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BIG ENOUGH TO LOOK AFTER YOURSELVES
Aspects of the Idyll in Children's Literature

> "Well, this time Daddy wants me to go to Scotland with him," said Mother. "All by ourselves! And as you are really getting big enough to look after yourselves now, we thought it would be rather fun for you to have a holiday on your own too"[1]

As I noted above, one of the discourses that informs our view of childhood is the child as an innocent being unsullied by adulthood, not concerned with adult concerns, not beset by adult worries, a being indeed who *should* be not concerned with adult concerns. Childhood is seen as being an idyllic time, forever lost but forever yearned for. And when that version of childhood is exemplified in adult literature, it is very much a case of look back in nostalgia. Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age*, (1895) provides a good illustration of this. In a series of self-contained little stories the anonymous first person narrator, often identified as Grahame himself, paints a picture of childhood where he and his brothers and sisters roam free and wild, always engaged in make believe play: as soldiers in battle – the English versus the French; as Cavaliers and Roundheads; as Arthurian knights; as acting out the adventures of Ulysses, as whatever takes their fancy. Two aspects of the book, two discourses if you like, are relevant to my purposes here. Firstly, and most pertinently, the childhood he describes is free of adult control and surveillance. Yes, aunts and governesses lurk in the background[2], but we only ever get to meet them very briefly. Amongst other things this is because, from the narrator's point of view, so far as adults are concerned: ' . . it is in the higher gift of imagination that they are so sadly lacking.'[3] When we get to meet adults in any more detailed way it is because they *do* share the children's gift of imagination. In the chapter entitled 'The Roman Road'[4] for instance, the narrator meets the Artist (Grahame's capitalisation), a landscape painter, and the child talks to him about his ideal city. The artist more than happily enters into the child's imaginative world and entirely shares his vision: the adult, in other words, enters into the child's world rather than the other way around.

The second feature of Grahame's idyll is its sense of timelessness. Nothing changes in the world of these children. Theirs is a life of the continuous present, 'the absorbing pursuit of the moment'[5]. Change does come, of course, and here it is when the oldest, Edward, has to leave the world of governesses and tutors and go away to school. And at the beginning of the book the narrator acknowledges that he is now an Olympian – his term for adults – and that, 'Somehow the sun does not seem to shine so brightly as it used; the trackless meadows of old time and shrunk and dwindled away to a few poor acres.'[6] But looking back it was Arcadian: 'I certainly did once inhabit Arcady.'[7]

Another childhood memoir, Alison Uttley's *The Country Child* (1931), evokes a similar sense of timelessness. The protagonist, Susan, seen by many as Uttley's fictionalised version of herself, is a farmer's daughter. Her world is not untrammelled by the real world of adults, and Uttley

describes the work of the farm and Susan's engagement with it in considerable detail. We are not spared the horrors, as here where a cow has fallen into a ditch: '… the cow's legs were twisted, and it moaned very softly.' It dies before they can pull it out and the knacker comes to collect it: 'it went down the hill with its legs sticking out, tragic and unreal…'[8] Susan is not indifferent to these things: when a foal is lamed, 'Susan's heart burst with sorrow', but still there was an unbreachable gap between the life of the child and that of the adult: '… between herself and the grown-ups existed a barrier she could never cross,'[9] the telling word in that quote being of course the word 'never'. Susan becomes the universal child – the book, note, is called *The* Country Child not *A* Country Child – who will never cross the boundary to adulthood. Uttley's discourse of childhood is not simplistic. She recognises that childhood has its own perceptions, its own feelings, its own unpleasantnesses, its own guilts, its own fears and terrors and, unlike Grahame, she describes them, whether it is long remembered guilt about once stealing from the village shop, or the unpleasantness of Susan's first day at school, or the terrors of coming home through the woods in the dark. But it is *Susan's* world rather than that of the adults around her, and it is, note, a rural world, as indeed is Grahame's: the natural world is omnipresent, the only changes are the changing seasons; and despite the terrors it remains an idyllic world, in which 'Every day was more beautiful than the last.'[10] The kitchen table is always replete with good food, and there is always a warm fire to sit beside, 'What more could they want?'[11] It is also, and crucially, an unchanging world: for all that the seasons change – Uttley takes us through all four – and for all that Susan goes to school for the first time, we have no sense that she is getting older. And even for the adults the world is timeless and unchanging. Here is Susan's father, Tom Garland, gazing at the stars: 'His father, his great-grandfather had stood there thinking the same thoughts…'[12] It is perhaps that sense that the world was once a stable place with the child as a stable presence within that stable world, a doubled stability if you will, that accounts for the, for some readers, almost unbearable nostalgia of the book.

