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Revisiting Some Icons of the Golden Age

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by Faye Cheatley

To approach and reread childhood literature is fraught with problems. The recollection is often replaced by a new adult version of reality, much of which threatens to shatter the illusion of the child reading. Therefore it was with trepidation that I approached the task, armed with the adult critical tools: suspension of disbelief; ability to recognise didactic and moral intent; a partially formed paradigm of literary theory; a vast body of knowledge about narrative structures, historical norms and biographies. An arsenal. The outcome was mixed. True, the reflection showed flaws, at times yawning gaps, but I found to my delight and perhaps to the discomfiture of my adult critic, that my child feelings and recollections survived. If necessary, they can subvert the grown up response of critical angst and threat of disillusionment.

I loved *The Secret Garden*, primarily for the character of Mary Lennox, the 'most disagreeable-looking child ever seen' (Burnett, 1951:7). Mary was amazing; she was 'sour' and not wanted at all by her mother. These features I related to strongly. She had other things I longed for. She had lived in India and survived a cholera epidemic alone! She learnt to read without help, because she had chosen to. Here was a girl who could do almost anything. She survived the teasing of Basil and 'living ... all by herself in a house with a hundred mysteriously closed rooms' (Burnett, 1951:61). She found the most amazing treasures. Imagine, a room containing a hundred elephants made of ivory, and even better, six baby mice (Burnett, 1951:53). No adults

interfered with these adventures. What a treat. Her discovery of the key to the secret garden and being able to go there whenever she chose was thrilling.

The fact that Dickon was her friend, and better still, that the robin communicated with her, sealed her role as my favourite. I knew she was misunderstood, and disagreeable, but I knew her strengths. In no way did the weak Colin take her place. His role was always secondary to hers and his recovery simply showed what a clever person she was. The focus of the text on Colin at the end I think I ignored. Mary, her secrets, strength of character and fearlessness was my joy and inspiration.

The rereading proved that the magic still existed. The central motif of the novel, the secret garden, withstood adult scrutiny. It retained its power to intrigue and invite, its development acting as a metaphor for the growth of Mary's psyche. Revision of the plot, its characters and outcomes, did, however, produce some new insights.

One of the unique features was Burnett's focus on anger. What it demonstrated was that such feelings could be channelled constructively into individual strength and self knowledge. Mary's strength of character not only saved her own life, but also that of Colin. The indulgence and 'molly-coddling' Colin received were not helpful, nor were the Doctor's brutal remedies. It is Mary with her fiery temper and unwillingness to be self sacrificing who jolts him out of hysterics, who deals with his fears and takes him to the secret garden to recover his strength and potential. Her

passion has its positive side. This was most subversive, especially in an era when meekness and even temper in girls was a virtue.

A text in which the child is clearly neglected because she was the wrong sex and a nuisance to a mother who 'cared only to go to parties and amuse herself (Burnett, 1951:7) struck me as being quite sharp social criticism. Adult indifference was rarely acknowledged in my childhood texts, and yet here, with the exception of Susan Sotherby, all parents were portrayed as indifferent, if not cruel to their children. Burnett offers very real reasons as to why Mary is disagreeable. The pity is that she does not stay with that view, and irritatingly backs away to centre the blame back on the child. 'She never seemed to be anyone's little girl ... because she was a disagreeable child (16).

The healing power of acceptance and recognition that Mary gains from Dickon, Martha and Weatherstaff are vital in her journey to self acceptance. Their role in the tale, as poor working class folk, suggests oblique criticism of the upper class and their self indulgence. Burnett also wisely supports an enlightened notion that healing childhood wounds requires understanding and opportunities for positive growth and self image, not just sermons and medical practices.

