

10. ‘WE WERE GOING TO DISCUSS MONEY’ POLITICAL, NEO-POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE.

“We were going to discuss money,” said Peter.

Enid Blyton: *Fun for the Secret Seven* (p.81)

As may be gathered this chapter is something of a ragbag, though I started with the idea that politics and economics are never very far away from each other, but in addition I wanted to take a brief look at some examples of female characters exerting power through, or rather in despite of, the traditional roles that they inhabit in much children’s literature, in other words issues of sexism, which I certainly see as being a political issue in the wider sense of the term, hence ‘neo-political’. Which left religion, which is nothing if not an ideological issue, and hence also political. In other circumstances each of those headings could merit a chapter of its own, offering a deeper analysis than I am attempting here, but here, as elsewhere in this book, I am merely offering a descriptive account, and shall be restricting myself to a couple of examples in each category.

The Discourse of Politics

In its more technical sense, Politics is the study of institutional power in nation states, and it tends to be a more overt discourse in YA fiction than in fiction for younger children. Stories set in dystopian futures, such as Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy, are political from the start, with authoritarian governments exercising arbitrary power, but their politics are at one remove from the political of the everyday here and now. And of course it has been widely noted that Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series also has a very political strand running through it, but that aspect of the series has received exhaustive cover already – enter ‘Politics of Harry Potter’¹ into Wikipedia and you will see what I mean! – and I doubt that I can add anything very useful. So instead here is a quick glance at another YA novel, Cory Doctorow’s *Pirate Cinema*, in which we find a direct engagement with contemporary politics and how it currently operates in the UK². The context: our protagonist, sixteen year old Trent McCauley, a wi-fi whizz-kid, is into creating his own films from bits and pieces of existing films already freely available on-line and editing them together to generally comic effect. Technically, however, what he is doing is illegal, since it breaches copyright; and since he hasn’t bothered to hide his on-line identity, he has been found out, and as a result his home’s internet access has been cut off. Which is a problem since his dad is dependent upon it for his phone answering service job; his mother needs it to claim her social security benefits on line; and his sister needs it for her studies, and cannot get to the library since it closes early and is only open four days a week anyway ‘thanks to the latest round of budget cuts.’(p18) – the first hint of the political discourse that runs through the book. And Trent, of course, can no longer pursue his obsession. Filled with guilt about what he has done to his family he runs away to London and finds himself on the streets, where he is spotted by one Jem Dodger, as artful as his namesake, who lives in a squat with a bunch of other

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Harry_Potter

² The book was published in 2012, but what is described by way of the UK political process is pretty much unchanged as of 2020, which is when I am writing this.

kids of Trent's age who call themselves 'The Jammy Dodgers' – and, needing to keep his identity secret for fear of being traced by the authorities, he tends to use a pseudonym, a nom de cinéma, Cecil B. DeVil. Once in the squat he can get back to working on his mashups, but he also acquires a girlfriend who calls herself 26, Twenty for short, and she is political, working part time at an anarchist bookshop run by one Anika, and he soon finds himself at a political meeting gathered to protest an upcoming bill to be presented to the British Parliament in the near future, 'The Theft of Intellectual Property Bill', which is all about policing the web, clearly a subject close to his heart.¹ Anika has a leaked draft of the proposed bill and is explaining it to the meeting.

“Look at this: Article 1(3) makes it a criminal offense to engage in ‘commercial scale’ infringement even if you’re not making money. That means that anyone caught with more than five pirated films or twenty pirated songs can be sent to *prison*.”(p.111)

She goes on to explain that sentencing guidelines will be determined by the Business Secretary, an non-elected official who in this particular case previously worked for Warner, and is ‘on record as saying that she wished we still had the death penalty so it could be used on pirates.’(p.111). Quoting the legalese Anika explains the powers that will be given to the police,

“..there’s a whole new set of police powers that go into effect, including the right to ‘remotely search’ your computer, with ‘limitation of liability for incidental loss of data or access.’” (p.111)

26 translates for Trent, (and for the reader!)

“It means that they have the right to hack your computer over the net, search your drive, and there’s no penalty if they get it wrong, mess up your data, invade your privacy, whatever.” (p.111)

Anika further argues that these powers are effectively being written into the bill because of the vested interests of the entertainment industry who get their way by wining and dining members of parliament, introducing them to celebrities, getting them free tickets to concerts, etc. to the extent that ...

“.. parliament has been giving EMI and Warner and Sony and Universal so much power for so long . . . that they don’t even think about it. They just get out the rubber stamp and vote for it.” (p.112)

¹ In fact, as serendipity would have it, there was indeed a real bill presented to Parliament in 2013 and passed into law a year later in 2014, just a couple of years after the publication of *Pirate Cinema*, entitled the ‘Intellectual Property Act’, the purpose of which was indeed to update copyright law, though it does not seem to have included the same powers for the invasion of the privacy, nor the same penalties for its contravention as this fictional one does here.

And she concludes with a peroration that precisely describes Trent's situation:

“Everyone knows someone who's been disconnected because someone in their house was accused of file sharing. Some families are ruined by this – lose their jobs, kids fail at school – ” (P.112)

She asks for comments and Trent suggests that every time someone in power quotes you, or even accidentally catches your graffiti in the background of a shot on television, you should sue *them* for breach of copyright, but Anika explains that the law is not written like that – you would have to show that whoever has used your stuff has used it for its ‘meaningful commercial potential’, and in any case the costs of suing for damages would be far beyond the capacity of the ordinary person.

“ . . . They're evil, but they're not stupid: when they buy a law, they make damned sure that it can't be used against them. (p.114)

So, what is to be done? Annika's suggestion is that they should increase the pressure on their individual local MPs¹ by visiting them and urging them to vote against the bill, though even then they will not be assured of success, as a Green Party MP who is at the meeting explains,

. . . he got up on his feet to say how much he appreciated all this, and how he knew that there were LibDem and Labour and Tory MPs who would love to vote against the whip, but they were too afraid of being thrown out of the party if they didn't co-operate. (p.114)

26 explains to Trent about ‘whipping’, that it meant that whatever their personal views might be on the matter, individual MPs had to vote along party lines, and Trent finds all this pretty weird:

This was just too weird: I had thought that MPs got elected to represent the voters back home. How could they do that if someone else could tell them how to vote. (p.114)

After the meeting, 26 proceeds with Trent's political education, telling him about what she had learned working at the bookshop.

¹ For the benefit of readers who might not be familiar with the British system, I thought a quick glossary might be helpful. MP = member of parliament (not military police!), and the political parties mentioned are the real ones – the Tories are otherwise known as the Conservative Party, and are the right wing party of British politics; the Labour Party is the party of the political left; and somewhere in middle are the Liberal Democrats, a.k.a the LibDems, and the Green party – the Greens; the latter being particularly concerned with environmental issues. Once elected the winning party becomes the government, and it is always* the government that introduces bills that they wish to be passed into law. (* Well not quite always. It is possible for individual MPs to introduce private members bills, though it happens very infrequently.) As for ‘whipping’, it's the term used to describe the process by which a political party puts pressure on individual MPs to vote in line with party policy, and if an individual MP does vote ‘against the whip’ as it is known, particularly if it is a ‘three line whip’, they can indeed face being thrown out of the party. And, just to be more confusing, the people who ensure that all this happens are called whips. See Wikipedia for more detail: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whip_\(politics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whip_(politics))

“I’d literally never thought about how the system worked and that. It never occurred to me to wonder why some people had stuff and other people had nothing. Why there were bosses and people who got bossed.”

(p.116)

So the story progresses. 26 takes Trent when she goes to lobby her own MP, Letitia Clarke Gifford, but she tells them that, for all that she is very impressed by the support that they seem to have rallied, the vote will still not go their way ‘ “the sad fact is that this is going to a three whip vote.” ’(p.135). More detail is to follow about how many MPs actually voted, including in this case the Speaker of the House, ‘the bloke who kept order and handed out the biscuits at teatime’ (p.148), who had to use his casting vote because there was otherwise no clear majority on either side.

As can be seen we are deep into political debate about the issues and the justice or injustice of the proposed legislation, and about democracy itself and the ways in which vested interests can effectively control legislation at the expense of the ordinary voter. But we are also into the minutiae of the political process, analysing the text of bills going to Parliament to see exactly what the implications are of the actual wording, examining the processes by which the law is going to be put into practice by the officials, and explaining the process of ‘whipping’, and how parliamentary voting actually takes place.

The story continues, the bill is passed into law, and the judiciary start handing out draconian sentences, the first being to a seventeen year old who had ‘some kind of mental problems – autistic spectrum they said on the BBC’(p.149), who had collected 450,000 songs on his hard drive that he seemingly didn’t even listen to, he just liked collecting them, but the prosecution argued that the collection was worth twenty million pounds, and he was sentenced to five years in prison where he got beaten up by his fellow prisoners and he hung himself after a couple of weeks, and who thereafter, unsurprisingly, became a cause célèbre.

