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What Makes a Children's Classic?

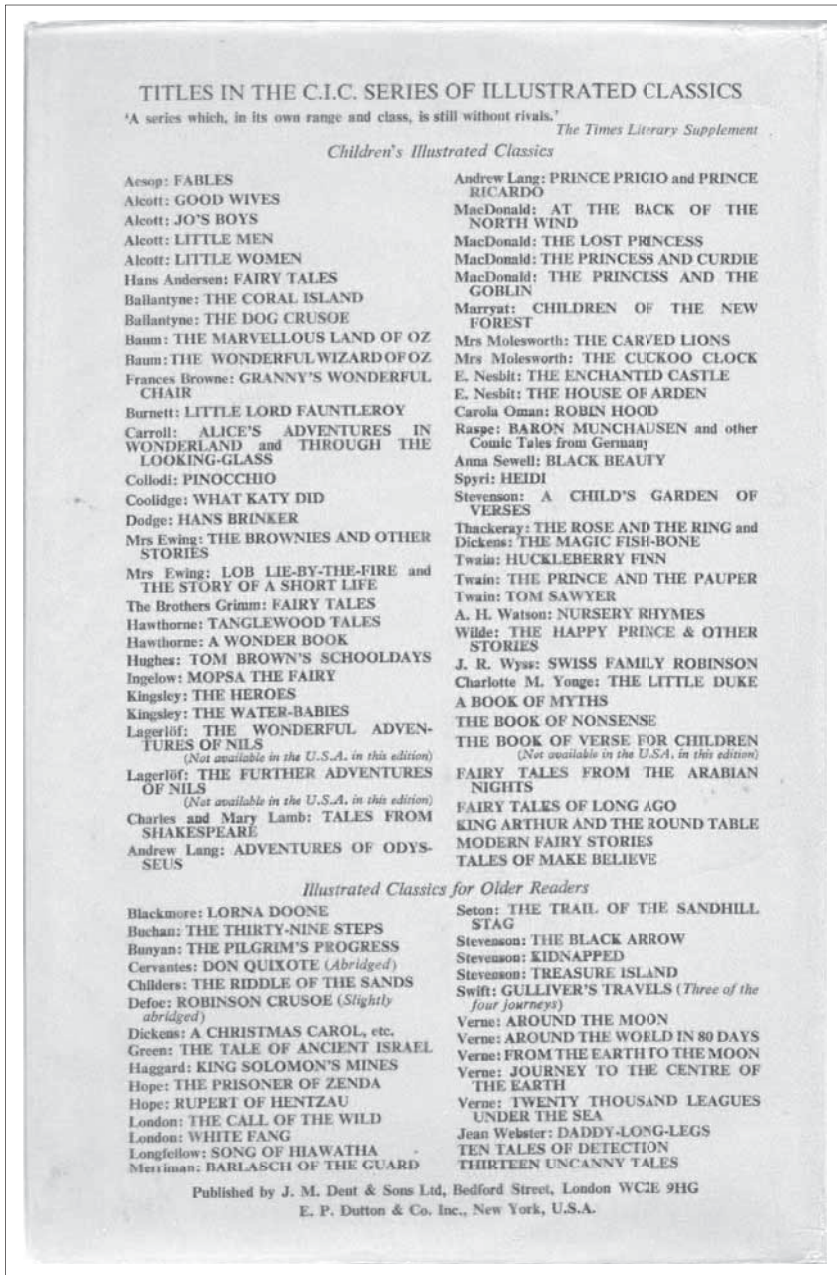
Let us begin with three genuine mysteries. Firstly, what do these books have in common? *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Frankenstein*, *The Italian*, *Tales of Mystery and Terror*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Oliver Twist*, *Wives and Daughters*, and *The Woman in Black*.

And the answer is *not* that they are all books for adults (although they are).

Secondly, where would you find these books grouped together? *Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present*, *Wise Children*, *Redwall*, *Midnight's Children*, *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Escape to Wonderland* *Colouring Book*, and *Down There On a Visit*.

Or, in which universe are these characters living side by side? The Famous Five, Peter Rabbit, Biggles, Mary Lennox, Little Miss Bossy, and Alice (of Wonderland)?

The answer is, in effect, the same for all of them: they are all on current publishers' lists of 'Children's Classics' (the books in the second group are all from the same publisher). They raise some interesting questions about the idea of the 'classic'. How is it that the first group, all initially written for adults, and still likely to be appropriate for adults, has ended up on children's lists? The second group – consisting of some books written for adults, some for children, some serious, some ephemeral, one wordless – raises the question of what these books, all in the same category, can possibly have in common. And even if we level the playing field – all the characters in the third group are from books written for children – surely there is a difference in quality?



