II.

Whatever Happened to God in Children's Books?

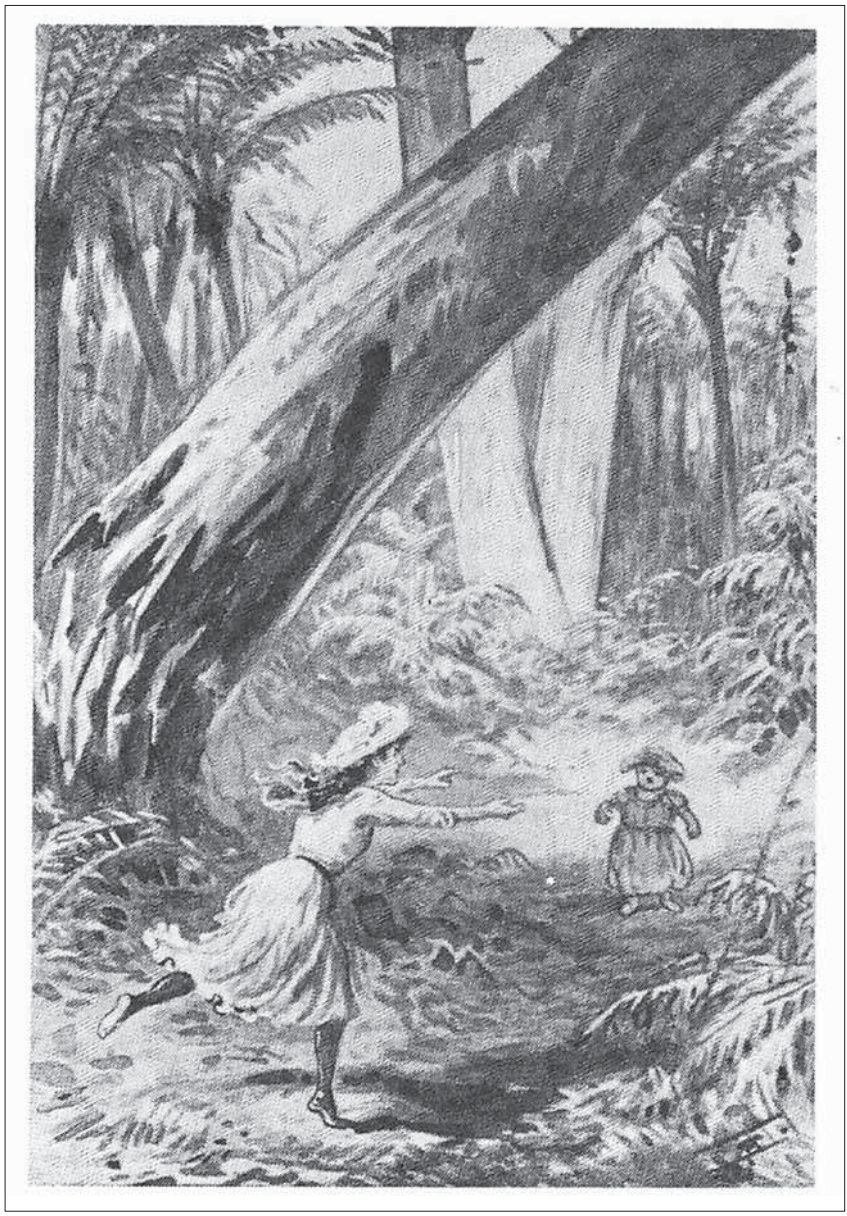
From *The History of the Fairchild Family* to *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

God, we have been informed, is dead, and no deader than in mainstream children's literature. In the past two hundred years, the overwhelming majority of children's books in English have moved from a religiously driven, primarily evangelical literature to a secular literature in which religious activity is feared, or not understood, or in which religion has become an empty cultural gesture.

One very striking example occurred in 2001 when there was a rumour that HarperCollins was planning to commission new Narnia titles. C.S. Lewis's series was (and is) a rare exception in the children's book market – one which (at least for three of the seven titles) wears its religious credentials on its sleeve. However, a strategy memo was leaked from HarperCollins: 'Obviously,' wrote an unfortunate executive, 'this is a biggie as far as the estate and our publishing interests are concerned.' But, he went on, 'we'll need to be able to give emphatic assurances that no attempt will be made to correlate the stories to Christian imagery/theology'. Christianity, it seems, had not merely vanished from children's books, but had become positively toxic.

How had this happened? Religion and faith have been replaced by myth and fantasy, and goodness is no longer reliable or an absolute. Take the central symbol of power and goodness, the father.