The story develops and focusses on Trent’s film making activities, and on those of the other Jammy Dodgers, and on their escapades as they organise showings in ‘unofficial’ locations – cavernous underground vaults in the sewers, disused underground stations, empty warehouses, etc., and so successful are they that eventually the press and the media pick it up and want to interview Trent himself about it all. In the course of all this the political discourse is never entirely lost, since Trent often introduces the showings with a few words about the circumstances that brought him to London. And later, when his sister visits him, he discovers that she has been following his activities online and has become more political in the process, lobbying *her* MP back at home. And more generally, popular discontent with the bill has grown, not least because of the number of people that have been sent to prison, ‘over two thousand ...and most of them are minors’ (p.253), and Clark-Gifford herself gathers enough support from her fellow parliamentarians to introduce a private members bill to repeal the act. She explains to them, again in considerable detail, that while most bills are introduced by the government, a private members bill can be introduced by an individual MP. If the government doesn’t like it they simply ‘talk it out’ until there is no more time left for debate.(p.257) And given that there is an election coming up and given how unpopular the legislation is, she is hopeful that it can be passed. They decide to hold a public meeting to drum up support for the bill, renting a town hall

for the purpose, inviting the press, etc. – there had been some debate about whether they should plan some underground secret meeting to plan some subversive activity to move things along, but Trent and 26 had argued against it.

We were helping to pass a law. That wasn't illegal, that was *democracy!*
We should be able to do it all nice and aboveboard, without sneaking about like spies. (p.282)

Their hopes are dashed, however, when the party bigwigs make it plain that the government will ensure that the bill gets thrown out: lobbyists from the entertainment industry have clearly used their influence to good effect. 26 has one final outburst.

“Forget it, Cecil. Just forget it. . . This is a ridiculous waste of time.
We'll never, ever change anything. Rich powerful people just run everything and the whole world is tilted in their favour. (p.341)

They may be down, but they are however not yet out, and they plan one last desperate measure. On the day of the vote they will project their movies onto the outside walls of the House of Commons itself, hoping that they will garner enough publicity on the day to sway the vote in parliament itself and to get the bill passed. Their movie making will effectively become a political act in and of itself. And at the same time they find a way of posting on line the details of which way every single individual MP votes so that the voters back home will see which way they have voted. MPs are thus faced with the threat that voting with the whip may lose them the chance of being re-elected in the forthcoming election. In so doing they themselves have found a weak spot that allows them to break into the political process at the point at which they can exert some real pressure of their own. The day arrives and they go ahead with their plans, broadcasting the event on-line as they go, and it is not long before a huge crowd gathers on the ground to watch the show and to mob the official cars. And on-line their own film of the event rapidly goes viral, accumulating eighty million hits by the following morning. And they won – for all that it is a low turnout the bill is passed.

The political is one of the major discourses of the novel, and as I have noted, that discourse has two interrelated strands, one of which is more directly political, with the characters going to political meetings, arguing their case, and inveighing against the ways in which the rich and powerful actually control things at the expense of the ordinary voters in the streets, about, in other words, the practice of democracy. The other strand describes the nuts and bolts of the political process itself, of how to lobby your MP, of how bills are presented in parliament itself, of how the party whip works to corral individual MPs to toe the party line, etc. And these two strands are intimately related and inextricably weave in and out of each other to the point at which it is impossible to really disentangle them. *Pirate Cinema* is clearly aimed at a YA market, (and, you might argue in parenthesis has a strong didactic strand lurking within it and I could have just as easily discussed the novel in the *Teaching and Learning* chapter) but, whatever else, you would not expect to find such content in a children's book per se. Fiction aimed at younger readers has to approach such matters more obliquely. So, for my next example I wish to look at Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, a book surely written with a much younger audience in mind.

A personal note: I first read *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (and I guess some of the subsequent books in the series) as a 10/11 yr. old I guess, and I loved it to bits. What impressed me then, as now, was the portrayal of this egalitarian family of animals that take over from the Doctor and basically run the show, and it that aspect of the novel that I wish to concentrate on. I had, however, entirely forgotten the story, which, amongst other things takes us to Africa and to an encounter with a tribal king. Which is where, from today's perspective, the problems start to arise, and which I shall deal with when I get to them

At the beginning of the book we meet Doctor Dolittle, a country doctor, much respected by his patients, young and old, but he also likes animals, and has accumulated a large number of pets of one sort and another: goldfish in a goldfish pond, rabbits in the pantry, white mice in the piano, a squirrel, a hedgehog, a cow with a calf, an old lame horse, chickens, pigeons, a couple of lambs etc. and including his favourite pets who are to become the main characters in the story.

But his favourite pets were Dab-Dab the duck, Jip the dog, Gub-Gub the baby pig, Polynesia the parrot, and the owl Too-Too. (p.22)

Eventually he accumulates so many animals that they begin to drive patients away – the crunch comes when an old lady with rheumatism inadvertently sits on the hedgehog, so she departs, never to return. Other patients follow until he has only one left, the Cat's-meat-Man, but by this time he has run out of money. So the Cat's-meat-Man suggests that he become an animal-doctor. Polynesia has been listening, encourages the doctor to take his advice, knowing that she can find a way to help him:

“Did you know that animals can talk?”

“I knew that parrots can talk,” said the Doctor.

“Oh, we parrots can talk in two languages – people's language and bird-language,” said Polynesia proudly. (p.31)

And then and there she sets about teaching him bird language, followed, when Jip comes in and twitches his nose, by dog language:

“That means, ‘Can't you see it's stopped raining?’ . . He is asking you a question. Dogs nearly always use their noses for asking questions.” (p.33)

And it is not long before Polynesia has taught him the languages of all the other animals too, which, when it comes to animal doctoring, proves to be a great asset, since he can ask the animals directly what is wrong with them, which in turn gives him an edge over all the other vets in the district. So, for example, when a plough-horse is brought in, he tells the Doctor he needs spectacles,

“.. that vet over the hill has been treating me six weeks now – for spavins. What I need is *spectacles*. I am going blind in one eye.” (p.34)

His fame spreads, not just amongst the people who brought their pets and their farm animals to see him, but also amongst the animal population itself, harvest mice, water voles, badgers, bats, you name it. And just as importantly his money worries are over. All goes well for a good while, the only problem being that some of the animals want to stay with him after they get better, so his menagerie grows. Amongst others, he acquires a monkey, Chee-Chee, whom he bought from an organ-grinder, and finally a crocodile with toothache who has escaped from a local circus. The crocodile promises not to eat any of the other animals, not even the fish in the fish pond, but his presence does become a problem – old ladies are frightened he will eat their lap-dogs and the farmers are afraid he will eat their sheep, and once again the Doctor begins to lose patients. Eventually he again runs out of money and his sister, who is also his housekeeper, warns him that if he doesn't get rid of the crocodile she will leave, but he won't get rid of it, so she does. But now there is no-one to keep house and the money keeps dwindling, and the animals themselves start to get worried.

. . . one evening when the doctor was asleep in his chair before the kitchen-fire they began talking it over among themselves in whispers. And the owl, Too-Too, who was good at arithmetic, figured it out that there was only money enough left to last another week – if they each had one meal a day and no more.

Then the parrot said, "I think we all ought to do the housework ourselves. At least we can do that much. After all, it is for our sakes that the old man finds himself so lonely and so poor.

So it was agreed that the monkey, Chee-Chee, was to do the cooking and the mending; the dog was to sweep the floors; the duck was to dust and make the beds; the owl, Too-Too, was to keep the accounts, and the pig was to do the gardening. They made Polynesia, the parrot, housekeeper and laundress, because she was the oldest. (pp.49/50)

As for the finances:

Then the animals made a vegetable and flower stall outside the garden gate and sold radishes and roses to the people that passed by along the road. (p.50)

At his point a message arrives by swallow for Chee-Chee from a cousin in Africa bearing news of a terrible sickness out there and that his relatives are dying in their hundreds, at which point the novel basically segues into an adventure story. They borrow a boat, and prepare to go to Africa, with Polynesia effectively taking charge of the preparations, drawing on her experience to tell the Doctor what he needs.

So then the parrot, who had been on long sea-voyages before, began telling the Doctor all the things he would have to take with him on the ship.

