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How Well Did George Orwell Really Know Billy Bunter?
'Boys' Weeklies' (1940)

Critics of children's literature are usually a fairly friendly crowd, at least in public, sympathetic to, and supportive of, each other's efforts. There have, of course, been some exceptions. According to her biographer Denis Judd, Alison Uttley (1884-1976), the author of the 'Sam Pig' stories, couldn't stand her neighbour, Enid Blyton (1897-1968), and Philip Pullman, among others, has expressed serious criticism of C.S. Lewis's books about Narnia. Anne Fine, the author of *Goggle-Eyes* (1989), twice winner of the Carnegie Medal, savagely attacked Melvin Burgess, another Carnegie prize-winner, for his treatment of teenage sex in his novel *Doing It* (2003).

George Orwell's critique of Frank Richards and his stories about Greyfriars School and its famous pupil Billy Bunter is not really of this order. His famous essay on 'Boys' Weeklies', which first appeared in *Horizon* magazine in March 1940, is a brilliant account of the content of such publications as the *Gem, Magnet* and other popular children's reading. Concentrating in particular on the school stories which appeared in the *Gem* and *Magnet*, Orwell analyses their stylised language and slang, their use of stereotyped characters and formulaic plots, and their absence of such topics as religion and sex. He thought that the name of author Frank Richards, the author of stories in the *Magnet*, must be a pseudonym for a team of writers, since he could not believe that the same person could have written so many stories in a series published from 1908 to 1940.

Orwell summarises the mental world of the *Magnet* as follows:

> The year is 1910 – or 1940, but it is all the same. You are at Greyfriars, a rosy-cheeked boy of fourteen in posh tailor-made clothes, sitting down to tea in your study on the Remove passage after an exciting game of football which was won by an odd goal in the last half-minute. There is a cosy fire in the study, and outside the wind is whistling. The ivy clusters thickly round the old grey stones. The King is on his throne and the pound is worth a pound. Over in Europe the comic foreigners are jabbering and gesticulating, but the grim grey battleships of the British Fleet are steaming up the Channel and at the outposts of Empire the monocled Englishmen

> are holding the niggers at Bay. Lord Mauleverer has just got another fiver and we are all settling down to a tremendous tea of sausages, sardines, crumpets, potted meat, jam and doughnuts. After tea we shall sit round the study fire having a good laugh at Billy Bunter and discussing the team for next week's match against Rookwood. Everything is safe, solid and unquestionable. Everything will be the same for ever and ever.

In May 1940, however, George Orwell had a great surprise when *Horizon* published a reply by 'Frank Richards', in which he revealed that his real name was Charles Hamilton, and that under such names as Frank Richards and Martin Clifford he had in fact written hundreds of stories for the *Gem* and *Magnet* and many other magazines since 1906. His first story about Billy Bunter and Greyfriars School had appeared in the *Magnet* in February 1908, and Richards continued writing it until paper shortages caused by the war led to the last appearance of the magazine on 18 May, 1940.

Orwell's account of the Boys' Weeklies and of the *Gem* and the *Magnet* is clearly affectionate. He calls Billy Bunter 'a real creation. His tight trousers against which boots and canes are constantly thudding, his astuteness in search of food, his postal orders which never turn up, have made him famous wherever the Union Jack waves.' Orwell's biographer Gordon Bowker suggests that he had probably read the *Magnet* as a schoolboy of seven or eight, almost from its very beginnings, and says that his passion for boys' comics and children's literature never left him.

Orwell's essay stresses his belief in the important influence of early reading upon children's development, and he points to various aspects of the *Magnet* which he does not like. First Orwell points out the way the stories are unrealistic and emphasise the 'glamour' of public-school life with its snobbery and its absence of working-class characters. Secondly, he draws attention to the absence of sex in these stories of adolescent boys and girls away at boarding-schools. 'Sex is completely taboo', he says. But what irritates Orwell most is the absence of what he calls 'contemporary history', by which he means any references to such issues as unemployment, Fascism and the European situation in general. Orwell says that these stories depict a fantasy world in which the clock seems to have stopped about 1910. He thinks that this matters because he believes that people draw their ideas from the stories they read, and are influenced by them: Many readers, he says, who consider themselves sophisticated are actually carrying through life an imaginative background which they acquired in childhood.

But is George Orwell's account of these stories about Greyfriars School accurate? How reliable are his memories of the *Magnet?* How well did he really know Billy Bunter?

'The working-classes only enter into the *Gem* and *Magnet* as comics or semi-villains', says Orwell. But this is not quite true. Although they are

usually only minor characters in stories which focus on the adventures of schoolboys, you will find a whole range of the lower classes appearing in the tales, ranging from beggars to circus-performers, and including fishermen, gypsies, a boot-maker, a green-grocer, a plumber, a glazier, the school gardener and the local policeman.

