

Introduction

It is often said that the stories we read when we are young are the ones that influence us the most, and school stories shaped many of our childhoods. When we revisit them now, they evoke not just a general nostalgia for school, but a more personal nostalgia for our own schooldays of which they were an important part. We remember where we were when we first read them, who our teachers and friends were, what they meant to us. We may or may not have attended schools like those in the stories, but they were still special places in our imagination, where we escaped from our parents and could associate closely with the triumphs and disasters, the comedy and the tragedy, of the heroes and heroines of those far off, or not so far off, schooldays. How did these stories come to be written? How did they speak to us then, and how do they speak to us now? How did (or do) they both reflect and shape their age? In many ways this is a book about going back: some of us go back further than others, and we go back with very different emotions.

My own earliest memory of school stories is of Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* series (1946-51). I had devoured Blyton's *Famous Five* (1942-63) and *Secret Seven* (1949-63) novels, and this was an intriguing and exotic sequel, borrowed from a girl who lived close by. After the *Malory Towers* adventures, I read Anthony Buckeridge's larkish tales of Jennings and Darbshire, and William Mayne's enchanting and sometimes mystical

tales of choir school life; but I disliked Billy Bunter and his mates at Greyfriars whose exaggerated humour was largely lost on me. During my early teens, I enjoyed some of Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) – it must have been on a compulsory reading list – William Goldings's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), and Rosalind Erskine's *The Passion Flower Hotel* (1962), disguised in a brown paper cover and giving an alternative and titillating account of what girls might get up to when lessons are over.

A little later, and much later, other school stories, written for an adult audience, crept onto my bookshelf: Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (1925); E.R. Braithwaite's *To Sir With Love* (1959); Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961); Humphry Berkeley's incomparable *The Life and Death of Rochester Sneath* (1963), which is more proof, if it is needed, that real life (here, real headmasters) can outdo in pomposity and stupidity anything an author imagines; and Zoë Heller's disturbing *Notes on a Scandal* (2003). Plays and films lie largely outside the scope of the present study, but in the theatre few are unmoved by Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* (1948), Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On* (1968) and *The History Boys* (2004) display Bennett's familiar and idiosyncratic nostalgia, and the various incarnations of *St Trinian's* are an anarchic antidote to the prim girls' schools stories that they satirise.

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It is generally accepted that the first school story – and the first novel written specifically for children – is Sarah Fielding's *The Governess, or The Little Female Academy* (1749).¹ It describes ten days in the life of Mrs Teachum's 'little Female Academy' for nine girls, aged from eight to fourteen. In the eighteenth century, very few children would have gone to school, but like the generations of children who followed, they could still go there in their imagination and enjoy vicariously its friendships, adventures and disasters. Notice how 'entertainment' ranks alongside 'instruction' as an aim for the Academy: the Academy is 'calculated for the entertainment and instruction of young ladies in their education', and is clearly influenced by the belief of John Locke (1632-1704) that learning should not be regarded as work but as something to be enjoyed.² Locke also believed that children should learn

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1. Sarah Fielding was the sister of the more famous Henry Fielding, author of *The History of Tom Jones* (also published in 1749); she was a member of the Blue Stocking Society, which encouraged women to discuss literature and the arts, and advocated women's education. The story was originally published anonymously.
 2. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693).

self-government through the wise teaching of a 'governor', so not only is Mrs Teachum's determination (as 'governess') that her pupils should learn as much as possible through their own discussions remarkably progressive, but the use of a child (Jenny Peace) to draw out lessons enables her to avoid the sort of patronising adult narrator that was to become horribly common.

School stories written from Victorian times until the middle of the twentieth century are usually about middle- and upper-class children in boarding schools (since there was little education for anyone else). Thus, they are about a closed world within a world, about unworldly teachers in all sorts of ways standing *in loco parentis*, about an inevitably febrile atmosphere in which tensions and passions smoulder and enflame. Charles Dickens wrote about the hidden, cruel private boarding schools in Yorkshire, while in the *Chalet School* stories (1925-1970) Elinor Brent-Dyer went as far as taking her pupils across the English Channel to set up a school in Austria. Within their world, schools build their own history. They develop their own traditions, both good and bad, which are passed down from one generation to the next; they have their own hierarchies and even their own language.

Mavis Reimer makes the useful distinction between boarding schools that are 'little worlds' – real and fictional, reflecting and intertwined with the world outside, so the one prepares its pupils for the other – and 'worlds apart', where the school isolates its pupils from the world outside so it can pursue its own agenda until the time comes for their departure.³ I think Reimer overstates the case, and the distinction is always a matter of degree, but, that said, the majority of boys' school stories fall into the former category. Public schools, in their prime in the second part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century, were unashamedly nurseries of the British Empire, and although in school stories the Empire remains largely as a background,⁴ if indeed it is mentioned at all, there is an underlying assumption that the young heroes are being prepared to play their part in the colonial world. In *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, for example, Tom's friend East leaves to join his regiment in India; in Reed's *The Fifth Form at St Dominic's*, Loman finds some sort of redemption farming in Australia; and in Kipling's *Stalky & Co.*, Stalky goes off to subdue the natives in the Khye-Keen Hills. In the same way, in girls' school stories, fathers return from their estates and plantations in distant parts to emotional reunions with their

3. Mavis Reimer, 'Traditions of the School Story', in M.O. Grenby and Andrea Immel (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 209-225.

4. Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* (1899) is, of course, an exception and is discussed in chapter 4.

daughters, and Sara Crewe in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) is in part an exploration of the role of girls in the Empire. However, although girls' schools today are far more outward looking than previously, most fictional girls' schools depict 'worlds apart', where their pupils learn and grow in isolation, fiercely protected from the patriarchal society beyond.

It is, I think, the otherness of boarding schools, like the otherness of island literature (such as *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719; *Swiss Family Robinson*, 1812; and *Coral Island*, 1857) and that of fantasy worlds (such as Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, C. S. Lewis's Narnia, and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth) that once made boarding school stories attractive to readers from all backgrounds. Children who attended boarding schools could enjoy a vicarious pride, both in the fictional school and in their own battle scars, and could have their own social standing endorsed; and those who did not could imagine themselves lifted into an exclusive world, putting on the uniform, and joining in the scrapes and adventures of new and privileged friends. Given that boarding schools have only ever been attended by a small proportion of the population, and hardly exist in some countries where the tales told about them have also been read avidly, the fact that they have become an element of our national identity is likely to have been caused by the literature that they inspired over a comparatively short period of time. From *Tom Brown's Schooldays* until the early twentieth century, there was a torrent of often third-rate novels about the rapidly expanding boys' public school sector, characterised by beating, fagging, sporting prowess and muscular Christianity. However, after the First World War, not only did all but a few of these novels quickly – and deservedly – lose their appeal, but little else of note was subsequently written about boys' public schools apart from the enduring and widely read accounts of *Billy Bunter* and occasional sugary and nostalgic adult novels that kept the public school myth alive – like James Hilton's *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1934) and, much later, R.F. Delderfield's *To Serve Them All My Days* (1972). Since girls' schools are newer foundations, stories about them became popular just as the boys' stories were fading. These stories also had a longer life, perhaps because girls' schools rarely had the strange and sometimes cruel excesses of boys' schools, and perhaps because they are more about 'worlds apart' and so less tied to their era.

But the cultural changes since the Second World War changed schools and the stories about them as they changed so much else. Over the past half century, with the transformed social and educational landscape, boarding schools have become less self-serving and claustrophobic, and so even less interesting to the novelist, while day school pupils now do as much growing up outside school as they do in it. As a result, the tribulations

of adolescence have been confronted in that new, often issue-based genre, young adult literature, and for thirty years (1978-2008) the world of the urban comprehensive school was dramatised for young people in the popular television series *Grange Hill*. Even so, the school story has managed to survive. Novels about day schools confront the struggles of children and teenagers more honestly than before, and those about boarding schools, having lost much of their inherent excitement, are discarding the commonplace and providing the starting point for fantastic adventure.

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Critics and historians have written perceptively about school stories, often investigating the ways in which they both reflect and influence the culture of their time. Isabel Quigly's *The Heirs of Tom Brown: The English School Story* (1982) is an insightful survey, but after considering the Victorian classics of the genre, her emphasis is on novels written with an adult audience in mind; she devotes only one chapter to girls' school stories. Similarly, Jeffrey Richards's *Happiest Days: The Public Schools in English Fiction* (1988) is an illuminating study of boys' public school stories from a historian's point of view, but again *Billy Bunter* is the only story of the past one hundred years written for schoolchildren that it singles out for particular consideration. P.W. Musgrave's *From Brown to Bunter* (1985) also concentrates on boys' school stories and their historical context up to 1945, by which time, it argues, the genre was nearly at an end. It is especially useful in its exploration of the shift in the early twentieth century towards school stories written for an adult audience.

My different aim in *From Morality to Mayhem* has been to write about school stories written primarily for the younger reader – boys and girls aged between eight and fifteen, or thereabouts – and I have included those written up to the present day. In particular, I have focused on those stories that are either milestones in the development of the school story, or that react against the development and the wider attitudes in society that were driving it. Part I is about the remarkable expansion of boys' public schools in the nineteenth century and about the array of stories that grew up around them; most of the stories are conservative, in that they endorse and even trumpet the schools in which they are set, however barbarous they appear when we look back. Part II is about the stagnation of the boys' public schools between the First and Second World Wars and the consequent decline of the stories – though their popularity was maintained for a time by their publication in comics and magazines – and by the brief flowering of the preparatory school story; here, the best stories are more enlightened,

highlighting the shortcomings of the schools and advocating change. Part III is about how the rise to prominence of girls' boarding schools in the first half of the twentieth century inspired a wave of girls' school stories, just as the boys' stories were beginning to wither. However, many of these stories are fantasies, sentimentalising their subject; too often they fail to recognise and even undermine the changing attitude to women and their education. Finally, Part IV is about the often unheralded regeneration of the school story. It focuses on the novels that have emerged since the 1950s, striking out in fresh directions and injecting new life into models from the past.

Children grow up quickly and schools are constantly in flux, so school stories for young readers are, by their nature, ephemeral. Today, for a number of reasons that will become clear, they may no longer attract the attention they once did, but the best of them are more skilfully written than their predecessors and more serious in their intent. It is premature to lament their passing.

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