How disappointing that Mrs Burnett did not let the story remain Mary's. The plot focus switches to Colin whose quest displaces Mary's, the pace slows and the narrative fluency is interrupted by less than convincing idealism. Colin beats Mary in a race that

becomes a symbolic gesture of power and the establishment of male superiority. He becomes 'the Athlete, the Lecturer, the Scientific Discoverer ... a laughable, lovable, healthy young man' (Burnett, 1951:251). How nauseating and unrealistic, but such contrivance on the author's part was clearly necessary to support the patriarchal norm (Paul, 1987:196). No wonder in my inner child version I remembered only Mary's adventure. In a final act of treachery the garden is opened to all by Colin. Perhaps it has fulfilled its function and marks the end of childhood and Mary realises that 'her own manners had not been of the kind which (were) usual or popular' (Burnett, 1951:238). This convenient and comfortable end is trite and contrived.

However, what remains significant is that Mrs Burnett, in a time of unquestioned male superiority, makes women essentially the most powerful force in the text. Mary, Susan, and even the dead Mrs Craven, not only are seen to have found their own *raison d'être*, but also to have the answers that the patriarchs need to become strong and whole. The full power of the feminine is revealed in a complexity of emotional modes to show power, insight and resourcefulness. The idealised Susan is counter balanced to some degree by the portrait of feminine darkness, in Mary's neglectful mother. The adult reader is left with a sense that Mrs Burnett not only spoke for the 'child courage and child longing' (Threadgold, 1979:114) but understood well the complexity of the female psyche.

Her women are not merely social victims, in spite of the social structure.

The novel presents us with a number of characters who are unrealistic and irritating. The idealised figures of Susan and Dickon promote the need to return to harmony with the natural environment and to access the natural healing power that such a relationship can offer, the 'magic'. The notions are laudable, but Mrs Burnett sacrifices her ability to create authentic characters to the lure of dogma. Mr. Craven is also given a mechanistic role and regardless of his coming to terms with a paralysing grief, we never readily relate to him or his experience. In spite of this *The Secret Garden* remains my firm favourite.

The fate of *The Coral Island* and *Little Women* under adult scrutiny was not as fortunate. My enjoyment of *Little Women* rested largely on character identification. Its appeal did not lie in the setting nor the family interaction. I had no siblings and was not stimulated by this text to wish that I had. I related strongly to Jo's rebelliousness and strong will. I emulated her role play, empathised with her inability to remain neat and tidy and understood only too well how she could allow Amy to fall in the river. Like Jo, I wanted to read all the time and resented the intrusion of domestic chores and responsibility. I hated to be beaten at games, by cheats and often felt the urge to be a horse and 'run for miles in (the) splendid air and not lose my breath' (Alcott, 1963:127). I admired Jo's bravery in dealing with Mr Lawrence and Aunt March and I

knew that I too wanted to be 'something splendid' (Alcott, 1963:119). I conveniently ignored Alcott's moralising about the need to curb one's anger and consider others.

Amy and Meg were also on my list of favourites. I identified with Amy who didn't like dolls, and who found herself joyfully being able to pay back the lime debt, only to be undermined by the vicious Snow and the vengeful teacher Mr Davis. Having experienced several such scenarios myself, how I envied Amy having such a compassionate Mother who said, 'You can have a vacation from school' (Alcott, 1963:91). I reread that part often to see if I could find the key to persuade mine that corporal punishment was unjust and school unnecessary. Amy's revenge on Jo also struck me as being rather nastily satisfying. I was so inspired by her labours to write a will, that I contemplated how best to dispose of my own treasures.

Meg who so keenly felt poverty was a girl close to my heart. Her dress-up adventure with its attendant embarrassment and discomfit encompassed some of my own more complex fears and insecurities. I was delighted with her romance, but felt more compelled to see Jo's point of view on the matter. I had no time for Beth, except when the canary died and this I related to because of my own carelessness with one of my pets. Compared with Mary, however, these were lesser heroines and I never felt completely at home in their domain. I really preferred 'nude, unladylike like' types and like Jo, avoided or ignored 'niminy-piminy chits' (Alcott, 1963:9) in books. As

Nicholas Tucker says in his *discourse* on children as readers, 'It's not a question of details they can recognize but more a question of having details they want to recognize'.

