**3**

It’s a fearful handicapbeing a child.

Discourses of the Relationships Between Children and Adults

in Children’s Literature.

“I wish I was grown up,” Albert said. “It’s a fearful *handicap* being a child. You have to stand there and watch, you can never make anything happen.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Clearly this chapter has close links with the previous one. There I identified the absent adult as one of the features of what I called the discourse of the idyll in children’s literature, so I shall not be examining the absent adult again here in any detail, except to note that there is a continuum that runs all the way from books where inconvenient adults are disposed of in the first page or two, to, at the other extreme, books where coping with adults is the very substance of the story. So in Bawden’s *Carrie’s War*, quoted above, the children have to struggle with the fact that they ‘can never make anything happen’; but the whole point of Blyton’s *Famous Five* books is that they *can* make things happen, indeed that they can make things happen that the adults can’t make happen, or at the very least don’t make happen.

There are several species of adult to be found in children’s books. There are first of all parents. They can be there or not there. They can be a positive element in the lives of the child characters, or neutral one, or a negative one, or they can be mixed. They can be supportive and collaborative, or they can leave the children to get on with their own doings. Then there are uncles and aunts and other relatives – an interesting subspecies – but they too can be a positive element in the lives of the child characters, or neutral one, or a negative one, or a mixed one. Then there are the non-related adults, who again can range all the way from the very benevolent to the very malevolent, and who can be closely involved in the children’s doings, or less closely, or only tangentially. It should immediately be obvious that you can have a horrible parent but a nice uncle, or a nice parent and a horrible uncle; or a nice other adult or a horrible other adult. It is those sorts of categorisations that I am interested in here.

The Adult as Enemy

At one end of the scale you have the discourse of the adult as enemy. The adults are antagonistic to the children or do not have their interests at heart, or in other ways want to stop them from doing what they are doing and make them do what *they* want them to do. The children in their turn are faced with the choice of challenging adults directly or having to work their way around adult agendas in order to find their own spaces and establish their own spheres of action. Let us start with the adult as out and out villain – and these turn up frequently in children’s literature. To take two examples pretty much at random, how about Count Olaf and Mr McGregor.

In *The Bad Beginning*, the first of Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* books[[2]](#endnote-2), the Baudelaire children, Violet, 14, Klaus, 12, and infant Sunny are, when their parents die in a fire, sent to live with Count Olaf, a distant relative: “He is either a third cousin four times removed, or a fourth cousin three times removed.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The Count is the archest of arch villains and lives in filthiest of houses. The children have to sleep on the floor, have only a cardboard box to keep their clothes in, and are treated as skivvies from the moment they arrive. The relationship between the children and the count then becomes a central discourse in the narrative and we watch as they begin to hold their own when they are told to cook a meal for a visiting theatrical troupe. This they do, making pasta with a puttanesca sauce[[4]](#endnote-4), and we have an account of the preparation.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the process they take command of the domestic sphere (cf my examples in Ch. 2), which in its turn gives them the courage to answer Count Olaf back when he comes in and demands dinner.

“Where is the roast beef?”

“We didn’t make roast beef,” Violet said. “We made puttanesca sauce.”

“What?” Count Olaf asked. “No roast beef?”

“You didn’t tell us you wanted roast beef,” Klaus said.

. . . . .

“I demand that you serve roast beef to myself and my guests.”

“We don’t have any!” Violet cried. “We made puttanesca sauce!”[[6]](#endnote-6)

The Count is seeking to lay his hands on the Baudelaire inheritance, which he is hoping to do by tricking Violet to marry him by staging the marriage ceremony within a play that he has written. The children have to outwit him, which *they* do by discovering that if Violet signs the marriage certificate with her left hand rather than her right hand she can use a legal loophole to her advantage, which she does, and thus escapes from his clutches – until the next book in the series comes along.

Count Olaf is a pantomime villain and so, in his way, is Beatrix Potter’s Mr McGregor. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* the adults and children discourse is doubled, the first being that of Peter and his mother, who warns him not to go into Mr McGregor’s Garden, ‘ “Your father had an accident there; he was put into a pie by Mrs McGregor.” ’[[7]](#endnote-7) Peter is naughty, and despite his mother’s warning, heads straight for the garden.[[8]](#endnote-8) Thus ensues the second child and adult discourse with a more clear cut villain. He is spotted by Mr McGregor and there follows what is essentially a chase narrative in which Peter has to overcome a number of obstacles and is nearly caught several times, but finally escapes by squeezing out under the gate when Mr McGregor’s back is turned. In both examples the children successfully overcome the villainous adults by outwitting them; the Baudelaire children have to outwit Count Olaf and Peter has to outwit Mr McGregor.

In Blyton’s *Five on a Treasure Island* there are again two adult child relationship discourses – in in this case more closely related discourses – that inform the plot. The primary discourse is that of the conflict between George and her father (Uncle Quentin to the other children). This is initiated when George turns on her parents when they threaten to sell the island which they have previously encouraged her to regard as hers.

“So you only gave me the island when you thought it wasn’t worth anything,” said George, her face white and angry. “As soon as it is worth money you take it away again. I think that’s horrid. It – it isn’t honourable.”