From these adult memoires there emerge three discourses that interest me. The first discourse is that of self-sufficiency. These children live their own lives, separate from those of the adults around them. The adults role may be to supply food and shelter, but for the rest of the time these children are on their own, living and feeling their own lives, separated by Uttley's 'barrier that can never be crossed'. The second discourse is the one of timelessness. Time may pass, even the seasons may pass, but the children never grow any older. They live, rather, in a continuous present. The third and perhaps more minor discourse is what I might call the picture postcard tourist brochure discourse. In the two above examples the children inhabit a rural world with an omnipresent and generally benign nature, a world where the sun always shines and every day is more beautiful than the last. In our modern world we can perhaps only expect to find lovely scenery when we go on holiday. It doesn't necessarily need to be rural England but we want to go 'somewhere nice', and somewhere nice must include a nice setting, nice scenery of some sort or another.

<u>The discourse self-sufficiency and freedom from adult surveillance and control.</u>
The discourse of the idyll in *children's* fiction, when it occurs – and note as ever that I am emphatically not suggesting that it occurs in all children's literature – shares two of the discourses identified above, (sub-discourses I guess they should strictly be called, but to spell out the distinction each time, would, I suspect, rapidly become tedious for the reader; it certainly

would for the writer!), and they are the discourses of timelessness and of self-sufficiency. The picture postcard discourse is there, but comes a distant third. Let me start with the discourse of self-sufficiency, the discourse in which the child is free from adult surveillance and control.

Most children's books have a child protagonist / child protagonists (though there are of course plenty that don't), and the action of the books tends to be focused through the child characters rather than the adult characters, which means that, to a greater or lesser extent, they pursue their lives outside of adult control or surveillance, or at the very least manage to slip through the meshes of that adult control and surveillance.

It is in fact surprisingly rare for children to be entirely independent, and even more rare for them to be independent for the entire story. In most case there is some interaction with the adult world. Parents may be absent in the middle class worlds of Blyton or Ransome, but there are always cooks or housekeepers or farmer's wives out there in support, the difference being that those characters have much less authority over the children than do the parents proper and can be overruled if necessary. To illustrate my thesis I am going to look at three books where the children are entirely self-supporting and do survive without adult intervention for at least part of the story, but it is important to recognise that they are at one end of a spectrum that extends all the way from Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* to, shall we say, Nina Bawden's *Keeping Henry*.

To start then with *The Coral Island* (1858), one of the earliest examples. In it three boys, Jack, Ralph and Peterkin, are ostensibly the sole survivors of a shipwreck in the South Seas. (I call them boys, though they are respectively 18, 15, and 13) Their ship has been driven onto a reef then blown back off it again to sink in open water, so there is no conveniently surviving wreck filled with tools and provisions as there is in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the archetypal model for such stories. Ballantyne's boys are to discover wild hogs on the island but otherwise initially all they have is a telescope, an axe conveniently buried in the oar that had floated to the shore carrying them with it, and a small penknife with a broken blade. Ralph, the first person narrator reflects on their predicament (he's obviously been reading Robinson Crusoe!)

> "Oh," thought I, 'if the ship had only stuck on the rocks, we might have done pretty well, for we could have obtained provisions from her, and tools to enable us to build a shelter; but now – alas! alas! we are lost!"

He has said the last few words aloud, but the others respond much more positively. Here's Peterkin:

> "I have made up my mind that it's capital – first-rate – the best thing that ever happened to us, and the most splendid prospect that ever lay before three jolly young tars. We've got an island all to ourselves."[13]

Later, of course, they are to be visited by savages and cannibals, as are the requirements of the genre, and there is to be a long episode with pirates, but to start off with they do indeed have the island to themselves, and they proceed to make the most of it. They find shelter and discover

how to make a fire They find breadfruit and coconuts and yams and plums, they fish, they construct bows and arrows and use them to kill the hogs and the occasional passing pigeon for meat: in the words of one of the previewing chapter heading summaries they 'luxuriate on the fat of the land'[14]. Peterkin is much given to dancing with glee, and they strip off their clothes and plunge into the sea at every opportunity and generally have a great time.