On rereading *Little Women* (Vol 1.) the joy of empathy was swamped by the slowness of plot and the excess of didactic and moral purpose. I was horrified that Jo and Amy should have been given such strong desires for independence by the author, only to be so brutally under-cut by her in tasks that constantly tied them to domestic servitude and lessons which left them stunned into obedience. Jo's yearning to be the man of the house is finally realised, but it is the domestic drudgery that she experiences not the privilege of male freedom. Whilst this may have reflected Alcott's own bitter experience (Carpenter, 1985:90), as an adult reader, I found it frightening as a child.

Hollander claims that readers turn 'again and again to Alcott's book solely for a gratifying taste of her simple stable version of feminine completeness' (Butler, 1984:191). Readers may, I certainly would not. Whilst Alcott does allow us to see a range of feminine attributes in her protagonists, those which she deems to be socially undesirable such as envy, selfishness or anger are seen as absolute negatives to be eradicated at all costs. Marmee in her stylised role of 'good mother' tells Jo 'I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it' (Alcott, 1987:71). Worse still she has had to be taught this restraint by her saintly, but somewhat financially stupid, husband. There is no comfort in her words for

me. Her words suggest unhealthy repression.

Virtue is the only appropriate way to discover life and gain satisfaction from it for 'even camellian rings were not so valuable as good behaviour' (Alcott, 1987:42) claims Alcott, ignoring the positive energy of the traits she seeks to eradicate. For all Jo's yearnings and passionate feelings there is only one way to succeed and that is to constrain herself and remember she is 'a young lady'. The warning in the introductory chapter bodes badly for a real exploration of the value of all aspects of the female psyche. We are told 'burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is the 'Celestial City' (Alcott, 1987:14). For Jo the reality is that she must 'simply bear it'.

Alcott used *Little Women* not simply to exemplify the necessity of virtuous behaviour in women, but to indicate that such behaviour has value beyond material riches. 'I'd rather see you poor men's wives if you were happy than queens on thrones, without self respect and peace' (Alcott, 1987:84). Exhortations to hold onto values in spite of poverty was clearly viewed as the only way to wipe out shame and scorn, although as Amy demonstrates this is not always easy with 'impertinent girls, who laugh at your dresses and label your father if he isn't rich' (Alcott, 1987:61). Alcott does however make it quite clear that work is essential for poorer young women. 'Work is wholesome ... it keeps (them) from ennui and boredom' (Alcott,

1987:98). Ambition in women is simply childish day dreaming. In *Cinderella* terms the girls discuss writing, art and doing splendid things, but their reality is quite different in its dreary domestic, nurturing focus. I found the preaching stifling.

The formula of controlling and constricting characters who might have found unique resolution to their dilemmas through individually liberating qualities, restricted plot, pace and characterisation. The author's strangely blinkered view of culture (Beth's music is wonderful, Amy's art is not) and character (Jo's anger is malleable, Beth's shyness is not) irritated me and left me feeling decidedly unhappy with both plot development and resolution. Why couldn't Louisa May Alcott have taken her own advice 'Let woman find out her own limitations but in heaven's name give her a chance' (Cheney, 1889:46).

The Coral Island was one of the few 'boy's books' I read as a child. I enjoyed the notion of 'roving' as it was one of my favourite pastimes and the notion of being able to do this on a grand scale was immensely thrilling. Having never been any where much, the coral island was extremely exotic and I had no trouble transporting myself there. The bower became a prototype for cubby house construction, the mountains and water spouts transformed the creek. I related to Ralph and Jack as fearless leaders and believed, as my Sunday School suggested, that Missionaries really did work wonders with wild untamed people in Fiji (a good Methodist

stronghold). The excitement of diving into hidden caverns underwater, escaping sharks, lurking in bushes to watch natives and being captured by pirates were marvellous fuel for the imagination.

