

## LITERARY LADDERS IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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**I**N May of 1893 Mary Louisa Molesworth published an article entitled "On the Art of Writing Fiction for Children" in *Atlanta* magazine. She knew the art well; she was the eminent Mrs. Molesworth who had written nearly one hundred children's books, among them the nursery classic *Carrots* (1876) and the influential tales *The Cuckoo Clock* (1877) and *The Tapestry Room* (1879). Looking over her profession as one of its solidly established members, she said, "Writing for children calls for a peculiar gift. It is not so much a question of taking up one's stand on the lower rungs of the literary ladder, as of standing on another ladder altogether—one which has its own steps, its higher and lower positions of excellence."

For over a century this statement has remained famous as an assertion of the dignity of writing for children, and it so aptly describes the current idea of children's literature that its accuracy has not been questioned. In English-speaking countries children's literature has become a field of its own, with its own space in public libraries, its own graduate programs, and its own respected journals. While it may attract adult interest, both serious and frivolous, it is assumed to be written for children by adults sensitive to children's interests and points of view.

This separate-but-equal concept of children's literature is often accompanied by the idea that adult writers for children have historically retained a childlike quality that makes such writing possible. Humphrey Carpenter's *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (1985), in fact, has connected the famous children's literature of 1865–1911 with authorial immaturity. His heavily Freudian interpretations stop short of saying that there was something sexually askew with *all* important children's writers such as Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter, Rudyard Kipling, James Barrie, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and E. Nesbit. He does, however, firmly attach their works for children to their "warped lives." Jackie Wullschläger's later book, *Inventing Won-*

*derland: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame, and A. A. Milne* (1995), puts the matter more succinctly in its opening sentence: "Once there were five writers who never grew up."

The theory that the famous works constituting the golden age of children's literature should have been the product of childlike authors unable to cope with the repressions of the Victorian adult world does have its attractions. It allows one to assume that great children's literature comes from innocence—and that innocence, despite the personal penalty it may impose, acts as a filter through which authors may pour their deepest feelings. This romanticized view, however, is invalidated not only by the immense financial success of Kipling, Barrie, and Burnett and the substantial professional achievements of Grahame, Potter, and Nesbit, but also by a simple chronological fact. During the year in which Mrs. Molesworth's article appeared, five of these six young authors began to write for children in a new and unprecedented way; the sixth, E. Nesbit, adopted their techniques three years later and soon joined them in celebrity.

To explain why six ambitious authors all turned to the same genre at the same time, it is imperative to look beyond their private lives into the professional world that shaped their careers. The literary marketplace in which they had to establish themselves was hardly one in which innocence could survive; it was changing with unprecedented speed determined by technological developments and a new generation of entrepreneurial editors. Mrs. Molesworth's description of her profession accurately described the world in which her generation had made its reputations, but the literary world of Kipling, Grahame, Nesbit, and their generation was no longer characterized by a single "adult" fiction ladder and a children's literature ladder with slightly different rules. It was a world in which the rules were no longer clear—and in which experimentation with the literary potential of a new idea of childhood yielded immense professional success.

The dominant ladder that characterized Mrs. Molesworth's mid-Victorian literary world was the novel. Many of the 20,000 writers publishing between 1837 and 1901 were journalists, tractarians, theologians, textbook authors, naturalists, poets, lawyers, playwrights, biographers, historians, doctors, or politicians—but

3,500 of them were novelists. The number of novelists increased during Victoria's reign, as did their output. In 1837 novels constituted 12 percent of an annual output of 2,000 volumes; by 1901 they constituted 25 percent of 8,000 works published. The *Publishers' Circular*, which recorded this growth in its annual statistical summary of all English publications, noted the rise with wry commentary: "Novels keep up to their average of more than two per diem, Sunday included," its editors remarked in 1887. Two years later they calculated that the 1,040 new novels and 364 reprints gave "the ardent novel reader as many as three new novels each week-day, with a balance to spare, and one new edition for every day."