In Mrs Sherwood's highly influential *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818-47), the relationship of father, mother, and children matches the relationship of God the Father, the Mother Church, and the congregation – the father represents God in his family, the mother interprets his words, and the children obey. It was a model for the structure of the Victorian



Judy rushes to her godless death
in Ethel M. Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894);
illustration by A.J. Johnson.

family. As Mr Fairchild says to his son, 'I stand in the place of God to you, whilst you are a child; and as long as I do not ask you to do any thing wrong, you must obey me.' Therefore, the father may whip his son with a horsewhip (if only a small horsewhip) for not learning his Latin, but it is tough love, all to save the boy's soul. Two centuries later, things could hardly be more different. By 1990, in Gillian Cross's award-winning *Wolf,* the father is a terrorist prepared to kill his mother and daughter for some plastic explosive. In 2015, Deidre Sullivan's *Needlework* centres on a girl whose father has abused and raped her from the age of twelve. The father is not the reliable image that he used to be. J.K. Rowling, looking back at the first five Harry Potter books described them as 'a litany of bad fathers'.

Children's books always reflect, if sometimes in distorted and exaggerated ways, society itself, and here they seem to be reflecting the decline of religion and one of its major symbols.

Britain today, by most measures, is not a particularly religious (or traditionally religious) country. In January 2016, the number of weekly Church of England worshippers fell below 1,000,000 for the first time, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, wrote in *The Guardian*:

> In some parts of the Communion the decline in numbers has been a pattern for many years. In England our numbers have been falling at about 1% every year since World War Two. . . . The culture [is] becoming anti-Christian, whether it is on matters of sexual morality, or the care for people at the beginning or the end of life. It is easy to paint a very gloomy picture.

In 2011, the Roman Catholic Church in Britain had the smallest number of priests since 1937, while evangelical churches are experiencing a revival. The third largest faith group in Britain, Islam, has around 2,000,000 practising members (an estimated 80 per cent of the total); overall, perhaps fewer than 8 per cent of the population actually practice a religion. However, it should be remembered that through the nineteenth century, the Anglican church's grip on its parishioners, in rural as well as urban areas, was never as complete as might be assumed.

And so, English-language children's books in the nineteenth century shifted slowly towards a secular fantasy and a pragmatic realism; this progressive loss of faith can be demonstrated in two best-selling, canonical, children's books, one from the USA and one from Australia.

In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) (and its sequel, *Good Wives* [1869]), the stresses between patriarchal power and child (or female) rebellion are clear to the modern eye. Mr March, the absent father, may still

stand as God to his children, and Marmee is the present mother church, interpreting his word; the girls are 'little pilgrims' – they suffer, they pray, and, in *Good Wives*, one of them dies. But there is rebellion afoot. If we compare the narrator's tone when Beth dies, with that of Mrs Charlesworth describing her confident *Ministering Children* (1854) with their unwavering faith, then we see a world of difference. The reaction of Beth's rebellious sister, Jo, to Beth's death is portrayed with self-conscious authorial irony:

> Seldom, except in books, do the dying utter memorable words, see visions, or depart with beatified countenances. . . . Now, if she had been the heroine of a moral story-book, she ought at this period of her life to have become quite saintly, renounced the world, and gone about doing good in a mortified bonnet, with tracts in her pocket. But, you see, Jo wasn't a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others, and she just acted out her nature, being sad, cross, listless, or energetic as the mood suggested.

Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894), the Australian equivalent of *Little Women*, shows a world of even more distinctive independence, but now the physical father is brutal and unreliable, and the spiritual father quite absent. This book is almost a requiem for religion. At the end of the book, the rebellious female hero, Judy, is killed by a falling tree, and as she dies in the arms of her sister, Meg, we see the void left by the absence of the father and the loss of religion:

> Judy's brow grew damp, her eyes dilated, her lip trembled.
>
> 'Meg!' she said in a whisper that cut the air. 'Oh, Meg, I'm frightened! Meg, I'm so frightened!'
>
> 'God!' said Meg's heart.
>
> 'Meg, say something. Meg, help me! Look at the dark, Meg. Meg, I can't die! . . . Meg, I can't think of anything to say. Can't you say something, Meg? Aren't there prayers about dying in the Prayer book? I forget. . . .'
>
> Meg's lips moved, but her tongue uttered no word.
>
> 'Meg, I'm so frightened! I can't think of anything but "For what we are about to receive" and that's grace, isn't it? And there's nothing in Our Father that would do either. Meg, I wish we'd gone to Sunday school and learnt things. Look at the dark, Meg! Oh, Meg, hold my hands!'
>
> 'Heaven won't – be – dark,' Meg's lips said.

> Even when speech came, it was only a halting, stereo-typed phrase that fell from them.
>
> 'If it's all gold and diamonds, I don't want to go!' the child was crying now. 'Oh, Meg, I want to be alive! How'd you like to die, Meg, when you're only thirteen? Think how lonely I'll be without you all . . . Oh, say something, Meg – hymns – anything!'
>
> Half the book of Hymns Ancient and Modern danced across Meg's brain. . . . Then she opened her lips:
>
> 'Come unto Me, ye weary, and I will give you rest . . .'
>
> 'I'm not weary, I don't *want* to rest . . .'

