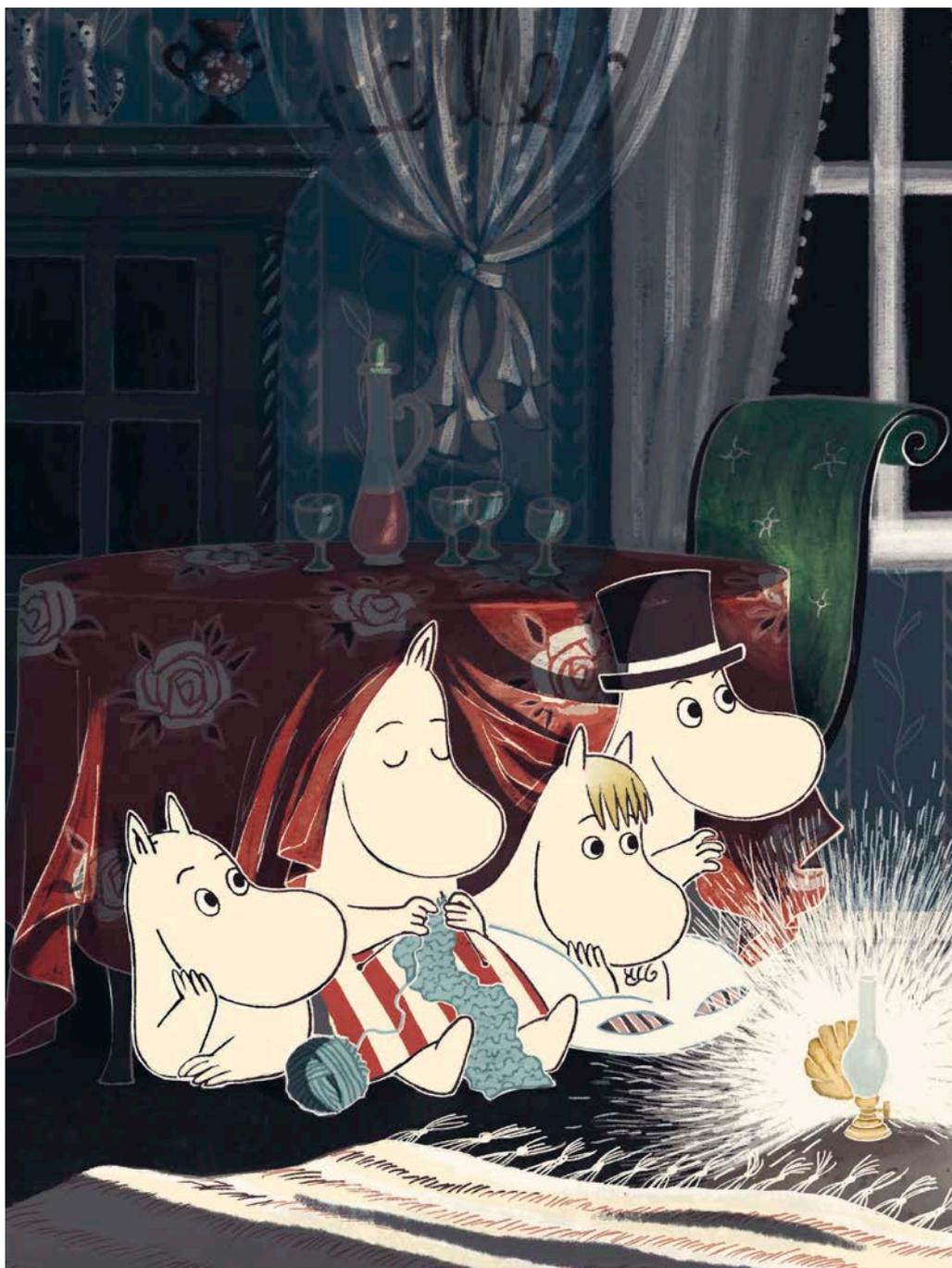


Families in Children's Literature: It Takes All Sorts



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Editorial

It is perhaps a truism that you can always choose your friends – but not your family. Luckily most families, while they may have moments of trauma or difference, are on the whole the most important group in your life and relationships are happy or at least tolerant of idiosyncrasies. How do families fare when in the hands (or under the pen) of an author? If current young adult books are to be believed, dysfunction is the norm – or seems to be. However, there are other more positive depictions as Brian Sibley records in his homage to the Moomin family. Frank Cottrell Boyce however looks back with a certain pleasurable frisson to the many varied – and sometimes downright – strange families to be met in books for children. There is surely nothing cosy about the parents in the French tale ‘Ma mère m’a tué, Mon père m’a mangé’! Here is a real contrast to the comforting presence of Moominmamma for whom no addition to the family home is too much and who can always be relied on to rise to the occasion. Moominpappa is, of course, a rather different proposition. But that is what makes a family interesting and memorable because the reader can recognise elements from their own experience.

Or can they? Patrice Lawrence reminds us that for her growing up, this was far from the case. Though the unit – and perhaps the relationships, might have struck a chord, they did not portray *her* family since the only books she saw reflected an exclusively white British society. Where were the diverse families she knew through her lived experience? It has taken a long time for this to change and it is still a long way from a norm where all children will be able to find themselves and their families as well as others in the books they

read. Patrice Lawrence, of course, is very much in the vanguard of this movement.

The Moomins are, it is true, not human. Nor are the Mennymys; they are a family of life-size rag dolls who, through the imagination of the author Sylvia Waugh, are living their lives quite happily (or not) among their human neighbours; Joshua indeed has a job as a night watchman for Sydenham’s Electrical Warehouse. Susan Bailes introduces us to this meticulously crafted series that charts the fortunes of the Mennym family, the tensions, the joys, the woes, the successes, failures, hopes and ambitions. Under the pen of the writer their characters step off the page to become a family that could be living next door, quietly and unobtrusively. It is extraordinary that they seem to have slipped into the shadowy limbo – though living in the shadows was always an important part of their existence.

But what about real human families? There are plenty of celebrated literary families – the Farjeons, or the Brontes for example. Then there are the Gattys. This extraordinary family is brought to our attention by Sarah Jardine-Willoughby. It was not just the matriarch Margaret Gatty who was talented – she not only wrote for children to support the family but was also an expert on seaweeds – her ten children also wrote stories and poems, composed, drew – or even painted. They all contributed to *Aunt Judy’s* magazine which ran from 1866 to 1885, at one time or another. It was created by Margaret and named after her second daughter, Juliana, who became its editor and a major contributor for almost the whole of its existence.

Families . . . , it takes all sorts!

Ferelith Hordon

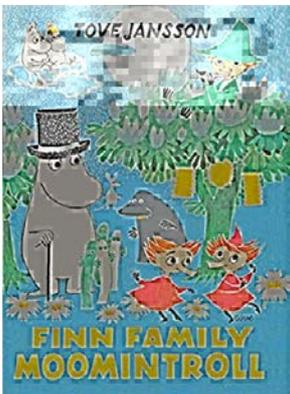
My Family – The Moomins

Brian Sibley is a writer and broadcaster whose many interests include children's literature and the art of illustration. Artists and writers of childhood classics about whom he has written include Lewis Carroll, A.A. Milne and E.H. Shepard, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Pauline Baynes. He corresponded with Tove Jansson for several years and, in 2015, contributed the afterword to a new Finnish edition of Tolkien's *Hobitti eli Sinne ja takaisin* (*The Hobbit*) with Jansson's illustrations.



I was an only child and a sickly child and, hence, a *lonely* child. Like many others such, I lived vicariously in a world of books. But *which* books? Certainly not most of those books featuring 'families'. I had read a few – by Wyss, Nesbit and Ransome – but those authors failed to engage this youngster with no siblings, few 'friends' and a daily life absolutely devoid of even the most commonplace adventure! The Swiss Family, the Bastables and the Walker children felt remote, as were those gung-ho, ginger-beer-fuelled larks of Julian, Dick, Anne, George and Timmy the dog.

I admit that I delighted in the escapades of William and the Outlaws and the high jinks of Jennings and Derbyshire, but that delight stemmed solely from the narrative skills of Crompton and Buckeridge, not from my identifying with (or, even, envying) their japes and scrapes – besides, the families to which those characters belonged were only ever supporting players.



Then, in 1961, I discovered the ideal family when I stumbled on the newly published Puffin edition of Tove Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll* – price two shillings and sixpence of my precious guarded pocket money.

I will resist attempting to describe Moomins because (although there are those who make analogies with hippos) the only thing a Moomin resembles is another Moomin. Apart from which, if you already know what a Moomin is then you don't need a description and, if you *don't* know, then I suggest you abandon reading this article and go and find a copy of one the books instead.

I was already well aware of the Moomins since I followed their daily exploits in the comic strip in my father's nightly copy of the *London Evening News*. But those strips, carefully clipped out and preserved, were three-or-four-frame 'cartoons' with 'speech bubbles'; in *Finn Family Moomintroll* I met the same storyteller but, unshackled from the limiting restraints of the newspaper layout and the demands of syndication, I found the work of a writer of emotionally nuanced prose accompanied by some of the most alive and exciting illustrations I had ever encountered. Jansson's drawings were in the black-and-white tradition that I loved from my copies of the Alice

and Winnie the Pooh books, but – without disrespect to Messrs Tenniel and Shepard, for they remain among my gods of the drawing board – Jansson was in a category uniquely her own, for *Finn Family Moomintroll* and her other books in the series tell their narratives in both word and line.

My imagination was instantly seized by one such illustration: Jansson's tantalising pictorial map of Moomin Valley (no book with a map can ever truly disappoint) and the wider landscape that is hinted at, for this was clearly but an intimate corner of a much larger world – and it was one that was irresistibly beckoning and beguiling.

I supposed that the landscape depicted on this map was purely imaginary, like the cartography encountered in other works of fiction. How, almost 60 years ago, could an 11-year-old have known that the mountains, forests and scattered archipelagos of the world of Moomins had been drawn from the Swedish-speaking Finnish author-artist's Nordic homeland? Finland to a child in 1961 was as fantastically remote as Narnia or Middle-earth.

Inveigled into the book by this map and the quaint 'Dear English Child' preface (written in Moominmamma's somewhat erratic English and her distinctive curlicue hand), I dashed into Moomin Valley ('a small valley that was more beautiful than any they had seen that day' [1]) and eagerly entered the tall, round, blue Moominhouse – the place where so many of the stories have their beginning and their end.

Moominhouse is a very particular residence: a haven for family (in the most hospitable definition of that word) and a refuge for outsiders. It is that place of which Snufkin, an eternal drifter, observes: 'You must go on a long journey before you can really find out how wonderful home is' [2]. In short, the blue tower of Moomin Valley is a shining beacon, the dependable embodiment of security and tranquillity, without those restraining locked doors and barred windows encountered in so many houses – in literature and life.

It was in the Moominhouse that I had my first introduction to the Family Moomintroll and I instantly knew that it was the kind of family to which I had long dreamed of belonging: a family unlike any other I had ever read about and one that was diametrically opposed to that into which I had been born.