There are many reasons for the expansion of the Victorian novel; but, from a business point of view, the most salient one was that publishing tradition subsidized it. The subsidy, an ultraconservative relic of Georgian publishing assumptions, ignored the technological developments that had revolutionized print culture in all other genres. Between 1850 and 1885 a combination of cheap paper, high-speed presses, inexpensive engraving, and the increasing literacy of an expanding population brought about an explosion of printed matter. Book production quadrupled, and so did the number of weekly, monthly, and quarterly magazines, which rose from 643 in 1875 to 2,531 in 1903, paralleled by a rise in newspapers from 1,609 in 1875 to 2,504 in 1914. During the late-Victorian era, readers of all social levels had regular access to literary and visual stimulation inconceivable to their grandparents.

Yet, until the closing years of Victoria's reign, the accepted publishing wisdom regarding novels remained the one expressed in the inaugural issue of the *Athenaeum* in 1828: "no Englishman in the middle class of life *buys* a book." Ridiculous though the statement had become for other genres, it still firmly applied to fiction. The readers who devoured the works of Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Trollope, Brontë, and Gaskell did not go to bookstalls and buy first editions of their works. If they wanted the latest novel, they bought it serialized in a periodical; if they were less conscious of fashion, they waited two or three years until a cheap reprint appeared. First editions of novels were launched in three-volume form (called *three-deckers*, after wooden ships of the line) and

sold for a guinea and a half—a prohibitive price when an annual income of £100 allowed a small family to assume middle-class status in a modest way.

Publishers, authors, and readers alike knew this price was as inflated as the assumption behind it was outmoded, but the three-decker lived on, a colossus towering above the mass market that scurried around its feet. The inflated price of the novel enabled the publishers, librarians, and writers who depended on it for their livings to profit from literature that could *not* compete in a mass market. At a guinea and a half per novel, a publisher could print small runs of 1,000 with the assurance that he could cover the costs of production even if he sold only 300–350 copies of the work. If he sold the full thousand, he made a handsome profit. From an author's point of view, this was a happy situation: on a novel that could be expected to sell most of its first run, the young Trollope could earn £150–£250, enough to sustain middle-class respectability for the year it took him to write another three-decker. If a first novel did well, the second might be accepted as a serial publication as well as a three-decker, thus paying its author twice. After a year or two it might be sold in a cheap reprint at further profit—provided, of course, that the author had not sold the copyright to the publisher.

These circumstances allowed an entrepreneurial popular novelist to receive unprecedented payment for his labor. Dickens earned £10,000 on *Our Mutual Friend* alone, and by the end of his career his writing had allowed him to amass an estate worth £93,000. Figures like this made Victorian society accept novel writing as a respectable profession—no mean feat in an evangelical age. More important than respectability, however, was the literary freedom the three-decker offered to authors. The novel was the only Victorian genre that could survive on the sale of 350 copies. Its protected state drew Mark Twain, Henry James, and other American authors across the Atlantic to a world in which they could ignore the demands of the democratic audience that had cost Melville dearly.

The three-decker could not have subsidized the great era of mid-Victorian fiction if it had not itself been subsidized. As Guinevere L. Griest has demonstrated in her *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (1970), its subsidy was supplied

by the irreproachably bourgeois entrepreneur C. E. Mudie. Looking at the expanding Victorian audience, Mudie realized that a man who could make reading the latest novels as cheap as owning unfashionable reprints would reap untold profits. He thus established a library in which one guinea allowed subscribers to borrow one volume at a time for a year, exchanging it for another volume as often as they wished. Wealthier subscribers could borrow two books for two guineas or three books for three. Victorian readers quickly realized that their guineas gave them access to books that would have cost their annual income to buy new, and their enthusiasm was richly rewarding to all. By the 1860s Mudie's Circulating Library commanded handsome marble-pillared headquarters on New Oxford Street, branches around the country and the empire, £40,000 a year in subscriptions, and the absolute submission of the publishing industry. His acquisitions—10–50 percent of a first edition, totaling 120,000 volumes a year—established him as a figure with whom no writer or publisher could afford to quarrel. If Mudie refused a three-decker because it offended his evangelical sensibilities, it failed. Well might Trollope remark, "I do believe that no girl has risen from the reading of my pages less modest than she was before."