The revisit lacked much of the recalled lustre. The adventure did, however, begin with a racy tone that *Little Women* and *The Secret Garden* lacked. There was no question here that the domain for the child reader was going to be restricted to the domestic scene; the potential promised to be as exciting as the hundred rooms on an isolated moor. This protagonist was no ordinary child: he was a sailor. In the tradition of boy's books he had been released from a domestic setting; the assumption that the world was his roving ground was firmly supported. In good quest tradition the protagonist was established as quiet and naive but with a 'heart (that) glowed ardently' (Ballantyne, 1956:6) as the sailors recounted 'their wild adventures in foreign lands' (Ballantyne, 1956:6). Storms, appalling dangers, wonderful creatures and blood thirsty savages all inspired Ralph. He was ready to face a journey that could transform his experience and his life and all with his Mother's blessing!

From the onset the unreality and contrived nature of the plot and characterisation is evident. With none of the normal reserve or attendant unease, Ralph becomes 'staunchest friends' with Jack and the 'mischievous' Peterkin. The three although under immense strain at times, have an unnaturally tranquil relationship. Jack is the unquestioned leader. 'We gladly

agreed to follow Jack' (Ballantyne, 1956:7). No power struggles ever mar the scene or test the relationship; all boys behave not only in a civilised way toward one another, but to others.

The three became mere prototypes of the best of the British Empire, in spite of Peterkin's odd leaders (Ballantyne, 1956:7) Jack in fact is 'superior to any Englishman' (Ballantyne, 1956:23). He leads without question as though it was a God given right. He is the 'wisest and boldest'. He knows exactly how to survive on a coral island. So skilled is he, that he knows the names of plants and which ones are edible. He is ludicrously unrealistic. He advises the boys on the log to flee from a shark by paddling, trusting him and not looking back and he proposes knocking out Peterkin, but settles for trussing him up, to dive through the tunnel. Most incredibly, he decides to rescue Avatea when he might have used the good old pirate ship to head for home. True knights and heroes have a reason for their actions, Jack doesn't seem to, other than in the interests of British chauvinism! Ballantyne tells us, it is his 'romantic impulsive nature' (Ballantyne, 1956:152). It is not evident elsewhere. Jack remains a wooden and unexplored character with an implied voyeuristic attachment to Avatea (Ballantyne, 1956:94).

Ralph shares the story with Jack. He too seems little more than a mechanism for advancing plot and morality. He is involved in bloody battles between natives and pirates, reveals the evils of drink, and preaches against the most un-British activity, lying and worship-

ping idols. Ralph seems to spend a good deal of time oscillating between fear and awe, and when called upon by his author becomes a convenient mouthpiece for Christianity. His attempts to save the soul of Bloody Bill by quoting Biblical texts gives him religious virtue by a process of osmosis. As with his brief meditation on the first morning on Coral Island, it does not seem in tune with what Ballantyne reveals in the rest of his personality. The attributes like the fleeting reference to the Ancient Mariner type albatross, seem imposed and remain unconvincing.

The romance of the story allowed Ballantyne to give full vent to a range of grisly details under the guise of showing savage behaviour that was anathema to the British. Cannibalism, a gruesome sacrifice for the foundations of a temple and a shark attack not only highlight philosophical British sensibility but also an unquestioned assurance of racial superiority. The heroes are not the God-fearing missionaries, they are the boys who brush aside heavy blows to the skull with smiles and immediate recovery. They are boys who 'rise naturally to the top of affairs, who bathe regularly, and admire orderliness, and who having set affairs to right in Feejee set sail for "homeward bound"'.

The plot of this story follows a predictable series of events. The characters are wooden and do not develop as anything more than mouthpieces for the romance and prescriptions of British behaviour. They do not reflect on or evaluate their experience nor do they in any major way cause the

reader to reflect on the dilemmas that confront them. Action and unquestioned assumptions are the text's basis.

To review books from one's childhood can be a sobering process. Awareness of the writer's worlds and constraints as well as recognition of their intent, combines with an adult perspective in a recipe for disillusionment. Yet the ease of recalling the joys of the text from childhood can retain its own special place that remains free from the carping of adulthood.

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Biographical Note

Faye Cheatley completed a Graduate Diploma in Children's Literature in 1993. She is a secondary school teacher and currently teaches at Toorak College, Mount Eliza, where she teaches English.