Deserted islands are particularly useful when it comes to getting away from adult surveillance, so turning next to Enid Blyton, getting away from adults is exactly what the Famous Five do, and in *Five Run Away Together* they do it deliberately and it is a central part of the plot. The Famous Five, for those of you who have never met them, are Julian, Dick and Anne, and their cousin George, who's a girl, and her dog Timmy.[15] In this particular case the adults in question are the Stick family, Mrs Stick, her son Edgar, and her husband who turns up a little later in the story. The children have been left in their charge by George's parents when her mother is taken ill. (Since the Stick family are so clearly members of the criminal underclass one wonders why they have been employed by her parents in the first place, the real answer of course being that if they hadn't been employed by them there wouldn't have been a story, since they, of course, turn out to be the bad guys.) The children fall out with the Sticks and they decide to camp out on Kirrin Island, a little off-shore island with a ruined castle which George regards as being hers. Blyton describes in considerable detail the preparations the children make in order to become self-sufficient, and once on the island, describes their life there. Here's Julian at an early stage in the decision making process,

> "We shall be out of the reach of those horrible Sticks. We shall enjoy ourselves and have a marvelous time." [16]

First of all they raid the larder and George's mother's store of canned food:

> "That's the biggest problem solved – food," said Julian.'[17]

They take tins of water for drinking. They take bedding and a little spirit stove for cooking on, and last but not least, the tin opener, and off they set. Says Julian:

> "I feel like a prisoner escaping to freedom!" [18]

And once they get to the island they set up house in a convenient cave and are basically totally self-sufficient.

> The children all felt very happy. *They were on their own*.'[19] (my emphasis)

The message couldn't be plainer.

The two examples I have discussed so far fit fairly clearly into the 'childhood as an enchanted place' discourse. Ballantyne's boys take one look at the coral island and are promptly delighted with the independence and freedom, the 'splendid prospect' that it promises; and the Five set off

for Kirrin Island with the sure foreknowledge of the independence and freedom, the 'marvellous time' that it will provide. In other respects both islands also meet the requirements of that other, more conventional conception of the idyllic, what one might call the tourist brochure idyllic, the sea, the sun, the beautiful scenery – the only thing that's missing are the Piña-coladas. So let me turn next to a context couldn't be further from tourist brochure idyllic if it tried, a storm in the North Sea. Such is the setting for Arthur Ransome's *We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea*. The story involves the four Walker children, John, Susan, Titty and Roger, whom those familiar with Ransome's oeuvre will have already met in *Swallows and Amazons* and other earlier books in the series. So far as the ages of the children are concerned, from the available evidence we may guess that John, the oldest, is about fourteen. The only thing we know for certain is that Roger, the youngest, is nine.[20] They are on their own on a small cutter, 'a sailing vessel . . . a small single-masted boat, fore-and-aft rigged, with two or more headsails and often a bowsprit' (Wikipedia is ever so helpful on these occasions![21]) and the plot initially finds them adrift in fog in the North Sea, having lost their moorings in Harwich. They get the sails hoisted and the boat under way and carefully manoeuvre it out to sea to prevent it becoming stuck on the sandbanks, but no sooner have they done that when a storm blows up, and the bulk of the rest of the book consists of an account of their first struggling to and then succeeding in controlling the boat and weathering the storm, during which time they actually cross the North Sea, and end up safely in Flushing in Holland. And as he gets control of the boat John finds that his mood is decidedly upbeat – first of all in the fog:

> John, in spite of being able to see nothing but fog, …. in spite of the awful mess they were in, was surprised to find that a lot of his worry had left him. The decision had been made. He was dead sure it was the right decision. … in spite of all his troubles, (he) was for the moment almost happy.[22]

.. then later in the night in the storm when again he has got the boat under control and he takes a quick glance into the cabin to check that all is well:

> He could just see Roger's feet rolled in a blanket, and a lump of red-tanned sail that Susan had used to stop him from sliding about in his bunk. Titty was out of sight in the fore-cabin. And here was poor old Susan asleep in the corner of the cockpit. All three of them were asleep. He was back at the tiller, leaning on it again. He took another look at the compass card under the dim yellow glow, wedged himself against the cockpit coaming with a foot against the opposite seat, looked up at the part of the sky that was full of stars, and a little ashamedly admitted to himself that he was happy.[23]

All is indeed well, the other three children are sleeping, John is master of all he surveys and nary an adult in sight.