… and her father responds with a blatant assertion of authority

“That’s enough, Georgina,” said her father, angrily. “Your mother is guided by me. You’re only a child.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

… the whole exchange being as powerful an exposé of adult hypocrisy, never mind of patriarchal power, as one might hope to find in children’s fiction anywhere.[[10]](#endnote-10) The biggest problem for the children is that George’s father’s power is all the stronger because it is legitimated by the fact that he *is* her father, and in this way it differs from the conflict between the Baudelaire children and Count Olaf. The Baudelaire children can challenge Count Olaf’s power directly, but George and her cousins cannot challenge her father’s power in the same way. Instead they have to get him to change his mind by demonstrating to him that the bad guys who want to buy the island are indeed the bad guys, which they do by way of the genre plot in which the gold is discovered and the island is saved. This genre plot itself involves a secondary adult child conflict where the bad guys *are* the out and out villains, and George’s initially unwinnable conflict with her father is displaced by the winnable conflict with the villains, the winning of which enables the primary conflict with her father to be resolved. Here he is at the end, acknowledging the children’s achievement, not least by the use of George’s preferred name, George, rather than Georgina, which is what he had called her at the beginning when he told her she was only a child.:

“I’m very proud of you all. No wonder you didn’t want me to sell the island, George, when you knew about the ingots! But why didn’t you tell me?”

The four children stared at him and didn’t answer. They couldn’t very well say, “Well firstly, you wouldn’t have believed us. Secondly, you are bad tempered and unjust and we’re frightened of you. Thirdly we don’t trust you enough to do the right thing.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

As can be seen in the unspoken responses of the children, he is far from totally defeated, he is still bad tempered, unjust and frightening, and is all set to live to fight another day.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In the three texts that I have discussed, the adult as enemy is dealt with in a variety of ways. Mr McGregor has simply to be outwitted; Count Olaf must be directly resisted, but also outwitted and circumvented. George’s father cannot be directly resisted nor indeed outwitted, he has to be circumvented, Also in these three examples, be it noted, we have: one parent, George’s; one distant relative in loco parentis, Count Olaf; and one villain unadorned in Mr McGregor.

The Benevolent Adult

While the adult as enemy can provide a very useful strategy for the generation of conflict in children’s books, adults do not necessarily have to fill that role. Nine year old Henry Huggins, for instance, in *Henry Huggins*[[13]](#endnote-13) benefits from supportive adults from the word go. The book is episodic in structure and charts Henry’s everyday adventures in six self-contained chapters. In all of them he benefits from the support of his parents and of other friendly adults. To start with a striking example, in the very first chapter Henry is adopted by a stray dog, (it is clearly the dog who does the adopting, not the other way around!) who knows he’s on to a good thing when Henry feeds him his ice-cream. Henry immediately christens him Ribsy on account of his ribs showing because he is so thin, but can he keep him?

If only he knew what his mother and father would say![[14]](#endnote-14)

So he rings them and gets his mother.

“Mother, I’ve found a dog. I sure wish I could keep him. He’s a good dog and I’d feed him and wash him and everything. Please, Mom.”

“I don’t know dear,” his mother said. You’ll have to ask your father.”

“Mom!” Henry wailed. “That’s what you always say.”

Perhaps sensing her uncertainty Henry puts the pressure on.

“Mom, please say yes and I’ll never ask for another thing as long as I live!”

“Well alright, Henry. I guess there isn’t any reason you shouldn’t have a dog. But you’ll have to bring him home on the bus.”

That proves to be somewhat problematic and Henry ends up being brought home by a couple of friendly policemen and, along with Ribsy, is welcomed with open arms by his father.

“Well,” said his father after the policeman had gone. “It’s about time you came home. So this is Ribsy! I’ve heard about you, fellow, and there’s a big bone and a can of Feeley’s Flea Flakes waiting for you.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

The tone is set, and it becomes clear that thereafter Henry will be able to turn to his parents for help and support whenever he needs it, and other adults are equally helpful. In one chapter he buys a couple of guppies in their own fish bowl. The friendly pet store man tells him all about how to keep them and the friendly librarian finds a book for him about them, and again he knows he can turn to his dad for help:

“I’ll let you take it out on your card if you think your mother and father will help you with it.”

“Sure, my dad will help me.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

When the Guppies start multiplying at an alarming rate, his father helps him bring jars up from the basement to put them all in. Finally, the guppies having taken over his entire bedroom, he takes them back to the kindly pet store man who exchanges them for a tank to keep a catfish in, and his father pays for the actual catfish. In another chapter he has to raise money to buy a football and the friendly next-door neighbour agrees to pay him to catch night crawlers[[17]](#endnote-17) and, when the task becomes a bit too much for him, again his father and mother help him; and in a forth chapter, when he’s entered Ribsy into a local dog show, his mother encourages him by ‘just this once’ allowing him to wash Ribsy in the bath, something he is not normally allowed to do; and when he subsequently inadvertently dies him pink by the ill-advised application of talcum powder, the judge, who clearly has something of a sense of humour, awards Henry the prize for the most unusual dog in the show.

From a parent to an uncle: Uncle Jim, aka Captain Flint, in Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* series. We first meet him in *Swallows and Amazons* itself[[18]](#endnote-18), and he turns up in several subsequent books. For various plot reasons he lurks rather helplessly in the background for most of the time in *Swallowdale*[[19]](#endnote-19); he takes the children sailing across the Atlantic in search of buried treasure in *Peter Duck*[[20]](#endnote-20); he turns up first as what one might call a benign absence in the middle of *Winter Holiday*[[21]](#endnote-21) and then as a benign presence at the end of it; he takes them sailing in the China Seas in *Missee Lee*[[22]](#endnote-22); and he takes them sailing in the Western Isles of Scotland in *Great Northern*[[23]](#endnote-23). Let me look at *Winter Holiday* in more detail.