I was the product of a mild-mannered father and an overanxious, mollycoddling mother: hereditary elements fertile (and, at the same time, sterile) enough to poorly nurture an only, sickly child. Mercifully, Moominland provided an escape route into a freer, happier life . . .

As I would later discover, through a decade of periodic correspondence with Tove Jansson, the creator of the Moomins was a highly unconventional individual from an unconventional family; and this prized individuality demonstrates itself in her writings for children and adults as a philosophy advocating the freedom and joy of self-expression, tempered with an awareness and acceptance of the individualism of others.



A greeting from Tove and her creations sent to Brian Sibley in 1975 (Brian Sibley Collection).

Presiding over the idiosyncratic Moomin clan (although 'presiding' is too authoritarian a word, suggestive of hierarchy and control) is an idealised model of parenthood that any child would thankfully embrace: the top-hat-wearing paterfamilias, Moominpapa, simultaneously romantic and pragmatic, a non-judgemental adult who understands the yearnings of the young because he has never forgotten the joys and perils of his own youth; and, with apron and handbag, Moominmamma, a universal cypher for motherhood ('Mama will know what to do' [3]) supremely calm, never censorious and a constant dispenser of unrestricted and non-prescriptive love, comfort, understanding and wisdom.

Moomintroll, their son, is (no doubt as a result of his parentage) loving, caring and sensitive; he is naïve, yet inquisitive and has that sharply attuned sense of wonder at the world around him that the world-weary adult identifies as a marker of a happy childhood. Although (as I was) he is a solitary child, Moomintroll is part of an ever changing, expanding and contracting, gathering of kith and kin

- some invited, others not - all received and accommodated by his parents and, as a result, enriching his young experience of life.

Within the first few pages of *Finn Family Moomintroll*, the younger me recognised Jansson's unconditional credo:

Moomintroll's mother and father always welcomed all their friends in the same quiet way, just adding another bed and putting another leaf in the dining-room table. And so Moominhouse was rather full - a place where everyone did what they liked and seldom worried about tomorrow. [4]

What, in that description, was there not to like - and desire?

Jansson's text rarely devotes time to descriptions of Moomintroll's extended family: having given their names (often suggesting personality and, where preceded by the definite article, singularity - as with The Joxter and The Muddler), she draws them and leaves her readers to make what they will of their nature and temperament.

The primary cast of characters becomes the young reader's close companions: and their diverse personalities are, if nothing else, a passport to the learning of tolerance. Every Moomin reader will have a favourite: my own (after Moomintroll) being Snufkin, the wanderer forever following the flowing river to the strange places for which he longs. 'I have a plan,' he tells Moomintroll before setting out on one of his enigmatic quests, 'But it's a lonely one, of course' [5]. Of course . . . And, of course, one spring morning he will return with his battered hat and his tobacco pipe and will whistle under Moomintroll's window and new adventures will follow.

The only-ever friend of my youth was a Snufkin whose close friendship was entirely dependent on being willing to forego closeness if and when a lonely plan came into his head. Jansson writes:

Moomintroll was left alone on the bridge. He watched Snufkin grow smaller and smaller, and at last disappear among the silver poplars and the plum trees. But after a while he heard the mouth organ playing 'All small beasts should have bows on the tails,' and then he knew his friend was happy. [6]

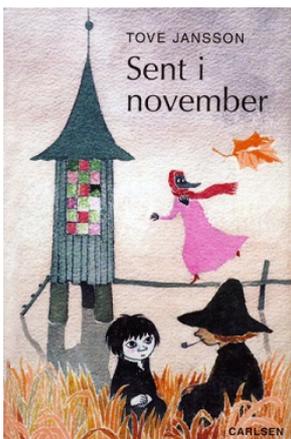
Your favourite character might be the timid, clumsy Sniff who nevertheless has his moments of triumph (such as finding the mysterious Hobgoblin's hat); or Moomintroll's inamorata, the loving, but foolishly vain Snorkmaiden; or her stickler of a brother, the Snork.

But there are so many others: the curmudgeonly Muskrat, The homely Mymble, The Mymble's Daughter and her sister, the impish Little My; those shy and anxious little creatures Toft, Toffle and

Ninny, the Invisible Child and, in contrast, that mischievous knock-about duo, Thingummy and Bob. Nor must we forget assorted (and highly strung) Fillyjonks and lugubrious Hemulens – the latter known for their predilection – regardless of gender – for wearing dresses.

You may, depending on your temperament, even be enticed by the inscrutable and unfathomable Hattifattners or, perhaps, share the soul-stirring anguish of the lonesome Groke, doomed forever to bring cold and darkness to wherever there is warmth and light.

With good evidence, I can surmise that Tove Jansson's favourite character was Too-ticky, inspired by the author's same-sex life partner of over 60 years, Tuulikki Pietilä (or familiarly, 'Tooti'), the American-born Finnish sculptor and a pioneer in graphic arts. As noted earlier, Jansson was an unconventional individual and the broad and open-mindedness that imbues her books is a reflection of her openly shown love for her Tooti. Although quite a few years before the adolescent struggles with my sexuality, I know – in rereading Jansson's stories – that her non-judgemental portrayal of friendships shaped my personal ideology.



It is also clear that Tooti influenced Too-ticky's philosophy of life and her Walt Whitman-like wisdom: 'It's a song of myself . . .', she explains to Moomintroll of a tune she is whistling,

A song of Too-ticky . . . The refrain is about the things one can't understand. I'm thinking about the aurora borealis. You can't tell if it really does exist or if it just looks like existing. All things are so very uncertain, and that's exactly what makes me feel reassured. [7]

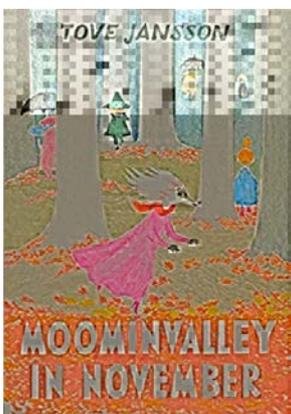
The Moomin family and their friends are repeatedly caught up in happenings, sometimes trivial, sometimes of consequence and frequently elemental: great floods, all-enveloping winter blizzards, lightning storms, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. As Jansson notes:

Very often unexpected and disturbing things used to happen, but nobody ever had time to get bored, and that is always a good thing.' [8]

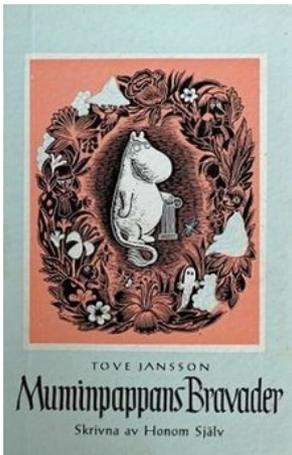
Boredom is never permitted in Moominland.

I often revisit the Family Moomintroll to relive their myriad exploits, large and small, at home and at sea (even those told in the one book in which the family never actually appear, *Moominvalley in November*), because they allow my younger self to run free once more and embrace life.

I pore over, as I did when I first discovered these books, Jansson's illustration in *Finn Family Moomintroll* of the Hattifattners' secret



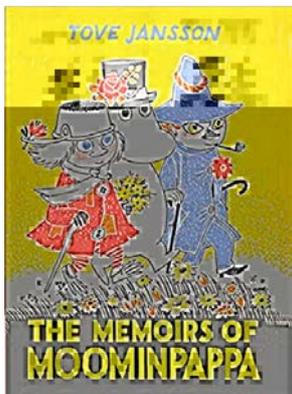
meeting place, their wavy, vacant-eyed forms drifting out from exotic vegetation to observe the Hemulen botanist who, magnifying glass in hand, has unwittingly strayed onto hallowed ground; or in *Moominland Midwinter*, the dramatic illustration of Moomintroll unexpectedly awake and anxious in the snow-bound house while his mother sleeps and with the moon flooding the room with pale light and ‘the cut-glass chandelier softly jingling to itself’; or, again, the drawing in *Comet in Moominland* of Moomintroll and his friends traversing the dried-up ocean bed on stilts casting long shadows on an alien, Daliesque landscape with a wrecked galleon suspended amongst the once-submerged rocks and the comet of the title relentlessly approaching.



I also return to these books for their perpetual challenge – gently demanding that, like the Moomins, I seek a fuller awareness of my world, my place within it and a better appreciation and acceptance of those with whom it is shared.

Beyond that, there is the imperative to respond to Tove Jansson’s perpetual call to adventure, as announced by Moominpappa’s oldest and closest friend, the inventor Hodgkins, at the conclusion of *The Exploits of Moominpapa*:

**‘Silence!’ cried Hodgkins and raised his glass. ‘To-morrow . . .’
‘To-morrow,’ repeated Moominpapa with shining eyes.
‘To-morrow the adventures begin anew,’ Hodgkins continued . . .
‘Not to-morrow, to-night!’ shouted Moomintroll.**



And in the foggy dawn they all tumbled out in the garden. The Eastern sky was a wonderful rose-petal pink, promising a fine clear August day.

A new door to the Unbelievable, to the Possible, a new day that can always bring you anything if you have no objection to it.’ [9]

And what objection could one possibly offer – especially, if we are to be in the company of Moomintroll and family?

Acknowledgements

Covers in Swedish are first editions. Covers in English are those published by Sort Of Books.

Notes

[1] *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, 1945, first translated and published in English in 2005.

[2] *Comet in Moominland*, 1946; English version, 1951; Chapter 8.

[3] *Ibid.*, Chapter 9.

- [4] *Finn Family Moomintroll*, 1948; English version, 1951; Chapter 1.
- [5] *Ibid.*, Chapter 1; Chapter 7.
- [6] *Ibid.*, Chapter 1; Chapter 7.
- [7] *Moominland Midwinter*, 1957; Chapter 2.
- [8] *Finn Family Moomintroll*, 1948; English version, 1951; Chapter 1.
- [9] *The Exploits of Moominpapa*, 1950; Epilogue.

Moomin books

Hyperlinks are to Wikipedia.

[*The Moomins and the Great Flood*](#) (Originally: *Småtrollen och den stora översvämningen*) – 1945.

[*Comet in Moominland*](#) (Originally: *Kometjakten/Kometen kommer*) – 1946.

[*Finn Family Moomintroll*](#), Some editions: *The Happy Moomins* (Originally: *Trollkarlens hatt*) – 1948.

[*The Exploits of Moominpappa*](#), Some editions: *Moominpappa's Memoirs* (Originally: *Muminpappans bravader/Muminpappans memoarer*) – 1950.

[*Moominsummer Madness*](#) (Originally: *Farlig midsommar*) – 1954.

[*Moominland Midwinter*](#) (Originally: *Trollvinter*) – 1957.

[*Tales from Moominvalley*](#) (Originally: *Det osynliga barnet*) – 1962 (Short stories).

[*Moominpappa at Sea*](#) (Originally: *Pappan och havet*) – 1965.

[*Moominvalley in November*](#) (Originally: *Sent i november*) – 1970 (In which the Moomin family is absent).

