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Keith Barker is a librarian at Westhill College, Birmingham with a special responsibility for children's fiction. Recently, he gave a research presentation on popular children's authors at the Second British Research Seminar on Children's Literature at Cardiff.

Wendy R. Katz
"Some uses of food
in literature"
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The Use of Food in Enid Blyton's Fiction

Wendy R. Katz makes a convincing case for recognising the uses of food in children's literature as a sort of sociology of childhood. However, the majority of her examples are from "serious literature", whereas food has often provided a staple ingredient in popular children's fiction, certainly in Britain (although the Bobbsey twins, Hardy boys, et al., do eat, their meals are not described with such relish as in their British counterparts). Most popular British heroes and heroines have an obsession with eating which is only equalled by their readers' appetites: for instance, the frequent references to school meals and "tuck" in the Jennings stories and the essential scene over the tea table where William Brown upsets either his siblings or a hapless visitor. One author drew a hero and his sister who were so preoccupied with eating that his books have been banned in some libraries: I refer, of course, to Frank Richards's Billy and Bessie Bunter. The trend has continued to the present day with Roald Dahl's descriptions of a chocolate factory which border on the orgasmic and Judy Blume's accurate descriptions of American junk food. However, one popular author in particular carried the use of food in her books to new heights (or, perhaps, depths) and in so doing demonstrated the manipulation of both her readers and her own subconscious creative forces, and that was Enid Blyton.

Enid Blyton was born in 1897 into a middle-class family and her formative years coincided with the Edwardian era. All her books are imbued with the principles so universal before the First World War: honour, a good clean fight, and a sense of fair play, all noticeable in the boy leader of the Famous Five pack, Julian. Her Edwardian upbringing extends to descriptions of meals. The Edwardians were notorious gluttons, using as many as 362 plates and dishes in a dinner party for 24 guests. J. B. Priestley has claimed:

J. B. Priestley
The Edwardians

Not since Imperial Rome can there have been so many signposts to gluttony. . . . The Edwardian breakfast alone would make one of our Christmas dinners look meagre.

Another Edwardian has attested:

Kenneth Clark
*Another Part of the
Wood*

How they ate! Local oysters and liver pâté, steak and kidney pudding, cold turkey and ham, treacle tart, double Cottenham cheese and always, to fill in the corners (as was often said with satisfaction), a slice of plum cake.

Despite the period in which they were written (Can any war child really have had a cook who provided him with veal and ham pies?), Blyton's stories are full of Edwardian, gargantuan meals:

Enid Blyton
Five Get into a Fix

They went up to see what there was for their high tea.

'Pork pie—home-made, of course,' said Dick. 'And what's this—golly, it's a cheese! How enormous! Smell it, Julian—it's enough to make you start eating straightaway! And more of that home-made bread! Can we start?'

'No—there are new-laid boiled eggs to begin with,' said Anne, with a laugh. 'And an apple pie and cream to end with.'

Enid Blyton
*Five Fall into
Adventure*

Still, when lunch-time came, Joan really did them well.

'Cold ham and tongue—cold baked beans—beetroot—crisp lettuce straight from the garden—heaps of tomatoes—cucumber—hard-boiled egg!' recited Anne in glee.

'Just the kind of meal I like,' said Dick, sitting down. 'What's for pudding?'

'There it is on the sideboard,' said Anne. 'Wobbly blancmange, fresh fruit salad and jelly. I'm glad I'm hungry.'

Enid Blyton
*Five Run Away
Together*

They opened a tin of meat, cut huge slices of bread and made sandwiches. Then they opened a tin of pineapple chunks and ate those, spooning them out of the tin, full of sweetness and juice. After that they still felt hungry, so they opened two tins of sardines and dug them out with biscuits. It made a really grand meal.

The psychologist, Michael Woods, discussing this aspect of Blyton's books, has said:

Michael Woods
The Blyton Line

The food is more reminiscent of an orgy in an Edwardian emporium than a modern child's idea of a good 'blow-out.' Enid Blyton writes of tongues, ham, pies, lemonade and ginger-beer. This is not just food, it is archetypal feasting, the author's longing for the palmy days of her own childhood.