"You must have plenty of pilot-bread," she said – " 'hard tack' they call it. And you must have beef in cans – and an anchor. And you'll need a bell ..to tell the time by And bring a whole lot of rope – it always comes in handy on voyages." (pp.56/57)

Even the swallow has an important role to play when the Doctor realises he doesn't know the way to Africa:

But the swallow said she had been to that country many times and would show them how to get there. (p.62)

On the way Dab-Dab is able to contribute to the larder by diving under the ship and catching herrings. Passing flying fishes bring them news of the monkeys and tell them how far they have still got to go, and porpoises turn up offering help, and when Polynesia tells them they are short of onions off they go to a nearby island where wild onions grow, and bring some back, 'dragging the onions through the waves in big nets made of seaweed.' (p.65) They are shipwrecked, but manage to get ashore, only to be imprisoned by the local tribal king because they are white, and for reasons which are nothing if not political:

“You may not travel through my lands,” said the King. “Many years ago a white man came to the shores; and I was very kind to him. But after he had dug holes in the ground to get the gold, and killed all the elephants to get their ivory tusks, secretly in his ship – without as much as saying ‘Thank you.’ he went away.” (pp. 73, 74)

Again Polynesia comes to the rescue, sneaking through the bars of the prison, getting into the king's bedroom and, imitating Dolittle, threatens to give the king mumps if he doesn't let them go.

(At this point in the story it is certainly necessary to address the criticism that has been levelled against the book for what is seen as the inherent racism of the portrayal of the African characters within it¹, and though it would be easy enough to pass over the episodes involving the Africans, to do so would be nothing if not disingenuous, and I do need to deal with the issue. It is certainly true that the king is foolish and easily duped, but the fact that he is African adds racist overtones to the characterisation, a racism that is exacerbated by the fact that the Africans are referred to as 'darkies', 'niggers' and 'coons' at various points (pp.77, 102, 134). The names don't help either: the king is the King of the Jolliginkis, and his son is Prince Bumpo, and Lofting's own line drawings add an element of grotesque caricature to their portrayal. And worse is to come, when, on the return journey, the Doctor and his friends are imprisoned once again. and this time it is the king's son who sets them free: he has been reading *Sleeping Beauty* and wants to be a white prince in shining armour so that he can find his own *Sleeping Beauty* and release her with a kiss, so Dolittle bleaches his face white, a narrative trope that, with its implication that only white is beautiful, is most decidedly racist.²)

¹ See, for example, Suhl 1979, Dixon 1978, and this paragraph very much summarises Dixon's analysis of the book, with which, I have to say, for all my love of the book, I don't particularly disagree.

² At another level that particular trope invites a perhaps more complex analysis, though that would be for another time and place, and in a different context, and any full discussion would require us to look at Lofting himself, at the time that he was writing, and at his agenda and declared purposes, and as readers will know, I am keeping authors out of my account and restricting myself to the texts themselves and to my readings of them.

Having escaped from the palace, they continue on their way, with Chee-Chee and Polynesia using their local knowledge, Africa having been their previous home, to keep them fed and watered.

They always had plenty to eat and drink, because Chee-Chee and Polynesia knew all the different kinds of fruit and vegetables that grow in the jungle, and where to find them .. (p.83)

They have almost reached the Land of the Monkeys when they discover that they are being chased by the King's men, and find themselves at the top of a steep cliff with a river flowing below. How are they to cross? More collaborative action is required, and the monkeys link hands to make a bridge,

For while his back was turned, the monkeys – quick as a flash – had made themselves into a bridge, just by holding hands and feet. (p.93)

The Doctor cures the monkeys, and they hold a big meeting where everyone gets their say, from the Biggest Baboon to 'a little, tiny, red monkey who was sitting up in a tree' (p.108), to discuss how they are going to pay him, which, on advice from Chee-Chee, they do by offering to find that rarest of rare animals, a pushmi-pullyu – a deer like animal with a head at each end – and persuading it to accompany the Doctor back home (luckily it agrees!), and off the doctor and his companions go. On the way home they have various adventures, including one in which they encounter pirates whose ship they manage to steal, and which, incidentally, is full of stolen treasure, so that solves their money problems. They find a locked door and wonder if there is anyone locked behind it, and this time it is Too-Too, the Owl, whose skills are needed since he has such an acute sense of hearing.

“I hear the sound of some one putting his hand in his pocket,” said the Owl.

“But that makes hardly any sound at all,” said the Doctor. “You couldn't hear that out here.”

“Pardon me, but I can,” said Too-Too. “I tell you there is some one on the other side of that door putting his hand in his pocket. Almost everything makes *some* noises – if your ears are only sharp enough to hear it. (p.175)

And behind the door they find a small boy who has been captured by the pirates, along with his uncle who is a fisherman. The last thing that the boy knows is that the pirates were threatening to throw his uncle overboard if he didn't join them. Can Doctor Dolittle and his animals help to find out if he is still alive? He recruits the porpoises, 'The Ocean Gossips'(p.185), to see if they know whether he has been drowned, but there are no rumours to that effect; he recruits the Eagles – 'No living thing can see better than an Eagle.'(p.187), but they too are unsuccessful,

“Nowhere, on land or water, could we find any sign of this boy's uncle. And if *we* could not see him then he is not to be seen. (p.189)

Jip, the dog, however, is scornful. He will find him by smell. Luckily the boy has a handkerchief in his pocket which had belonged to his uncle.

As soon as the boy pulled it out, Jip shouted:

“*Snuff*, by Jingo – black Rappee snuff. Don’t you smell it? . . . The man’s as good as found.” (p.193)

First the wind comes from the North, then from the South, then from the East, but Jip can catch no smell of him. But when the wind blows from the West Jip can smell him. He rushes downstairs to wake the doctor,

“The wind’s from the West and it smells of nothing but snuff. Come upstairs and start the ship – quick! . . . Now I’ll go up to the front and you watch my nose – whichever way I point it, you turn the ship the same way.

And they do indeed find the uncle sheltering in a cave in the middle of a rocky island in the middle of the sea.

To sum up. In the course of the exposition of the book the animals have established what is effectively an egalitarian commune where everyone contributes whatever they are capable of doing, all for the greater good – ‘from each according to his or her abilities, to each according to his or her needs’, to quote Marx in a slightly amended form¹. And that political organisation, for political organisation it is, becomes a defining feature of the novel: Polynesia uses her knowledge to take charge of the preparations for the voyage; the swallow uses his knowledge to navigate them to Africa; Dab-Dab can go fishing for them; passing flying fishes and porpoises are able to offer help; Polynesia and Chee-Chee keep them fed once they get to Africa; the monkeys themselves work together to make the bridge that will get them to their destination, and later convene a council where everyone gets their say in order to discuss the payment due to Dolittle for his help; and on the way home Too-Too and Jip are able to use their skills first to discover find the little boy locked away in one of the rooms in the pirate ship, and to discover his uncle in the cave in the rock in the sea, with the eagles and the porpoises lending a hand. This equality even extends to the Doctor’s animal patients themselves, who are able to tell the doctor what is wrong with them rather than the other way around. And it is important to note that these political changes are brought about by economic necessity. It is when the Doctor runs out of money for the first time because he is losing human patients, that Polynesia intervenes and teaches him the skills that will enable him to make money as an animal doctor. And it is when he, or by this time it is they, run out of money for the second time because the crocodile has effectively chased all his animal patients away too, that the animals themselves take over and start running the household.

So far I have concentrated on the political, but have, I hope, already demonstrated that the political and the economic are always closely linked, and the African King’s comment about the white man’s exploitation of the continent for his own gain, taking the gold and the ivory without any offer of recompense, adds colonialism to the equation. Which brings us neatly to a passage

¹ Marx (amended), 1875. See Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critique_of_the_Gotha_Program

in Marryat's *Masterman Ready*, which I shall examine briefly. {Readers of my earlier chapters will recall that the book is a 'wrecked on a desert island' story in which Mr. Seagrave and his family are emigrating to Australia. William is his eldest son, and the protagonist, and Ready is an old seaman who accompanies them in their subsequent adventures. With them also is their maid, Juno, described as a 'black girl who had come from the Cape of Good Hope'. (p.5)} In the following passage William questions his father about colonialism itself, in response to which Mr. Seagrave offers him an exposition about the nature and function of colonialism, and how it operates in practice.¹ Initially Mr. Seagrave offers him a history lesson, explaining to him that the English were not the first colonists, that they were preceded by the Spanish and the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, and indeed that England gained a good few of their colonies by seizing them from the Portuguese and the Dutch.