All the books in the main series except *The Moomins and the Great Flood* (originally: *Småtrollen och den stora översvämningen*) were translated and published in English during the 1960s and 70s. This first book would eventually be translated into English in 2005 by David McDuff and published by Schildts of Finland for the 60th anniversary of the series. A later 2012 version of the same translation, featuring Jansson's new preface to the 1991 Scandinavian printing, was published in Britain by Sort Of Books, and was more widely distributed.

There are also five Moomin picture books by Tove Jansson:

[*The Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My*](#) (originally: *Hur gick det sen?*) – 1952.

[*Who Will Comfort Toffle?*](#) (originally: *Vem ska trösta knyttet?*) – 1960.

[*The Dangerous Journey*](#) (originally: *Den farliga resan*) – 1977.

[*Skurken i Muminhuset*](#) (English: *Villain in the Moominhouse*) – 1980.

[*Visor från Mumindalen*](#) (English: *Songs from Moominvalley*) – 1993 (No English translation published).

Websites

Moominpapa. <https://www.moomin.com/en/characters/moominpappa/>.

Moominmamma. <https://www.moomin.com/en/characters/moominmamma/>.

Moomintroll. <https://www.moomin.com/en/characters/moomintroll/>.

Snufkin. <https://www.moomin.com/en/characters/snufkin/>.

Too-Ticky. <https://www.moomin.com/en/characters/too-ticky/>.

Other characters by clicking on their portrait in the graphic.

<https://www.moomin.com/en/characters/>.

'A Guide to the Moomin Characters'. <https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/books-for-children/the-moomin-characters>.

From a Mountain to a Rocket: Diversity and Family Representation in Children's Books in the UK

Patrice Lawrence is an award-winning British writer of books for children and young people. She has worked with the UK charity Booktrust on increasing the ethnic diversity of children's writers and illustrators. Patrice Lawrence has worked in the UK charity sector for over 20 years on projects and policy initiatives promoting social justice, anti-discrimination and elevating the voices of marginalised communities.

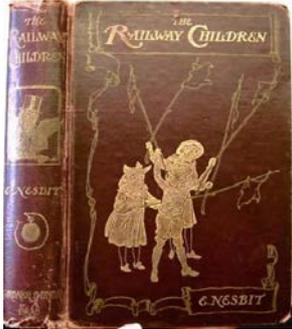
My parents met as student nurses in Sussex. They were young and came from different parts of the Caribbean. They were together briefly and split up before I was born. For me, families have always come in myriad shapes. I have lived in a white foster family, with my unmarried single mother, and with my mother and Italian stepfather before, during and after their marriage. (They got on better after their divorce.) I have never lived in a family where we are all the same colour and never with my biological father.



I was encouraged to read widely from an early age by both my foster mother and my mother. As a black child growing up in a very white society, it never occurred to me that children that looked like me could ever be seen between the pages of a book. However, stories presented me with families that were not the standard nuclear ideal. Dead mothers abounded, not only in classic fairy tales such as 'Cinderella' and 'Sleeping Beauty', but also in books considered classics such as *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden*. The plots of these books are powered by orphaned girls who are sent to live with an extended family member – an angry grandfather and a grieving uncle respectively. I knew that one of my mother's options for me as a baby was to send me to live with one of her older sisters in Trinidad to be cared for until her nurse training was complete. It is perhaps why I found Heidi and Mary Lennox such absorbing company.

As well as encouraging me to read these books, my mother was a big fan of *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne is also orphaned, but mistakenly sent to middle-aged siblings, Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert, who wanted to adopt a boy to help them work the farm. As the first of my family to be born in the UK, British but often not

considered so, I empathised with the feeling of not belonging. Two other favourites of my mother were *Little Women* and *The Railway Children*, both tales featuring single – albeit respectably married – mothers caring for their children while their husbands are absent.



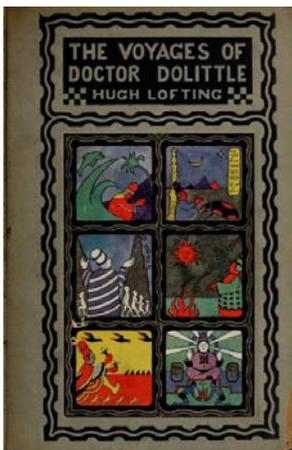
As I look back now, I realise that these books were written and published during the period sometimes referred to as the New Imperialism. The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 led to the infamous Scramble for Africa, when European countries planned the division, colonisation and exploitation of the African continent. In *Beyond the Secret Garden*, an article for the children’s literature magazine *Books For Keeps*, Chetty and Sands-O’Connor note:

British children’s literature rose and gained prominence along with the rise of the British Empire . . . [and] therefore found its way onto bookshelves throughout the world. (2018)



How do the experiences of black and other minority ethnic children write themselves into this national story? One column focusing specifically on classic literature, addresses controversy surrounding the Barnes and Noble ‘Diversity Editions’ of classic texts such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Secret Garden*, repackaged for US Black History Month with covers depicting main characters as children of colour.

The backlash against taking classic texts, many of which are inherently tied to white European and American ideas of colonization, westward expansion and imperialism, and ‘colouring in’ the main characters to sell more books, was instantaneous and angry. (Chetty and Sands-O’Connor, 2020)



Chetty and Sands-O’Connor also refer to a book with particularly damaging depictions of family. The families that I saw in books as a child were white families. I grew up surrounded by white families. The families on TV and in films were primarily white. The only time I saw – and it was vividly illustrated by the author too – a black family in a book, was in Hugh Lofting’s *The Story of Doctor Doolittle*. It is a royal family, the King of the Jolliginki (a fictional African country), his wife, Queen Ermintrude, and their son, Prince Bumpo. They live in a palace made of mud and their body and racial features are racist caricatures. Prince Bumpo is stupid and uneducated, in spite of attending university in England. He is persuaded to bleach his skin white if he hopes to marry a princess. I read this book when I was six.

In 2019 the literacy charity Booktrust launched Booktrust Represents, an initiative to increase the number of UK-based children’s writers and illustrators from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds. Booktrust commissioned research to underpin

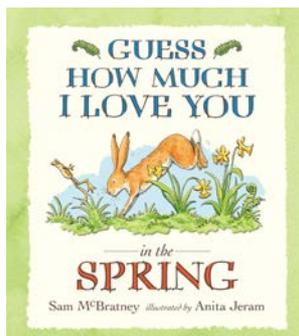
the work. In her introduction to the findings, Ramdarshand Bold reminds us:

Inclusive children's literature is vital. Children's books can act as mirrors, to reflect the readers' own lives, but also as windows so readers can learn about, understand and appreciate the lives of others. They can shape how young readers from minority backgrounds see themselves . . . (Ramdarshand Bold, p.6)

Furthermore, she reminds us of the warning from the African-American academic, Rudine Sims Bishop:

[W]hen children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. (Ramdarshand Bold, p.17)

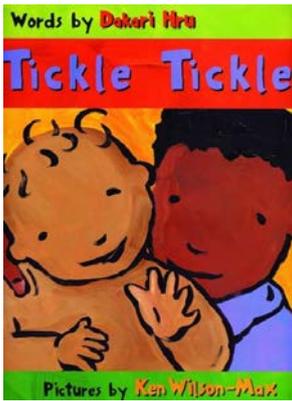
I read many of the books referred to above in the 1970s when racism in the UK was embedded within our popular culture. For instance, the popular TV show *The Black and White Minstrel Show* – white men in blackface singing and dancing with white women – only ended its 20-year run on BBC TV in 1978. The white 'comedian', Jim Davidson, appeared on family TV shows imitating a Caribbean accent, the joke being a black character called Chalky. A golliwog adorned the label of the popular Robinson's jam jars. All the above were used in the repertoire of racist 'teasing' by some of my peers at school, and – not infrequently – from adults too. Where were the alternative representations that could challenge those versions of me and my family that were constantly reflected back at me? I never found them.



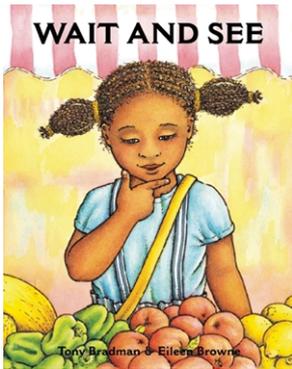
When I became a mother myself in the mid-1990s, I was acutely aware of the lack of children's books with positive representation of black mothers. I was also acutely aware of the many stereotypes of black motherhood, especially single black motherhood when I found myself in that situation a few years later. Finally, as a mother of a mixed heritage child with a lighter skin shade than mine, I knew that our family would – and did indeed – evoke curious questions. I did not have the luxury to wait to discuss 'race' and racism with my child. I saw it as essential to my parenting role from the beginning to reinforce a positive view of black and mixed heritage families. Books were essential to this.

Of course, many picture books for young children depict animal families. Yes, the Nutbrown Hares in *Guess how much I Love You* are irresistible. We were also big fans of Lauren Child's Charlie and Lola series. The relationship between the older brother and his mischievous sister felt beautifully realised and hummed with kindness and love. But where were the stories with a child of colour

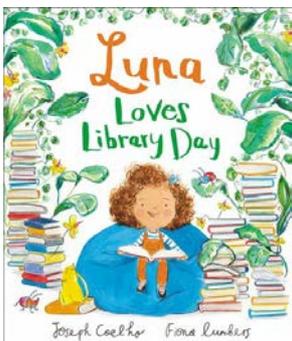
and their family at the centre, just like the many, many white children we had read about?



Our first find was *Tickle Tickle*, written by Dakari Hru and illustrated by Ken Wilson-Max. A darker-skinned father is playing with his lighter-skinned baby. The text is rhythmic and repeated like a song. The images are large and vivid. The loving relationship between the baby and father is unquestionable. Our favourite book, however, was *So Much*, written by Trish Cooke and illustrated by Helen Oxenbury. Although I did not grow up surrounded by my Caribbean family, I recognised the characters instantly. Uncle Didi's fade, Mum's braids, Aunty Bibba's desert boots, Nannie and Gran-Gran's handbags are all also a snapshot of 1990s UK Caribbean fashion! Most important of all was the father figure. He is wearing a suit – something that felt so significant to me. He works in an office or even a bank. Perhaps he's even in charge. This representation was counter to so many of the negative stereotypes that abound about black men and fathers. The father arrives home a little grumpy, but is soon surrounded by the loving energy of the family gathered for his surprise party.



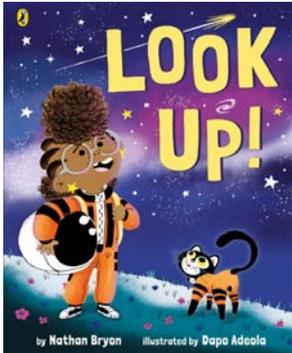
And then, finally, I found a book with a mixed heritage family. It was *Wait and See*, written by Tony Bradman and illustrated by Eileen Browne. Jo's mother is black and her father white, and, like my daughter's father, enjoys a spot of baking! I learned later that it's set in Finsbury Park in north London just up the road from where we lived in east London. This was why the shops and community it depicted felt very familiar. But why, in the twenty-first century, was it so difficult to find a book with an explicitly mixed heritage family in a high-street bookshop? It feels even more bizarre when the UK censuses in 2001 and 2011 showed that 'mixed race' people were the fastest growing ethnic category – and one of the youngest.