The fact that Blyton was affected by her early influences is well known. Her method of working, so wickedly satirised by Joyce Grenfell in her sketch 'Writer of children's books,' was a form of hypnagogic imagery, in

which she let her mind go blank so that her stories and characters could pour from her subconscious. In correspondence with Professor Peter McKellar, Blyton wrote:

I think my imagination contains all the things I have ever seen or heard; things my conscious mind has long forgotten—and they have all been jumbled about till a light penetrates into the mass, and a happening here or an object there is taken out, transmuted, or formed into something that takes a natural and rightful place in the story—or I may recognise it—or I may not—I don't think that I use anything I have not seen or experienced—I don't think I could. . . . Our books are facets of ourselves.

However, not only was Blyton heavily influenced by her Edwardian upbringing, she also brought into her stories much of the Froebel training she received as a student teacher. This is evident in the child-centred approach of her books, the little homilies on nature, and the stress she placed on healthy foodstuffs. Froebel training, whose influence can also be seen, for example, in the less stodgy (in both meanings of the word) attitude shown towards food in the 1920s by the English nanny, used house-keeping, cooking, farming, and gardening as a means of expression for children. Blyton displays this attitude in her promotion of home grown produce:

Five Get into a Fix

It wasn't long before they were all sitting round the small table eating a very nice meal. Boiled eggs, laid that morning, cheese and new bread and butter, and a jar of home-made jam they found in the cupboard. They drank steaming hot cups of cocoa.

Enid Blyton
Five Get into Trouble

Once again they bought food for their lunch—new bread, farm-house butter, cream cheese, crisp lettuce, fat red radishes and a bunch of spring onions.

Enid Blyton
Five on a Hike Together

'Come your ways in,' said the plump old lady. 'Now you'll have to take what we've got. I'm busy today and haven't had time for cooking. You can have a bit of home-made meat-pie, or a slice or two of ham and tongue, or hard-boiled eggs and salad. Bless you, you look as pleased as Punch! I'll put the lot on the table for you and you can help yourselves! Will that do? There's no vegetables though. You'll have to make do with pickled cabbage and my own pickled onions and beetroot in vinegar.'

'It sounds too marvellous for words,' said Julian. 'We shan't want any sweet after that!'

'There's no pudding today,' said the old lady. 'But I'll open a bottle or two of our own raspberries and you can have them with cream if you like. And there's the cream cheese I made yesterday too.'

'Don't tell us any more!' begged Dick. 'It makes me feel too hungry. Why is it that people on farms always have the most delicious food? I mean, surely people in towns can bottle raspberries and pickle onions and make cream cheese?'

'Well either they can't or they don't,' said George. 'My mother does all those things—and even when she lived in a town she did. Anyway, *I'm* going to when I'm grown up. It must be so wonderful to offer home-made things by the score when people come to a meal!'

How much this uncharacteristic speech of George's sounds like the outpourings of a health food fanatic!

This last passage is interesting in that it displays Blyton's manipulation of her reader's interest in food in order to make a statement about her idea of utopia, one in which the earth-mother or a substitute earth-mother provides food (preferably home-grown) for her cubs. The various mothers, cooks, and farmers' wives (always female personages, it should be noted) are regarded by their creator with benevolence:

Five Get into Trouble

There was a little tea-place that said 'Home-made cakes and jams,' so they went there for tea.

The women who kept it was a plump, cheerful soul, fond of children. She guessed she would make very little out of the tea she served to five healthy children—but that didn't matter! She set to work to cut three big plates of well-buttered slices of bread, put out apricot jam, raspberry and strawberry, and a selection of home-made buns that made the children's mouths water.

Enid Blyton
Five Go Off to Camp

There were home-made scones with new honey. There were slices of bread thickly spread with butter, and new-made cream cheese to go with it. There was sticky brown gingerbread, hot from the oven, and a big solid fruit cake that looked almost like a plum pudding when it was cut, it was so black.

'Oh dear! I wish now I hadn't had so much dinner,' sighed Anne. 'I don't feel hungry enough to eat a bit of everything and I would so like to!'