Establishing the canon:
J.M. Dent's 'Children's Illustrated Classics' series from the 1950s.

How these books are all called classics is a genuine mystery, as is the definition of a 'classic' itself, a term that is now merrily applied by marketing persons to, well, anything: fizzy drinks, bank accounts, crisps, cars, fashions, and so on. And it generally refers to the previous, just-out-of-date, or still-selling-despite-our-efforts version.

A cynic might say that in literature, classics are books that we think we ought to read – and, eventually, probably think that we *have* read. But identifying a specific book as classic because of what it actually *is* – that is to say, what is on the page – is another matter. A good many publishers and authors have chased the answer – and the wealth it would bring – down the centuries, but, as those lists prove, it is a fruitless exercise.

Books carrying the label 'classic' rarely have much in common in terms of style or content. Definitions that bring in value judgements, such as Margery Fisher's notion that classics 'must offer universal truths, universal values, to one generation after another, impermeable to the erosion of Time', flounder on undefinable terms. Victor Watson's idea may seem to be less vulnerable to criticism: 'The great children's classics are those books our national consciousness cannot leave alone. We keep remaking them and reading them afresh'. But readers – and national consciousnesses – can only react to what is presented to them. Books may end up as being famous for being famous, and somebody must start the snowball rolling.

We might even conclude that publishers publish books labelled as 'classics' because most of those books are old and therefore out of copyright. The ones that aren't may be more recent books that happen to be published by the same publisher – thus prolonging the book's shelf-life. This is not as cynical as it sounds. The idea of producing series of 'classics' dates from the depression years in the USA, as Leonard S. Marcus explains:

Classics in new or revived editions enjoyed renewed attention from publishers and readers alike. By reissuing books already in the public domain, publishers were able to factor out royalty payments from the cost side of the equation and thus to offer the books at more affordable prices.

In England, Methuen tried to capture the school literature market by launching Methuen Modern Classics in 1924, drawing on their backlist (*The Wind in the Willows* was one of the first titles – and one of the unabridged ones, as Grahame refused to allow anyone to take scissors to his work!). Dent followed, and now there is hardly a publisher or retailer that does not have a list of children's classics: currently, or in recent memory, we

have seen Puffin Classics, Puffin Modern Classics, Young Puffin Modern Classics, Vintage, Red Fox, Oxford, Everyman, Ladybird, and on and on. 'Classics', then, either save publishers money or keep books from their backlists alive.

Regrettable as it may be in principle, all of this makes life rather easier for the majority of us who do not know much about children's books (and, let's face it, for people running children's book courses: it is easier to teach books that are widely available, thereby increasing the likelihood that their students might have read them). Furthermore, most people have a nostalgic or vague memory of books they encountered as children, and the classics lists are likely to have a book that stirs a chord (however out of tune). At least if we choose a 'classic' then we don't need to worry about our lack of expertise – the book must have the imprimatur of *somebody*.

Which is all very well, but there are obvious problems – notably the gap between the commercial instincts of the publishers and the needs of the young readers. I distinctly – vividly – remember an incident in my local children's bookshop a few years ago. A father and daughter came in – the daughter about ten years old – and she went immediately to the young adult section, while the father, rather uncertainly, browsed among the classics and found a copy of *Heidi*, complete with a cover of a small girl in a white frock on a flower-covered hillside. (It could have been in any of a dozen 'classic' editions.) The daughter, meanwhile had found, as I recall, the fourth volume in a series featuring teenage vampires, and there ensued an increasingly high-pitched negotiation that ended with both books being bought, on the condition that both were read. I had some sympathy with both participants: to one, *Heidi* was safe and familiar, as well as being culturally desirable; to the other, *Heidi* was, at best, irrelevant and at worst a symbol of adult oppression. And embarrassing.

To judge from the first list that we looked at, the criteria for nominating books as classics varies wildly. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Oliver Twist* might be there because the narrators, at least initially, are children or teenagers; *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*, perhaps because (apart from being old) there is a certain teenage-girl passion about them; *Frankenstein* and *Tales of Mystery and Terror* may seem to speak to the teenage horror market; *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are among those many books that have slipped down the age ranges as being not quite suitable for adults anymore. (It is, not quite incidentally, instructive to see how successful reprints of old crime novels – 'classics' – have become the secret vice of certain readers.) In regards to *The Italian*, *Wives and Daughters*, and *The Woman in Black* – and from

the second list, *Wise Children*, *Midnight's Children*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Down There On a Visit* – I must leave it to my readers to speculate on the thinking behind their selection, or to imagine a childhood to which they might possibly appeal.