It is now 2020. There has definitely been an improvement in the diversity of families in children's books. *Spacegirl Pukes* (written by Katy Wilson and illustrated by Vanda Carter) was originally published in 2005 then reprinted and relaunched in 2017. As well as neon-bright vomit, there is a young astronaut with her two mothers, Mummy Loula and Mummy Neenee, who are different colours. Mixed heritage Luna in *Luna Loves Library Day* (written by Joseph Coelho and illustrated by Fiona Lumbers) also has parents that are different colours, but they are separated. Luna spends a day with her black father exploring the imaginative worlds contained in library books.

Another book written by Joseph Coelho, illustrated by Allison Colpoys, reminds us that mixed heritage families are not just black and white. *If all the World Were . . .* is a poetic, sensitive depiction of

loss and stories, and the relationship between a granddaughter and her grandfather – ‘If all the world were memories/the past would be rooms I could visit/ and in each room would be my granddad.’ The text is on a page illustrated with the grandfather holding his granddaughter against a backdrop of a wall filled with photos of the multi-ethnic family. A few pages along, the granddad is no longer there, just his empty chair, slippers and glasses . . .



Finally, we return to space – or nearly – with Rocket in *Look Up!*, written by Nathan Bryon and illustrated by Dapo Adeola. This is a book about Rocket, a space-obsessed little black girl who wants to be an astronaut. She is passionate about a once in a lifetime opportunity to see a comet, but her phone-obsessed older brother Jamal is less interested. For me, the glory is in the illustrations. These are the pictures that I needed when I was a child, that would have made me feel valued and capable of changing the world. Having seen the many pictures Adeola posted of black children dressing up as Rocket on World Book Day, many parents and carers feel the same way. At last, this is a hero for their children. In these divided times, my hope is for many more books that celebrate the rich variation of family life both as a mirror and as a window for us to look through, enjoy and learn.

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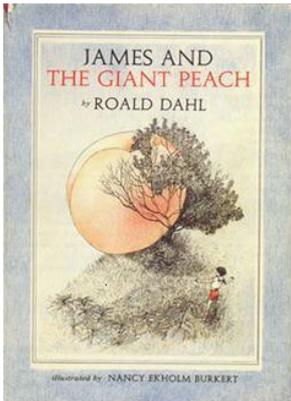
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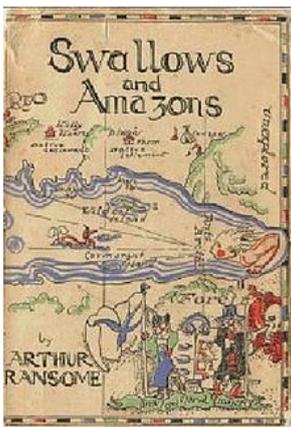
Framing Families in Fiction

Frank Cottrell Boyce is the award-winning author of *Millions*, *Sputnik's Guide to Life on Earth*, *Runaway Robot*, *Framed*, *Cosmic*, *The Astounding Broccoli Boy* and the *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* sequels. Frank Cottrell Boyce's first book, *Millions*, won the CILIP Carnegie Medal in 2004 and he also won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for *The Unforgettable Coat* (Walker Books). Frank Cottrell Boyce is a highly successful British screenwriter whose credits include *The Railway Man*, *Millions* and *Goodbye Christopher Robin*. He is also a judge for the BBC Radio 2 500 Words competition. He resides in Merseyside with his family.

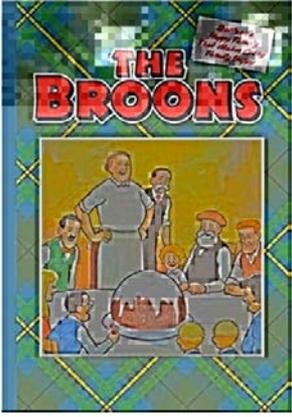
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Traditionally in children's fiction the adventure only gets going when the parents get lost. I've always admired the dismissive swagger with which Dahl dispatched James Trotter's parents in *James and the Giant Peach* ('killed by a rhinoceros'), and of course I love the way the father in *Swallows and Amazons* dismisses himself from responsibility with that telegram - 'If not duffers won't drown, if duffers better drowned.' I'm mesmerised by the father in Eleanor Graham's *The Children who Lived in a Barn*. When his wife is invited to speak at an international conference he says she can't be expected to go on an aeroplane all by herself, so he and his wife leave their kids behind in rented accommodation (as it happens they've forgotten to pay the rent). Of course if the parents aren't eaten by a rhinoceros or don't abandon their children through demented sexism, then the children can always leave home to seek their fortune. Maybe they'll get the Hogwarts letter¹, be summoned to Olympus², or shipwrecked on Kensuke's island³.

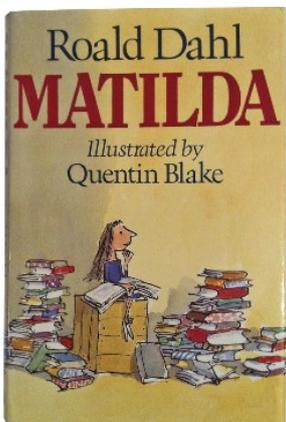


But I'm writing this in the middle of the pandemic lockdown, when most families are spending a lot more time together than they normally would. Families are often separated by absences - a parent has left, or is dead or works long hours or is away at sea. Now all of a sudden everyone is in the house. All. The. Time. Like in a hostage situation. Can you have an adventure with all the whole family? As a child reader I was always slightly wary of books that dismissed the grown-ups, because I really liked the grown-ups in my own life. If I'd met ET I would not have hidden him in my bedroom, I would have said, 'Mum come and look at this!' I was always suspicious of authors who pushed the idea that they somehow understood you but most grown-ups wouldn't. It always made them sound to me a bit like those flaky uncles who turn up in *Just William* stories and announce that they are 'good with boys'. 'Who says so?' wonders William 'not boys I bet.' One of the things I loved about the *William* stories was that his dad, his mum and siblings were all part of the cast. The same went for my favourite comic strip - *The Broons*.⁴



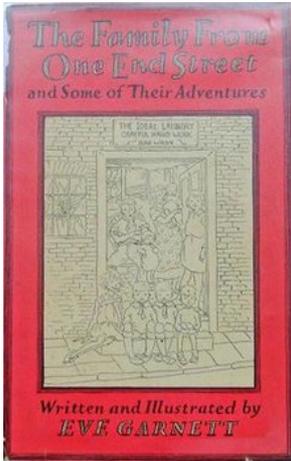
This idea that the family prevents the adventure is a relatively recent one. If you look back at fairy stories, family WAS the adventure. We can barely imagine now how grinding and dull the lives of European peasantry were. How short they were of time, food and space. How mind-bendingly tempting a house made of gingerbread would be. We often talk now as if these have complicated psychological subtexts but there's nothing complicated or hidden about the early versions. In the early versions of *Beauty and the Beast* (tale type 433) the beast eats a series of failed brides.⁵ In the French *Mother Goose* there's a story called 'Ma mère m'a tué, Mon père m'a mangé' which does exactly what it says on the tin. A mother cooks her son and lets her daughter serve him to her father as a sausage. Food is not a metaphor for sex. Food is food. There is not enough of it and youngest sons and foster children can get lost or get eaten.

Victorian fiction is obsessed with money but by and large people don't go out and earn it. They inherit it. The children in these stories often have a price on their heads because they are often the legitimate heirs, hidden away in orphanages, or lofts, adopted by apparently kindly uncles who are conniving to get them to sign everything over to them before arranging to have them - as in the case of Davey Balfour - kidnapped and sold into slavery.⁶ *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is a brilliant modern reworking of this idea.

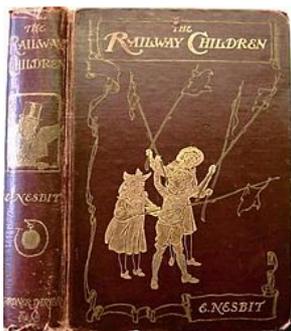


One book that appalled me as a child was *Matilda*. I still find its snobbery detestable but I can see now that the thing that upset me about it was how it seems to deny that family is relevant at all. She's not like the bad children in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, whose flaws are the result of over-indulgent parenting. Matilda is a kind of changeling. Her parents have had no impact on her whatsoever. She speaks with a different accent from her parents. She becomes what she is despite them, and in fact to spite them. I find this interesting because Dahl also wrote the screenplay for *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* which is one of the great and true family adventures, thanks in no small part to a genius creation that is all Dahl - the Child Catcher.⁷ The Child Catcher is one of the most truly terrifying villains in fiction. Voldemort is just a poor misunderstood soul by comparison. Yet the Child Catcher is only on screen for a few minutes. I've thought long and hard about how he has so much impact. It's because he is the public policy aspect of the weirdly perverted Bombursts. The baroness wants the baron to be her little baby so she bans real children. The Child Catcher is the weapon this creepy perversion of family life launches against the lovely wholesome family in the magical motor car. This is how all the great children's stories work. They offer you something beautiful and enviable - a loving family with a great car, or a school that teaches

you magic – and then threaten to destroy it. It's worth remembering during these days of cancel culture that Dahl wrote two such contradictory works, that people are complicated and binary questions are useful for programming computers, not people.



I imagine the emphasis on ditching your family that was such a strong thread in children's writing in the 1970s was something to do with social mobility and the fact that many writers really had moved away from their families. I wonder if now that social mobility is by and large a thing of the past, and now that everyone has had this lockdown experience, the family will once again be seen as a setting for adventure. I've always tried to place family in the centre of my own stories partly because my family is the centre of my life and I believe in putting as much of yourself as possible into your writing. But also because I see a lot of children in schools for whom family is a troubled, complicated and sometimes dangerous place. I think one thing that children's fiction can do powerfully is say this is how good life can be, this is what you deserve. By that I don't mean that every parent has to be like Mrs. March faultlessly shepherding her girls through their choices and dilemmas.⁸ I hope the mums and dads I've written are endearingly flawed as well as always loving. I think one of the things I'm most proud of writing is the moment when Dylan's dad unwittingly drinks a mug of espresso in *Framed*. Because I want to say that it's not boring to love or be loved. That's what I took from, for instance, the brilliant *Family From One End Street*. I loved the Ruggles because they were, for all their differences, in it together. Family life for them was a project – a work of art – whose aim was to make the most of the little they had. The other great family for me was Tove Jansson's Moomin family. Jansson's picture of the family is the opposite of the one in *Matilda*. The Moomins' door is always open. The 'family' includes a lot of frankly added and incomprehensible waifs and strays. Not everyone in the Moomin family leads the same life – Snufkin migrates for the winter while the others hibernate. Come to think of it, they're not all the same species. Family is where tolerance is forged. Indeed if you're inclined to make room for two tiny, double-talking ruby thieves to your table, then toleration itself will be an adventure.