The subsidy of the novel thus came at a price, both in form and in content. A novel was necessarily a three-volume work, regardless of its author's ability to amass material and sustain inspiration that would last for eight hundred pages. Consequently, as Henry James unkindly put it, a novel's structure often resembled a pudding in which good things "irrelevant to the whole experience but nice for the taster" were mixed together. A novel necessarily portrayed nothing overtly sexual, though "sensation" writers such as M. E. Braddon might portray bigamy, murder, and infidelity if they spared their audiences graphic details. Mudie's rules were *the* rules, and they were all the firmer for being unstated. As the 1880s progressed and French and Russian authors pushed the novel in exciting new directions, an increasing number of English writers desired *not* to obey those rules—but conservatism reigned. Mudie, though happy to support novelists and publishers, would not tolerate literary innovation.

During the years in which the Victorian novel achieved great popularity, children's literature also expanded; but the circum-

stances surrounding its composition and publication in the first half of the nineteenth century were so different from those of the novel that Mrs. Molesworth's two-ladder analogy is altogether apt. One essential difference was that, between 1780 and 1850, the association of "children's books" with "fiction" would have caused a considerable stir. To the most influential children's writers of that period—Maria Edgeworth, Mrs. Trimmer, Mrs. Barbauld, and their famous Calvinist successor, Mrs. Sherwood—children's fiction was tolerable only if it inculcated a moral; reading fairy tales and other literature purely imaginative was a sure pathway to irrationality or sin. At a lower social level evangelical writers of cottage literature deplored fiction because it was frivolous and wicked. The combined influence of these two groups was very powerful; many children in Georgian and early Victorian England grew up with no knowledge of fairy tales, though they were well acquainted with stories of child deaths or with the imports and exports of Peru.

Theoretical and religious disapproval of children's fiction, however powerfully expressed, could not survive the demands of a developing mass audience, for children's books did not receive the price protection accorded to three-decker novels. New middle-class children's books were one-volume affairs that sold for five or six shillings, depending on the quality of their printing and illustration, and were reprinted in cheaper editions if they did well. Cottage literature designed for lower-class children sold at prices varying from a penny to sixpence. Publishers could print books at these prices only if substantial sales were likely to be forthcoming. A six-shilling book had to sell 500 copies in order to cover costs. At sixpence a publisher had to sell 27,000 copies to break even and 36,000 if the author were to be compensated at roughly 10 percent.

Publishing reality thus forced the genre the *Publishers' Circular* categorized as "juvenile works and tales" to compete in the book market in a way new novels did not—and that market increasingly demanded fiction. Technological developments in the 1840s made it possible to sell cheap reprints of old novels for as little as two shillings and sixpence. Instructive treatises on the exports of Peru suddenly had to compete with books that children found entertaining: *A Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Ivanhoe*, the

adventure tales of Marryat and J. F. Cooper, and increasingly—as the translation of the Grimms and the stories of Andersen became popular in the 1840s—with the revived and illustrated fairy tale.

The temptations of literature put pressure on middle-class juvenile works and tales, but the most intense competition took place at the lower rungs of the ladder. The cheapest children's works faced the threat of an expanding corpus of sensational literature that lured children away from stories of missionaries and child deaths by offering exciting one-sheet accounts of murders, robberies, and other sensational events. The 1840s saw an even more serious threat: the "penny dreadfuls" that offered thrilling tales of highwaymen and other heroes of a dissolute underworld. Any child could read them. Like other sensation pamphlets that appealed to the marginally literate, they were printed in breathless one-sentence paragraphs and supported by lurid illustrations. Their spectacular popularity extended far beyond lower-class children; Dick Turpin and Jack Shepherd became the cult heroes of generations of adolescent boys with a predictable adult response. In 1869 the *Publishers' Circular* reported that there were now lads who, inspired by their clandestine reading, had taken to robbery and forgery, even though their fathers occupied "some highly respected" positions and even though their "knowledge of Scripture and . . . orthography, and acquaintance with arithmetic" suggested they had been brought up according to "sound and good" principles. Faced by such lucratively degenerate works, editors of "appropriate" children's books who wished to keep their audience were forced to reconsider their marketing strategies.

