George, offer 'an imaginary alternative to the responsibilities assigned to women'?[25] Others, like Liesel Coetzee, have detected subversive or 'contradictory' meanings hidden within the 'dominant discourse' of gender as Blyton seeks to reveal different possibilities for girls beyond the role of housekeeper.[26] Elsewhere Barbara Wall has highlighted the importance in Blyton's writing of 'the relationship of narrator to narratee' and her narrator's powerful use of the 'single address', that is, speaking directly to children, an innovation that seemed modern at the time.[27] Meanwhile Dennis Hardy has discussed Blyton as a writer of utopian fictions. Kristin Bluemel has suggested another guise for Blyton: as an 'intermodernist' writer, part of a loosely defined collection of authors of the 1920s and 1930s, who were not high modernists; that is to say, they were not T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield. This interesting idea of seeing Blyton as potentially part of a bigger creative group rather than as a lone author and defined by a commitment to 'middle-brow' or 'mass' genres and who have been judged as 'too popular to be good' adds to the number of critical approaches.

What has also been recognised is that despite being all but dismissed from the canon of children's literature, Blyton's output is more impressive and wide-ranging than is often presented—something which Tony Summerfield's four-volume *Enid Blyton: An Illustrated Bibliography* (2002–2005) has made apparent. Blyton's first collection of poems, *Child Whispers*, was published in 1922, followed by *Real Fairies* in 1923, the same year in which she was awarded a weekly column in the magazine, *Teacher's World*, a commission she held until 1945. In 1924 she published *The Zoo Book* and *The Enid Blyton Book of Fairies*, both with George Newnes Ltd. and began a long association with the company. This included, in 1926, the launch of *Sunny Stories for Little Folks*; it was announced as 'edited' by Blyton although she was in fact responsible for writing all its contents in its different

manifestations for the next twenty-six years; in 1937, its name was changed to *Enid Blyton's Sunny Stories* before being changed back to *Sunny Stories* in 1942. In 1953 Blyton resigned as editor in order to launch a more ambitious project, *Enid Blyton's Magazine* (–1959). Alongside this, Blyton was in constant demand from other magazines and annuals. To begin with, she concentrated on short stories and poems but in 1927 published her first long adventure story, *The Wonderful Adventure* (1927), which led to more stand-alone books and series, notably: *The Secret Island* and sequels (five titles; 1938–1953), The Famous Five series (twenty-one titles; 1942–1963), The Find-Outers series (fifteen titles; 1943–1961), the '--- of Adventure' series (eight titles; 1944–1955), The Caravan Family (six titles; 1945–1951), The Secret Seven series (fifteen titles; 1949–1963), the Barney mysteries (six titles; 1949–1959) and the fantasy tales, *Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937), *The Enchanted Wood* (1939) and *The Magic Faraway Tree* (1943). Many of these texts appeared initially in instalments, sometimes in Blyton's own magazines but also in other periodicals and newspapers and, as Victor Watson notes, they had the effect of helping 'define for the general public what children's books were and how they were to be perceived'.[28] Between 1940 and 1951, Blyton turned her hand to boarding school stories which also became series, including *The Naughtiest Girl in the School* (three titles; 1940–1945), the novels set at St. Clare's (six titles; 1941–1945) and Malory Towers (six titles; 1946–1951). Blyton's readiness to experiment with different sub-genres included circus stories, beginning with *Tales of the Circus* (1927) but more ambitiously with *Mr. Galliano's Circus* (three titles; 1938–1942), and stories of farm life beginning with *The Children of Cherry Tree Farm* (three titles 1940–1943) and followed by *Six Cousins at Mistletoe Farm* (two titles; 1948; 1950). These last sets of novels were also part of a move into so-called 'Family Books' which focused on the challenges and tribulations thrown at apparently ordinary families, including divorce, unemployment and juvenile delinquency, examples of which include *The Family at Red-Roofs* (1945), *House-at-the-Corner* (1947) and *Six Bad Boys* (1951). The celebration of the countryside was a familiar Blyton motif and formed the basis for those works of non-fiction in which the teacherly aspect of Blyton was much to the fore: *Enid Blyton's Nature Lessons* (1929),

