



Authorgraph No.105: Enid Blyton

Article Author:

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Authorgraph

Byline:

Enid Blyton 'interviewed' by **Nicholas Tucker**.

Although Enid Blyton died in 1968, she has returned briefly to earth on the centenary of her birth for this interview by Nicholas Tucker.

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NT : I have always marvelled at how you managed to do so much. Not just over 600 novels and weekly editions of **Sunny Stories** , written entirely by yourself, but also the answers in longhand to your readers' letters, sometimes 100 a day. There were too the various clubs you ran, such as The Sunbeam Club, for raising money for blind children, and The Busy Bee Club, the children's division of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals. On top of all that, there were afternoon games of bridge throughout the week, pre-war cocktail parties, golf, tennis and on most days an hour given over to your own children once they were past the baby stage. You also sewed beautifully, painted, sometimes entertained readers at home and made numbers of school and library visits.

EB : I have always been supremely well organised and also know exactly what I want. I found it easy to compartmentalise my life: writing in the morning, other things later. I also had quite a sizeable domestic staff ? gardener, cook, chauffeur, parlour maid and cleaning lady.

NT : But no secretary or literary agent?

EB : I preferred to do all my own business arrangements myself. I had a phenomenal memory, and acted as my own filing-cabinet.

NT: But that didn't always work. There was the under-paid Income Tax accumulating over seven years up to 1949, which with the heavy fines incurred briefly threatened to bankrupt you. Elsewhere, critics have pointed out numbers of careless mistakes in your stories ? names that alter from page to page, for example, that perhaps a secretary would have spotted.

EB : The tax matter was the result of a misunderstanding. As for the odd slips, these are inevitable when you write as much as I did. I used to pay my daughter Gillian and her friend a penny for each mistake they spotted on the typescript. But if a few got through, what does it matter? Conan Doyle was also sometimes careless in the Sherlock Holmes stories, but everyone always seemed more than satisfied with what they got. When I mistakenly described Syria as a jungle country inhabited by natives wearing loin-cloths in **River of Adventure** , no readers complained. They were all enjoying the story too much.

NT : So what *does* make you so popular with children?

EB : I am a trained teacher; I know how to address children. All the critical fuss about my so-called 'repetitive' use of language misses the point. Children like repetition! If I put the same word five times on a page, young readers positively relish its growing familiarity. It's the same with my plots. In 16 of my 21 books in the Famous Five series, caves, cellars

and tunnels come into play, either under earth or sea. Children soon come to know what to expect; they also know on past form that the Five stuck there will eventually get back to the surface. This is the security children need; much-loved fairy stories often have repetitive plots too. If I continually created new situations in new language, my fans wouldn't know where they were. They like playing the same game again and again; why shouldn't they enjoy reading the same type of stories, especially ones that contain so much action and exciting incident?

NT : But there have been objections to the repetitive, prejudiced depiction of your villains. You often pick on blackness as a warning sign of something dangerous. Or else you concentrate on some physical abnormality: characters with only one arm or one eye, a spotty face, a long nose, or even the 'queer, dwarf-like fellow, with a hunched back that seemed to force his head on one side?', up to no good in **Five Get into Trouble** , and nick-named 'Hunchy'.

EB : Oh, fiddlesticks! I *do* have a number of pleasing black characters too. As for the disabled, remember The Enid Blyton Magazine Club I founded in order to raise money for spastic children, long before they had become a fashionable cause. Besides, someone has to take on the villain's role, and I am not the only one to make bad people look bad too, or at least a bit different. Dickens did the same; think of the dwarfish Quilp in **The Old Curiosity Shop** , or Mr Squeers in **Nicholas Nickleby** whose 'appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two.'