<u>Home Building: Establishing the Domestic.</u>

In the discourse of self-sufficiency, being away from the adults, however, is not the whole story. The other aspect of the discourse is the necessity it brings with it to establish an alternative place to live, and this leads to what Rudd, in reference to Blyton, calls 'home building activities'[24]. These home building activities often constitute a substantial part of the narrative, and are perhaps more important than might initially appear to be the case since, as I shall argue, they have a bearing on the establishment of an alternative identity for the characters, an alternative identity whose dominant characteristic is the assertion of independence, whether it be from a previous life that they want to get away from, or merely from the adult defined life of their normal existence.

An early example can be found in Captain Marryat's *The Children of the New Forest* (1847), the children in question being Edward, Humphrey, Alice and Edith, aged 13, 12, 11 & 8 respectively. The book starts in the month of November in 1647 – Marryat is specific – and we are thus in the English civil war, a little before the execution of the king in 1649 – and we follow the fortunes of the children for three or four years, at which point the narrative then speeds through to the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Before the story starts the children's father, Colonel Beverley, has been killed fighting on the royalist side and their mother has died of the resultant grief she feels at his loss, as females are wont to do in such novels, and in the first pages of the novel their home, Arnwood, is burnt to the ground by the Parliamentarians. There is a maiden aunt who is also disposed of early in the narrative and the children end up in the care of Jacob Armitage, an old family retainer who, fulfilling a promise made to their father, has taken the them to the safety of his cottage in the forest – as Marryat has it, 'embosomed in the lofty trees'[25] – a replacement home for them that will come to provide them with all the succour and sustenance implied by the verb, and where for their own protection they will have to change their name to Armitage so that they can be passed off as part of Jacob's family. Edward, recognising perhaps that the burning of his home threatens his identity, is himself initially reluctant, wanting to stay and fight those who have taken his home from him,

> "It is *my* house that those Roundheads have burned down," said Edward, shaking his fist (my emphasis).[26]

Jacob helps them settle in, recognising the need to 'teach them to be useful' but also that 'they must learn to provide for themselves'[27] very necessary as it turns out since Jacob himself is to die a bit further into the novel. No sooner are they in the cottage than Marryat establishes the domestic as, with Jacob's encouragement, the children set about preparing their first meal.[28] Alice volunteers to be cook, 'if you will show me how,' and the rest of the children help. It is a collaborative enterprise. There are vegetables, some venison, and there is water in a nearby spring. Edward . . .

> . . . took up a pail and went out to the spring.
> The potatoes were peeled and washed by the children – Jacob and Edward cut the venison into pieces – the iron pot was cleaned – and then the meat and potatoes put with water into the pot and placed on the fire.

Humphrey peels the onions, they are thrown into the pot, and the whole lot is set to boil. Then says Jacob,

> "Now, you see you have cooked your own dinner; ain't that pleasant?
> "Yes," cried they all; "and we will eat our own dinners as soon as it is ready."

They find plates on the dresser, knives in the drawer, Edith gets the salt from the cupboard,

> . . . and Humphrey cried out, as he very often did, "Now this is jolly!"

Remembering of course that, since these are the children of the wealthy, these domestic tasks are well beyond their ken: Jacob has to teach them the basics:

> While the dinner was cooking Jacob amused the children by showing them how to put things in order; the floor was swept, the hearth was made tidy. He showed Alice how to wash out a cloth and Humphrey how to dust the chairs. They all worked merrily while little Edith stood and clapped her hands.

As for the cottage itself:

> It contained a large sitting room, or kitchen, in which were a spacious hearth and chimney, tables, stools, cupboards, and dressers; the two bedrooms which adjoined it were now appropriated, one for Jacob and the other for the two boys; the third, or inner bedroom, was arranged for the two girls.

