

Introduction

‘Why does Edgar not reveal himself to his blind father, as he truly says that he ought to have done? The answer is left to mere conjecture.’

– A.C. Bradley on *King Lear*

When our little study on *How Did Long John Silver Lose his Leg? And Twenty-Six Other Mysteries of Children’s Literature* appeared in 2013, instead of the storm of abuse we expected, the work was greeted, along with a few compliments, with a series of complaints and grumbles as to why other mysteries, which were of particular importance to the complainants, had not been tackled. The urge to speculate about various problems in children’s books is evidently more widespread than we had anticipated.

This may be partly due to nostalgia, of course. Many of our readers urged us to investigate mysteries that had no doubt first occurred to them when thinking about their years of juvenile enthusiasms, perhaps after re-reading old favourites in middle age. Hence there were many queries about the Biggles books, about Richmal Crompton’s great comedies involving William Brown, and concerning Frank Richards’s immortal character, Billy Bunter. So here we attempt to tackle some of those queries, as well as to investigate other popular works, such as *Lorna Doone*; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; and Enid Blyton’s school stories set at St Clare’s.

Other chapters have a more theoretical base – about the problems of religion and of war in children’s books, the difficulties of writing a series of books about the same characters, and about the long-running debate

on the value of fairy tales. Others are more speculative – about questions of authorship, or of the challenge of deciding which children's books are 'classics', of trying to identify and list the 100 best children's books, or of trying to award prizes to the *very* best.

In many cases there are no definitive answers, of course. As A.C. Bradley, the great Shakespearian scholar, said in his essay upon *King Lear*, 'The answer is [often] left to mere conjecture.'

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