It is, as one might guess from the title, the winter holidays. Dick and Dorothea Callum, generically known as the D’s, are staying in the lake district. They meet and become rapidly friendly with two other families of children, familiar from earlier books in the series, who are also staying there, the Walkers, John, Susan, Titty, and Roger, aka the Swallows (whom we have already met when I discussed *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*, above), and Nancy and Peggy Blackett, aka the Amazons. Uncle Jim / Captain Flint is the Blacketts’ uncle, who, when he is in the Lake District, lives on board a houseboat anchored in the lake. The Walkers and the Blacketts are hoping against hope that the lake will freeze over completely so that they can sledge and skate up to its northernmost point, which they have dubbed the North Pole, and which turns out to be a currently empty little house at the top of the lake. A hitch comes in their plans when Nancy, who is very much in charge, gets the mumps, and has to issue orders from her quarantined bed, and sends a note to Peggy enclosing the key to the houseboat, with the clear implication that they should get on board and open it up.

“But are you sure Captain Flint would like us going into his cabin?” said Susan. “He might not mind us just on deck.”

“He’d be jolly pleased,” said Peggy.

. . . . .

“It’s awfully like burgling,” said Titty.

“He’s our uncle,” said Peggy.[[24]](#endnote-24)

No more need be said, so they do indeed occupy it, Uncle Jim being thus defined as a benevolent adult even when he is not there. Since it is already frozen in the ice they name the boat *Fram*[[25]](#endnote-25), and proceed to use it as a base for their exploration of the lake; and continue to do so until later in the story, when Captain Flint himself unexpectedly turns up and finds just Dick and Dorothea, neither of whom he knows, on board. Dorothea, who has a fanciful turn of mind, has seen him coming across the ice and has already cast him as a ‘tall Dutchman’ in one of her oft planned romantic novels, and so he remains in her mind even as he arrives alongside. In their initial exchanges Uncle Jim is more puzzled than antagonistic,

“Well, I’m jiggered!” he said again. “And, may I ask, who are you?”

“Dorothea Callum,” said Dorothea.

“Never heard of her,” said the tall Dutchman. “But she seems to be very much at home. Don’t you find it rather cold standing about on the deck of a boat when it’s freezing as hard as this?”[[26]](#endnote-26)

He is still not phased when Dorothea only agrees to let him on board his own boat when she has established who he is, but even then he treats her with the greatest courtesy – albeit touched with a tinge of irony.

“Perhaps you *are* their uncle,” she said. “Of course, that explains everything.”

“He shook hands with her. “I’m glad it does,” he said.

. . . . .

“Well, may I go into my own cabin?”

And before long he is helping Dick with making star charts, being shown the log of the expedition that the children have been keeping, accepting tea from them, and having his bed made up for him by Dorothea, so that:

It would have been hard to say who was at home and who was the visitor at tea in the cabin of the *Fram*.

Once established he then enters whole-heartedly into the children’s half imaginative world of re-constituting the north end of the lake as the North Pole, the world that they have created in order to give shape and purpose to their plans beyond that of simply skating up the lake. Thus, no sooner has he bundled the D’s back to the farm house where they are staying, than in preparation for the arrival of Peggy and the Walkers next morning, and in ‘Captain Flint’ mode, he puts up a notice: ‘TRESPASSERS WILL BE HANGED, LIKE THE LAST’; and when they do arrive, teases them by telling them that he had thrown the D’s out in earnest. When the D’s arrive back to give him the lie, Peggy turns on her uncle.

“Why did you pretend you were such a beast?” said Peggy furiously, turning to her uncle.

Dorothea listened with grave interest. This seemed a queer way of talking to an uncle.

But of course Peggy’s queer way of talking to her uncle neatly defines the relationship between Uncle Jim and the children. Thereafter he is an integral part of their plans, as the chapter heading ‘The Uses of an Uncle’[[27]](#endnote-27) demonstrates. They have, for instance, consumed all the tins of food that he kept on board, so he cheerfully goes off to replenish them. He carries messages from the still quarantined Nancy to the other children; he gets the key to the little house, cleans the Jackdaw nests out of its chimney, stocks it up with a welcoming box of groceries, plus coal for a fire. And when, at the climax of the novel, the D’s are thought to be lost in a blizzard and the book has moved out of the let’s pretend mode and into real life-threatening danger mode, he it is that organises search parties to try to find them. And he’s there at the all’s well that ends well conclusion, with Peggy and Nancy’s mother even holding him half to blame for the whole thing and in doing so tacitly admitting that he belongs to the children’s world rather than that of the adults.

“And I dare say if I knew the truth it would turn out to be your Uncle Jim’s fault as much as anybody’s.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

Henry Huggins is surrounded by nice and helpful adults, including his parents; Uncle Jim is specifically an uncle, but both examples are in a long line of benevolent adults in children’s literature that extends all the way from faithful retainer Jacob Armitage in *Children of the New Forest[[29]](#endnote-29)* to Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* series[[30]](#endnote-30), (which series, of course, also offers us a nice example of the malevolent adult in the form of Professor Snape who can neither be directly challenged nor outwitted, but who can, most of the time, be evaded).

It’s a Bit More Complicated Than That.

So far I have looked at clear cut cases, the adult as enemy, or the adult as friend. But of course in real life[[31]](#endnote-31) it is often a good deal more complicated than that. I shall look at two examples, Nina Bawden’s *Carrie’s War[[32]](#endnote-32)* and Mary Norton’s *The Borrowers[[33]](#endnote-33)*. In *Carrie’s War* twelve year old Carrie and her ten year old brother Nick are a pair of second world war evacuees, children sent to the country in order to be safe from the bombing, and lodged with whoever will take them. Carrie and Nick end up in Wales with Mr. Evans and his meek younger sister Louise, whom they rapidly learn to call Auntie Lou. In the course of the book Auntie Lou will be courted by an American officer from the nearby American base, and will leave home to marry him without telling her brother because she is too scared to, doing so on the very day that Carrie and Nick are due to return home; and Mr Evans’s very much older sister, Mrs Gotobed, whom Carrie gets to meet, will die. Carrie becomes much more directly involved in the latter story, meeting the old lady, and carrying deathbed messages from her to her brother about her will, which proves to be non-existent, though Carrie thinks Mr Evans has stolen and destroyed it.