There is now no father, no God, and no God the Father.

In the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of mainstream writers of children's books ignore the Church totally. One exception is John Masefield, who so regarded the church as a social institution rather than something actively involved in human spirituality, that he felt that he could include the kidnapping of a Bishop and most of the chapter of Tatchester Cathedral in his cheerful farrago *The Box of Delights* (1935). Indeed, he seems to regard the Church as merely another ingredient in the kaleidoscope of English myth. One character, looking back over several thousand years of history, reflects in passing on paganism: 'That was our old religion. . . . It was nothing like so good as the new, of course'.

Arthur Ransome, perhaps the most influential of twentieth-century children's writers is more typical. In the Swallows and Amazons novels (1930-47) we find the age-old pattern of the absent, omniscient Father and the Mother who interprets his will to the children. There is a hierarchy within family, which is governed by good middle-class codes of behaviour. But the church is only mentioned in passing as part of the framework of society. The real articles of faith are adherence to codes – professional, family, cultural. Thus, when the children are in real danger in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (1937), sailing in storm and darkness across the North Sea, there is no reference to anything except self-reliance and acquired skills. The children's mantra is 'What would Daddy have done?'

One of the few exceptions to this secularisation was C.S. Lewis's partly allegorical Narnia series (1950-56), but the fact that it has had such wide and uncritical acceptance is taken by those who disapprove of Lewis's version of Christianity as evidence of the ignorance of the general population on matters of faith. Books that discuss Christianity seriously in a contemporary context, such as Aidan Chambers's *Now I Know* (1987), have become extremely rare.

Christianity, or, indeed, any religion, has become a minor, specialist area in terms of children's books; it has been replaced by at best a vague humanism. We have moved from a perhaps authoritarian confidence in religion as part of the fundamental thought processes of society to an era of fragmentation and uncertainty. Ultimately, as in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000), we have arrived – literally – at the death of God.

More than that, the lack of sureness and faith has led to a deep unsureness about fiction. Take the example of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), one of the most commercially successful children's books ever. The 'good' characters exemplify secular humanist values; the parents are lost; there is a quasi-omnipotent father-substitute; religion has been forgotten, domesticated. At the School of Magic they celebrate Christmas, but it is a secular, culturally commercial occasion with no significance beyond holiday and presents.

Curiously, perhaps, the Harry Potter books became for a while the most-banned books in the USA. The primary arguments against them rested, and rest, not simply upon a very naive understanding of the link between text and affect, but on the subject matter: those who would ban or burn the books fear the depiction of the occult *because they believe in it*. All of this is curious, for the books are the product of an age that (generally) understands that fiction is fiction. Non-believers – or believers in science – have not the slightest problem with Harry Potter: you cannot be corrupted by witchcraft, as it is a fiction. Rowling herself is reported as being 'truly bemused' by suggestions that she was advocating the occult.

I should like to stress that I am talking about 'mainstream' publishing. There are many specialist 'Christian' publishers – notably the successful Lion Hudson imprint who in 2015 produced *The Lion Comic Book Hero Bible* (in the style of Marvel Comics) – as well as publishers rooted in Islam (although apparently not many produce fiction) and other religions.

However, the cultural mainstream does not take kindly to proselytising – that is no longer what fiction is *for*. To take an example of a book for adults, Kel Richards's attempt to build religious arguments into detective novels in which the detective is one C.S. Lewis, such as *The Corpse in the Cellar* published by SPCK, received cool reviews. Unlikely to be reviewed at all are presumably well-selling series such as Jenny L. Cote's Epic Order of the Seven, published by specialist evangelical publishers. The first in the series, *The Prophet, the Shepherd, & the Star*, is perhaps most fairly summed up by the blurb:

> Side-splitting humor, danger, heartache, hope & spiritual truth.
> The Nativity Story – it's not just for Christmas anymore.
> A talking, musical scroll, a pigeon-flying-and-camel-driving

> mouse, a writing cat, a courageous lamb, and two lion-fighting dogs provide non-stop action in this adventure that brings the Christmas story to life as never before. You will be astonished at the accuracy and perfection of the prophecies and God's unfolding plan to bring Jesus into the world.

But the gap between traditional Christian believers and unbelievers, as Archbishop Welby suggests, is very wide, and this text may be written in an incomprehensible language for many. Whether there is any going back to the sureties of the past, or whether children's books are (as they so often have been) accurate indicators of cultural movements – and they suggest that formal religion (at least Christianity) is in terminal decline – remains to be seen.