One of the most powerful lines in all literature is Bobby's cry of 'Oh, my Daddy, my Daddy!' at the end of *The Railway Children*. I don't mean to boast but Jenny Agutter herself once left that phrase as a voicemail on my phone and I played it to everyone. It's another one of those small moments of incredible power. It works because for the length of the book the children have been given this gift of a wild, fresh air careless childhood. Bobby loses that when she finds out the truth about her father. She's forced to become an adult. When she sees her father emerging from the steam on the station

platform, she is given back her childhood. The cry 'Oh, my Daddy, my Daddy!' is the cry of someone forced to have grown up, becoming a child again. That's what the best children's writing does for all of us. It gives us a chance to be as little children once again.

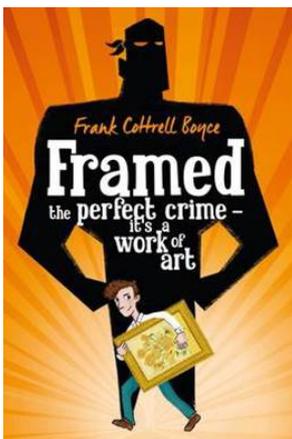
Notes



- 1 Letter of acceptance to the Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (illus. Thomas Taylor) (1997), London: Bloomsbury.
- 2 Rick Riordan's the Percy Jackson series.
- 3 A boy Michael is shipwrecked on an island in Michael Morpurgo's *Kensuke's Kingdom* (illus. Michael Foreman) (1999), London: Egmont.
- 4 *The Broons*. A cartoon strip published by DC Thomson Media. <http://www.dctmedia.co.uk/brands/the-broons/>.
- 5 Type 433. See Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index. <http://oaks.nvg.org/folktale-types.html#300>.
- 6 David Balfour is the main character in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886), London: Cassell & Co,
- 7 *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Film (1968), screenplay by Roald Dahl, based on the book *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang: The Magical Car* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964) by Ian Fleming.
- 8 Mrs March, called Marmee by her four daughters in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1860), Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers.

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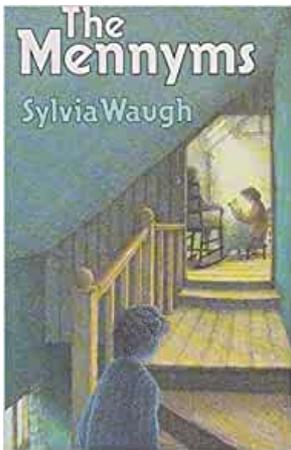
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The Mennym Family

Susan Bailes taught for 36 years and retired from a Surrey headship in August 2012. She was one of the early MA in Children's Literature cohorts at Roehampton University and continues to carry out research. She values serving on the committees of IBBY UK and the Imaginative Book Illustration Society, is Chair of the Children's Books History Society and regularly reviews books for these organisations. She has a particular interest in doll literature and all it reveals about the historical context in which it appears. One of her talks 'Kathleen Ainslie (1858-1936): A Forgotten Female Edwardian Illustrator of Children's Books' was published in *Studies in Illustration*, no. 66, Summer 2017 and another was on 'Fashioning Dolls: Different Treatments and Attitudes Revealed in Children's Texts' published in *IBBYLink* Spring 2019 entitled 'Hobbies and Crafts in Children's Books', the theme of the 25th IBBY UK/NCRCL MA conference.



The Mennym family are a devoted, respectable family peacefully residing at No 5, Brocklehurst Grove in a modern British town, where they have been for 40 years. They form a large household representing three generations. Their world is suddenly thrown into chaos when, one wet October morning, they receive an unexpected letter from Australia. A certain lonely Albert Pond has apparently inherited the house and is their new landlord. He wishes to meet the Mennym family and is planning to make a trip to England in late November. Grandpa Mennym groans 'If he ever finds out what we really are I shudder to think what he might do.'

Sprung from the pen of Sylvia Waugh, a retired English teacher, this series of five novels: *The Mennym Family* (1993), *Mennym Family in the Wilderness* (1994), *Mennym Family Under Siege* (1995), *Mennym Family Alive* (1996) and finally *Mennym Family Alone* (1996) all deal in one way or another with the Mennym family trying to avoid exposure. They form a twentieth-century extension of earlier doll tales but, unlike countless predecessors, these kapok and cloth dolls are life size, made by the house's original owner, spinster Kate Penschaw, an extremely gifted seamstress.

They were living and walking and talking and breathing, but they were made of cloth and kapok. They each had a little voice box, like the sort they put in teddy-bears to make them growl realistically. Their frameworks were strong but pliable. Their respiration kept their bodies supplied with oxygen that was life to the kapok and sound to their voices. (*The Mennym Family*, p.17)

Throughout, the Mennym family is central and we are made to consider the dynamics of family life and relationships as well as the ways in which various domestic rituals and traditions help bind it together. The uncanny nature of dolls leads to a consideration of greater issues concerning existence itself and what it is to be human. It is the author's treatment of the relationship between doll and human which I have found particularly fascinating, and one

which at times strains the credibility of the reader or is troubling and disturbing.

Another early clue suggesting the true nature of their identity is their names, which seem a little strange for humans. Sir Magnus and Tulip are the grandparents, Vinetta and Joshua the parents with their six children who remain the same age each birthday: teenagers brother Soobie and his twin sister Nuova Pilbeam, along with his other teenage sister Appleby, younger ten-year old twins Poopey and Wimpey, and lastly Googles, the baby. Included in the household is Miss Hortensia Quigley, who becomes the Nanny. These unusual creations only came out of their silence and took over the house after their maker died. In Kate's workbox she had left a cache of money which was sufficient to provide for the Mennymys in the difficult period of transition between her death and their life. Over the years they had become a successful family unit, able to cope with almost anything. Kate's property passed to her nephew, Chesney Loftus in Australia where he remained. He was informed that the Mennymys were his aunt's 'paying guests' who wished to remain on as tenants in the property. Sir Magnus and Joshua signed a tenancy agreement and Chesney received monthly rent in line with inflation.

The Mennymys are completely aware that they are not human. By ingenious subterfuges and stratagems, they have successfully kept their existence secret and have hidden safely behind the drawn curtains of their house of Brocklehurst Grove in the centre of a square of private, large, detached houses with well-hedged gardens. Their home is 'ideally situated, just five minutes' walk from the shops on the High Street, but looking as if it belonged to a country village'.

Being rag dolls, they did not need any food. They did use heating to keep warm and dry. They found that they could see with their button eyes. Their felt ears proved successful at hearing and their mouths learned to open and shape words. Their brains, made of kapok were no worse, and in some cases much better, than many of the human variety. (*The Mennymys*, p.18)

The Mennymys had very soon realised that they would need a policy for survival in an alien world. Their first law was to have as little contact as possible with human beings. They are mostly confined to the house but when they do venture out, they wear glasses to cover their button eyes, brimmed hats and wrap up well, carrying a large umbrella, weather permitting. They cleverly learnt how to use a telephone and manage to open a bank account without actually going into a bank. Rummaging through Kate's old desk, they discovered an agent to whom they pay the rent.

Grandfather Mennym is a patriarchal figure, presiding over this post-war, traditional, stable 'middle-class' family, summoning them all to conferences in his bedroom whenever there is anything challenging or threatening to their lives which needs to be discussed and resolved. As the most senior male in the household, he is described as Sir Magnus. He has a particular interest in the English Civil War and writes articles, which he sells, by post, to various newspapers and periodicals. His purple foot can be seen flopping over the side of his bed. Tulip, his wife, is ceaselessly active, quick and economical in her movements. She speaks rapidly and is purposeful. She has beautiful crystal eyes, pure white hair, wears a small pair of glasses and a blue-and-white checked apron. A skilful knitter, she has ingeniously created her own 'tulipmennym' label for Harrods and earns money selling her garments. Her daughter Vinetta is very much the traditional 'Angel in the house', described as 'ever the busy mother'. Her domestic chores include keeping the windows of the house clean and washing the net curtains. She struggles with the twin-tub washing machine and her rebellious 14-year old daughter Appleby. Meanwhile her husband Joshua and the twins take care of the garden. Joshua has wiry, threaded grey hair and is the only Mennym with regular dealings with human beings as he is employed. One position is that of night watchman at Sydenham's Electrical Warehouse on the other side of town but in walking distance as buses are too well lit. Along with gloves, he wears a thick overcoat and a cap well down over his brows. By walking around the aisles of shelves once an hour or so, switching lights on and off, he deters potential robbers and, at seven sharp, hands the keys back to Charlie. Another position he succeeds in is playing the part of Santa Claus at Peachum's store before Christmas, suitably disguised.

Soobie is distinctive, mysteriously being entirely made from blue material. He has short-cropped navy-blue hair. His face is a lighter blue and his eyes silver buttons, and he initially wears a blue-striped suit and blue leather slippers. His sad mood is in keeping with his colour. Poopie has blue button eyes and a straight yellow fringe that touched the top of his eyebrows. Wimpey has the same pale blue button eyes and golden curls, tied up in bunches and satin ribbon, making her even more doll-like than the rest of the family.

All the Mennym family 'played at living and developed talents.' Their days are filled with 'pretends'. Christopher Ringrose (2006) examines lying in a number of children's texts and cites the Mennymys as 'sharing the aesthetic dimension which involves consideration of lying's relation to imagination, fantasy and creativity rather than morality'. Countless earlier doll texts show children playing with their dolls and pretending to have meals or

teaching them lessons, for example the illustrated series about *Josephine and her Dolls* (1915) by Mrs H.C. Craddock, whilst the Mennymys pretend to have meals and imitate humans. The children have their own doll playthings, for example Poopie has his favourite Action Man doll Hector, Wimpey has her American doll which says 'Would-you-like-a-Chocolate-Milk?', Sir Magnus pretends to suffer from 'the gout' in his leg hidden by the counterpane, so Tulip places a wicker frame under the top sheet to protect the inflamed big toe. Vinetta prepares countless meals and pretend cups of tea for her husband Joshua. Vinetta comments:

'It is not all pretend. We are real aren't we?'

'I think,' said Soobie sarcastically, 'therefore it is self-evident that I am. And at least I know what I am, which is more than the rest of you do. I am a blue rag doll, that God knows how, can think and move. I do not eat or drink. I don't know what being hungry or thirsty means. I do not mix with human beings. And I know that Miss Quigley lives in the hall cupboard.' (*The Mennymys*, p.48)

Miss Quigley's situation reveals yet another layer of fiction and pretence. For much of the first volume she likes to keep up appearances, pretending to live in her own house in Thetherwick Street and visiting from time to time. At the end of each visit she officially says farewell to the family but secretly slips in by the back door and back to her cupboard.