“Yes I understand perfectly, papa; but now tell me: why are England and other nations so anxious to have what you call colonies?” replied William
 “Because they tend so much to the prosperity of the mother country. In their infancy they generally are an expense to her, as they require her care; but as they advance, they are able to repay her by taking her manufactures, and returning for them their own produce; an exchange mutually advantageous, but more so to the mother country than to the colony, as the mother country, assuming to herself the right of supplying all the wants of the colony, has a market for the labour of her own people, without any competition.” (p.115)

A more succinct account you couldn't hope to find. As can be seen, the considerations are entirely economic, about exploiting the natural resources of the colony, and in 'exchange', though certainly not in fair exchange, establishing a closed market for the export of the mother country's manufactured goods back to the colony itself, to the overall financial advantage, of course, of the mother country. And it seems that, in contrast to Lofting's tribal King, Mr. Seagrave finds nothing wrong with this state of affairs, seeing it, rather, as an entirely natural process which will lead eventually to the establishment of an entirely self-supporting independent country, a process akin to that of a child growing up to become an independent adult, as natural as a bird learning to fly and leaving its nest.

“As soon as the colony has grown strong and powerful enough to take care of itself, it throws off the yoke of subjection and declares itself independent; just as a son, who has grown up to manhood, leaves his father's house, and takes up a business to gain his own livelihood. This is as certain to be the case, as it is that a bird as soon as it can fly will leave its parent's nest.” (p.116)

The Discourse of Economics

Both *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* and *Masterman Ready* offer us accounts of the ways in which politics and economics are intertwined, so now I want to move on now to an example where the

¹ I discuss this passage at greater length in *Some Thoughts about 'Masterman Ready' by Captain Marryat* also to be found on this website.

economic is dominant, Beverly Cleary's *Henry Huggins*, a book incidentally with a much younger implied readership that either the Doctorow or the Marryat. Chapter 3 finds Henry wanting to buy a football, but where is the money to come from? He must review his finances, which means taking into account his expenditure in the previous couple of chapters, in the first of which he had acquired a dog, Ribsby¹ and had had to meet the costs associated with him, and in the second chapter he bought a pair of guppies, and a fish bowl etc to keep them in, for just 79¢, but they bred and bred until he had hundreds and had to take them back to the pet shop man who then gave him \$7 worth of credit which he used to buy a tank for a catfish – his father bought the catfish. So now, back at the beginning of chapter 3 he is checking out his capital assets, reviewing his expenses, and factoring in his current income.

. . . he shook all his nickels and dimes and pennies out of a marble sack onto his bedspread. His expenses had been heavy and he knew he did not have much money left. The first thing he had done after finding Ribsby was to pay for his licence and buy him a collar . . . he had spent sixty-nine cents for a red plastic dish with D O G printed on it. This nearly exhausted his savings. He had spent his silver dollar on the guppies and all his allowance to take care of them. Then he had sold the guppies for seven dollars and spent all seven for the tank and thermostat for the catfish.

At breakfast this morning his father had given him his weekly twenty-five cents. Besides that he had six cents saved from last week's allowance. He also had a nickel he had found in the park. And then there was the Canadian dime . . . with the Canadian Dime he had forty-six cents, not counting nine cents he could get for three old milk bottles he had found in a vacant lot on the way home from school.

It was not enough.

Henry needed thirteen dollars and ninety-five cents plus forty-one cents for tax. (pp.60 /61)

Then his friend, Scooter McCarthy turns up, and he already has a brand new football. They start playing with it, throwing it back and forth between them, but then Henry loses his concentration for a minute and loses his aim; the ball sails in through the back window of a passing car and is gone. Now he has got to buy Scooter a replacement – he is effectively in debt, and his creditor presses him for repayment.

“You’ll have to buy me a new football before next Saturday or I’ll tell my dad and he’ll tell your dad and then you’ll really get it.” (p.68)

There is only one thing for it, he has to earn the money. He rehearses various options; he could collect tinfoil or old newspapers but that would take too long, and besides the junk men wouldn't pay enough. He could set up a lemonade stand by the park but that wouldn't bring enough money in either.

¹ We have already met Ribsby in the carnival chapter, also to be found on this website.

He could charge fifty cents for mowing lawns. That would be a dollar for two lawns. He would have to mow twenty-eight lawns to earn thirteen dollars and ninety-five cents. Even if he could get twenty eight lawns to mow, he didn't see how he could find time after school. (pp.70/71)

He sits on his porch and thinks. Then just as it's beginning to grow dark he sees his next door neighbour, Mr. Grumbie, catching night crawlers, large worms that he uses to catch fish, and that only come out at night when the ground is wet. When he has to stop to go down to the store to get some bread he recruits Henry to help him,

“How would you like to earn some money?”

“Catching worms? I'll say I would!”

“I'll pay you a penny apiece for every night crawler you catch.”

“Golly,” said Henry. “A penny apiece! How many do you want?”

“As many as you can catch. If I can't use them some of the other men can.”

....

A penny apiece! There were one hundred pennies in a dollar, so it would take one thousand three hundred and ninety-five worms to pay for the football. And forty one worms for the tax. (pp.75/76)

Henry sets to work and by the time Mr. Grumbie gets back he has caught sixty-two worms and Mr Grumbie, being a good customer, promptly pays him.

Mr. Grumbie reached into his pants pocket and brought out a handful of change. He picked out a fifty cent piece, a dime, and two pennies and gave them to Henry. (p.78)

Luckily for Henry demand is high: Mr Grumbie tells him that he is going fishing with some friends come Sunday and that he can use all the night crawlers he can catch.

“Tomorrow night you get someone to help you and catch enough for all of us.” (p.79)

Henry, however, cannot afford to share the profits.

Because he needed so much money, he knew he would have to catch all the worms himself. (p.79)

Still and all 1,395 pennies plus tax was a lot of worms. As for where he's going to find them, he'll have to go down to the local park. He would have to get permission from his mother of course, so has to tell her the whole story, but then off he goes. It is a big job, and hard work – he has to pounce rapidly in order to catch the worms – and somewhere around the 430th worm ‘Henry was tired of pouncing. Henry was tired of worms.’ (p.83), but he persists. It gets late,

and still he hasn't caught enough, but luckily some free labour turns up in the form of his father and mother, and they help him finish the job. Now he does have enough worms.

He took his jars of worms to Mr Grumbie, who paid him thirteen dollars and thirty-one cents . . . He felt the money in his pocket. "I guess this ought to take care of old Scooter," he said and, wishing he could spend it on a football for himself, he went home to bed. (pp.84/85)

(And just in case you're wondering, the story has a happy ending: the car driver turns up, gives Scooter's ball back to Henry, who can return it to Scooter, and of course Henry now has enough money to buy a ball for himself after all.) Much of the chapter is given over to accounts of finding and digging up the night crawlers, and it that sense that is what the chapter is *about*. But there is no doubt that it is also about money, which is certainly a major discourse in the story, and in this particular case you could argue, is also a theme of the story, and at that level it has been money, money, money all the way. In the first instance it should be noted that Henry has the basic numerical skills needed to do all the necessary calculations, which include understanding the tax scenario. And though by using terms like, for instance, 'capital assets' it might be argued that I am taking this material altogether too seriously, in point of fact that is what his savings are: his capital assets. And his weekly allowance from his father is indeed his income, and he has to decide how he is going to spend it. Then faced with the, indeed, very serious problem of finding the necessary money to pay off his friend, he has to work out what he can do to raise the money to do so. To put it another way he has to review his marketable skills, and check out the market, and though his skills include collecting tinfoil and waste paper, the market is not strong enough to repay his efforts in time. Luckily he is flexible enough to be able respond when a market opportunity *does* arise in the form of his next door neighbour's requirement for a gatherer of night crawlers. Then it is a question of the necessary hard work to make the money that he needs, though in good capitalist tradition, he is ready to exploit free labour when some is offered. In none of this does he deviate one iota from a real entrepreneurial businessman or woman looking for a gap in the market and using his or her skills to develop the product to exploit that market. Writ small it may be, but it is indeed the discourse of economics from top to toe.

The Discourse of Gender: A Couple of Countervailing Examples

As with racism, sexism in children's books came under scrutiny in the later 1970's, and gender role stereotyping continues to be an issue in comment on children's literature. I have come across comment,¹ for instance, that Hermione in the *Harry Potter* books is sex role stereotyped because she is a bookworm, and it is certainly true that Harry is action, and Hermione is books and thought. But if you return to my chapter on teaching and learning you will see how much power Hermione has. Time and time again she is able to use her book learning to keep the more impulsive boys on the right track. And there is a long tradition of very proactive girls in children's literature, we have met a couple in other chapters already. Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* whom we came across in the sex and romance chapter, leaves the boys standing, and Totty in Godden's *The Dolls House* is decidedly proactive. Carrie, in Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*, drives the narrative, and helps Mr. Evans in the shop rather than helping his sister in the kitchen,

¹ I can't reference this I'm afraid – it falls rather into the category of hearsay! .

though she does have a sort of mothering role when it comes to looking after her younger brother, Nick – but the bookworm character in the book is a boy, Albert. One might even note that Polynesia, the parrot whom we met earlier in this chapter in *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, is a female parrot, and basically runs things, all the way from organising the household to sorting out the ship for their journey to Africa. In Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* books the problem is ostensibly solved reversing the stereotypes. So when we meet Violet for the first time in *Book the First: The Bad Beginning* she is described thus:

Violet had a real knack for inventing and building strange devices, so her brain was often filled with images of pulleys, levers, and gears, and she never wanted to be distracted by something as trivial as her hair. (p.3)

It is however true in children's literature, particularly in earlier children's literature, that where there are domestic roles to be assigned, it is the girls who get them. But the girls are often able to exercise a good deal of power and influence *through* those roles. To start with, a brief example from one of the *Famous Five* series, *Five Run Away Together*. (The famous five?: Julian, Dick, and Anne, and their cousin, George, a girl despite her name, and Timmy the dog.) In the series, Anne, the youngest, always has a domestic role, and she is also generally regarded as the weakest character by the others¹, in need of care and protection.