Mrs. Andrews laughed. 'You eat what you can, and I'll give you some to take away too,' she said. 'You can have some cream cheese, and the scones and honey—and some of the bread I made this morning. And maybe you'd like a slab of the gingerbread. I made plenty.'

'Oh, thanks,' said Julian. 'We'll be all right tomorrow with all that. You're a marvellous cook, Mrs. Andrews. I wish I lived on your farm.'

Five Get into a Fix

They all went downstairs together and found their living-room warm with a great wood-fire. Breakfast was laid, but only a big crusty loaf, butter and home-made marmalade were there, with an enormous jug of cold, creamy milk.

Mrs. Jones came in almost at once, beaming at them. 'Well, good morning to you now,' she said, 'and a nice morning it is too, for all the snow we had in the night. What would you be wanting for breakfast now? Ham and eggs—or home-made pork sausages—or meat patties—or. . . .'

'I'd like ham and eggs,' said Julian, at once, and the others said the same. Mrs. Jones went out of the room, and the children rubbed their hands.

'I feared we were only going to have bread and butter and marmalade,' said Dick.

Any display of this attitude in the young female cubs is also approved by Blyton, as is shown in the case of Anne, the most domestic of the Famous Five, who is often called 'a good little housewife' or generally patronised by Julian, the paternalistic leader of the gang.

Of course, any female who fails to show these attitudes is obviously regarded by the author as deficient, if not downright villainous, as, for instance, Mrs. Stick:

Five Run Away Together

They went back to tea, and Mrs. Stick provided them with bread and butter and jam, but no cake. The milk was sour too, and everyone had to have tea without milk, which they all disliked.

The sandwiches were not very nice. The bread was too stale; there was not enough butter inside, and they were far too thick.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Stick and her family turn out to be crooks.

Nowhere is this attitude more evident than in *Six bad boys*, an attempt Blyton made in the early fifties at a problem novel, in this case the problem being juvenile delinquency. Blyton shows the causal effect on delinquency of deficiencies in the home background, most particularly in the case of mothers' deficiencies. She does this by contrasting three middle-class families, two of which produce "bad boys." And again she utilises food to show how each of the mothers either cares for or neglects her offspring. The "good" mother of the three is shown early in the book proffering food and drink to a neighbour's child who has just moved in:

Mrs. Mackenzie appeared with the tea. She had put it on a tray

Enid Blyton
Six Bad Boys

with a jug of milk. She had put a glass of lemonade on the tray as well, and a plate of biscuits.

The mother of one of the bad boys, Bob, is a widow who has the audacity to wish to go out to work. Having a working mother means that Bob cannot go home for his lunch and therefore he has to eat sandwiches:

That was the beginning of Bob's queer, lonely lunches. Each day he went off with the others, left them at the road that led down to the canal, and went off to find his favourite corner there. He ate his sandwiches all by himself, staring at the barges that went smoothly by.

And when he returns home in the evening from school, he finds that his mother has "left him some cake on a shelf in their little garden shed, but he never touched it. 'Leaving out food for me as if I was the cat next door,' he grumbled to himself. 'I'll wait till she comes home, and have supper – proper supper, even if she has to cook it when she's tired.'"

The other bad boy in the neighbourhood belongs to a broken home where a shrewish wife has driven out the boy's father. The child and his sisters are seen attending a birthday party at the "good" mother's house:

'What a lovely cake!' said Hilda, when she saw the big pink-and-white iced cake on the table, and watched the candles being lighted. 'Best I've ever seen!'

'I bet it tastes good too!'

Eleanor wished she could have a cake like that for *her* birthday. Birthdays weren't like this at home! Things always seemed such a burden to her mother. But Mrs. Mackenzie didn't seem to mind anything. She sat at the head of the table and beamed away at everyone.

Thus the author makes the implication that a mother who fails to provide food (among other creature comforts) is likely to produce a delinquent child.