When the children first arrive at the Evans household he is not there, and we learn of his power indirectly through Auntie Lou’s behaviour. First of all she informs them that he’s a Councillor, with a capital C, ‘a very important man,’ and then proceeds to hustle them into bed before he should get back from his council meeting. The children ‘were more than glad to escape from the kitchen where the Very Important Councillor Evans might appear any minute.’[[34]](#endnote-34) When he does return, the children, now safely ensconced in their bedroom, listen to the ensuing exchanges between him and his sister.

The loud hectoring voice went on. … They lay quite still in the darkness listening to the roar of Mr Evans’s voice.

Nick, frightened, cuddles up to his sister.

“He must be an Ogre, Carrie. A horrible, disgusting, real-life OGRE.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

Thus are we introduced to Mr Evans, and on the next page we find him further characterised by the omniscient third person narrator.

Councillor Samuel Isaac Evans was a bully. He bullied his sister. He even bullied the women who came into his shop, selling them things they didn’t want to buy and refusing to stock things they did.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Initially it certainly looks as if Mr Evans is simply going to be the enemy, an ogre to be resisted and overcome, but that view is promptly moderated when Nick actually meets him in the flesh the next morning and discovers that he has false teeth.

“You can’t really be scared of someone whose teeth might fall out,” he told Carrie.

And thereafter he isn’t fazed by Mr Evans at all. Thus when Mr. Evans hopes that Nick won’t wet the bed, Nick already has the measure of him.

“That’s a rude thing to mention,” he said in a clear icy voice that made Carrie tremble. But Mr Evans didn’t fly into the rage she’d expected. He simply looked startled – as if a worm had just lifted its head and answered him back, Carrie thought.

And later in the same conversation, when Mr Evans warns them that he won’t tolerate bad language, Nick, with an intuitive understanding of the English class system, answers him with what amounts to a very successful put down:

“We don’t swear. Even my father doesn’t swear. And he’s a naval officer.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

Nick may have rapidly learned how to cope with Mr Evans, but so far as he is concerned Mr Evans remains an implacable enemy, to the extent that when Auntie Lou is planning to leave home in order to marry the American officer Nick becomes her co-conspirator. We only learn of this indirectly, since we see the action of the book almost entirely from Carrie’s perspective, and indeed at one level it could be argued that the developing relationship between Carrie and Mr Evans is a central focus of the book, as she struggles to understand him and see things from his point of view. In the process Mr Evans softens in his attitude towards the children, even to the extent of shutting up the shop and taking them on a picnic on their last full day before they go home and paying Carrie a rare compliment.

“I’m going to miss my assistant,” he said more than once. “You’ve been a real help to me, Carrie.”[[38]](#endnote-38)

And when, on the last morning, as Carrie discovers that he hadn’t stolen and destroyed the crucial will and wasn’t a bad man, she finds herself grinning with relief.

“What are you grinning for?”

“I’m just glad,” Carrie said, and she was. Glad to know that he wasn’t a bad man, not a thief, after all.[[39]](#endnote-39)

And, finally, as he tries to fix them breakfast with Auntie Lou gone and it is clear that he doesn’t quite know how to go about it, Carrie does it for him.

“Porridge, then.” He looked around rather helplessly.

“I can do that,” Carrie said. She took the double saucepan from the rack and the packet of oats from the cupboard and busied herself, not looking at him.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Once again things are resolved in the domestic sphere, and as the children are pulling away in the train after Mr Evans has finally said goodbye to them, Carrie discovers that she actually has something positive to say about him, much to Nick’s outraged response.

“He was quite nice at the end.”

“*Nice*?” Nick rolled his eyes upwards.[[41]](#endnote-41)

In passing it may be noted that the book provides us with another purely benevolent character in Hepzibah, who provides food, succour, and emotional support throughout.

*Carrie’s War*, tracing, as it does, the growing and changing understanding of a child as she discovers the complexity of the adult world around her, is an example of what gets variously called ‘psychological realism’ or ‘literary realism’ or ‘expressive realism’ or ‘classic realism’.[[42]](#endnote-42) Mr Evans may have started as an ogre in the children’s minds, certainly as an enemy to be withstood and avoided wherever possible, but by the end of the book, in Carrie’s eyes at least, he has become a more rounded and morally complex human being. In the old ways of thinking this would mark the book out as ‘quality literature’ as opposed to what often gets dismissed as genre fiction, but, as the genre theorists have taught us, psychological realism is a genre in and of itself too, and if it offers us, as is claimed, psychological insight and moral complexity, then other genres offer us different insights and other pleasures and are none the worse for that. But I digress.