The letter from Albert Pond, which begins volume one, is revealed to be a complete fiction created by Appleby, Grandpa's favourite. Her intelligence and ingenuity are highly praised as she finds a way to save the family from Albert's planned visit by writing to tell him that the family will be away at a christening in Manitoba. However, all is not as it seems; the family discovers the truth that she wrote the letters and chose Albert Pond after seeing his name written ten times inside the front cover of a book, *Greenmantle*, she had found in the cupboard under the window seat in her room. She had purchased foreign covers from a catalogue and had loads of used stamps. Appleby's actions border on immorality as she deliberately deceives the entire family and runs away when she is found out. There is a positive outcome, however, as Pilbeam declares:

If you hadn't told all those lies in the first place, I wouldn't be here. I would still be asleep in the trunk in the attic. I could have been left there for another forty years. And Miss Quigley would still be living in the hall cupboard. It was only my time in the airing cupboard that made me realise how awful her life must have been. (*The Mennymys*, p.213)

Whilst clearing the attic to make a place for Miss Quigley as a member of the household, Googles and himself to spend time in,

Soobie is startled to find his twin doll sister literally in pieces in a chest. The headless torso 'dressed in a Fair Isle patterned jumper, and roughly fastened round its middle was an unfinished short, grey pleated skirt. Pinned to its chest was a label with "Nuova Pilbeam" written neatly on it.' The head is nearby, wrapped up in tissue with

a pale face with thick black braids either side of cheeks that each showed a spot of unnatural red. Pink lips that had never yet moved were stitched in fine satin thread in a neat, compact blanket stitch. Arched black eyebrows surmounted long black eyelashes. But where the eyes should have been there was a blank, unseeing space. (*The Mennymys*, p.92)

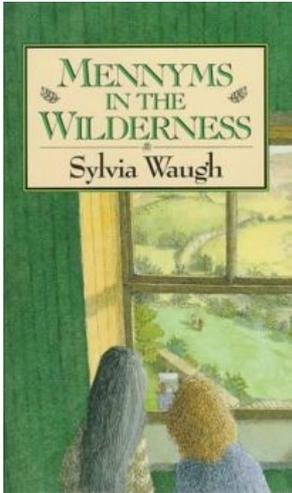
Finding two black beads on metal pin stems Soobie fills the eye spaces. So the reality of the process of the Mennym dolls' creation is vividly revealed and Pilbeam is lovingly finished. 'Carefully, with the eyes of a needlewoman, Vinetta examined every part of her unfinished child.' The coming to terms with a new sister is also handled with the sisterly relationship between Appleby and Pilbeam bringing the first volume to a triumphant conclusion and emphasising the benefits of sibling love.

The relationship between dolls and the human world is perilous. Throughout the series we are made to comprehend the vulnerability of the Mennym family. Early in the first volume, there is a frightening encounter for Joshua during a spell as night watchman when his material leg is eaten by a rat. He has a perilous journey home where it can be repaired. In the concluding chapter of the first volume, Appleby confides in her sister Pilbeam how terrified she was when three skinheads in leather jackets came into the shelter where she had been hiding. They swore at her and she ran off terrified in the dark, tripping over a little iron railing into the lake. She managed to crawl out, wet through and wriggled into some bushes where she slept. She had ended up after dark, exhausted, lying on a park bench to rest which is where Soobie had found her.

The tangible fear and dread of death for the Mennym family is never far away and is manifested in the dilemma Vinetta faces when her daughter returns home soaked through. The decision to bathe Appleby to remove all the dirt both inside and outside is a brave one and something Vinetta privately regrets and questions. Her daughter's survival is uncertain and she remains in the airing cupboard for several months to dry out before she can re-emerge and join the rest of the family. The reader empathises with Vinetta and it is not surprising that Appleby wishes to discard the chair she sat on during her captivity as soon as she is released.

Ironically Albert Pond does exist and writes a letter which begins the second volume, *Mennymys in the Wilderness*. After seeing a

vision of his Aunt Kate in which she begs him to rescue the Mennymys as their home is to be threatened with demolition, Albert becomes involved directly with the family. He provides them with an alternative residence, miles away in the countryside, 'Comus House' with its Miltonic association, whilst campaigns take place. The plans are overturned for the time being thanks to the protests masterminded by a neighbour, Anthea Fryer at Number 9, Brocklehurst Grove.



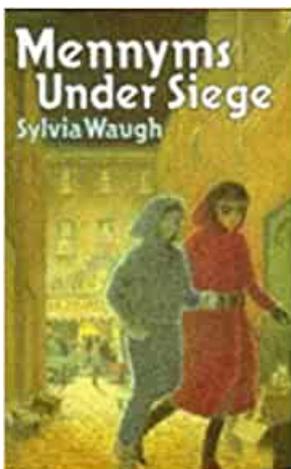
Soobie has a close encounter with death himself in *Mennymys in the Wilderness* when he is kidnapped by some boys who call him a 'clouty doll' to be a guy on their bonfire. Waugh alludes to the sacrifice of Sydney Carton in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* ('It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known') when Soobie believes that he is to be sacrificed on the bonfire to save his family. 'It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people . . .'. He considers the situation:

If these intruders should find out that the house was home to a whole family of living rag dolls, there would be no end to the misery it would cause. Soobie remembered only too sharply how his grandmother had called him a freak. All Mennymys are freaks, for what is a freak but someone or something outside the norm? (*Mennymys in the Wilderness*, p.178)

Soobie is hidden away but one of the boys, Bill, sat him upright on a chair and treated him as a prisoner, calling him Carlos and taking him a white enamel mug and a tea plate. As Soobie is being wheeled in a barrow towards the bonfire, he recognises the petrol station and decides the only solution it to make a run for it. The boys gain on him but, fortuitously, Albert Pond rescues him as he drives into the petrol station. He calls out to the boys, 'I am Frankenstein and this is my monster.' Undeterred they persevere until Soobie bravely turns on them and threatens to crush their bones. He opts for replacement clothing, a dark blue tracksuit with white bands round the cuffs. When the Mennymys leave Comus House, Soobie waves to the boys hidden in the grounds and terrifies them, as they realise he was certainly no robot.

Unlike the Plantagenet small doll family in Rumer Godden's *The Dolls' House* (1947) the Mennymys can speak to one another but also directly with humans. They are independent and animate. Godden's dolls are passive and are able to do no more than wish. As Margaret and Michael Rustin point out (2001), 'The stories establish a boundary between the humans and the doll people, while nevertheless allowing the dolls to be sufficiently active in their own thoughts and feelings to be figures in a drama. The dolls depend on

the children to be made and kept alive.’ In *Mennymys in the Wilderness* the drama is heightened when human Albert Pond spends time with them, visiting the house and moving them to Comus House for safety. In the penultimate chapter Albert spends Christmas with the family and Appleby observes ‘Albert Pond is falling in love with you’ to Pilbeam. She replies ‘Don’t talk rot. He is a human being. I am a rag doll.’ The seriousness of the situation involves Sir Magnus speaking with him to protect Pilbeam. ‘You do not belong here. Its will be much better for you and for us if you return to your own world and leave us to get along in ours.’ Albert disagrees as he believes the doll family has become part of his life and his Range Rover is useful to them. Tulip informs him that he must go away and forget them for Pilbeam’s sake. ‘You are a human being with a future in the world of human beings. You will fall in love and marry one of your own kind. That is the way of things. When you leave this house today you will forget that we exist.’ He does leave but impulsively kisses Pilbeam on her cheek as he says farewell. ‘The black button eyes that had learnt to see suddenly did something they had never done before. They cried real tears.’ The chapter concludes: ‘Pilbeam’s heart was soon mended. She was only sixteen. Pilbeam never forgot Albert, but the memory, oh the memory, was sweet.’



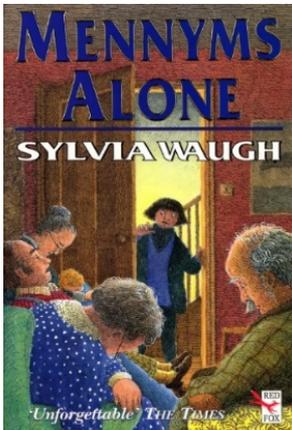
Interestingly we return to this topic of romance in *Mennymys Under Siege*, when Appleby decides to explore a relationship with a human neighbour. Visiting a record shop with Pilbeam, she attracts the attention of neighbour, 16-year-old Tony, and they carry on a clandestine courtship with secret letters. Appleby accepts a date to a discotheque. Dressed in second-hand clothing including a long black skirt with a deep fringe round the hem, a shocking pink top with long sleeves ending in a point and a richly patterned tapestry waistcoat along with her butterfly sunglasses and candy striped gloves, she is prepared. With her red hair flying she out dances everyone else on the dance floor. Tony was surprised to touch her and find her wearing cloth gloves but she excuses this saying, ‘I have to take special care of my hands because I am employed by a model agency to advertise creams and lotions. My hands have appeared on TV.’ As he steers her back to the dance floor she realises how late it is and, like Cinderella, suddenly abandons him.

The plight of the family in *Mennymys Under Siege* has disconcerting relevance to us today as we endure the impact of coronavirus and ‘lockdown’ measures. Just as we have been advised to remain confined in our homes to stay safe, so Sir Magnus dictates that the Mennym family remains confined to their home. The nosy human neighbours have caused him to fear discovery, in particular Anthea Fry of Number 9, who had offered Pilbeam a lift after her secret trip

to the theatre. She was rescued in the nick of time by Soobie who pulled her jogging away.

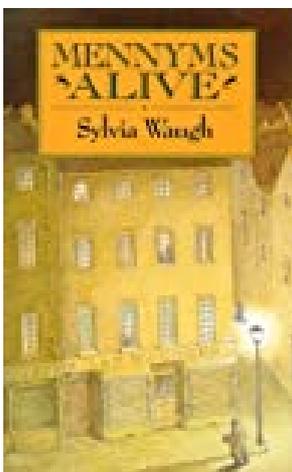
There is every chance that Miss Fryer will speak to Pilbeam the very next time she leaves the house. Then what? And she may know by sight any one of us that is in the habit of going out into the street, for whatever reason. She is dangerous . . . As I see it we must all stay indoors for a month or two, till Miss Fryer loses any interest she might have in the residents of Number 5. (*The Mennymys Under Siege*, pp.39-40)

The restrictions placed on the Mennym family allow Joshua to go to his employment but 'non-essential activity' must cease including Soobie's jogging and shopping. Initially it is all done by Miss Quigley until she finds it too much to bear. Such severe measures understandably lead the teenagers to rebel so that after two months Appleby and Pilbeam visit the Sounds Easy record shop.



The consequence of not going out to the shops means that the family suffers financially as Tulip's products and Sir Magnus' articles cannot be posted or materials received, not unlike the current economic consequences of 'lockdown'. All of this seems plausible and uncannily realistic but the event leading to the apparent death of Appleby strains credulity. After spending time in the attic, Appleby discovers a 'forbidden door' which the ghost of Kate warns her not to open. Like Pandora's box, she cannot resist and in opening the door becomes lifeless.

And the more it pitted its strength against hers, the more of the wonderful light filtered into the room. It bathed the bare floorboards making the wood look precious as diamonds. Whatever this was it was another world and Appleby knew that it could destroy her own, no matter how beautiful it might be. Appleby was finished, failing in her attempt to put right the harm she had done. (*The Mennymys Under Siege*, p.177)



Later Vinetta is filled with Kate's spirit and pushes with Appleby calling out, ' "Deliver us from the evil. Strengthen us again disaster. Forgive me. This will never, ever happen again." The moment the battle ended Kate's spirit was free to leave the attic and thus did life return to the rest of the Mennymys. For half an hour Kate had been Vinetta, Vinetta had been Kate.'