But many readers might insist there *must* be some qualitative element here. Not just any old book cannot become a classic, whatever the commercial pressures. As Winston Churchill remarked, history is written by the victors, and so the benchmarks for what we value culturally are set by those books that have survived. As the spate of revivals – notably in ‘forgotten’ women’s writing, crime novels, and girls’ school stories, among others – suggests, the writing of history that validates certain books as classics might have been very different. Arthur Ransome was only one of a legion of ‘outdoor’ writers of the 1930s, but because his books, by some quirk, survived, they *are* the standard. Whatever happened to M.E. Atkinson, Aubrey de Selincourt, David Severn, or Garry Hogg? Perhaps their ‘classic’ time will come.

Even if literary survival is largely a matter of luck, and the survivors set the standards for the others, surely there are ‘landmark’ books, which seem to have changed history, which *deserve* to be classics, and should be read in order for us (or the children) to understand literary history? This is a persuasive argument, but some of these books scarcely survive despite their ‘historical importance’: Captain Marryat’s *Masterman Ready, or, the Wreck of the Pacific* (1841-2) was the beginning of the boys’ sea story; Harriet Martineau’s *The Crofton Boys* (1841), published sixteen years before *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, brought together all the essential features of the school story; and Joanna Cannan’s *A Pony for Jean* (1937) marks the beginning of the pony story. These are significant books, but rarely read now.

Conversely, it doesn’t much matter what a book is once it has joined the canon: students study *The Secret Garden* not because it is a particularly outstanding book of its period – or even an outstanding example of books of that period with the same plot – but because it has become a beacon to navigate by.

All of this might seem intriguing but irrelevant, were it not for the fact that the ‘classics’ regularly become a political tool. In 2011, Michael Gove, the then British Secretary of State for Education, began a campaign to get schoolchildren to read classic British literature, deriding the suggestion that ‘the idea of a canon is outmoded’. In February 2016 the Department for Education, in association with Penguin, launched a ‘new classic books in schools initiative.’ The one hundred titles supplied cheaply to schools (in ‘sets’) are, according to the publicity,

taken from Penguin's popular Black Classics series, range from the earliest writings to early 20th century works, span fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose, and are intended to offer a springboard for children to discover the classics. All the titles are by authors who died before 1946 and are therefore out of copyright.

(This sounds like a familiar song – especially the final sentence.) There are only three recognisably 'children's' titles in the Penguin list – *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island*, and *Little Women* – which raises intriguing questions about matching children's age and experience with the books they read. (Scholastic, not surprisingly has also launched a range of classics – and these *are* children's books.) What is revealing about the thinking behind these initiatives is that in terms of education *children's classics* don't count.

While the randomness of the process of becoming a classic, let alone the circularity by which those that survive determine the survival (or revival) chances of the rest, is clear, there often remains a stubborn resistance to it. Not *all* books can be equally good. Surely the books that feature in our third list – The Famous Five, Peter Rabbit, Biggles, Mary Lennox, Little Miss Bossy, and Alice – are not equally *valuable*.

There is an interesting paradox here. A traditionalist (and, as far as literary judgements are concerned, that means most of us) might argue that Peter Rabbit, Mary Lennox, and Alice have an obvious quality – after all, they feature in books that the literary culture agrees are important. On the other hand, the Famous Five, Biggles, and Little Miss Bossy are ephemeral and commercial, of no literary value. We are on dangerous ground if we try to impose an abstract 'literary' hierarchy on these books; perhaps it would be better to acknowledge that there is a distinction between books that *are* for children and which *were* for children. Those that become 'classic' because of age may have nothing to do with contemporary children or childhood.

If all this seems to lead deeper into mysterious areas of discussion, there are signs that the mystery is being solved. More and more it is being recognised (*pace* the politicians) that the most important, the most *classic* children's books are not those recognised as such by adults – but are those that are the true domain of childhood. These books are *not* accessible to adults and adult sensibilities and adult value-judgements. Enid Blyton claimed never to listen to any critic over the age of twelve, and as a classic writer for children, she is the genuine article.