Her elder brother, Julian, can be particularly patronising, but the others are not far behind, and she herself does not have a particularly strong self-image. My examples come from a point in the story in which the children have found a cave on the island that they have run away to, and which they have decided to make their home. As well as the main entrance there is a hole in the roof, plus a large rock pool outside that they go swimming in. Here is the domestic Anne:

“Let's arrange everything very nicely in the cave,” said Ann, who was the tidiest of the four, and always liked to play ‘houses’ if she could. (p.105)

Anne had a very happy morning. She arranged everything beautifully on the shelf – crockery and knives and forks and spoons in one place – saucepan and kettle in another – tins of meat next, tins of soup together, tins of fruit neatly piled on top of one another. It really was a splendid larder and dresser! (p.108)

Then the little girl set to work to make the beds . . . “I shall want lots more heather. Oh, is that you, Dick? You're just in time! I want more heather.”
(p.108)

As can be seen, in her domestic role, she does have some power, she can for instance send Dick off to get more heather without a problem. On the downside here is the patronising Julian:

¹ And it isn't just the other characters who see her in this way, David Rudd quotes readers who had similar views, suggesting that she was ‘really wet’, ‘a wimp’, ‘feeble’, and ‘namby-pamby’ (p.100) Other readers, however, empathised with her, precisely because of her domestic role.

He looked around admiringly. My word, Anne – the cave does look fine! Everything in order and looking so tidy. You are a good little girl.” (p.108)

And here is the self-deprecating Anne:

“George can do anything in the water,” said Anne. “I wish I could dive and swim like George. But I never shall.” (p.104)

However, look at this little incident, and I shall need to quote a bit more extensively to get the drift of it. It is night time, and they decide to light a candle, but Anne would like a fire.

At once queer shadows jumped all around the cave. And it became a rather exiting place, not at all like the cave they knew by daylight.

“I wish we could have a fire,” said Anne.

“We’d be far too hot,” said Julian. “And it would smoke us out. You can’t have a fire in a cave like this. There’s no chimney.”

“Yes there is,” said Anne, pointing to the hole in the roof. “If we light a fire just under that hole, it would act as a chimney, wouldn’t it?”

“It might,” said Dick, thoughtfully. “But I don’t think so. We’d simply get the cave full of stifling smoke, and we wouldn’t be able to sleep for choking.”

“Well couldn’t we light a fire at the cave entrance then?” said Anne, who felt that a real home ought to have a fire somewhere. “Just to keep away wild beasts. That’s what the people of old times did. It says so in my history book. They lighted fires at the cave entrance at night to keep away any wild animal that might be prowling around.”

“Well, what wild beasts do you think are likely to come and peep into this cave?” asked Julian lazily, finishing up a cup of cocoa. “Lions? Tigers? Or perhaps you are afraid of an elephant or two.”

.....

“I don’t think we ought to have a fire,” said Julian, “because it might be seen out at sea and give a warning to anyone thinking of coming to the island to do a bit of smuggling.”

“Oh no, Julian – the entrance to this cave is so well-hidden that I’m sure no-one could see a fire out to sea,” said George, at once. . . . “I think it would be rather fun to have a fire. It would light up the cave so queerly and excitingly.”

“Oh good, George!” said Anne, delighted to find someone agreeing with her.

“Well we couldn’t possibly fag out and get sticks for it now,” said Dick, who was far too comfortable to move.

“You don’t need to,” said Anne eagerly. “I got plenty myself today, and stored them in the back of the cave, in case we wanted a fire.”

“Isn’t she a good little housewife!” said Julian, in great admiration. . . “All right, Anne – we’ll make a fire for you.” (pp.110/111)

Like I say, Anne wants a fire – it is not quite clear whether it is for reasons of security, or, as suggested in the text, that it would help to make the cave a ‘real home’. She meets opposition, initially from Julian – there’s no chimney – but she has her first counter-argument prepared – there’s a hole in the roof. But Dick is still against it, the smoke will still swirl around – so she produces her second counter-argument – make it in the entrance – and she backs it up with her knowledge of history. She is not even deterred by Julian’s put down, though he seems to have a stronger case in terms of the need to keep them hidden from prying eyes. By this time, however, she has won George over, and now she is on the home straight, and the final coup de grace is the revelation that she has already gathered the sticks, so Dick’s objection won’t stand either; and even though Julian’s capitulation may come across as condescending, capitulate he does. Anne has won. And, it may be added, the revelation that she has already collected the sticks is not only a revelation to the other children, it is also a revelation to the reader – there has been no previous mention of her gathering firewood but plainly she had it all planned from the start! And it is in pursuing her domestic role that she has been able to gain ascendancy over all of them, though it is certainly true that more generally she is the meekest of characters, and her victory here has little or no bearing on the development of the plot as a whole.

Susan in Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazon* series is also cast in the domestic role: in all the books she is the mother figure, responsible for cooking, both planning it and doing it, responsible for organising the domestic chores, responsible for seeing that the younger children get to bed on time, and so on. But she is far from meek, and her decisions can have a major impact on the plot. But I run ahead of myself. So for those of you who don’t know the books, a brief introduction: there are two families, the Walkers, a.k.a. the Swallows, in descending age order, John, Susan, Titty and Roger; and the Blacketts, Nancy and Peggy, a.k.a the Amazons. Throughout the series John and Nancy are Captain John and Captain Nancy, the commanders of their respective sailing dinghies, and Susan and Peggy are the mates, each with a domestic role. ‘Able seaman’ Titty is the dreamer, given to quoting poetry and inventing scenarios for their role play games, and ‘ship’s boy’ Roger is into all things mechanical. In *Peter Duck*, the third in the series, we find them all in Lowestoft with the Blacketts’ Uncle Jim, a.k.a Captain Flint, planning to go on a sailing holiday up and down the English Channel in his schooner, the Wild Cat. Accompanying them is old timer Peter Duck, who spins them a yarn about having, as a cabin boy, witnessed two pirates burying a square shaped box under a tree on a deserted Caribbean island, Crab Island. Once back in Lowestoft he had told his story, which then got retold and retold again, and as the yarn spread so the supposed size of the treasure grew in people’s imaginations until it was ‘cases of gold dollars and casks of silver ingots’ (p.86) Eventually it comes to the attention of the pirate, Black Jake, who has ever since pestered Peter Duck to reveal the whereabouts of the island until he, Peter Duck, is sick of it. He certainly has no desire to return himself, and remains phlegmatic about the whole business. Nonetheless when Black Drake witnesses Peter Duck leaving with the Wild Cat he is convinced that he is off to retrieve it at last, and gives chase, and in so doing piques Captain Flint’s own curiosity, which grows into a desire to go and hunt for himself, and the children pick this up, and demand that he tells them what’s on his mind.