Mennymys Alone and *Mennymys Alive* require the reader to believe in the possibility of some mysterious power which transforms the family back into dolls, restored fortuitously to life at the beginning of *Mennymys Alone*. After the loss of their home, the family are moved to a shop and are kindly looked after by a shopkeeper known as Aunt Daisy. Her nephew, Billy Maughan, visits the shop and sees the family of dolls, recognising the girl doll from three years ago at Comus House. In the last volume his aunt looks round

the room, 'This was the home of her childhood, and these dolls, people, dolls, whatever . . . were hers by choice.' She remembers Billy had told her about the blue doll and that it was alive. There is a dramatic encounter between Billy and Soobie when the truth is acknowledged by them both. 'You tried to save my life once,' said Soobie. 'You cared what happened to me. I care what happens to you. Just sit and listen till I tell you the story of the Mennymys.' Billy understands the Mennymys will move to a new home and live for ever but promises he will never say a word about this. As predicted, the family does purchase a new home with the money Tulip has deftly saved over the years. They move there secretly, so completing this family saga.



The first volume was awarded *The Guardian* Children's Fiction Prize and was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal. It created enormous interest in film and television circles but none of these plans came to fruition. Today, however, you can see the original manuscripts at Seven Stories. Other archive material includes a musical adaptation of *The Mennymys* written by Lyndsay Barnbrook as part of a Masters in Composition at the University of Southampton. A production of the musical was held at the university in December 2007. The file includes a copy of the play script; prints of three digital photographs of the cast and crew from the university production; a copy of the programme for the production; and a CD recording of the music.



In conclusion it seems only appropriate that I should point out a direct link between the Mennym family and IBBY. The 22nd IBBY UK/NCRCL MA conference took place on 14 November 2015 at which the Ryde Mennymys themselves appeared and made themselves comfortable in The Portrait Room at Roehampton University. They had crossed by ferry from the Isle of Wight. Teresa Grimaldo explained how the figures had been made and the part they had played in the Ryde Arts Festival. The project had been about adults and young people creating and playing, and about how the characters invited interaction. There were many instances of townspeople relating in an amused and friendly way to the inanimate and potentially scary figures.

This photograph above in the margin shows a model of the spirit of Kate Penshaw in the tree above Pilbeam and Soobie. Unsurprisingly the number of *Mennym* book loans has increased in Ryde and further members of the family have been created including Miss Crocus and her dog, Brigstocke. Like Mary Norton's family series of books *The Borrowers* (1952) the Mennymys will continue to inspire creativity and spark young readers' imaginations provided they remain in our libraries for future generations and so live for ever.



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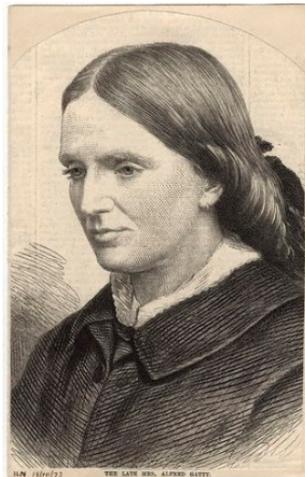
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The Gatty Family - Close and Talented

Sarah Jardine-Willoughby - Children's book collector including some books by Margaret Gatty and Mrs Ewing. I was able to buy some of the monthly parts of *Aunt Judy's* magazine which appear to have belonged to Horatia Gatty, and a couple of books inscribed to her from Margaret Gatty. I am a librarian, now more or less retired following redundancy. I catalogued the Wandsworth Collection of Early Children's Books. I worked for Middlesex University Library from 1990-2009, as senior subject librarian for the performing arts and literature, then as library manager for a small hospital library (still for Middlesex). Then from 2013-2020 I was librarian for the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing.

The Gatty family includes the nineteenth-century children's authors Margaret Gatty, mother of the family, and her daughter Juliana Horatia Ewing, now largely forgotten, both were well respected. However other members of the family were talented too, as will be seen.



Margaret Gatty



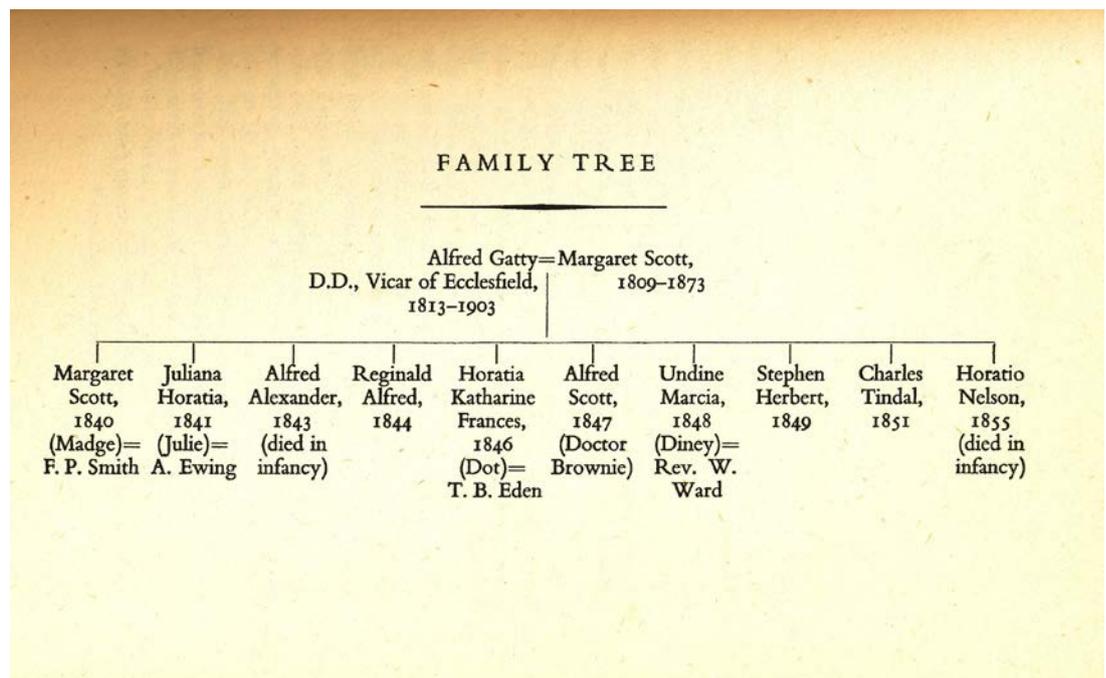
Juliana Horatia Gatty

Margaret Gatty was the second daughter of Alexander Scott, a naval chaplain who served on *The Victory* with Nelson and has been described as Nelson's spy. He was Nelson's foreign secretary as he had a gift for languages and could gather intelligence. He sat with Nelson as he lay dying at Trafalgar, then accompanied Nelson's body back to Britain. Scott married Mary Ryder, eloping with her in the face of parental opposition to their marriage. Their first daughter was named Horatia in memory of Nelson and a pledge made by Scott as Nelson lay dying, a tradition carried on in the following generations. Mary Scott died young when Horatia was three and Margaret was only two and they were brought up by their father and educated at home. He was a lifelong book collector and had a large library. Indeed when he was vicar of Catterick he left home with money to buy a pony but returned with books. The two

girls were close, writing letters to each other in a code they developed when they were separated and forming the Black Bag Club; members wrote stories, poems or essays which were placed in the bag to be drawn out and read aloud. Margaret not only displayed literary talent, she also painted and did copper etching. However, many family responsibilities fell on her shoulders. Christabel Maxwell writes in her book *Mrs Gatty and Mrs Ewing*:

Upon Margaret fell most of the burdens, for her sister Horatia was beginning to show signs of the family eccentricity which led eventually to her departure from England in almost the Byronic manner, accompanied by a cat, a dog, and a guitar. (1949)

The Reverend Scott had become the vicar of Catterick, Yorkshire. Here Margaret met Alfred Gatty when he had a curacy on the Yorkshire moors and visited her father. Unfortunately Alexander Scott opposed their marriage at first, however it took place in 1839. While on their honeymoon Alfred was offered the living of Ecclesfield by an uncle of Margaret's. Alfred Gatty was to stay there until his death in 1903. The Gattys were to have ten children, with two dying in infancy. Names are repeated, the family tree below shows this, family nicknames are also included in the family tree.



After the birth of Undine, her seventh child, Margaret went to convalesce in Hastings. It was here she developed her interest in seaweed after a suggestion from her doctor. This led to her becoming an expert in the subject, publishing a two-volume work in 1863, *British Sea-Weeds. Drawn from Professor Harvey's "Phycologia Britannica." With Descriptions, an Amateur's Synopsis, Rules for Laying Out Sea-Weeds.* She even gives practical advice on how to dress for collecting seaweed. Juliana Gatty wrote a

humorous poem about her mother's obsession which was accompanied by a drawing that was included in the Gatty family magazine *The Gunpowder Plot*:

**O Gatty's! go and call your mother home
Call your mother home
At least in time for tea!
The breakfast, lunch and dinner come and go and come
Unheeded, at the sea . . .**

She passed this interest on to her daughter Horatia to whom she had bequeathed her collection. Margaret corresponded with marine biologists, and a couple of marine specimens were named after her. Her work has now been recognised and discussed in academic studies.

In fact, when Margaret published her first children's book, *The Fairy Godmother*, in 1851 she asked for a marine-biology book as payment and another biology book as payment for the second edition. This book was followed by the first series of *Parables from Nature* in 1855. More series followed, a few of the parables appeared in *The Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Younger Members of the English Church*, edited by Charlotte M. Yonge.



Various editions of *Parables from Nature*: The complete edition, *Selections from Parables from Nature* and an early edition.

A couple of her books appeared as *Aunt Judy's Tales* and *Aunt Judy's Letters*. Her last two books were published in 1872 - *A Book of Sundials* and *A Book of Emblems*, reflecting early interests; she had started to collect the mottos on sundials as a girl. Sadly she suffered a debilitating disease, now described as undiagnosed

multiple sclerosis, making writing difficult. Thus, her daughters helped and acted as aides with this. Ultimately this caused her death in 1873.

Margaret and Alfred Gatty's first child was Margaret Scott, born in 1840. She too painted, and illustrated her sister Juliana's first book and provided illustrations for some of her mother's *Parables from Nature*.

It was Juliana Horatia, the second child, who became known as the family storyteller; indeed one brother wrote to her from school asking for a story. She started her career as a published author with short stories in the *Monthly Packet* between July and December 1861, credited to J.H.G. They appeared in 1862 collected as *Melchior's Dream and Other Stories*, edited by Mrs A. Gatty and illustrated by M.S.G. (Juliana's elder sister, Margaret Scott Gatty) – a family collaboration.



Cover illustration by Randolph Caldecott.

Juliana married Alexander Ewing, an army major, in June 1867 and within a week of marriage they were on their way to New Brunswick, Canada. She continued writing the serial she had started while in Canada and sent home her work for *Aunt Judy's* magazine.

After returning to England ill health prevented her from accompanying her husband on future postings. However, she used the army background for some of her stories, notably for one of her very popular titles *Jackanapes* and also *The Story of a Short Life*. *Jackanapes* was originally illustrated by Randolph Caldecott, and included a coloured frontispiece (see above). Alexander Ewing returned to England in 1883 and they settled in Trull, Somerset. She established a garden there which inspired *Mary's Meadow*.