Round the Year with Enid Blyton (1934) and *Hedgerow Tales* (1935), to name but three examples. More prestigiously, she worked with the distinguished editor of *Nature* magazine on thirty-six *Nature Readers* (1945; 1946), and, in 1949, Blyton, now seen as a writer with a sense of social and moral purpose, was invited to re-tell Biblical stories in *The Enid Blyton Stories Old Testament Book* (in fourteen parts), followed by the *New Testament* presented in a similar format; she had already published *The Children's Life of Christ* in 1943. Alongside this work were re-tellings of other 'classic' tales taking in figures who were public property, like Robin Hood, and others who were not (Brer Rabbit and Babar the elephant), as well as assorted stories for much younger children, including those featuring Mary Mouse (1942; twenty-six books), 'Amelia Jane, the naughty doll' (1939; three books), and the doll, mouse and rabbit, Jose, Click and Bun (1940; five books). Notable later projects included the collaboration in 1949 with the Dutch illustrator Eelco Martinus ten Harmsen van der Beek on the first Noddy book, *Noddy Goes to Toyland*. By the time of Blyton's death, there were 154 titles featuring the same character, who also sparked a mass of Noddy-related products, a television series and a long-running West End pantomime (also written by Blyton), which ran for five successive Christmases from 1954. Alongside this are the hundreds of stories and poems written for magazines and newspapers which were invariably collected into Enid Blyton 'Readers', 'Bedtime' and 'Holiday' books. As 'Mary Pollock', Blyton wrote six books: *The Children of Kidillin* (1940), *Three Boys and a Circus* (1940), *The Secret of Cliff Castle* (1943), *The Adventures of Scamp* (1943), *Smuggler Ben* (1943) *and Mischief at St. Rollo's* (1943). This summary represents the tip of the iceberg; and alongside the titles listed in Summerfield's *Bibliography*, new ones continue to be unearthed. The quality of this writing varies enormously but the diversity and scale of these achievements are, as Summerfield has pointed out, another reminder that Blyton is a figure who cannot be conveniently classified with a single label.

Approaches to Blyton

The impressive range of Blyton's work will hopefully become clear in the following chapters. Before then, it is worth exploring further some of the popular ways in which Blyton has been approached. In terms of Blyton the person, there are the challenges (often expressed by feminist biographers) in making ambitious, successful women—and Blyton falls into this category—'understandable rather than monstrous'.[29] She was not as straightforward a character as is sometimes assumed. As has been seen, Peter Hunt has championed the idea in respect of Blyton's writings of a 'complexity of ideas beneath the apparently simple surface'.[30] There is also the idea (in respect of Blyton the person) of a 'tension between sunny surface and welling undercurrent' as David Rudd puts it. This depends on a reading of Blyton as a woman who assumed different identities, and for much of the time successfully covered up her emotional turmoil and sense of insecurity.[31]

Rudd's comments point to one of the recurrent features of Blyton studies which is the persistence of a tendency to read her stories as having autobiographical elements. It is an assumption often made of female authors—what Mary Jacobus termed the 'autobiographical fallacy'—whereby women's writing is viewed as closer to personal experience than men's, and their texts are thus viewed as 'dramatic extensions of the female author's consciousness'.[32] The occasional parallels between Blyton's own life and her stories and poems have helped make them intriguing works, both for the inquisitive reader and for critics concerned with the origins of Blyton's creativity. The publication in 1974 of Barbara Stoney's biography of Blyton played a part in this, not least in her summation of Blyton as 'a very insecure, complex and often difficult, childlike woman' whose insecurities began in childhood (Stoney, 191). This analysis helped begin a trend according to which the break-up of her parents' marriage and her father's departure from the family home was a kind of conversion experience for the young Enid who in *The Six Bad Boys* (1951) revisited the negative effects it had on herself and her two younger brothers.[33] It is certainly the case that critics find it very easy to think of Blyton as someone divided, having a sunny public face and a