The most obvious strategy was to print works more cheaply, and the most obvious way to print more cheaply was to adopt the traditions of Grub Street presses and to exploit children's authors. The endeavor was made easier by the lack of firm rules governing literary contracts. Royalties, which allowed American authors to receive a certain percentage of the sales of all editions of their books, were unknown in England until the 1880s and were not an assumed part of publishing agreements until the turn of the century. Publishers offered profit-sharing agreements only to authors of Dickens's proven marketability; a great number of his contemporaries were forced to sell their copyrights to their publishers for

the highest price they could obtain, thus relinquishing all claims to the profits from reprints if the books were successful.

Children's authors were certainly not the only ones to suffer from this situation; many beginning novelists accepted unprofitable contracts as the price of publication. But, in a publishing world that required tough bargaining skills, most of the women who wrote for children had no business experience and were thus particularly vulnerable to editorial exploitation. Hesba Stretton, desperately trying to maintain middle-class status after her father's death, sold the copyright of *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) to the Religious Text Society for less than £50, only to see its sales make it one of the few evangelical books whose circulation competed with those of Dick Turpin stories. The press grudgingly paid her an extra £15, but no more. Such misfortunes continued throughout the century: as a result of sold copyrights Florence and Ruth Upton received not a penny from the craze for Golliwogg dolls that followed the publication of their *Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg* (1895); and *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899) brought Helen Bannerman only £5.

A less controversial means of competing with Grub Street was to take advantage of the increasingly commercial Christmas season, which after midcentury became *the* time in which children's books were released. By 1889 the *Publishers' Circular* noted that while a generation ago there had been handsome adult books printed for the season, "English publishers now devote their Christmas aspirations wholly to 'juvenile' books, for the habit of seasonal gifts is here confined mostly to the nursery, the school, and the 'lads and lasses.'" The extent of the industry's Christmas aspirations was visible for many years in the *Circular's* first December issue, which was adorned with pages of beautiful illustrations from new juvenile books.

At midcentury, however, publishers could not yet count on bookstalls or Mudie's library for the majority of their sales, and herein lay the major difference between "juvenile works and tales" and the novel. The most influential buyers of juvenile books were not libraries or generous relatives; they were the committees that purchased reward books for schools. The reward book was originally a feature of the Sunday School movement, which



was one of the most important catalysts in increasing working-class literacy before the Education Act of 1870 was passed. The movement, which began with the foundation of four Gloucester Sunday schools in 1781, took hold in a way that surprised even its most enthusiastic advocates: 206,100 children were attending such schools by 1801, and that number had grown to over two million by 1851. The swelling audience of schoolchildren had a predictable effect on the publishing industry: between 1824 and 1830, a time when a publisher felt lucky if he could sell 1,000 copies of a three-decker, the demand for elementary readers and spellers was in the millions.

The development of the schools had a less predictable indirect effect on children's reading. Struggling against the many factors that kept poor children from attending school and from behaving well when they got there, Sunday School teachers encouraged diligence and obedience by issuing tickets that allowed students to save up for the "purchase" of a book. Today's readers, introduced to the process by Tom Sawyer, tend to share Mark Twain's cynical attitude toward the morality thus inculcated, but Victorians thought differently. The reward book became a feature not only of Sunday schools but of the national schools that grew up beside them. By 1870 reward books had become so much a part of education that the board schools set up by the Education Act adopted the tradition automatically. In the early nineteenth century the only books used for rewards were Bibles and testaments, but gradually the committees began choosing "suitable" juvenile works and tales as well—thus making it suddenly possible for a publisher of such books to sell not five hundred but hundreds of thousands of copies. The effect on the style and content of mid-century children's books was immense.