Though known as an author, according to Christabel Maxwell, Juliana was proud of her painting too. She wrote short stories and longer ones which were serialised in *Aunt Judy's* magazine, depicting families, indeed some of her descriptions of family life draw on her own experiences. Other stories have a fairy-tale theme – in 'Timothy's Shoes' the wearer had to go to school or the shoes will pinch him. When Timothy does not go to church, the shoes go and so he is found out. Her story 'The Brownies' inspired the name taken up by the Girl Guides.

After her death in May 1885, her sister Horatia wrote a biography *Juliana Horatia Ewing and her Books*, which includes a detailed bibliography of her work. This was included as the eighteenth volume when her complete works were published in 17 volumes (including her writing for adults).

Juliana was well regarded during her lifetime. Mrs Molesworth wrote an article 'Mrs Ewing's Less Well-Known Works' published in the *Contemporary Review* in March 1886, and her stories were in print in the early part of the twentieth century. Since then two of her stories have been retold by Berlie Doherty and issued as picture books. A collection of her letters was published in 1983, *Canada Home: Juliana Horatia Ewing's Fredericton Letters 1867-1869*, and *Illustrated News: Juliana Horatia Ewing's Canadian Pictures, 1867-1869* was published in 1987.

It was a large close family.

Younger brother Reginald Alfred studied law before becoming a clergyman like his father. He was appointed vicar at Bradfield. He seems to have suffered concerns about his vocation in 1870 and travelled to Belgium, and closer to the front line of the Franco-Prussian war. He became a temporary member of the Red Cross before he returned to Bradfield. He died in 1914.

Her sister Horatia, always known as Dot, worked closely with their mother both with the sorting and the collecting of seaweed. She also helped her with her work on *Aunt Judy's* magazine as Margaret became less able to write, and also with Margaret Gatty's last two

books. After Margaret Gatty's death she moved to London to be nearer the publishers and became a publisher's reader too.

Alfred Scott Gatty was born in 1847 and later changed his name to Scott-Gatty in 1892. He was described as a composer in the 1871 census. Though a member of the College of Arms - indeed in 1904 he became Garter King of Arms and played a leading role in organising various state ceremonies, including the funeral of Edward VII and the coronation of George V - he continued composing and contributed music to *Aunt Judy's* magazine regularly. He was knighted in 1904.



Juliana's youngest sister Undine Marcia (photo by Juliana) was described as her father's unpaid curate. Her sister Juliana wrote in a letter to her husband about Undine 'consuming life in the treadmill of running errands for the Governor and slaving at the parish'. Undine married the Reverend Walter Ward, her father's curate in 1884. A story was passed down the family that Alfred Gatty tried to persuade his daughter not to marry and said he would give up his second marriage if she would give up her marriage. Her daughter Christabel Maxwell was the author of *Mrs Gatty and Mrs Ewing*.

Then there were the two youngest surviving brothers. Stephen Herbert studied at Oxford and became a barrister in 1874 and a QC in 1891. He became a colonial law officer serving in various places, including the Caribbean, before becoming Chief Justice of Gibraltar (1895-1905). He was knighted in 1904. His daughter Hester married Siegfried Sassoon. Stephen was musical, a watercolour painter and an amateur actor contributing to the family theatricals. The youngest was Charles Tindall born in 1851. He seems to have failed to get into university and undertook parochial work in the East End of London: Juliana thought he would make a good clergyman. In the end he became curator of the Liverpool Museum before a variety of different jobs. He was the unsuccessful Irish Home Rule candidate for West Dorset in 1892. He was well travelled and also a published writer. He wrote a two-volume history of the Grosvenor family and its estates, *Mary Davies and the Manor of Ebury*. He died in 1928.

In 1866 Margaret Gatty edited *Aunt Judy's* magazine, a new monthly magazine for children published by George Bell. Two sources write that Margaret Gatty was asked by George Bell to edit it and Susan Drain writes that Alfred Gatty suggested the idea to the publisher.

Aunt Judy's magazine was issued monthly, featuring articles, stories and reviews. The first book reviews section was in the second issue, June 1866; the first review was of *Alice in Wonderland*. The magazine was collected into two volumes, the Christmas volume and the May Day volume for the first few years until it became an annual publication. *Aunt Judy's* magazine was truly a family

enterprise as many members of the Gatty family contributed to it. The first volume – the Christmas volume for 1866 – as well as articles on natural history by the editor, has an article by Alfred Gatty on ‘Sea Forts at Spithead’, the first instalment of Juliana’s story ‘Mrs Overtheway’s Remembrances’, which continued for several years. Alexander Ewing contributed music and ‘The Prince of Sleona’, a serial, also several pieces of music by Alfred, who continued to contribute to future issues, composing music for some of the songs in *Alice* – ‘The Walrus and The Carpenter’, ‘Pig and Pepper’ and ‘Will You Won’t You Join the Dance’.

Other members of the family contributed regularly too. Reginald, under the pseudonym LLB, contributed stories from his childhood and some poems, including two both titled ‘To J.H.E’ and written for his sister when she was in Canada. He also contributed illustrations, as did Alfred. Stephen contributed plays, using his initials SHG. Charles contributed articles about some of his travels. Margaret Gatty’s sister Horatia, under her initials HSE, also wrote for *Aunt Judy* – and there was even a poem by the Reverend Walter Ward.

Aunt Judy’s magazine was edited by Margaret Gatty until she died. After her death Juliana and her sister Horatia became joint editors. Then Horatia became sole editor – indeed, she had always helped her mother in this role. The magazine was one of the most popular of its time – through its readers, more than one cot in Great Ormond Street Hospital was sponsored and were regularly featured. Susan Drain writes:

***Aunt Judy’s Magazine* was an amateur effort and a family affair, particularly for the first seven and a half years By amateur, I mean the editorial, though not the publishing, work was done by people whose identity was not primarily that of the professional writer or editor, and whose livelihood did not depend on that work alone. (2007)**

I don’t agree totally with this statement as Margaret Gatty started writing to augment the family income, especially needed with a large family. She was able to attract well-known writers, including Lewis Carroll, featuring ‘Bruno’s Revenge’ which later became part of *Sylvie and Bruno*. There were stories by Hans Christian Andersen too and one by Mrs Molesworth.

Sadly *Aunt Judy’s* magazine ceased publication in 1885 (it was not a profitable venture) with a farewell note from Horatia Gatty citing the death of Juliana Ewing as the reason and that she could not be replaced as her contributions were so integral to *Aunt Judy’s*. Also the name would be meaningless as she was ‘Aunt Judy’. The last volume includes a song ‘To J.H.E.’ with words and music by Alfred and a serialised memoir of Juliana by her sister Horatia.

It is interesting to note that the first biographical writings about both Margaret Gatty and Juliana Horatia Ewing were by family – Juliana on Margaret, Horatia on her sister and Christabel Maxwell on them both.

I think the fact that most of the family contributed to *Aunt Judy's* illustrates what a close family they were, even if they were physically apart. Also, I wonder if Margaret Gatty had had a more conventional upbringing and more of an interest in domestic matters and had just devoted all her time to supporting her husband's parish, would her children have achieved as much?

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Book Review

Fantasy Fictions from the Bengali Renaissance

Translated and edited by Sanjay Sircar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2018 (978 0 1994 8675 5 print; 978 0 1990 9217 8 e-book) (Foreword by Peter Hunt)

This impressive and substantial volume not only provides the text of two tales by the nephews Abanindranath and Gaganendranath of the distinguished poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, but also, with a wealth of editorial material, puts the stories in their literary and historical context – to the extent of making an uninformed reader like myself suddenly aware of a previously unfamiliar rich treasury of classic writing for children. The stories themselves, Abanindranath’s ‘Kheerer Putul’ (The Make-Believe Prince) and Gaganendranath’s ‘Bhondar Bahadur’ (Toddy-Cat the Bold) are in fact fairly short: even with the illustrations and the extensive footnotes, they total only about a quarter of the text. (Incidentally, it occurs to me that a children’s edition comprising only these two stories and the illustrations could well be enjoyed by young readers across the world. Certainly Sircar’s fluent and colloquial translations would lend themselves to such a venture.)

The structure of the first story, for which Sircar’s title differs from the original, ‘The Solid Milk Doll’, is based on a contrast between a King’s two wives. The Beloved Younger Queen lives in seven pavilions and has a retinue of 700 serving maids, while the dwelling and the life in general of the Neglected Elder Queen are miserably inadequate:

[A] one-roomed dwelling he gave her, and that tumbledown, – one serving maid he gave to attend her, and she deaf and dumb. To wear he gave her worn-out, tattered saris; to sleep on – he gave her a tattered quilt. The King used to come to the Neglected Queen one day in the year, when he sat a moment, said a word, and rising, departed.

The Beloved Queen – the Younger Queen, it was in her dwelling that the King stayed the whole year long. (p.90)

Even so, when the King goes on a voyage, he attends to the insatiable demands of the Younger Queen for rubies, diamonds and gold, but nearly forgets the single request of the Elder Queen – for a

blackfaced monkey. Eventually, this monkey becomes the agent of the Elder Queen's means of restoration to favour, by effecting a transformation which, as Sircar points out, is in fact a traditional fairy-tale device, classified in the Aarne-Thompson typology as AT 459.¹

The second story, with its framework of a quest to rescue an abducted child, is enlivened by a cast of elaborately dressed animals, including some geese who are off to sit their examinations; also in evidence is a moving railway station platform. The characters and their ingenious absurdity certainly recall Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, and Sircar's editorial material has a good deal to say about how 'Carroll's there-and-back-again quest journeys serve as templates for the structure of Gaganendranath's fantasy quest' (p.179). He also highlights the Bengali author's adaptation of 'Carroll's cards/chess people, fabulous and linguistically derived monsters' (p.187). Altogether he provides a very full and impressive analysis of how what might appear to be uniquely Victorian British absurdity can enliven a tale set in a very different background. The extensive use of nursery rhymes by both the Tagore brothers, again in emulation of Carroll, is also noted.

Peter Hunt's Foreword highlights the affinity between children's literature and traditional tales, and welcomes the contribution which Sircar, as a scholar capable of linking disparate cultures, makes in this volume. Illustrative of this is Sircar's Preface, which usefully gives background information about the Bengali Renaissance: this began in the mid-nineteenth century, and the transition from medieval to modern occurred in a range of intellectual, technological, social, cultural and political fields. Stories such as the two in this book exemplify the iconoclasm which was directed at the time towards traditional pieties, as well as the cultural eclecticism which characterised its later years, during the earlier twentieth century. The stories also reflect the gradual emergence of literature addressed specifically to younger readers.

This book is surely destined to open its readers' eyes to a range of different perspectives about the impressive variety of manifestations of children's literature throughout the world.

Note

- 1 Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales.
https://sites.ualberta.ca/~urban/Projects/English/Content/ATU_Tales.htm.

Pat Pinsent



The UK section of the International Board on Books for Young People

The next issue of *IBBYLink* is *IBBYLink* 59, Autumn 2020 and will be titled 'A Sense of Place: Landscape'.

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