dark, private inner-life. Duncan McLaren, in his idiosyncratic *Looking for Enid* (2007), presents Blyton as an insecure genius in search of a surrogate father (her own having left). Initially, she found such a figure in Hugh Pollock, the book editor whom she married in 1924.[34] Elsewhere, George Greenfield writes in *Enid Blyton* (1998) of how the author 'in her stream of consciousness approach to creative writing' redesigned elements of her own life. In *First Term at Malory Towers* (1946) Blyton takes her second husband, Kenneth Darrell Waters—re-christened 'Rivers' in the book—as the model for the surgeon father to the heroine (Darrell) and her sister, characters who it is suggested were modelled on Blyton's own schoolgirl daughters, Gillian and Imogen. Greenfield takes this as a sign of how far Blyton had, in her own mind, 'obliterated the real father of her children, Hugh Pollock' after having divorced him in 1942.[35] What is also true is that these responses are, in a curious way, a critical throwback to those adopted by Blyton's early reviewers, some of whom often claimed to discern Blyton's 'real' personality in her stories via their 'Nanny narrator'.[36] Coming away from a Blyton book it was possible to feel like one had been 'governessed' as a reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement* put it (possibly snobbishly) in 1938.[37] For another reviewer, writing in 1954, *The Mystery of the Disappearing Cat* and *The Mystery of Tally-Ho Cottage* both displayed evident traces of their author's 'clear-cut ideas of right and wrong' and also her penchant for 'fun'.[38] In 1974 William Feaver also suggested that Blyton could be spotted in the character of Uncle Quentin from the Famous Five series: 'secretive, insecure and irritable'.[39] Although Blyton always denied her writing was autobiographical or a form of therapy—'I do not write, as I know some authors are forced to do, to express some side of myself repressed in ordinary life' she announced testily—it is added grist to the mill that in her own life Blyton—like many others of her generation—was guarded about her emotions.[40] In reading Blyton's stories, it is perhaps inevitable that critics assume that the narrator is the author or that a particular character is a 'mouthpiece' for Blyton or that a scenic description of a lighthouse or rushing water is a psycho-sexual slip. The limitations of these kinds of readings become evident as the extent and variety of her achievements are recognised more fully.

Rosemary Dinnage's profile of Blyton in *Alone! Alone! Lives of Some Outsider Women* (2004) is an example of this kind of approach in its most extreme form. Dinnage's book with its Blytonesque exclamation marks also takes in Katherine Mansfield, Marie Stopes, Gwen John, Clementine Churchill and Rebecca West (amongst others), and is traditional in categorising these women 'who, especially acutely, felt alone', as strange but modern in their achievements. The harsh verdict on Blyton is that she was 'a tiresome, insecure, Margaret Thatcher-esque queen of kitsch'. But Dinnage's work also exemplifies the way in which cod-psychoanalysis has been used to explain Blyton's 'fixation' with 'pixies, bunnies and teddies' and her 'compulsive fantasizing'. Blyton is dealt with in a chapter alongside a contemporary, Angela Brazil (another prolific writer of school stories). Dinnage tells the reader that '[w]ith the Brazils and Blytons we feel that at some point in childhood they were not *noticed* enough and so there they stuck and blew up their fantasy balloons'. Her father's decision to leave home 'and live in sin' haunted Blyton and it is for this reason that for years she stuck with tales of Toyland and *Sunny Stories* because they 'must have been devitalized substitutes for memories of a real childhood that was both denied and preserved'. For Dinnage, this poses the interesting question: how was it possible for a mentally 'impoverished' woman with a 'dissociated talent' and a 'dull' and 'depleted' personality to sustain her literary career for so long? Blyton's early 1920s columns for children in the magazine *Teacher's World*, in which she talks of playing with conkers and making snowmen, are chosen by Dinnage as places which can be picked apart to show Blyton's difficulties in growing up but, by the same token, of course, her ability—and compulsion—to connect with children (apart from her own). All this was helped by a sense of emptiness, proof that '[w]hen there is such a sense of void at the centre, all the stronger is the stockade that protects it'. Thus Blyton 'successfully stifled any misgivings under an unstoppable flow of words'.

In her reading of Blyton, Dinnage analyses what she takes to be Blyton's 'oddities', including the successful author's famous description (given in interviews) of how she wrote her books whereby she closed her eyes and characters would 'take on movement and life' before her while she then typed out their talk 'like a secretary taking dictation'.

Although Dinnage wonders if making fun of Blyton has somehow become 'inevitable', she recognises that the truth is not so simple:

> To become the fantasists they were [Blyton is coupled with the birth control pioneer Marie Stopes here], they had to be isolates; the oddity is that through a different part of their personality they became extremely successful women rather than bag ladies. They could put their self-deluding inner-life into the service of others or, in Blyton's case, into making money.