Turning to *The Borrowers* we find another example of a more complex relationship between a child and, in this case, her parents. For those of you who have never met the Borrowers, they are little people who live under the floors and behind the wainscoting of big old houses. They survive by ‘borrowing’ food and other stuff from the ‘human beans’ who live in the same said big houses and their presence accounts for the disappearance of various small objects around the house, the odd cotton reel, missing chess pieces, a mustard pot, never mind safety pins and other smaller and more useful items that can be turned into tools etc.[[43]](#endnote-43) The greatest risk is to be ‘seen’ by one of the humans in the house, because while some can be friendly others aren’t, and being seen can lead to dire consequences. The family we are particularly concerned with is the Clock family[[44]](#endnote-44), Homily, Pod and their fourteen year old daughter Arrietty, who are the last surviving family in this particular house, the others having at one stage or another been ‘seen’ and have had to leave, to ‘emigrate’. The result has been that Arrietty has grown up without playmates, and as a virtual prisoner in their apartment under the kitchen floor because of her parents’ fears for her safety. Her only view of the outside world has been via a grating in the outside wall of the house through which she can see a bit of the garden, and she longs for the opportunity to get outside, and to meet other Borrowers of her own age. Then Pod is ‘seen’ by a boy who has come to live in the house, and they realise that they need to tell Arrietty more about histories of the other Borrower families who used to live there. In particular they tell her about how Uncle Hendreary and his family had had to emigrate and go and live in a badger’s set after his daughter Eggletina went out, never to return, and they came to the conclusion that she had been eaten by the cat.[[45]](#endnote-45) Such, however, are Arrietty’s longings that she doesn’t see the possibility of emigration in quite such a negative light as do her parents, Homily in particular.

“Couldn’t we emigrate?” she ventured at last, very softly.

Homily gasped and clasped her hands and swung away towards the wall. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she cried, addressing a frying pan which hung there. “Worms and weasels and cold and damp and – ”

“But supposing,” said Arrietty, “that *I* went out, like Eggletina did and the cat ate *me*. Then you and Papa would emigrate. Wouldn’t you?”

“Homily swung round again, this time towards Arrietty; her face looked very angry. “I shall smack you, Arrietty Clock, if you don’t behave yourself this minute!”[[46]](#endnote-46)

But Arrietty persists,

“I bet the cat didn’t eat Eggletina. I bet she just ran away because she hated being cooped up . . . day after day . . . week after week . . . year after year. . . . Like I do!” she added with a sob.

“Cooped up!” repeated Homily, astounded.

Arrietty continues for the next paragraph or two, focussing particularly on her longing for company of her own age, and Homily, despite her need to cling to the security of the known and her own fears of the outside, understands the force of Arrietty’s feelings.

“The child is right,” she announced firmly. . . .

“You see, Pod,” went on Homily, “it was different for you and me. There was other families, other children . . . the Sinks in the scullery, you remember? And those people who lived behind the knife machine – I forget their names now. And the Broom-Cupboard boys. And there was that underground passage from the stables – you know, that the Rain-Pipes used. We had more, as you might say, freedom.’

And much to Arrietty’s surprise Homily suggests that the next time Pod goes borrowing he should take her with him. It’s now Pod who is cautious, but Homily overrules him.

“Suppose anything happened to you or me, where would Arrietty be – if she hadn’t learned to borrow?”

Pod stared down at his knees. “Yes,” he said after a moment. “I see what you mean.”

“And it will give her a bit of interest like, and stop her hankering.”

“Hankering for what?”

“For blue sky and grass and suchlike.”

So Arrietty does go borrowing with him the next time he goes out, but unbeknownst to Pod, is ‘seen’ by the boy and gets into conversation with him. Not only that, but she makes an arrangement with him to take a letter to the badger’s set to see if she can get in touch with Uncle Hendreary, which he does, and Arrietty is on tenterhooks while she waits for on opportunity to visit the boy again to see if there has been a reply. Homily notices, but again is not unsympathetic.

“I don’t know what’s come over you lately. Always idle. You don’t feel seedy do you?”

“Oh,” exclaimed Arrietty, “let me be!” And Homily for once was silent. “It’s the spring,” she told herself. “Used to take me like that sometimes, at her age.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

Finally an opportunity does arise, she manages to get upstairs to the night nursery to find out from the boy if there’s any answer from Uncle Hendreary. This time Pod does catch her, and orders her home. Once there he tells Homily what has happened and when they question her, the whole story about the letter spills out, and she explains how desperately she wanted to get in touch with other Borrowers, at the very least just to reassure herself that she and her parents weren’t the only Borrowers left in the whole world ( “…please understand. I’m trying to save the race!” “The expressions she uses!” said Homily to Pod under her breath, not without pride.[[48]](#endnote-48)) and the exchanges that follow are a mixture of reproach, understanding, even sympathy, and then fairly rapidly move on to more pragmatic considerations of the implications of what has happened and questions about what they are going to do.

“We’re in very grave danger, Arrietty, and you’ve put us there. And that’s a fact.”

“Oh Pod,” whimpered Homily, “don’t frighten the child.”

“Nay Homily,” said Pod more gently, “my poor old girl! I don’t want to frighten no one, but this is serious. Suppose I said to you pack up tonight, all our bits and pieces, where would you go?”[[49]](#endnote-49)

Arrietty, by her actions may have put the family in peril, may have ‘done wrong’, but she never loses the sympathy and understanding of her parents, Homily in particular, who understands where she’s coming from and her yearnings for a different life; and for the rest of the story, as things escalate and finally get out of hand, they never lay another word of blame on her head even as the final disaster approaches in which they are discovered and chased out of the house by rat catchers with smoke and gamekeepers’ boys with ferrets. Instead it is a question of the family pulling together in order to survive.

In both *The Borrowers* and *Carrie’s War* the discourse of the relationships between adults and children is a central element in the plot. In *Carrie’s War*, one might argue, it *is* the plot, for all that the ostensible plot involves lost wills and skulls being thrown into ponds and broken promises. In *The Borrowers* the plot is centrally about Arrietty’s meeting with the boy and the disastrous consequences that follow from that meeting, but the relationship between Arrietty and her parents continues to inform the story for the rest of the book.