Orwell shrewdly notes that the *Magnet*'s depiction of the arrival at Greyfriars School of scholarship boys made it possible for readers from very poor backgrounds to project themselves into the public-school atmosphere. In 'A Lad from Lancashire' in 1908, Frank Richards tells the story of Mark Linley, a working-class boy who wins a scholarship to Greyfriars and is scorned by the snobs at first, but gradually becomes popular. He is a studious pupil and wins prizes to help his family back home who are in financial difficulties because of his father's poor health. He even wins five guineas in a short story competition by writing a tale about factory life. Richards repeated the idea in his 1911 story 'By Sheer Grit!' about another scholarship boy, Dick Penfold, the son of a cobbler, who again triumphs against the cads and snobs of the Remove. Thomas Redwing, the son of a poor fisherman, is another scholarship boy who makes good by winning the Memorial Scholarship which helps to pay his fees. In 1932 (at the height of the economic depression, in other words) Richards produced an extraordinary series of stories about Billy Bunter and a young vagrant called 'Flip.' Flip is a young pickpocket who has run away from the criminal underworld of Puggins's Alley in London. Bunter feels sorry for him and rather improbably manages to get him a place in the second-form at Greyfriars. There is a distinctly Dickensian flavour to these pages. The story collapses into melodrama when Flip recognises a new teacher as a criminal, whose arresting officer, Inspector Brent of Scotland Yard, discovers that Flip is his own long-lost son! But those pages describing Flip's early years of squalor still stand out.

Although there are often disputes, occasional elections and even a strike within Greyfriars School itself, George Orwell is quite right in drawing attention to the absence of references to them in the outside world. There is one notable exception: in February 1914 the *Magnet* published the story of 'The Factory Rebels!' While out of school visiting town, Tom Cherry and his chums discover that there is a strike at Hardinge's Factory and go along, in Peter Todd's words, 'to see the fun.' The boys learn that Mr Hardinge has sacked Bloggs, a demagogic blackguard, for bad behaviour, but that Bloggs has managed to incite his fellow-workers to support him, claiming unfair dismissal. The boys take the factory-owner's side, and defend him in a pitched battle, and later prevent the workers from stealing Hardinge's car and setting fire to the factory. (All the available police have apparently been called away to deal with another strike in a large town twenty miles away, but Frank Richards offers no explanation for this strike.) Bloggs's bad character is finally exposed, and the 'decent' workers, realising that he has deceived them, return to work. The boys' automatic support for the factory owner, before they know any of the facts, and his account of the workers' violence, do not make this a pleasant story.

Orwell's observations about the absence of any teenage sex at Greyfriars is pretty accurate. 'Occasionally girls enter into the stories', he says, 'but it is always entirely in the spirit of good clean fun.' There are, however, more stories about boy-girl relationships in the *Magnet* than Orwell implies. Molly Locke, the Headmaster's daughter, idolises and falls in love with Harry Wharton, while both Tom Cherry and Harry Wharton admire Marjorie Hazeldene of Cliff House School, the sister of Peter Hazeldene from Greyfriars. Billy Bunter himself is completely entranced by Zara, the graceful Queen of the Ring, in a circus series that ran in the 1930s; and Lord Mauleverer, 'Mauly,' falls in love with and writes poetry about Bella Bunbury, the young shop assistant, in 'Mauly's Flirtation!' of 1915.

Most striking of all, however, is the double-number of the *Magnet* entitled 'Wingate's Folly', which appeared in December 1911. Seventeen-year-old George Wingate is captain of the school and the football-team, but, when escorting the Remove to an afternoon *matinée* performance of a pantomime, he falls in love with Paula Bell, the young actress playing Little Red Riding Hood. He becomes so taken by her sweet and simple charms that he arranges meetings outside the theatre, and begins to lose all interest in school activities, including sport and work. He even drops himself from the school football team in order to keep a date! But, although Paula likes him as a friend, she tells him that their relationship is impossible. She points out that, although their age-difference is apparently slight (she is nineteen to his seventeen) 'it means that I am a woman – and you are a boy.' When the Headmaster finds out about Wingate's situation, he is sympathetically understanding, but persuades Wingate to say goodbye to her. With that, this simply-written but not insensitive account of a familiar kind of unfulfilled relationship ends.

Orwell's observations about the *Magnet*'s lack of interest in the events leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War are perfectly correct, except for one very odd exception. There seems to be no mention of the war at all until October 1939 when the Editor's Column refers to a possible paper-shortage, 'as ships bringing it may be sunk.' There are references to an air-raid warning and gas masks the following week, and from then on we hear about such topics as the black-out, petrol-rationing and the A.R.P. The Christmas Editorial expresses the wish 'May the war clouds lift and leave us once more in peace and happiness!' By April 1940, as the direction of the war became more threatening, Greyfriars finds itself in the thick of it. When the boys spend their Easter holidays at Sir William's home at Eastcliff Lodge, they stumble across a German spy, Herr Braun, who is working for the Gestapo. Fortunately Soames, Sir William's old butler, who is a crook but a patriotic one, outwits him in 'The Nazi Spy's Secret' of May 1940. Because of the paper shortage, the following weeks' story 'The Shadow of the Sack!' was the very last issue of the *Magnet*.