The other question Dinnage poses is whether Blyton, like other women, 'sacrificed' herself, possibly willingly, either 'to other people's needs' and/or to her 'art'. Was she one of those women who 'built entire fantasy worlds that got them through life but nevertheless estranged them somewhat from ordinary humanity'?[41] For Blyton, life was a struggle and it is—so the argument goes—the resulting work which shows us what was really going on.

Whether Blyton was able (or not) to free herself from her past is a question likely to remain unanswered but Dinnage's approach is, of course, not uncommon. Identifying a trauma in a famous woman's life which led her to act as she did is a popular pastime amongst biographers. So, too, is the tendency to see the female subject as someone's daughter: what father, it is asked, was responsible—directly or indirectly—for this woman's achievements? Another of the striking things about Dinnage's book is, of course, the tendency to make it seem that Blyton's success turned her into a 'monster' (that term again). This is also partly true of other re-considerations of the author, notably Imogen Smallwood's *A Childhood at Green Hedges* (1989), which points to similar negotiations needing to be made around stereotypes of expected behaviours for women. As Iris Marian Young puts it, the notion of home expresses 'a bounded and secure identity….where a person can be herself'.[42] Blyton's home 'self' at Green Hedges, as Smallwood portrays it, is that of a distant, self-centred woman preoccupied with her career and her public image. The effect is to retain admiration for Blyton's work ethic but also make her appear unappealing. It also reiterates the idea that one of the reasons that Blyton is so hard for biographers—and even her daughters—to follow

(in the sense of understanding the 'real' woman beneath) is precisely the way she compartmentalised her life. She was a public figure (as the fan mail and interviews testify) but her public self was also a performative one.[43] 'Enid Blyton' the literary character and Enid Blyton the person were not the same. When Smallwood's book was published in 1989 some readers felt betrayed that the author they admired was apparently so nasty—or at least indifferent—to her children. The fact that Blyton was female ensured that the dismay was increased. While many men have behaved equally objectionably to their families—Charles Dickens is a notable example—revelations about their home lives provoke far less lasting damage to their literary reputations. More than Dinnage's essay, Smallwood's reading has proved the most provocative analysis of the relationship between text and author's life and certainly one very different from those which appeared during Blyton's lifetime.

The Story of My Life (1952)

Whilst it is over-simplistic to amalgamate Blyton's life and work and see her texts as examples of involuntary self-revelation, as a critical habit it has proved remarkably difficult to shake off. It is encouraged by the fact that while Blyton left a number of written versions of herself—including diaries and letters—she tended not to give much away. Yet she was certainly aware of stories told about her, complaining in private that most were 'wide of the mark' (Mac, 8 September 1944). It was partly to counter such gossip that in September 1952, aged fifty-five and at the peak of her popularity, she published *The Story of My Life*, an attempt to demonstrate what she always said, namely, that '[w]riting'—and nothing else, 'is my ordinary life – writing for all ages of children, taking a score of different themes as varied as a child's needs'.[44]

Since *The Story of My Life* is referred to at various points in the present book—as well as being the nearest we get to a Blyton autobiography—it is worth paying some attention to it. For example, while the book was the result of Blyton's wariness about her public image it was also, as David Rudd has noted, produced out of unfinished childhood business.[45] Like much of what Blyton produced, it is also a text which appears artless. Partly this is because it was (ostensibly) written for Blyton's young fans and it is to them that Blyton gives innocuous details of 'My Home: Green Hedges', 'Another Home: Old Thatch', 'My Very First Garden', 'Pets I Have Had' and 'My Little Family', explaining that in writing the book 'I have tried to answer all the questions you [her fans] have asked me for the last ten or twelve years' (*SML*, 6). What is striking, however, are the number of gaps and silences. There are no dates provided—an omission justified perhaps on the grounds that they might confuse younger readers. But as David Rudd has noted, throughout Blyton rarely refers to her mother. Nor does she mention her brothers or her first husband, Hugh Pollock—the father of Gillian and Imogen, who *do* figure prominently, the latter shown riding her pony.[46] Pollock's removal from the record obviously had a purpose behind it: he was a painful reminder of a marriage that had not worked. Removing him also allowed Blyton to camouflage the arrival of her second husband Kenneth Darrell Waters, elevating his

importance and leaving readers to assume he was the girls' father (This was a sleight of hand Blyton also deployed in newspaper interviews throughout the 1950s).