But where are Susan and Peggy – though it is Susan who, as the story develops, very much takes the lead – in in all of this? Perhaps some quotes will establish their roles, the first being from the moment they get aboard for the first time:

“We’ve got a gorgeous galley to do the cooking in,” Mate Peggy called to Mate Susan (p.20)

Susan had taken her tin box, black, with a red cross on it, full of iodine and things for colds and stomach-aches and sticking plaster to put on people’s knees. (p.24)

Peggy and Susan were going through the stores and getting things into working order in the little galley at the forward end of the deckhouse, where they were to cook. (p.33)

Everybody aboard the *Wild Cat* was very hungry when Susan and Peggy, after coming back laden from the market and trying what they could do with the galley stove, decided that the potatoes had been boiled long enough and that the mutton chops would be burnt if they tried to give them another minute’s cooking. When Peggy banged the big bell just inside the galley door there was a cheerful rush from all parts of the ship. (p.40)

It was just about Roger’s bedtime, and a late bedtime at that, when they had the North Foreland¹ abeam. Roger wanted to be allowed to stay up, but Susan and Captain Flint would have none of it. (p.107)

. . . when John and Roger had dressed and cleaned their teeth (Susan had put her head out of the galley to remind Roger to clean his).. (p.124)

As we can see, within their own sphere, which Susan certainly seems to have embraced enthusiastically, they have considerable power, they are responsible for the stores and for shopping. They decide on the menus and are responsible for planning and organising the meals, and thus the meal times. And Susan in her little mother role with her first aid box has made herself responsible for the health and wellbeing of them all, and has also assumed responsibility for Roger’s bedtime and teeth cleaning. Thus when it comes to making the decision about whether to set sail for the Caribbean she has a lot of say in the matter. The first time is when Captain Flint tells the children what’s on his mind. They respond variously, and finally agree that it would be nice to go, but perhaps at a later time his time;

“Yes, let’s go,” said Susan. “some time or other, when we’ve had a bit more practice. Let’s go next year. It’s the sort of thing that wants a lot of planning.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Captain Flint (p.137)

But he has now sown the idea in the children’s heads, and as Black Jake’s pursuit becomes more relentless it is clear that the mood on the ship is changing. And perhaps Susan has picked this up. Anyhow here she is a few pages later; the Viper (Black Jake’s boat) has been following

¹ It’s a lighthouse.

them closely, and they have been dodging about trying to evade him when a sudden squall sends the boat reeling, and Susan and Peggy come up from the saloon to find out what's happening.

“What are you two doing down there?” Nancy asked, hanging on to the windward shrouds as the startled mates put their heads out of the companion-way,

“Counting up stores,” said Susan.

“Good for you,” said Nancy. “I'd been hoping you would.” (p.144)

Things come to a climax when they have a close encounter with the Viper in the fog, and in the process pick up his ship's boy, Bill, whom he has cast afloat in a dinghy with a foghorn to lure the Wild Cat to its fate, telling him that if he doesn't manage to do it, the pirates will run him down and leave him to drown; and who tells them of Black Jake's plan to board them and kidnap Peter Duck, threatening to kill the crew of the Wild Cat itself if they don't give him up. So finally Peter Duck sides with Captain Flint about going on and finding the treasure, if for no other reason than to get Black Jake off his back for once and for all, though he warns them that the treasure may not amount to very much even if they do find it:

But it was Susan who, in the end, gave the deciding vote.

“Whatever it is,” she said, Black Jake ought not to have it. And Peggy and I were counting things all yesterday, because of what you said at Cowes. We've got enough for a very long time.”

“Six months' stores,” said Captain Flint. “And if there's anything short we could fill up in Madeira.

“I think we ought to go,” said Susan. “Black Jake's almost a murderer. He oughtn't to be allowed to get it after this.” (p.173)

Susan has the deciding vote. And it is because of her domestic role in the situation that she has it. Everyone else in the boat wants to go, the two captains, John and Nancy, the two adults, Captain Flint and Peter Duck, never mind the two younger children, Titty and Roger. But it is Susan – with, we must presume, the support of Peggy – who decides. She outranks them all. (And the story? Well they go, and have, of course, more encounters with Black Jake, plus other adventures on the way, and if you want to know what happens in the end, read the book!)

The Discourse of Religion

Before I start this section I need perhaps to signal that I am not a religious person, so I approach this particular subject with more than a little scepticism. That said, let me start with a quote from M. F. Thwaite's introduction to the facsimile reprint of John Newbury's 1744 *A Little Pretty Pocket Book*¹

Before 1700 books for the young had been dominated by religious teaching, moral lessons or scholastic purpose. (p.3)

But Newbury himself had broken the mould by writing a book for the amusement of children rather than for their religious and moral education, though he does touch on religion in passing.

¹ Often thought of as being the first 'children's' book per se.

All good Boys and Girls say their Prayers at Night and in the Morning,
which makes God Almighty love and bless them. (p123)

But even the best part of a century later the religious agenda was still never very far away. Thus in Marryat's *Masterman Ready*, published in 1841, the religious discourse is there from the very beginning of the story. The story proper starts when a storm hits the ship they are travelling on, and a number of the crew are washed overboard and drowned. Ready is prompt with his moralising:

"You are young, Master Willy, but you cannot think too early of your Maker, or call to mind what they say in the burial service: 'In the midst of life we are in death.'"

"Thank you, Ready, thank you for the lesson you have given my son," said Mr Seagrave; "and William, treasure it up in your memory." (p.21)

And they fall to their knees at every opportunity. Thus when they have brought the now leaking ship safely to land and beached her, the crew having taken to the boats in the fear that the ship was sinking, the first thing they do, before they have even got ashore, is to fall on their knees.

"All's well so far, sir," said Ready to Mr. Seagrave; "and now let us return our thanks to heaven."

Ready knelt down on the deck, took off his hat, and remained a short time in prayer. Mr. Seagrave did the same: the children at first looked on, and wondered, and then knelt down by the side of them, following the example of Juno.

And the characters continue in like vein throughout the story. The existence of God is never questioned, and the practice of prayer is totally normalised. The reader, we presume, is expected to go along with it. However in Ch. XXV there is a much more substantial and extended discussion of religion. (pp.163-168) The occasion for this is Tommy's killing of beetles. Mr. Seagrave catches him at it and reproves him:

"Who made those beetles, Tommy?" Who made everything?"

"God," replied Tommy after a little while.(p.163)

Mr. Seagrave turns his attention to William, showing him an insect that is crawling on his finger.

".. look at this minute insect which is crawling on my finger; what a number of legs it has!"

"Yes; I have seen something like it in old books. How fast it runs on its little legs; thinner than hairs – how Wonderful!"

"Yes, William," replied Mr Seagrave, "we have only to examine every portion, however small, of creation, and we are immediately filled with wonder; we have only to look around us, wherever we may be, and we have food for contemplation. There is nothing which points out to us the immensity and the omniscience for the Almighty more than the careful

provision which has been made by Him for the smallest and most insignificant of created beings. (pp. 163/164)

And Mr. Seagrave goes on for a couple of pages or so to produce more and more examples that demonstrate ‘the infinity of His creative power’: the fact that no two people are exactly alike; the fact that, as any shepherd could confirm, even no two sheep are exactly alike. Then there is the evidence of the perfection of structure of every living thing, a perfection that no mere human could possibly hope to achieve. Indeed the very order of the natural universe itself and the laws of nature which govern it, the succession of the seasons, the creation and order of the inanimate world of rocks and earth. Even the stars in the sky, which may look disordered to us because of the variation in distance they are from the earth, have their own God given order.

In all of this the existence of God is demonstrated, but, as the subsequent exchange demonstrates, it is open to discussion, there are after all such people as atheists.

“They say there are people who are atheists, papa. How can they be so if they only look around them? I’m sure a mere examination of the works of God ought to make them good Christians.”

“No, my child,” replied Mr. Seagrave; “there you are in error. Few deny the existence of the Deity, and an examination of His works may make them good and devout men, but not Christians. There are good men to be found in every denomination, whether they be Jews, Mohammedans, or Pagans; but they are not Christians.”

“Very true, papa.”

“Faith in things seen, if I may use the term, my dear child – faith produced by an examination of the works of creation – may induce men to acknowledge the power and goodness of the Almighty, but it will not make them wise to salvation; for that end, it is necessary, as the apostle saith, to have faith in things not seen. There is little merit in acknowledging what is evident to our senses: The fate required of us as Christians, and to which are attached the great and gracious promises of the gospel, is faith in a sublime, and to us incomprehensible mystery – the incarnation of the Son of God, who descended upon earth and took the form of man, and actually suffered for our redemption. (p.167)

In brief, then, the works of creation constitute evidence of the existence of God, though even that needs faith, the faith in things seen, but Christianity itself requires faith in things not seen, a leap of faith as it were. But all of this is couched in the form of a rational debate *about* religion, and the fact that Mr. Seagrave, in the use of the word ‘may’ above: ‘faith in things seen .. *may* induce men to etc.’ implies that there is still the possibility of legitimate doubt. And notice also, that Mr. Seagrave does not offer any criticism of other religions, nor even dismiss atheism itself as a possibility. Beyond the implied argument that the wonders of the natural world constitute evidence for the existence of God, there is little or no proselytising; Mr. Seagrave’s intentions would seem rather to be to promote understanding than to engender belief. Furthermore it should be noted that religious belief, or lack of it, does not play any part of the development of the plot, which means that readers do not have to engage with the religious element in the book if

they don't wish to, they are left entirely free to observe the actions of the characters without having to commit to their beliefs.