One way to understand that effect is to consider the word *reader*, which in this period came to refer not only to a person who read, either to herself or to others, but also to a certain type of book. A *reader* in the new sense might well contain enjoyable material, but its primary purpose was to inculcate technical and moral skills. As a word used in education, *reader* still has this connotation, and its implications still exist. Children approaching a reader are not invited to enter into a complex interrelationship with the person who has written it—a relationship that allows

them to interpret what the author has said, or to argue, or simply to enjoy sharing the author's mental world. Children who read readers are subordinates; their duty is to learn the skills and values the reader offers, thus improving themselves. The resulting situation affects not only readers but writers; however well the author may understand children and sympathize with them, the necessity of instruction disallows the extended state of companionship that writing "non-readers" offers. Discipline must be maintained, however compassionately, and so must distance.

The great majority of early children's books were not readers in the sense that they taught children to read; there were primers for that. But the association of reading and moral education, coming at a time when literacy was introduced to a broader and broader social spectrum, determined the nature of children's books written by evangelical writers and rationalists alike. On very rare occasions a children's book appeared that was *not* didactic: William Roscoe's *The Butterfly's Ball* (1806) combined fanciful illustrations with a nonsense text worthy of Edward Lear's later efforts, and Sara Coleridge's complex *Phantasmion* (1837) influenced George MacDonald's far more didactic fantasies. But these were "home stories"—works written for specific children rather than with an eye to the market—and they were published mainly because Roscoe was an eminent member of Parliament and Coleridge was the editor of her famous father's works. How many other tales of this rule-breaking kind perished in lesser known people's attics is a matter of conjecture. What is *not* a matter of conjecture is that until the middle of the 1850s, reward-book committees, parents, children's writers, and the *Publishers' Circular* alike assumed that what we now call the *transaction* of reading "juvenile works and tales" was different from the transaction of reading "novels, tales and other fiction."

The penny dreadful, whatever its literary and moral drawbacks, offered the reader a literary transaction. So did Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—pirated American novels so in tune with Victorian sensibilities that reward-book committees considered them suitable for pious children. The children so rewarded did not turn to a life of sin, and the publishers supplying the books saw their sales catapult into the millions. The lesson was lost neither on

the committees nor on the major religious publishing houses that monopolized the printing of children's books before the 1860s. From that time on, while the reader variety of juvenile works and tales still sold briskly, the novel gradually moved into children's literature with the blessings—first tentative, then enthusiastic—of reward-book committees.

One result of this development was the Victorian boy's adventure tale, which strove to create a healthy alternative to penny dreadfuls. The genre was pioneered in 1851 for the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge by W. H. G. Kingston's *Peter the Whaler*; the next year brought not only another Kingston novel, but also the swashbuckling Captain Mayne Reid's *The Desert Home*. Kingston and Reid subsequently turned out adventure stories at the rate of one or two a year, and they were joined in 1856 by R. M. Ballantyne with the publication of *Snow Flakes and Sunbeams; or, The Young Fur Traders* and then the enormously popular *Coral Island* (1857), which would later influence James Barrie. The new genre derived many of its features from the older adventure stories of Defoe, Wyss, Scott, Cooper, and Marryat—all "adult" novels that had been popular with children for many years, frequently with parental sanction. Like their models the new books offered exciting episodes, geographic and historical "experience," and useful information about surviving in the wilderness, all interspersed with improving religious sentiments. The sentiments were sincere, and they appeared in amounts sufficient to justify reward-book status.