Outside there are outhouses of one sort and another, and a garden. They are thus now established in their new home, complete with its own furniture, where they can be sheltered, safe and warm; and they have learned to keep the place clean and they have cooked their first meal. Once settled Edward will learn to hunt, they will acquire a cow which will keep them supplied with milk, they will acquire chickens to keep them supplied with eggs, and they will grow vegetables in the cottage garden. Though Jacob is supporting them at this stage, in due course they will indeed be entirely self-sufficient and able, in Jacob's words, 'to provide for themselves'; and 'jolly' though it may be, at the wider metaphorical level their home in the forest will become their very identity, they will indeed be 'The Children of the New Forest'.

It may seem a far cry from surviving in hidden in the New Forest while the English civil war is raging around you to playing detective in the cosy domestic world of the 1950's, but the discourse of home building occurs in Enid Blyton too. Examples abound in the Secret Seven series, and in one such, *Secret Seven Fireworks* (1959), home building becomes a whole little dramatic narrative of its own and as it unfolds there are some striking structural parallels

between the two texts. The seven children who constitute 'The Secret Seven' always meet in the shed at the bottom of the garden belonging to two of them, brother and sister Peter and Janet, and the shed essentially constitutes the home of the Seven. The other major characters in this little narrative are Jack from next door, another member of the gang, and Jack's sister Suzie who is excluded from it. In this book we discover that there is a problem, their shed has been occupied, by onions, and there follows what I cannot resist thinking of as the Battle of the Onions[29]. It is Suzie who gleefully reveals the occupation,

> "I know you can't use Peter's shed for meeting places.. … "I saw your shed full of onions! *Onions!*" … "It'll be a pretty smelly meeting, sitting on top of all those onions."

… and she recognises that their loss of a home threatens their very existence, all that's left is the initials on the door.

> The Secret Seven's falling to bits.
> It doesn't meet any more.
> The only thing that's left of it
> Is the silly S.S on the door!

The Beverley children in the Marryat have to establish a *new* home since theirs has been burnt out, but the Seven still have the option of expelling the enemy onions and re-occupying their old one. The Beverley children have to change their name in line with their change of home, the Seven can reclaim their name by reclaiming their home. The onions, the proletarian ground troops, if you'll pardon the pun, will have to be thrown out.

> ". . . we'll have to turn all those onions out and put them somewhere else" . . .

… and lest I should be accused of anthropomorphism, Peter got there first when he addressed the onions directly when they roll out of the door:

> "You wait till Saturday!" he said. "You'll have to get out of here, and make room for the Secret Seven."

Victory is not yet theirs, however, since it turns out that the onions have their own Cromwell, in the form of the gardener, who now intervenes. He doesn't want 'his precious onions' moved. Echoing Edward Beverley's claim to ownership, 'it's my house', Peter points out that he also has prior territorial claims:

> ".. this really is *our* shed. We meet here. You know we do." (my emphasis)

The gardener counters with the argument that such claims are merely historical,

> "Not for weeks you haven't"

But Peter has invoked a higher authority, his father, the ipso facto ruling monarch of this little domain, who has said that the onions can go into the summer house, and the gardener, routed, 'walked off, his rake over his shoulder', doubtless muttering imprecations about what he'd like to do to those little perishers given half a chance! One might say that the only difference between the two books is that the re-establishment of the power of the monarch took 11 years in the 17th century but only took a few minutes in Peter's back garden. Once the occupying onions are out the home-building proper can start and they can hold their first meeting.

> "Now we'll go back to the shed and hold our meeting," said Peter. "We'll get a few boxes to sit on, and after the meeting we'll clear up the shed and make it neat and tidy again."

Collectively they get the boxes and an old table. They clean the place out and finally they have their home.

> The shed looked very neat and tidy now, swept out, and with sand sprinkled all over the floor by Peter, except where an old rug lay, given by Pam's mother.. Two shelves were up, and on them stood some plastic cups[30] and a plate or two. There was also a tin of toffees and a second tin in which were home-made biscuits made by Peter's mother.[31]

In both books, then, the domestic has been established, neatness and tidiness, cleanliness, furniture, food, cutlery and crockery, shelter, in a word all the accoutrements of home, and as I have said, with home comes confirmation of identity; but in both books, note, that achievement, that identity has had to be fought for. And though clearly Peter's fight is trivial, and the fight of the Beverley children is deadly serious, the latter also turn it into a game, or have it turned into a game for them by Jacob who '*amused the children* by showing them how to put things in order' (my emphasis); and Peter and his gang could just as easily have come to the conclusion that the whole thing was 'jolly' as did Humphrey Beverley.