Other examples in children’s literature abound. Look for instance at the evolving relationship between Anne, she of *Anne of Green Gables[[50]](#endnote-50)*and her adoptive parents, brother and sister Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert

Riding to the Rescue

Finally in this chapter I want to consider child adult discourse structures in which the intervention of the adult plays a climactic role in the plot. Two examples, superficially about as far apart as you could possibly imagine, Enid Blyton’s *Third Year at Malory Towers[[51]](#endnote-51)* and Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother[[52]](#endnote-52)*. One of the story strands in *Third Year* features Bill – real name Wilhelmina – another of Blyton’s characters who refuses to conform with socially constructed gender roles. She arrives at school on her horse, Thunder, which she is able to keep there, and immediately makes it clear where her priorities lie.

“I wouldn’t have come if they hadn’t let me bring Thunder. I shall have to look after him too, even if it means missing some of my lessons.”[[53]](#endnote-53)

The problem is that her mind is so dreamily pre-occupied with the animal that she fails to concentrate in class and soon runs into conflict with her teachers, the strict Miss Peters in particular, who as well as being their class teacher is also the riding mistress. When, on the first Monday of term, Miss Peters catches Bill not paying attention she sets about her in no uncertain terms.

“Wilhelmina!” said Miss Peters at last. “Did you hear a word of *any*thing of what I have just said?”[[54]](#endnote-54)

. . . and continues in like vein for a couple of pages. Having thus established the already somewhat antagonistic relationship between Bill and Miss Peters, Blyton picks up on it in a later chapter headed ‘Bill and Miss Peters’[[55]](#endnote-55) where the conflict escalates and ‘ Miss Peters began to punish Bill in the way that she resented and hated most.’[[56]](#endnote-56), keeping her in to catch up with her lessons, and when she argues back, forbidding her to visit Thunder. It is a prohibition which Bill starts to ignore. Things build to a climax when Bill begins to get worried that the horse is not well. Finally, when she is absent from lessons, Miss Peters catches her with the horse, and tells her that the horse will be sent home, a scene which is overheard by Darrell, Blyton’s main protagonist in the series. What Darrell also overhears, however, is Miss Peters comforting the horse after Bill has gone. Then it is confirmed that the horse really is ill and has colic, which can be fatal. The climax occurs when Bill, now desperate, sneaks out at night with Darrell to find the horse in pain and really ill; if it lies down it will die so they have to keep it walking. Darrell herself can’t ride well enough to go for the vet, so she will have to wake up Miss Peters regardless of the consequences. The teacher realises the seriousness of the situation and far from scolding the girls, rides off into the pouring rain to get the vet, which she duly does, and the horse is saved. She sends the girls to bed and stays up all night herself with the horse to make sure it is all right. And of course in the same moment the rift between teacher and girl is healed, and Bill herself is, by implication, forgiven.

(Bill) took Miss Peters’ hand in hers and held it tightly. “Miss Peters – I can never repay you. Never. But I’ll never forget tonight and all you did.”

Miss Peters patted Bill on the back. “That’s all right. I’m not asking for any repayment! I’m fond of Thunder too, and I knew how you felt. I’m not sending him home, Bill. You shall keep him.”

And, as in *Five on a Treasure Island* analysed above, the new relationship is signalled by the change in the name that Miss Peters calls her by, this time from the much despised Wilhelmina to the much preferred Bill.

*Little Brother* is a ‘young adult’ novel, and such novels are not by and large my focus in this book, but it so happens that this also has an ‘adult riding to the rescue’ structure not dissimilar to the one in the Blyton. The novel is set in present day San Francisco and features a scenario in which terrorists blow up the Bay Bridge[[57]](#endnote-57) and, immediately afterwards, the tunnel that takes the BART, the Bay Area Rapid Transport system, beneath the bay itself. The casualties run into the thousands. First person narrator, Marcus, a computer geek, and his friends, Van (Vanessa), Jolu, and Darryl, get caught up in the panicking crowds and Darryl gets stabbed. They struggle back onto the bridge itself where they are picked up by the Department of Homeland Security (the DHS) on suspicion of terrorism. They are held separately on what they later discover is Treasure Island[[58]](#endnote-58), without access to a lawyer, unable to contact their parents and subjected to pretty ‘severe’ interrogation. When Marcus asks about the wounded Darryl he’s told he doesn’t exist. After six days he, Van, and Jolu are released, enjoined to keep silent, and threatened with the death penalty if they don’t.

“You will never speak of what happened here to anyone, ever. This is a matter of national security. Do you know that the death penalty still holds for treason in the time of war?”[[59]](#endnote-59)

Of the ‘non-existent’ wounded Darryl there is no sign – Darryl’s dad, an ex-military man, goes to pieces completely. Darryl himself is to remain missing until the dénouement. The other three, unable to tell anyone in the adult population who might be able to do something about it, not even their parents, (and anyway ‘ “No one will believe us and no one will care.” ’[[60]](#endnote-60)) are on their own. Hiding behind an impenetrable code name, M1k3y, which only he, Van and Jolu know, Marcus proceeds to wage a cyber war on the authorities. He gathers internet followers. Between them they are able to totally screw up the large number of daily transactions requiring electronic confirmation of ID, the use cash machines and credit cards amongst them. In addition they plant false tracking information on unsuspecting passers-by, thus totally disrupting the surveillance of the authorities, until stop and search escalates to the point at which the entire city comes to a standstill; and they organise an impromptu a technically illegal but otherwise peaceful concert in one of the city parks to which the authorities respond with substantial amounts of pepper spray and the liberal use of truncheons. They are by now getting substantial press coverage, and of course everyone wants to know who M1k3y is. Throughout all of this the tension builds and builds, as does the increasing need to tell someone in the world of adults whom they can trust and who will actually believe them. In the meantime Marcus finds the burden of secrecy about his incarceration, about the ‘disappearance’ of Darryl, and about his M1k3y internet name, more and more difficult to handle. Doctorow establishes the climate of fear that pervades the novel right from the beginning, when Marcus is still being interrogated.