The teenaged heroes of these adventures provided emotional food for the dreams of all sheltered nursery children. Girls eagerly joined boys in reading them; the absence of feminine characters allowed girls to enjoy the masculine world vicariously without awkward reminders of women's secondary place in that world. But the religious publishing houses also appealed to less adventurous readers. Mrs. Molesworth's hundred children's novels were published by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. Her contemporary Mrs. Ewing, whose *Six Through Sixteen* (1875) was for many years Rudyard Kipling's favorite book, began her career writing for the *Monthly Packet*, a magazine founded by the Anglican Charlotte Yonge, who urged women between fifteen and twenty-five "to perceive how to bring [their] religious

principles to bear upon [their] daily life." Charlotte Yonge's own novels combined piety with a sophisticated sense of the possibilities of realistic fiction; her popular book *The Daisy Chain* (1856) portrayed life in a large family in a way that influenced Louisa May Alcott and E. Nesbit.

The religious publishing houses had reason to be proud: they might not have driven the penny dreadful from the field, but they had proposed a viable alternative—popular moral fiction for children that offered a genuine transaction. Soon that fiction drew audiences of a size and steadiness that made it possible for religious publishers to appeal to reward-book committees *and* to Mudie *and* to the Christmas market. In general they passed their considerable profits on to their authors with an unprecedented result: after 1860 it became possible for a person with no other means of support to maintain middle-class status by writing juvenile works and tales. Ballantyne, G. A. Henty, Molesworth, Yonge, and Ewing were professional children's writers, deeply and rightly respected for the technique and sophistication they brought to the genre.

The message to major nonreligious publishing houses was clear: it was becoming profitable to publish children's literature. The first house that ventured to do so was Macmillan. In the last years of the Crimean War it had published Charles Kingsley's spectacularly successful *Westward Ho!*, a three-decker Elizabethan adventure story for adults whose muscular Christianity influenced all subsequent boys' adventure stories. It had also done well with a book by Kingsley's friend Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, which, though also written for adults, soon became the model for subsequent school stories. Kingsley's thus being in Macmillan's good graces, the press agreed to run a story he had written for his children in their magazine, and they published *The Water Babies* in 1865 in one-volume form. In that same year the press published Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* on the recommendation of George MacDonald, whose realistic three-decker novels were also doing well for Macmillan. Soon MacDonald persuaded the press to take his own one-volume collection of children's stories, *Dealings with Fairies*.

Customarily the golden age of children's literature is said to begin with these publications, as if their appearance put an end to

didacticism for all time. Publication statistics do not bear out this assertion; *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* sold 108,000 copies between 1865 and 1898, but Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* sold 1.5 million during the same period. Despite the splendid literary experimentation that graced the children's books of Carroll, Kingsley, and MacDonald, didacticism remained a staple of "juvenile works and tales" for the next twenty years. Its continuation was inevitable in a field still influenced by reward-book committees and religious publishing houses.

The situation, however, was changing. Macmillan's success with children's books made other editors realize that the works of professional children's authors could survive without subsidy in a competitive market. Coincidentally the Reform Act's new extension of suffrage in 1867 brought the necessity of universal education to the forefront of political debate. Even before the passage of the Education Act of 1870, it took no prescience to see that the number of child readers was going to expand exponentially in the coming years. Slowly, as one commercial press after another ventured into children's literature after 1865, the two ladders of publishing began to merge.

The merging was not just a matter of publishing; it was also a matter of content, as can be measured by the changes in the children's periodicals. Mid-Victorian magazines such as *Sunday at Home* (1854), *The Boy's Own Magazine* (1857), and *Chatterbox* (1866) were concerned mainly with offering boys a healthy alternative to the degenerate pleasures of such "bloods" as *Boys of England*. The endeavor was not unsuccessful. Barrie admitted he had been weaned from penny dreadfuls by *Chatterbox*, and Kipling later named "King Lion," a story in *The Boy's Own Magazine*, as a source of *The Jungle Books*. But Kipling's admission and Barrie's early "school story" journalism reveal the longer-term result of these magazines. Among the boys who grew up reading periodical adventure stories were Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, Anthony Hope, Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. G. Wells; when they became writers, they began to think of ways to reshape the adventure genre for adults.