NT : But you are writing for a much younger audience; surely it's important not to encourage cruel prejudice at this early age? Look too at the way you often associate working class characters with a bad smell, as in this passage from **Five Fall into Adventure** : 'Two people came slowly along the beach ... A boy and a man ' and what a ragamuffin the boy looked! He wore torn dirty shorts and a filthy jersey ... The man looked even worse. He slouched as he came, and dragged one foot. He had a straggly moustache and mean, clever little eyes that raked the beach up and down ... 'What a pair!' said Dick to Julian. 'I hope they don't come near us. I feel as if I can smell them from here!'

EB : But these were *bad* characters. I have plenty of honest, humble folk in my stories who never smell of anything. Not washing is horrible, whoever is guilty. My books have always set firm standards of decency, and I make no apology for this.

NT : Going back to the way you compartmentalised your life, would you say the same thing happened in your books? For example, you wrote over 50 religious books advocating among other things the importance of prayer. Yet the children in your adventure stories never pray, never go to church, and never mention religion. Your many nature books are detailed and knowledgeable, as befits a writer who also wrote the entry on British fauna for the **Encyclopedia Britannica** . But in the adventure stories, the world of nature comes over as only the vaguest of backdrops to whatever else is going on.

EB : You clearly don't understand the way I wrote my adventure books. As I have described elsewhere, I sit down at my typewriter and the stories happen in front of my eyes. I simply write down what I see and hear. If the child characters who come alive this way also talked about religion or nature, I would put both topics in, but they don't. And I'm glad! My readers want adventure, and they get it. I don't make them wade through passages given over to education or moralising as other authors sometimes do. This would be too much like those dreary sin- and death-obsessed Victorian children's books I detested when I was a child.

NT : Do you actually like children? I ask because your youngest daughter Imogen has described her own childhood as a distinctly unloved time in her life.

EB : Of course I like children! But as an older friend, rather than as an over-indulgent, doting adult. I regard my readers rather as I did my fellow-pupils at school when I was head girl for two years, as well as tennis champion and captain of lacrosse. They are there to be entertained and encouraged, but they also need to follow a good example and learn to be proud to be British. One reason I rarely feature mothers in my books is because too much love and care can weigh down an adventure story, just as it can weigh down a person in real life. That's why we hardly hear anything about Julian, Dick and Anne's mother in the Famous Five stories. She barely has a name, let alone any personality. The children are

much better off away from her, standing on their own feet and fighting their own battles.

NT : Could this maternal absence in your fiction also be because you preferred being an eternal head girl to being a mother yourself and writing about that experience? There are no babies in your adventure stories. Arthur Ransome has the children's mother constantly returning to look after her infant in **Swallows and Amazons** , but your mothers ? when they exist ? merely seem to cook or play bridge.

EB : What nonsense! Who wants a baby in a children's adventure story anyway ? they would be nothing but a nuisance. And parents *do* feature in some of my books. In **Six Cousins Again** , they practically divorce. So much for my claimed ?escapism?!

NT : One of your critics, Robert Druce, in his study **This Day Our Daily Fictions** suggests there is some ?phallic imagery? in your Little Noddy Stories, what with monkeys' tails misbehaving and Noddy squirting his neighbour with a garden hose or pulling off a Goblin's nose.

EB : How dare you! This interview is at an end ? and you will be hearing from my lawyers!

A (small) selection of series by Enid Blyton

From BBC Books

Noddy TV tie-ins

From Bloomsbury Children's Books

Enid Blyton Stories for 5/6/7 year olds

The Adventure Series

Happy Days Series

From Hodder Children's Books

The Famous Five

The Secret Seven

The Naughtiest Girl

From Reed Children's Books

Malory Towers

St Clare's

Mystery Series

From HarperCollins Children's Books

Noddy (non-TV)

The Barney Mystery Series

The Secret Series

From Macmillan Children's Books

The Adventure Series

About Enid Blyton

Enid Blyton by Gillian Baverstock, Evans ?Tell Me About Writers? series, 0 237 51751 5, £7.99

Nicholas Tucker is a lecturer in psychology at Sussex University.



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