In contrast, Blyton's own father, Thomas, is very much present; the impression given is that he was part of his daughter's home for her entire childhood, rather than leaving for another woman. Much is made of Thomas's cultural and intellectual interests and their influence on his daughter's early life. Thomas gave his young daughter access to his large library ('hundreds of books…on every subject under the sun' including works on botany [one of Enid's passions], alongside volumes of poetry and drama, and works on astronomy [Thomas also had a telescope] [*SML*, 51]). It was in order to impress her father that the young Enid—a child prodigy—read 'every book' from her Francophile father's collection. She claims to have taught herself French, mastering the language by picking up a dictionary and slogging through Alphonse Daudet's comic novel *Tartarin de Tarascon* (1872). The importance of self-improvement—a favourite Victorian mantra—looms large.

As part of this theme, Blyton also writes of the impact on her in childhood of Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*. This was a serial publication tailored for the aspirational Edwardians which was launched in March 1908 and appeared at fortnightly intervals (until February 1910). Each issue contained different sections ('divisions of knowledge') under headings such as 'Literature', 'Plant Life', 'Countries of the World', 'Stories: the great stories of the world that will be told forever'.[47] 'It gave me my thirst for knowledge', Blyton writes of the *Encyclopaedia*, recalling that it had the effect of sending her 'questing through my father's vast array of book-cases for other books…There were many volumes above my head that I found and read because I *had to* know more…' (*SML*, 49). It was Arthur Mee who gave the fourteen-year-old Blyton her first experience of being published when, in 1911, she won the *Encyclopaedia's* poetry competition for children. 'I could have cried for joy', she writes, especially when Mee wrote back inviting her to send other things (*SML*, 70). Undaunted by her family's warnings not to become big-headed, Blyton then describes how she resolved to carry on writing and nightly prayed for Mee's success and soul. In a chapter entitled 'Struggling Along', Blyton celebrates persistence (notably her own) and also raises the dilemma of personal ambition

versus loyalty to one's parents. 'I didn't want to upset my parents', she writes of her youthful decision to abandon music and take up teaching, but her father, she explains, 'liked my independence....He probably recognised the same things in himself' (*SML*, 76; 77). There is, as had become usual, no mention of her mother's reaction. As a middle-aged woman living in a mock-Tudor mansion with servants, and as a fêted author, Blyton in 1952 was far removed from the angry young girl in Beckenham who poured her emotions into short stories which got rejected. Now she could savour her success and remove as far as possible those, like her mother, who had hindered it.

Several other observations can be made about *The Story of My Life*. The most notable is that Blyton's passionate response to reading and writing is virtually the only aspect of herself about which she was prepared to be open. She disliked much of the material she was given as a child, remembering many of the children's books as 'deadly dull… there were no real children as characters…no lively conversation' and 'it was children I badly wanted to read about…' (*SML*, 48). She wrote enthusiastically of her encounters with Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) and of her young self being bewitched by the heroine's meetings with talking animals. Despite her status as a child, Alice is also, of course, a reckless adventurer and shapeshifter who strikes out on her own. There was a similar attraction in George MacDonald's fantasy novel *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), notable for another plucky, eight-year-old heroine, as well as for its secret staircases and malignant gnomes living underground. Blyton also liked Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) and R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857) and Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), 'which I *loved*, though some of it was too sad' (*SML*, 48). If we allow that childhood reading represents the 'furnishings of a mind', as biographers often maintain, then Blyton's choices can be viewed as significant especially given how her career panned out.[48] They remind us that as with all lives, Blyton's attitudes were influenced by the times in which she grew up. She was a product of its forces and this included her literary encounters. Secondly, and with an eye to posterity, she was seeking in 1952, to align her own career within the classic traditions of children's literature.

All this points to another challenge which frequently present itself to students of life-writing: how far do we accept or reject the subject's *own* presentation of themselves? It is a challenge tied up with the idea that there is a secret self that the subject tries to keep hidden. In *The Story of My Life*, which is the 'official version' of Blyton, one result is that all Blyton's 'lives', past as well as present, become 'her own, controllable construction'.[49] *The Story of My Life* presents Blyton as she wanted to be seen: a professional author and literary figure. Indeed, as Rudd points out, what is particularly striking about the book is that while Blyton seems to be telling her own story, she presents herself almost entirely as a writer.[50] Eight of the nineteen chapters are about how she produces her stories: 'How the Story Comes', 'Which of My Characters are Real' and 'Why I Write So Many Books' (a question many people had begun to ask in 1952). The pages detail her pride in her success, convey a sense of writing as vocation and reveal an appreciation of her audience, something which she was always conscious of needing to express. 'I belong to all of you', she explains, 'I am your storyteller' (*SML*, 6).