One example from the 1840's, one from the 1950's, so let me conclude with one from 2012. Cory Doctorow's young adult novel, *Pirate Cinema* where home building is again important in establishing a sense of identity for the main characters. The story, briefly, is that Trent McCauley, the sixteen year old first person narrator of the book, has effectively run away from home when his compulsive habit of illegally downloading material from the internet in order to create his own mash-ups of the work of a film star / director of yesteryear, gets the internet access of the whole family cut off for a year, which means that his dad can't run his phone answering service, his virtually housebound mum can't claim her disability benefit, and his sister, Cora, can't study for her A levels. In the exposition of the novel Trent, with the collective help of new found friends, will establish for himself a new home which, as in the previous two examples, will provide him with shelter, warmth, comfort, food, security, and most importantly a new sense of belonging, effectively a new identity. Arriving at Victoria coach station and

finding himself on his own he is picked up by one Jem Dodger, as artful as his Dickensian namesake, and a member of a self-identified little gang who call themselves the Jammie Dodgers, c.f. of course the little gang that call themselves The Secret Seven above. Together they start to establish a squat in an empty pub in Bow in London's East End. Trent's first sighting of the pub, the last remaining building still standing amongst the surrounding demolition, its only neighbours being the local drug dealers, does not fill him with any sort of enthusiasm, but Jem is considerably more up-beat.

> "Beautiful, innit? Wait'll you see inside. An absolute tip, but it will scrub up lovely."[32]

Jem explains about squatters' rights, that you can't be thrown out if you can establish residency, so the first thing they do is change the locks. Then they have to tackle the smell – not onions in this case but . . .

> . . . old piss and booze and smoke and shite. It was not a good smell. I gagged a bit, then switched to breathing through my mouth.[33]

. . . and which they will deal with by scattering coffee grounds all over the place. Meanwhile Jem lays out a timetable and establishes an agenda.

> "I'm going to clean out this place . . . move in some beds and that, get the electricity and gas working, and I am going to live here for as long as I can.
> . . .
> We'll get big comfy sofas, clean up the kitchen and get the water going, stick up a Freeview antenna, find some WiFi to nick, it'll be a bloody palace."[34]

. . . which is basically what they proceed to do, Jem bringing in some of his mates, several of whom will end up living there. They coin a name for the place, 'Zeroday', and refurbish it 'from roof to cellar'[35] One of them turns out to be a great cook, and within a fortnight or so:

> It was all brilliant, sitting in our cozy candlelit pub room . . . we had all the food we could eat and we were getting on well with our neighbours . . . a utopian palace in Bow.[36]

Trent acquires a girlfriend, and the home-building continues, and in an extended sequence at the beginning of Chapter 3 Trent waxes lyrical. He has indeed found a new home, which he describes in loving detail, and with it a new family and thus essentially a new identity as a member of the Jammie Dodgers. Here, to finish this section, is a sample:

> One morning, I woke up and realised that I was *home* (his emphasis) . . . Jem was a pretty fair artist, and he'd taken to decorating the walls with gigantic, detailed charcoal murals . . . we sanded and

> painted the floor a royal blue and it was as smooth as tile under my bare feet. The dishes were drying in the clean rack beside the sink . . . the fridge was full . . . the sofa had a Cecil shaped dent in it that I settled into with a sigh, and the room still smelled faintly of oregano and garlic from the epic spaghetti sauce we'd all made the night before . . .