The same cannot be said for Michael Morpurgo's 1993 *The War of Jenkins' Ear*. We are at a British prep school¹, Redlands, and it is the beginning of the new term. Our hero is the 12 year old Toby Jenkins. At supper on the first evening he finds himself sitting opposite a new boy, the 13 year old Simon Christopher. Rice pudding is on the menu and Toby particularly likes the skin.

“You like skin?” said a voice from across the table. It was the new boy, Christopher. How he knew that Toby liked the skin Toby could not make out. “You can have mine then,” said Christopher. “I can't stand skin.” He stood up, leaned across the table and scooped the skin on to Toby's plate – not at all the sort of thing you were supposed to do at Redlands. (p.7)

The action has been spotted by the headmaster who makes both boys stand up on their benches, and proceeds to tell them off. In the following exchange, and to the amazement of all, Christopher quietly answers back, telling him that he doesn't eat the skin. The headmaster, unsurprisingly, is not happy!

“Here you will do what you are told to do, not what you feel like doing. Food at Redlands is always eaten whether you like it or not and without complaint. We do not waste our food at Redlands, do you hear me?”
 “Yes, sir, I know, sir. It was the same at my last school. That's why I gave it to him, sir, so it wouldn't be wasted.”
 No one in the dining-hall could believe what they were witnessing. (p.8)

It is clear that Christopher is an exceptional boy, prepared to stand up against arbitrary and dictatorial authority when nobody else will, and thereby engaging both the admiration of the other boys and our empathy as readers; immediately we are on his side, and as the story progresses we will discover just what it is that makes him exceptional. The religious cues are there right from the very first sentence, as the headmaster intones the Latin grace before supper, ‘Benedicat Nobis Omnipotens Deus’. There is Christopher's surname with its Christ reference; he was previously at a school named St Peter's; his father is a carpenter. Then there is his apparent ability to divine what is in Toby's mind even when Toby hasn't said anything. Then that night the headmaster catches him talking after lights out, and this time he gets slipped – three whacks on the hand; and the next morning he has gone. One of the boys has seen him go, and describes his rather odd behaviour.

¹ For non-English readers or those not familiar with the independent education sector in England, preparatory schools, a.k.a ‘prep’ schools, are fee paying schools taking pupils from as young seven years old, whose job is to prepare children for an exam which they take when they are thirteen, to get them into ‘public’ schools, another misnomer, since they are also fee paying schools only available to those who can afford them, and as far from being publically funded state schools as you can possibly get. Most pupils board for the duration of the school term though there can be more locally based children who go home every night ‘day-bugs’ – there's a giveaway! – and they tend to be single sex.

“I saw him from the bathroom window. He stops at the school gates, puts his suitcase down, takes off his shoes, shakes them, puts them on again and that was it.” (p.18)

.. a biblical reference if ever I saw one, the first of several, see note.¹ The next biblical reference that I picked up occurs on the following day when he is brought back by his mother and starts attending lessons. He proves to be a very fast learner, asking questions all the way, some of them quite unexpected.

And that was the main problem. He unnerved everyone by asking too many penetrating and unexpected questions. (p.31)

Echoes here certainly of the 12 year old Christ at the temple in Jerusalem.² So far it's all hints and clues, but the religious discourse becomes explicit when Toby, who has become his firm but only friend, has the opportunity to show him the around park which constitutes the grounds of the school, showing him in particular a little camp that he had constructed under a rhododendron forest when he was younger. While there, Christopher collapses and remains unconscious even when Toby tries to revive him. He even stops breathing and Toby fears that he is dead. Toby shakes him and shouts at him, but seemingly to no avail, though he does produce a hollow gurgle,

A death rattle, Toby thought. Jesus, he's dead. He's really dead. He stood up and backed away, unable to take his eyes off Christopher's face. He was sobbing now, his hand in his hair pulling at it. “Please God, no,” he cried. “Please God.” (p.43)

The invocation revives Christopher, who tells him that he frequently has such fainting fits, and that when he has them he has visions in which he sees Jesus.

“It's always the same, a blinding light and then he comes through it and stands as close to me as I am to you, so close I could reach out and touch him.”

“Him?”

“Jesus,” said Christopher. “It's Jesus, I know it is.” . . .

. . . “He tells me that I am him reincarnated, come back, I am Jesus, and like he did before me I have to try to save the world. And today he told me that the time has come, that I have to start my work right away and with you at my side. You will be my Peter, my rock, my first disciple.”³
(pp.45,46)

¹ I am no biblical expert, nor, as I have said, am I even a religious person, but having been doused in a Church of England ‘education’ until I was 18 or so, some of it did rub off, so when I thought I spotted the references I went searching on line to find the sources. So this one, I discovered, was from Acts 13:51: Paul and Barnabas have just been chased out of Antioch: ‘But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium.’

² St. Luke 2:46-47. Jesus is missing and his parents find him at the temple: ‘And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.’

³ Matthew 16:18 ‘And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.’

And like Jesus before him he needs followers to spread the word.

“Will you follow me?”

Toby struggled for an answer that would not offend. (p.46)

Christopher senses his scepticism.

“You don’t believe in me do you?’ Christopher turned away.

“Look,” said Toby, “I want to believe you, but . . .”

“I know,” said Christopher nodding, “I know, but a small miracle might help to persuade you. You need proof. Is that it?” (p.46)

Notice that Christopher needs Toby not just to believe him but also to believe *in* him, to make the leap of faith that he really is Jesus reincarnated. To prove his case he offers Toby a miracle.

“All right then,” Christopher went on. “You’ll have your miracle. But promise me this, when it happens, and it will happen, don’t just put it down to luck or coincidence, because it won’t be either.” (p.47)

The ‘miracle’ occurs a couple of days later: Toby is a keen rugby player and hopes to get into the school team, but is beaten to the post by another boy, Hetherington, but as the first match approaches Hetherington falls downstairs and twists his ankle and Toby ends up in the team, and indeed turns out to be very good. But, as Hunter, the captain, reminds him,

“Bit of a miracle, really,” Hunter went on. “Couple of hours before the match and Hetherington goes and crocks himself, and there you are in the team,” (p.53)

And when Hunter says the word ‘miracle’, Toby remembers Christopher’s promise, so when, a bit later, Christopher congratulates him:

He looked at him and saw that it was all true. Christopher *had* seen Jesus in the camp in the park. He was Jesus. He was the Son of God. He had worked a miracle. In that moment Toby’s doubts vanished. (p.53)

As the story continues it becomes clear that this is the central presumption of the book, as a number of incidents will demonstrate. The first of which is one in which Toby’s conversion, for such it is, is confirmed. They have returned to the camp and Christopher constructs an altar to commemorate his vision and, swearing Toby to secrecy, they pray together, Christopher praying to God the Father for an end to injustice, hunger and disease, that people should love one another and that there should be peace and joy on the earth; and Toby now willingly praying with him.

Toby knelt down and prayed beside him, not because he felt he had to but because he wanted to. (pp. 57/58)

Christopher wants them to become blood brothers.

“.. you and I will bind ourselves together as blood brothers in Jesus.”
(p.58)

And after they have cut their fingers and performed the ritual:

“Blood brothers for ever,” he said. And when Toby looked up into his eyes he found he could not look away. “You are in me,” said Christopher, “and I am in you.” (p.59)

Toby is now fully committed. His finger, however, goes septic and he has to go to Matron for treatment and a plaster. Christopher sees the plaster and tells him he can heal him, and takes his hand and holds it.

“You can heal?” Toby whispered.
“If you believe I can, then I can.” (p.61)

Toby prays for the strength to believe Christopher, and his prayers must have worked because his finger heals overnight. The next day Matron is amazed.

“I always knew I was a good nurse, but this, though I say it myself, this is unbelievable.” (p.62)

Christopher gets to demonstrate his commitment to bring peace to the earth when he intervenes in the long standing feud between the boys at the school and the village boys, the ‘toffs’ and the ‘oiks’ – the river at the bottom of the grounds is the dividing line – and in the course of the plot Toby finds himself fishing from the wrong bank. The village boys attack him, and his ear gets torn – hence the title of the book – and he loses his school issued boiler suit, and when the boys from the school come to rescue him, a battle is precipitated with each side hurling stones at the other. Christopher appears and, in a remarkable display of calm courage, intervenes.

He ran forward to the river’s edge. “Stop it, stop it!” he cried. He was wading out into the river, the stones falling all around him. “Stop it, stop it everyone.” He appealed to both sides, facing first one and then the other, holding his hands above his head and waving them. Gradually the barrage subsided until at last there was silence. Christopher still held his hands in the air. “Drop your stones,” he said quietly. “Drop them and there will be peace.” (p.82/83)

He is almost successful, until one of the village boys decides he doesn’t want to do anything that a toff tells him to do, and the stone throwing starts again, and this time Christopher is right in the firing line and gets badly hurt. This particular little story has a sequel when, later, a scarecrow appears on the village side of the river wearing Toby’s boiler suit, and, despite the threats from the other side and the warnings from his own, never mind his previous experiences, Christopher again intervenes and wades across the river and manages to retrieve the boiler suit, this time without incident.