I had never, ever felt this bad or this scared before.[[61]](#endnote-61)

This is followed by the threat on his life, quoted above, that the Department makes when he is released. It is not long before his friends feel the pressure. Here’s Van,

“I want you to stop putting yourself at risk,” M1k3y

. . .

“Don’t use that name in public anymore,” I snapped

Van shook her head. “That’s just what I’m talking about. You could end up going to jail for this, Marcus, and not just you. Lots of people. After what happened to Darryl–”

“I’m doing this for Darryl!”

. . . .

“You think you’re going to stop them? You’re out of your mind. They’re the government.”[[62]](#endnote-62)

Then a bit later Jolu abandons him,

“I can’t live my life in perpetual terror.”

. . .

“You can’t declare war on the government of the USA. It’s not a fight you’re going to win.”[[63]](#endnote-63)

Finally, at a party of his most trusted internet allies, Marcus at last starts to unburden himself and tell others about what happened, about his incarceration, about Darryl’s disappearance, and about the threats made against them all. But still the threat remains.

“They say that if we ever tell anyone about this, they’ll arrest us and make us disappear. Forever.”[[64]](#endnote-64)

Even so, at least Marcus no longer has to carry the burden of secrecy on his own.

“I’m glad I finally told people. Any longer and I might have started to doubt my own sanity.”[[65]](#endnote-65)

They need to tell *someone*, but who? Certainly not the older generation,

“I know who *not* to trust: old people. Our parents. Grown-ups.

. . .

“Don’t trust any bastard over 25!”[[66]](#endnote-66)

… and ‘Don’t trust anyone over 25’ becomes a slogan for the whole group. Marcus already knows he can’t go to his dad, who has told him earlier,

“.. the occasional road stop is a small price to pay. This isn’t the time to be playing lawyer about the Bill of Rights. This is the time to make some sacrifices to make the city safe.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Eventually somebody turns up with a photo of them on the bridge just after the attack and the photo includes Darryl which proves that he was there, and finally he gets a message from Darryl himself, via another prisoner who has been released. Darryl *is* still alive. Marcus finds himself sobbing with relief, and at last tells his mother about his own incarceration and about his friend’s ‘disappearance’.

Mom took me in her arms, the way she used to when I was a little boy, and she stroked my hair, and she murmured in my ear, and rocked me, and gradually, slowly, the sobs dissipated.

I took a deep breath and Mom got me a glass of water. I sat on the edge of my bed and she sat in my desk chair and I told her everything.[[68]](#endnote-68)

It is as if Marcus has to become a child again to finally be able to cross the adult child divide. His mom turns out to know a crusading journalist, one Barbara Stratford, and it is to her, in one tiny sentence, that he reveals biggest secret of all, the secret that has made him the most wanted person in San Francisco.

“I’m M1k3y.”

It constitutes, for this reader at least, the emotional high point of the novel, and from here on out it is Barbara Stratford who determines the course of the remaining plot, who effectively rides to the rescue. Marcus is re-arrested and is being water-boarded when the State Troopers arrive – Barbara’s revelations have brought them in. The DHS is routed and they finally find Darryl curled up defensively in the corner of his cell in a dreadful state.

Both novels, then, feature adult child discourses each of which constitute a strong structural element in each of the plots. And indeed, again for this reader at least, Miss Peters’ intervention and in her case literal riding to the rescue, also constitutes the emotional high point of the Blyton. Despite the fact that the two novels couldn’t be further apart if you tried, the adult child discourse functions structurally in exactly the same way. In each case the situation that the protagonists find themselves in, whether they be the seventeen year olds of the Doctorow or the thirteen year olds of the Blyton, and whether their implied audiences are ‘young adults’ or children proper, requires adult intervention to resolve it.

In this chapter I have looked at four varieties of child adult discourses, and all of them play an important structural role in the texts. In Lemony Snicket’s *The Bad Beginning* the children’s success in outwitting Count Olaf actually *is* the plot, as is Peter Rabbit’s success in outwitting Mr McGregor in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. In *Five on a Treasure Island*, while the actual plot concerns the discovery of the treasure and the routing of the bad guys, the central motivation for the plot is the children’s need to prevent George’s father from selling the island in the first place, in which they are successful. In the positive corner we have Henry Huggins, who would never have been allowed to keep the dog were it not for the agreement of his parents, nor would his adventure with the multiplying guppies been possible without the support of his father and the advice of the kindly pet shop man and the kindly librarian. And Uncle Jim in *Winter Holiday* fulfils the roles of helper, supporter, and final rescuer, all of which are essential to the plot. In the ‘in between’ corner we have *Carrie’s War* in which the plot is at least as much about Carrie’s developing and changing relationship with Mr. Evans as it is about skulls in ponds and lost wills; and in *The Borrowers*, while at one level the plot is clearly about the discovery by the boy of the Borrowers’ home under the floorboards which will lead to them fleeing for their lives, it is also about Homily’s growing understanding of Arrietty’s needs to the extent that, though Arrietty’s contact with the boy has led to the disaster, neither parent ever blames her. As for adults riding to the rescue, the very title of my subsection says it all. In *Third Year at Malory Towers* the intervention of Miss Peters that effectively saves the life of Bill’s horse, Thunder, constitutes the major climax of the book, as indeed, it might be argued, is climax of *Little Brother* constituted by Marcus’s final confession to his mom about who he is, and the recruitment to his cause of the reporter Barbara Stratford. In both cases, it might be added, both climaxes are further strengthened by the fact that until the turning points, the adults in question have been seen in a negative light. Miss Peters has harried Bill about her failure to pay attention in class and to stop sitting there dreaming of Thunder, and the adults in *Little Brother* certainly fall into the category of ‘anyone over 25’, the category of the never to be trusted adult.