One of the most interesting features of the use of food in Blyton's works is the fact that her most prolific period of writing coincided with a time when the majority of people in England were eating less than they had throughout the whole of the twentieth century. Food rationing began in January 1940 and was not finally discontinued until 1954. Throughout most of this time, an average personal weekly ration consisted of 1s. 6d. worth of meat, 8 oz. sugar, 4 oz. butter or fat, 1 egg, 1 oz. cheese, with jam and honey also heavily rationed. This was hardly enough to provide the enormous meals described in Blyton even for one day! Fresh vegetables, so often a staple

ingredient in a Blyton picnic, were in such short supply that an "aunt" in the radio programme *Children's hour* after wishing one listener a happy birthday, remarked, "I did hear of a lucky girl the other day who was given some onions, but we can't all expect a lovely present like that." So the author can hardly be said to be portraying with realism the period in which she or her contemporary readers were living. While the Famous Five were consuming fat red radishes, their readers were being fed banana sandwiches made with parsnips and banana essence or carrot tart glazed with lemon jelly to make a pudding, and while the Secret Seven breakfasted off well-buttered home-baked bread with chunky marmalade, their devotees never even saw fruit like oranges or bananas and had to make do with the infamous Woolton Pie, a combination of carrots, parsnips, turnips, and potatoes, covered with white sauce and pastry.

How then could Blyton's readers relate to the situations in her books if they could not relate to such basics as the ingredients of her characters' meals? If the child reader cannot share the adult writer's nostalgia, then presumably he is acting out a form of wish fulfilment, a type of vicarious living in which a diet of home-grown food, creamy milk, cakes, and ginger-beer, supplemented by ices from the dairy, is the norm. This is possible in Blyton's adventure stories, even more so than in her intentional fantasies in which the food is merely a variation on biscuits and cake. The whole milieu of the adventure stories, the situation in which a group of children can be safely dumped in the English countryside so that they can conveniently catch a criminal, encourages this, a situation which is aided by descriptions of lavish meals. These descriptions therefore contribute to the escapist nature of the books but are in themselves memorable. I can remember that as a working class child in the fifties, I was enormously attracted by a description of condensed milk used at a midnight feast in one of Blyton's school stories as a "creamy, sweet liquid." This, in itself an inept definition, was so memorable to me that years later at my somewhat snooty grammar school, when called upon to explain the word "condensed," I defined it as "sweet."

And is this escapism the major reason for today's children to continue reading Blyton and writers of her ilk? In his latest work, *The child and the book*, Nicholas Tucker takes some time to examine rather than merely condemn the work of Blyton (a hopeful trend which has increased in recent years). He says:

Nicholas Tucker
The Child and the Book

An orgy of eating occurs at some stage in most of Enid Blyton's books—one more pleasant fantasy to add to the effortless adventures of this idealised group of children.

If adults cannot expect their own reading to be completely realistic (Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, for instance, lives in the type of idealised English village which is a feature of many Blyton books), why should they expect children not to have their own escapism? Elsewhere in his book, Tucker reflects:

Once gripped by a story, readers may find some of their feelings, ambitions or favourite fantasies either defined or reflected in the characters who are pushing the story along, but what effect this may have upon each one of them will never be certain. Nor should it even be thought that it is only fiction of a high standard that can have a positive effect upon readers' imaginations; Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of this century's most eminent philosophers, once praised his favourite American detective magazines as being "rich in mental vitamins and calories."

It is a pity indeed that we do not know the effects of popular reading on the recipient. Perhaps if we did, we could show a connection, however slight, in the recent growth of interest in health and whole foods and the descriptions of home-grown, home-baked, home-bottled food in Enid Blyton's books. But who would sponsor such research?

Meanwhile, amid such speculations, the Famous Five et al. go happily munching on:

Five Go Off to Camp

They all sat down to dinner. There was a big meat-pie, a cold ham, salad, potatoes in their jackets, and home-made pickles. It really was difficult to know what to choose.

'Have some of both,' said Mrs. Andrews, cutting the meat-pie. 'Begin with the pie and go on with the ham. That's the best of living on a farm, you know – you do get plenty to eat.'

After the first course there were plums and thick cream, or jam tarts and the same cream. Everyone tucked in hungrily.

'I've never had such a lovely dinner in my life,' said Anne, at last. . . .
'Smashing,' said Dick. 'Absolutely smashing.'

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