

Introduction

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Readers of children's literature often wonder about the texts or the authors of the books they have just read. They sometimes linger over the question of what happened next, or what else happened to their favourite characters, such as Long John Silver or the Railway Children. They often speculate about incidents or events not fully explained by the writer in his or her tale: how exactly did Mary Lennox get from India to Misselthwaite Manor? Or, how did Tom get hold of Hatty's skates in *Tom's Midnight Garden*? Readers, librarians, and collectors too, for that matter, are often baffled by the identity of the authors themselves. Was P.F.C. Westerman, the author of early twentieth-century adventure stories, the same person as J.F.C. Westerman, who wrote similar books? Were Herbert Strang and Mrs Herbert Strang really husband and wife? And who was A.L.O.E. aka 'A Lady of England'?

This book of essays, which frankly acknowledges a great debt to John Sutherland's entertaining studies of puzzles in nineteenth-century fiction, focusses upon our reading of children's books; many of them often termed 'classics'. Some of our essays are based upon close reading of particular texts, as we try to disentangle some of the problems in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in *Winnie the Pooh*, and in the changes the poet Wilfred Owen made in his version of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. Other chapters concentrate on individual authors, such as R.M. Ballantyne and Rudyard Kipling, or on literary controversies, as we revisit Graham Greene's brush with Beatrix Potter and George Orwell's insightful encounter with Frank Richards, the author of the Billy Bunter stories. As readers speculate about the missing details about the lives of such famous characters as Sherlock Holmes or Elizabeth Bennett, so we speculate about the depiction of Mr March in *Little Women*, and of the boy-heroes Bevis and Jennings. We look at some of the canon's best-known books – *The Railway Children* and *The Wind in the Willows* – and discuss such problems as the apparent absence of awareness of the turbulent political situation of the 1930s; and we consider the old chestnut of the relationship between an author's books and his personal life.

The purpose of this book is to investigate and try to explain some of the mysteries and problems found in children's books. We hope that readers will find our discussions interesting and enjoyable, and that they are not regarded as too frivolous. We take our defence of the project from Sir Thomas Browne's words in his *Urn-Burial* of 1658: 'What songs the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid among women, though puzzling questions are not beyond all conjecture'.

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