1. Bawden 1973 *Carrie’s War* p. 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Snicket 1999a [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ibid p.15 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. As may be gathered from Snicket’s description, a sauce containing garlic, olives, anchovies and tomatoes – or so the internet informs me! [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ibid p.44 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ibid pp. 45, 46 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Potter 1902 p.11 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Though here Peter’s naughtiness is clearly defined by his disobedience to his mother, naughtiness constitutes a discourse all of its own, and I shall be looking at that in Ch.?????????????????????????? [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Blyton 1942a p.104 There are clearly gender issues in this extract too, but I shall be discussing gender in a later chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. YA literature is a very different matter of course. There, adult hypocrisy is often a central element in the narrative. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Blyton 1942 p.175 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Some of David Rudd’s respondents told him that they always found Uncle Quentin the most frightening character in the *Famous Five* series (see Rudd 2000), and I remember feeling the same thing when I read them as a child, and I am sure that it is because, as I say, Uncle Quentin’s power is legitimated. It cannot be directly challenged – what he says goes, whereas the power of the villains, for all that they are adults, is only ever temporary. All the children have to do is to find them out and report them to the police, and their power is gone. Uncle Quentin’s power, by contrast, remains, and, this being series fiction, is in addition carried over from book to book. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Cleary 1950 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This, and the following quotes, ibid. pp 6 – 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ibid. pp 27/28 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. ibid. p. 46 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. A species of large invasive earthworm that has a deleterious effect on the growth of the trees and plants, growth that is dependent on slowly rotting vegetation, since it consumes that same said slowly rotting vegetation and thus dries out the soil – a particular problem in the temperate zones of North America. Thankyou *Wikipedia*. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ransome 1930 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ransome 1931 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ransome 1932 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ransome 1933 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ransome 1941 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ransome 1947 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. op. cit. pp. 178, 180 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Named after Norwegian Arctic explorer, Nansen’s boat; he wanted to confirm the theory of Arctic drift – the idea that the ice was in continuous motion across the North Pole. He built a boat strong enough to withstand the pressure of the ice, which he named *Fram*, kitted it out with enough supplies to last 5 years, and in 1893 off he set. The ship did indeed drift with the polar ice cap, and got a good way north, whereupon Nansen set out to ski to the pole itself, though he never got there. He and his fellow explorers set off back to Norway, getting back only a matter of days before the ship itself re-emerged from the ice. The whole expedition had taken three years. (Thankyou *Wikipedia*.) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. This, and the following exchanges all come from Ch XXI, ibid. pp.247-260 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ch XXIII ibid. p.269 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. ibid. p. 357 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Marryat 1847 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Rowling 1997 et seq. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. If I was being strict with myself I should say the *discourse* of real life because ‘real life’ is nothing if not a discourse that varies mightily from one situation and social milieu to another. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Bawden 1973 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Norton 1952 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. op. cit. p.23 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. ibid, all three quotes p.26 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. ibid. p.27 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. ibid pp. 28, 29 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. ibid p.117 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. ibid p.132 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. ibid p. 130 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. ibid p. 132 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. The latter two terms are Catherine Belsey’s (Belsey 1980) – the book as an artistic expression of the writer’s own creativity / view of the world / understanding of human motivation and psychology. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Indeed it might well be argued that they are still with us today – how else can you account, for instance, for the fact that no matter how many paperclips you buy, you are always short of them! [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. So called because the entrance to their home is a mouse-hole under the grandfather clock in the hall. As will be seen later, other Borrower families are also named in accordance with the same principles. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Fear not dear reader, she did survive and turns up in the second book in the series, *The Borrowers Afield* (Norton 1955) [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. ibid. The whole episode takes several pages, pp. 45-49 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. ibid. p.90 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. ibid. p.100 . [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. ibid. p.101 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Montgomery 1908 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Blyton 1948 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Doctorow 2008 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. op. cit. p.32 [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. ibid. p. 40 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. ibid. p. 61 (My cheapskate Dragon edition doesn’t have chapter numbers – it doesn’t even start each new chapter on a new page. It’s a shame that such publishers have such disrespect both for Ms. Blyton’s work and for her readers.) [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. ibid. p. 68 [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. As Doctorow is at pains to point out, this is not the famous Golden Gate Bridge, but the bridge that crosses the bay at a lower level, connecting the two halves of the city together. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Yes indeed, another ‘Treasure Island’, an artificial island in San Francisco bay, a one-time naval base – not to be confused with Alcatraz [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. ibid. p. 57 [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. ibid. p. 65 [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. ibid. p. 46 [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. ibid. p. 106 [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. ibid. p. 151 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. This, and the subsequent few quotes: ibid. pp. 157-159 [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. ibid. p. 159 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. ibid. p. 158 [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. ibid. p. 129 [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. ibid. p. 242 [↑](#endnote-ref-68)