. . .and when his girlfriend comes downstairs and snuggles up next to him on the sofa

> . . . there and then, cuddling the woman I loved, in the pub I'd made over with my own hands and with the help of mates who were the best friends I'd ever had, I realized that this was the family I'd always dreamed of finding. This was the home I'd always dreamed of living in.[37]

Timelessness

Next let me examine the discourse of timelessness. It is, remember, a discourse in which the characters never seem to get any older no matter how much time has passed. Perhaps the most obvious place to look for examples of this is series fiction, fiction where from book to book the characters must remain the same. Again Enid Blyton comes most immediately to mind. In the first of the 'Famous Five' series, *Five on a Treasure Island* (1942a), we are informed that, of the four children and a dog who constitute the five, Julian is 12, George and Dick are 11, and Anne is the youngest, at 10. As for how old Timmy[38] the dog is, goodness knows. The problem for series children's fiction, of course, is that for the series to work, the children have to have the same relationship with the adult world in each book. This means that essentially their ages *have* to remain the same. If the Famous Five children were to age in accordance with the publication dates, by the time the final one came round in 1963 the characters would have been 31, 30, and 29 respectively, and Timmy would have been a very old doggie indeed. And of course such aging would make nonsense of the entire premise of the books, which is that the children solve the crimes and avert the disasters that are threatening the adults around them, but which they, the adults, are unable to solve.

Initially in the series Blyton makes concessions to the realities of time passing: *Five Run Away Together* (1944), the third in the series, is set, as is the first, in the summer holidays, and logic of course suggests that the children must be a year older, and Blyton concedes this. Julian yells, ' "Golly you've grown." ' at George when they first meet at the station; and the narrator continues, 'They all had. They were all a year older and a year bigger..' [39] But in the same book we are told that the nasty child, Edgar Stick, 'seemed about thirteen or fourteen', i.e. the same age as Julian. But Edgar certainly doesn't behave like a thirteen or fourteen year old: he puts out his tongue at George, and sings "Georgie-porgie pudding and pie"[40] at her, a behaviour, one would think, more likely to occur with younger children, children perhaps of the same age as the readership who so enjoy the books, and if Edgar behaves younger than Blyton tells us he is, the implication is that Julian too is younger than she implies he is. By the time we get to *Five on Kirrin Island Again* (1947), the sixth book, set in yet another summer holidays, the characters still discuss with each other how much they've grown, but there is no mention of age per se, and

by the time we get to *Five Fall into Adventure* (1950), the ninth book, there is no discussion at all of how much they each might have grown, let alone of being any older than last time.

Richmal Crompton's 'Just William' books provide another example. I can do no better than to quote the Wikipedia article on the series[41]:

> Published over a period of almost fifty years, between 1921 and 1970, the series is notable for the fact that the protagonist remains at the same eleven years of age, despite each book being set in the era it was written in.

We first discover that William is 11 in the story entitled *William and the White Satin*, which is to be found in the first book to be published, *Just William*,(1922)[42] and, as the Wikipedia article suggests, he never ages. It follows, of necessity, that his gang, known as The Outlaws, must also stay the same ages, and so indeed must his older brother and sister, Robert and Ethel, both somewhere in their late teens, early 20s, (their age varies a bit from story to story). Ethel has an infinite set of admirers, and Robert is always about to go to college or is falling in love with, for example, ' "..the most beautiful girl I've ever seen" '[43]

It is interesting to note, in parenthesis, that a lot of adult series fiction follows the same genre rules with regard to unchanging relationships. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, for instance, there is an unchanging relationship between Holmes and Watson, an unchanging relationship between Holmes and his housekeeper, Mrs Hudson, an unchanging relationship between Holmes and Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard, and an unchanging relationship between Holmes and his brother Mycroft. But age, of course, is not an issue. In children's series fiction age *is* an issue, the children must always have the same relationships with the adults around them, which means that their ages *have* to remain the same from book to book. It follows, of course, that if the children have to remain the same from book to book, then so do the adults. Uncle Quentin must continue to be a rather cold, rather threating presence lurking behind the secret scientific work that he is involved in and Aunt Fanny must continue to be his ameliorating opposite. Mr Brown must continue to hide behind his newspaper and suffer the depredations of his walking catastrophe son, Mrs Brown must continue to do the sewing, Ethel must continue having admirers, Robert must continue to fall for the most beautiful girl in the world, and the do-gooding villagers must continue to meet in the village hall to do good.