Blyton's decision to be selective in what she told the public or to distort events was not exceptional, of course. Few people who write autobiographies put everything in. Moreover, as Liz Stanley notes, there is generally an acceptance that 'the self who writes' does not have a straightforward access to the 'self who is past': 'memory is necessarily limited, and fictive devices are always necessary in producing accounts of ourselves'.[51] It is also the case that in 1950s Britain, this kind of approach to autobiography was not unusual, something which becomes apparent if we compare Blyton's autobiography with those of other celebrities who were also publishing in 1952. In *Tallulah*, the actress Tallulah Bankhead boasted of having 'lived to the hilt' and of having 'soared in the clouds and touched bottom', but this kind of frankness was unusual—and Bankhead was American.[52] Cecil Beaton's *Photobiography* is gossipy but is equally concerned to explain his working methods. *Matty* by A.E. Matthews is a celebration of sixty years of the veteran actor's life but offers little in the way of soul searching. John Masefield, *So Long to Learn*. *Chapters of an Autobiography*, is typically elegiac and lyrical.[53] Interestingly, the text to which *The Story of My Life* comes closest in tone and in its focus on a career well done is

the autobiography of another 1950s icon, Stanley Matthews, whose book, *Feet First Again*, was reprinted in the same year. Matthews writes of his passion for football in much the same tone as Blyton describes her writing: ‘Soccer is life to me. If I ever did quit the game I love, I should age suddenly and fade away’.[54] Thus *The Story of My Life* might usefully be seen in terms of these other studies of achievement and service, which are more about how their subjects accomplished their feats rather than how they actually experienced the past. What also makes the text valuable for the purposes of the present study is that, as David Rudd notes, it ‘provides some revealing insights into the *persona* “Enid Blyton”’ who, by 1952, is able to ‘fashion her own ideal family tree pruned and disentangled of unsightly roots’.[55] The book’s title with its definitive ‘The’ hints that this is the only true account, although the use of the word ‘story’ in a book by someone specialising in make-believe, also looks like further careful positioning.[56]

Blyton in Context

In what other ways might Blyton be approached? As noted earlier, one important development since the 1990s has been that while many critics continue to find a good deal of mileage in psychoanalytic readings, others adopt a socio-cultural or historicist approach. There is the same recognition of the difficulties in pigeonholing Blyton, but it manifests itself in a greater emphasis on Blyton's centrality within the history of twentieth-century ideas and anxieties. This is partly the case with Peter Hunt's aforementioned 'How Not to Read a Children's Book' (1995). Like Rosemary Dinnage, Hunt is interested in the sources of Blyton's creativity and inspiration as a writer but, whereas Dinnage is obsessed with Blyton's works as evidence of personal neuroses, Hunt is interested in reading Blyton's stories 'contextually'. This might mean reading Blyton texts alongside other stories but also thinking about the texts at the moment of their production—for example, the ways in which Blyton's texts respond to some of the anxieties of her time, particularly in the 1940s. This was a period in which war-time restriction was tied up with the physical bombing of Britain's cities, along with over-crowding, rationing, the blackout, poor standards of national health, fears about youth crime and rising divorce rates. In 1945, a purposeful national mood saw Clement Attlee's Labour government sweep to power and embed the welfare state but Britain's loss of Empire, the emergence of the Cold War and continued food and fuel shortages led to the sense that exhausted post-war Britain was on the verge of becoming 'destitute', as David Childs puts it.[57] Read alongside these contexts, the bicycles, picnics, country lanes, unlimited food and lemonade, and the middle-class children, 'innocently free and empowered' who emerge victorious against kidnappers, robbers and smugglers begin to take on new dimensions. As Hunt notes, Blyton's works of the 1940s, specifically, though not exclusively the Famous Five series, can be viewed '[i]n the context of post-Second World War literature' and that period's 'ruralist, pacifist, nostalgic trends', including the aching desire for 'a lost, golden, idyllic world'.[58] With society in flux, it is hardly surprising that readers—whether they were

at home or had been evacuated—embraced Blyton's fictional world so readily.