Christopher's bravery has brought him the undying admiration of the younger boys, and the smallest of them all, Benedict Swann, has taken to following him around the school, and his devotion to Christopher takes a further leap when, the following Tuesday, there is a run in the driving rain and Toby and Christopher find him sheltering under the trees and crying from the wet and the cold, and Christopher gets him moving and stays with him for the rest of the run, encouraging him as they go. In the meantime Christopher has now recruited Hunter, though not Swann himself, Christopher telling Toby later, ' "He's too young. He wouldn't understand." '(p.139)

The feud between the boys in the school and the village boys comes to a climax when the latter release a bull onto the school grounds. Everybody runs, except for Swann, who is standing in the bull's path, transfixed with fear. Christopher is not present. To Toby's own amazement, and despite his every instinct to run, he finds himself walking towards Swann in order to rescue him, speaking quietly to reassure him.

He knew as he spoke that it was not his voice. It was Christopher speaking through him. "I'm right behind you, Swann. Don't look round. We'll be alright." (p.147)

Not content with rescuing Swann he then approaches the bull itself and manages to get close enough to it to start gently scratching the hair between its eyes and thus calming it down.

The book builds to its climax when the chronically ill daughter of one of the teachers looks as if she's going to die – the doctors can do nothing. Toby is in his den under the rhododendron bushes when he overhears her parents talking in their garden next door. Mr. Birley is crying, and his wife is trying to comfort him.

"It's God's will, darling," she said. "I don't know why he chose Jenny – we'll never know – but he did. You must understand, it's God's will."
"God's will!" Mr. Birley shouted at her and threw her hand off his knee. "God's will! You tell me how any loving God, any God worth worshipping, can pick on a small innocent child. Six years old, and put her through such pain." (p.130)

They catch Toby listening, and Toby without really thinking about it, tells them about Christopher's powers as a healer.

".. sir, I think I know someone, someone who could help." Toby couldn't stop himself now, even though he knew he should. He had given them hope. "He's a sort of healer. He's got sort of powers." (p.132)

He takes Christopher, accompanied by Hunter, to see them, and Christopher tells them that yes, he can heal their daughter. Mr Birley is sceptical but Mrs Birley wants to try.

“We must try, Arnold. You know that. We must try anything, and after all, it can’t do any harm.”(p.135)

Christopher goes upstairs to the daughter’s room, and they overhear his voice, though not what he says. He returns,

.. his face fatigued and pale. He nodded at Mrs. Birley. “it’s all right,” he said. “She’ll get better.” (p.136)

But Jenny does not get better. Toby and Hunter are getting more and more worried and their doubts are growing. Eventually, unbeknownst to Toby, Hunter goes to see the local vicar – he’s the divinity teacher in the school – and tells him the whole story, in confidence he hopes, but the vicar breaks that confidence and tells the headmaster, who calls the whole school together in the hall and confronts the boys.

“It seems we have amongst us a boy , who claims he is Jesus Christ, that’s right, Jesus Christ. This boy pretends he can heal, that he hears voices, that he is Jesus Christ come back to earth.” (p.170)

And he calls on the boy to stand up and reveal himself, and Christopher does indeed reveal himself by standing up.

“You raised Mr and Mrs Birley’s hopes falsely and that was cruel, cruel beyond words.” (p.172)

The headmaster demands that he recant, but he won’t. His voices have told him who he is.

“They say I am Jesus, and I believe them.”

“Do you know, Christopher, do you know what you are saying? Co you realise that if you’d said that just a few hundred years ago they’d have burnt you at the stake?”

“Yes, sir,” said Christopher, “and a few hundred years before that they’d have crucified me.” (p.173)

This is the final straw. Christopher will have to go, and that very day. But before he does the head wants to root out his followers. They must be found out and punished.

“They have been foolish, not evil, not wicked like you. They have been duped. But they are implicated in your blasphemy. They have encouraged you, and for all I know helped to spread your lies. They too will have to be punished.” (p.174)

He calls on them to stand up, but it is Swann who stands up first, though the head won’t have it.

“Me, sir,” he piped. It was me. I’m Christopher’s friend, I’m his follower.” . . .

“I know who the two boys are and you are not one of them.” (pp.174/175)

Hunter and Toby then stand up, and the head gets both of them to deny that Christopher is Jesus, threatening them with expulsion if they don't, forcing Toby to say it loudly for all to hear,

“Christopher is not Jesus.” Toby said it out loud. (p.177)

.. Toby's denial echoing that of Peter's denial of Christ in another biblical parallel¹. So Christopher goes, and Toby and Hunter do indeed get beaten for their part in his blasphemy. But it is Swann, who has never wavered in his belief in Christopher, who gets the last word, and it is the very last word of the novel, clinching the argument as it were, because, miraculously, the Birley's daughter does get better. Toby and Swann see her running across the field between her parents, and Swann is triumphant: “See?” he said.” (p.188)

As can be seen, the discourse of religion is one of the major discourses of the novel, indeed it is a major theme in the book, and at the heart of it is Toby's own 'conversion' from un-thought acceptance to conviction and belief, and the same can be said of Swann; and there is a very strong sense in the book of an 'underlying message' which is being imposed on the reader. As a reader one then has a choice: you can either read 'with' the flow and import of the story, in which case I guess that you don't notice the imposition; or you can read 'against' it, as in my case, in which case you do notice the imposition, and indeed the manipulation by which that imposition is being achieved. Though whichever way you read it, it starts with Christopher's confrontation with the headmaster over the rice pudding which gets readers onto his side from the get go, so readers will already be sympathetic towards him when he tells Toby about his visions and claims that he is Jesus reincarnated. And the way in which the discourse is handled means that readers are encouraged, or even required to go along with the presumption. Readers are faced with two choices. If they go along with the premise that Christopher is indeed the reincarnated Christ, then there is much to support it. There is the 'miracle' of Hetherington's injury allowing Toby to get into the Rugby team, as a result of which Toby starts praying 'because he wanted to.' There is the miraculous healing of Toby's finger. There is the incident with the bull when Toby feels that Christopher has given him the strength to confront the bull because he is speaking through him, echoing his earlier claim that he is in Toby and Toby is in him. Finally there are Christopher's healing powers, first Toby's finger, then the clinching fact of the recovery of the Birley's child, Jenny.

If, however, readers do not go along with the basic premise, then other readings present themselves. Right from the beginning Christopher applies considerable pressure on Toby. He knows that Toby values his friendship, never mind admiring him after his handling of the rice pudding incident. He knows that thus when he asks Toby to be his follower, he, Toby, will find it difficult to say no, not least because he doesn't wish to run the risk of losing him as a friend by offending him. The result is that Toby is now enough persuaded to the extent that when the 'miracle' does occur, he has effectively precluded himself from interpreting it as luck or coincidence. Then there is what I can only describe as the moral blackmail of the healing of the cut finger incident: Toby, and the reader, is caught in a classic *Catch 22* situation. If Toby's finger heals then it cannot be put down to luck, or Matron's good offices, it must be because of

¹ It's in all the gospels. See Matthew 26:30-35; Mark 14:29-31; Luke: 22:15-62; John 13:36-38

the power of prayer; and if it doesn't heal it only shows that Toby's prayer wasn't strong enough, and that worse still he himself is to blame for his finger not healing. Either way natural explanations are precluded. And when it comes to Toby's bravery with the bull, one could well argue the strength of mind that enabled it came from the confidence boost of his achievements on the rugby field. And of course Jenny's recovery at the end could have been a perfectly natural occurrence.

The contrast with *Masterman Ready* is striking. In *Masterman Ready* there is no necessity for the reader to accede to the religious 'messages' of the book. It is not essentially about religion at all. It is, rather, a desert island story about exploiting the natural resources of the island to ensure the survival of the characters, and religion as such is not the issue. And the discussion *about* religion in the book leaves readers free to disagree with the basic religious premises of that debate without in any way compromising their engagement with the story. *The War of Jenkins' Ear*, by contrast, requires readers to commit themselves to the religious import of the book in order to empathise with the characters and become engaged with the development of the story. I must say that I read the book with increasing amazement; I felt that I had been subjected to a blatant piece of propagandising, all the more objectionable because it was not overtly didactic, which would have left me free to resist it and get on with the rest of the story – if it was interesting enough, but insidiously, covertly, by engaging my sympathies with the characters and their actions and offering me no escape as a reader other than to put the book down and refuse to continue reading it. Which I most certainly would have done had I not been wanting to use it as an example in this, my final section of this chapter.

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