The eldest of these, Robert Louis Stevenson, crossed the old "boys' book" with a new adult genre, "the romance," in an experiment that appeared just as the new generation, hamstrung by the

restrictions of the triple-decker, was looking for something new to do with fiction. The result was *Treasure Island*, and credit for its success must go partly to W. E. Henley, the powerful one-legged editor immortalized as Long John Silver. Stevenson first published the story under a pen name in the periodical *Young Folks*, but Henley recognized the book's crossover potential and recommended it to a new press—Cassell's—as a one-volume romance. Cassell's published it in 1883, and it sold 12,000 copies in three years, with American sales that made it one of the most popular books of 1884. Pleased with this conspicuous success, Cassell's decided to risk publishing another romance in 1885. H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* sold 30,000 copies in the first year, thus assuring the future of the genre. The next year saw another one-volume publishing sensation, this one secularizing the familiar juvenile book model of the child savior. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was first published in the American children's magazine *St. Nicholas*, but it quickly crossed the Atlantic to an enormous adult audience.

Encountering the sensational sales of these books and those they influenced, now called the *romance* and the *child story*, the *Publishers' Circular* began to face a problem in its yearly tabulation of works published. In 1870 the distinction between "juvenile works and tales" and "novels and other works of fiction" had been fairly straightforward. But in 1888 the editors found it hard to compile accurate statistics, "for now-a-days, books addressed to young people in the shape of stories are so admirably written and illustrated that grown-up persons are glad to read them, and it is often difficult for one who has a book of this kind before him to determine whether it should be classed as 'juvenile' or as a work of fiction—which most young people's books are."

The difficulty of the distinction was occasioned by the understandable problems of placing such works as Stevenson's *Kidnapped* in 1886, Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* and Haggard's *She* in 1887, and Stevenson's *The Black Arrow* in 1888. The appearance of such works as Andrew Lang's *The Red Fairy Book*, MacDonald's *The Light Princess*, and Burnett's *Little Saint Elizabeth* in 1890 only exacerbated the statistical hand-wringing in the coming years. By 1893 Mrs. Molesworth, still protected by the SPCK and extensive reward-book sales, might still think of children's and

adult literature as two separate ladders, but other people were not so sure.

At this point the literary world suffered an upheaval that invalidated Mrs. Molesworth's two-ladder image. In June of 1894 Mudie's Circulating Library and its chief rival, now owned by W. H. Smith, sent out an encyclical to all publishers: as of December 31, 1894, neither library would purchase any more thirty-one-shilling three-deckers. A more stunning announcement could not have been imagined. "Is the three-volume novel doomed?" gasped the *Publishers' Circular*. If so England was experiencing "a revolution in literature" that would see "the occupation of two-thirds of our novelists destroyed at a blow."

The revolution did not have the anticipated effect. Three years later the *Circular* cheerfully reported that novels numbered 2,677 out of a total of 7,926 books published in 1897, a third of the total output: "fiction not only holds the field, but threatens to crush all rivals." But the *Circular* was no longer counting novels the way it had earlier. In 1896—in the wake of the newfound popularity of Burnett's *The One I Knew Best of All*, both of Kipling's *Jungle Books*, Grahame's *The Golden Age*, and Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy*—the statisticians had decided to classify "juvenile works and tales" together with "novels and other works of fiction." The reason, it explained, was that "the questions What is a novel and What is a story for juveniles . . . cannot be answered definitely."

What the *Circular* acknowledged was that children's literature—no longer subsidized exclusively by the reward-book market—and adult fiction—no longer limited to the subsidized three-decker—had merged in a way and on a scale that had simply not been possible earlier. This merging was very different from the casual trend that had led so many earlier children from the exports of Peru to the exciting pages of *Robinson Crusoe*. The issue was no longer one of children appropriating adult books. It was one of authors bringing children's genres into the literary mainstream. The trend, coinciding temporally with the discovery of child psychology and a new sociological "cult of childhood," made children's literature the solid publishing investment of the twenty years between the end of the three-decker and the beginning of World War I.