In discussing the *Magnet*'s apparent unawareness of the events leading up to the Second World War, however, Orwell failed to notice an extraordinary circus story which ran in the summer months of 1936. In July of that year Billy

Bunter joins a circus run by the Italian Signor Muccolini (sic) and has a series of comical adventures which were serialised between July and September. Muccolini is a 'rather a swaggering and bullying sort of man', and takes a strong dislike to Bunter. But Bunter has seen Muccolini taking photographs of the nearby Wapshot Air Camp, and so has a hold over him, though not actually realising that Muccolini is a spy. He is also a nationalist braggart who speaks of 'my great and glorious country, the conqueror of Africa, the great nation led by our illustrious Duce Mussolini.' (To show how topical Richards is being, we must remember that the Duce's army had captured Ethiopia as recently as May 1936.) Muccolini tries to get Billy Bunter murdered, but is thwarted and in the end arrested for spying. As one of the circus-hands says, 'Mussolini's methods would not do here . . . Setting up a war in Africa to get shot of the unemployed in Italy may suit your Duce – but it would not suit us.'

If Orwell missed the extraordinary political material here, he rightly noted the much more vigorous treatment of the First World War, pointing out that throughout it the *Gem* and *Magnet* were 'perhaps the most consistently and cheerfully patriotic papers in England.' However, he exaggerates when he suggested that every week the boys caught a spy or pushed a conchie into the army; although such tales as 'The Greyfriars Spy-Hunter' and 'Foiling the Foe!' (both 1914) do show the boys outwitting the enemy, while in 'The Deserter' of 1917 a young coward resolves to enlist, as does Richard Hilary's father, a former conscientious objector, in 'His Country's Call' of 1918. Furthermore, Orwell may not have noticed or remembered how at a time of strong anti-German feeling in Britain the boys also sympathetically defend Herr Gans, their German master, from accusations of spying in 'The Sneak's Revenge' of 1913, and from theft in 'Ructions in the Remove!' in 1914.

Even more remarkable for a school ethos which Orwell described as 'safe, solid and unquestionable' is Frank Richards's depiction of war itself in his story 'Looking for Alonzo,' which appeared in the *Magnet* in November 1914, not long after the war started. The plot is typically implausible. Peter Todd's cousin Alonzo is visiting his uncle in Switzerland during the summer of 1914, when the war breaks out. Fearing that he may have been trapped in Germany on his way home, Peter and his chum, Vernon Smith, generally called the Bounder, abscond from Greyfriars to search for Alonzo. Renting a car (Vernon Smith is wealthy), they make for Rouen:

> It was a Wednesday morning. That afternoon there was a half-holiday at Greyfriars, and the Remove were playing Redclyffe at football. Both the Bounder and Peter Todd were to have played in the Remove eleven. But they were not thinking about footer now. There are signs of war on all sides as they covered the miles inland. Peasants passed them on the road leading westward, some pushing hand-carts laden with household goods, some carrying huge

> bundles. Their faces were grim and despondent. The mere rumour of Uhlans in the neighbourhood had scared them from their homes. They did not want to share the fate of the unhappy Belgian peasants.

Passing through a wood, the boys see a French marksman shoot at three Prussian cavalrymen:

> As the blaze of rifle-fire broke out the two juniors saw the nearest of the horsemen reel and tumble out of his saddle, and disappear into the bracken. He did not re-appear. They knew that he had been instantly killed.
>
> 'Good heavens!' muttered Todd, his face going white.
>
> In that instant of time a human being had been blasted out of existence. It was war – grim, deadly, savage war!

Peter Todd and the Bounder are eventually captured by German soldiers and sentenced to be executed as spies, but their adventures end predictably when Harry Wharton – fortunately given leave of absence from school – comes to their rescue. Even so, the restrained prose, with its reminder that the actors are only schoolboys, offers a glimpse of tragedy which is not often found at Greyfriars.

On the whole, Orwell's account of the Greyfriars stories is accurate. He can't have read or remembered everything that appeared in the *Magnet*, and it is clear that he was unaware of or ignored some material, such as the stories about Muccolini, which might have modified his views to some extent.

However, he is unlikely to have changed his opinion of Richards's political ideas. In a letter of May 1, 1940 to Geoffrey Trease, the children's author, he wrote: 'It's well-nigh incredible that such people are still walking about, let alone editing (sic) boys' papers.' Orwell took the question of children's literature seriously, saying that:

> there's no question that this matter of intelligent fiction for kids is very important for I believe the time is approaching when it might be possible to do something about it. I don't think it's unimaginable that some paper like the News Chronicle might start a line of kids' papers, or I suppose it even conceivable that the T.U.C. might. Of course such a thing would be quite hopeless if done by the ultra-left parties . . . But I do think there is a chance for papers just a little more "left" & also a little less-out-of-date than the present ones . . .

There's a thought. Geoffrey Trease was already the author of some left-leaning historical stories for children, such as *Bows Against the Barons* (1934) and *Comrades for the Charter* (1934), and he wrote back on May 5 offering to help Orwell. But there was a war on and nothing came of the idea. It's one of the great unresolved questions of literary history – what would have happened if George Orwell had started a magazine for children?