During these two decades the six children's writers whose works marked the culmination of the golden age of children's

literature were at the height of their fame. Their works, far from being relegated to a separate-but-equal ladder of children's fiction, were published by the most forward-looking periodicals and presses of the day. Charles Scribner's Sons opened the new trend of reflective children's works by publishing Burnett's *The One I Knew Best of All* in 1893 and contracted for Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy* in the same year. The majority of Kipling's *Jungle Book* tales first saw publication in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Pall Mall Budget*, and *McClure's* before being published in book form by Macmillan. The stories comprising Grahame's *The Golden Age* first appeared in the *National Observer*, and several stories of its sequel *Dream Days* first appeared in the "decadent" *Yellow Book*; both books were published by the Bodley Head. E. Nesbit's Bastable stories were first published in the *Pall Mall Magazine* and the *Illustrated London News*, and they then achieved unprecedented success when T. Fisher Unwin brought them out as *The Treasure Seekers*.

The literary importance of children's literature was acknowledged in 1897 by the foundation of the *Strand Magazine*, a periodical that became famous as the place in which fashionably popular literature first appeared. In its pages readers met Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and the novels of H. G. Wells; after the turn of the century they also encountered Nesbit's *The Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, and *The Story of the Amulet*, the last episodes of which appeared back to back with the opening tales from Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*. Nor was the *Strand* alone in realizing that works appealing to a dual audience brought in dual profits. Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* and its beautiful sequels aroused so much adult affection that soon Frederick Warne & Co. used her illustrations prominently in its catalogues. In 1904 Barrie's *Peter Pan* opened to a theater audience composed entirely of adults, and it remained a cult classic with adults fascinated with the idea of childhood. In 1908 Methuen marketed *The Wind in the Willows* as "a book of Youth—and so perhaps chiefly for Youth, and those who still keep the spirits of youth alive in them." Kipling, reflecting on the sophistication of his *Rewards and Fairies* (1910), called it a collection of tales that "had to be read by children, before people realized they were meant for grownups." And at the end of the period Burnett's *The*



*Secret Garden* was first published in the adult *America* magazine and was for many years marketed as a book that "appealed to young and old alike."

As these publishing facts demonstrate, the golden age of children's literature was not the work of six writers who never grew up. Whatever their personal quirks, the authors who turned to children's literature in 1893 made a professional choice opened to them by an unprecedented combination of technological, cultural, and sociological circumstances. They inherited a tradition of children's literature from the gifted writers of the previous generation and continued that tradition in circumstances that for two decades accepted children's literature as a part of the literary mainstream. The liberated genre allowed them to join their late-Victorian contemporaries in challenging the evangelical morality and artistic repression that had all too frequently accompanied their fathers' and grandfathers' entrepreneurship. The "secret gardens" their works made famous—Mrs. Tiggywinkle's Lake District, Mole and Rat's River Bank, Mowgli's Jungle, Peter Pan's Neverland, the Mouldiwarp's ancient Sussex, Mary and Colin's walled rose-garden—became the most enduring creations of a generation that protested against the despoiling of England's rural beauty in the name of industrial progress.

Far from being childlike in their professional careers, these authors developed a pastoral vision that continued in twentieth-century children's books as Pooh's forest, Charlotte's web, Tom's midnight garden, Narnia, and the Shire. They also created a habitually subversive outlook—an antiauthoritarian irreverence that developed further in the works of the modernists after World War I. The first legacy is universally recognized; the second, because of the romanticized view of childlike writers for children, is generally ignored. But it should not be. Precisely because they wrote children's literature during the brief time when the genre was *not* confined to "another ladder altogether," the authors of children's literature's golden age used the genre to question the assumptions upon which mid-Victorian literature had been based and to offer—to young and old alike—a new literary vision for the twentieth century.