This sort of series fiction may, as the Wikipedia article suggests, depict a changing world, but it is only a superficially changing world. *William and the Evacuees* (1940) for example, is clearly set during the Second World War: in one of the stories the village children want to be ''vacuees' so that they can have presents and a party like the evacuees themselves have had; and in another story in the same book William inadvertently discovers a spy drawing up plans of an airfield. Similarly with the Famous Five: in *Five on Finniston Farm*, the eighteenth in the series written in 1960, the children bump around the farm in the back of a Landrover, but back in 1942 they didn't even have Landrovers, and the children are picked up from the station in a pony-trap.[44]

So far so straightforward, but in the Famous Five series, on more than one occasion, Blyton takes it one stage further, and makes change, or rather the threat of change and the thwarting of that

threat, a major factor in the motivating structure of the plot. And given Blyton's superficial reputation as a superficial churner out of pot boilers featuring totally unrealistic children in totally unrealistic situations, it is perhaps surprising to discover (though Blyton is always full of surprises) that the threat of that change is anchored in very real financial circumstance. Thus, in *Five on a Treasure Island*, following on from the exchange which I quoted at the top of the chapter, the parents discuss where the children are to go while they, the parents, are off gallivanting (something which they don't seem yet to have thought about!), a major determining factor is financial, as Father explains:

> "I had to see Quentin's wife in town the other day, about a business matter – and I don't think things are going too well for them. Fanny said that she would be quite glad if she could have of one or two people to live with her for a while, to bring a little money in."[45]

Once they get there it turns out that it is not the first time in history that the Kirrin[46] family have been in straightened financial circumstances, as George tells the others.

> "It's like this," she said. "Years ago my mother's family owned nearly all the land around here. Then they got poor, and had to sell most of it. But they could never sell that little island, because nobody though it worth anything, especially as the castle had been ruined for years."[47]

The plot of the book then concerns hidden treasure which the bad guys suspect may be in the dungeons of the castle, which leads them to offer to buy the island. Given their current need for money, Uncle Quentin and Aunt Fanny are tempted. George herself takes a different view, not least because she has been promised the island when she grows up and already regards it as hers. Her function in the novel then becomes that of ensuring that they retain the island, thus effectively resisting change and maintaining the status quo. This is done, of course, by the discovery of the treasure by the children, which means that the island doesn't have to be sold after all.

In an almost identical exposition in *Five on Finniston Farm*, the Philpots, who own the farm, are also taking in boarders because they are short of money. Here's Mrs Philpot:

> "I expect your aunt told you the farm's not doing too well, and she kindly said she'd send you here for two weeks. I've some other boarders too – an American and his son…"[48]

The American lodger, always a favourite nationality for Blyton's bad guys, has already been buying some of the valuable antiques that are about the farm, and has cast covetous eyes over a warming-pan and bed warming bricks. Great Granddad, the spokesman for continuity, explodes, but Mrs. Philpot remonstrates with him, reminding him of the pressing financial constraints that the farm is struggling under.

> "You thought you could buy 'em, I suppose!" suddenly shouted old Great-Grand-dad . .
> (He continues)
> "I don't like this selling of things that have been in our family for donkeys' years! That I don't! And . . ."
> "Now, now Grand-dad, don't excite yourself," said Mrs. Philpot, in her gentle voice. "Surely it's better to sell old things that we shall never use, in order to buy a new set of tools, or wood to mend the barns?"[49]

The argument in a nutshell. Again the resolution of these problems reverts to genre, resulting, as it happens, in two totally identical plots: in *Five on a Treasure Island* the bad guys want to buy Kirrin Island because they suspect there may be hidden gold in the dungeons of the castle – there is; and in *Five on Finniston Farm* the bad guys want to buy the land which contains the ruined castle because they suspect there may be hidden gold in the dungeons – there is. Continuity emerges triumphant, Great Granddad is jubilant and, in words that echo Tom Garland's in in *The Country Child*, sends the American packing.

> "HA! NOW YOU LISTEN TO *ME*!" bellowed Great-Grand-dad. "This farm belongs to ME, and my GRANDSON, and it'll go to my GREAT GRANDSON sitting yonder. A finer farm there never was, and my family's had it for hundreds of years. . ." [50]

And at a more serious level that is exactly what is at issue. When Blyton was writing in 1960 the rural economy was changing. The big corporations were beginning to take over and the small family farm was indeed under threat. The family may have owned their farm for 'hundreds of years', but they would not own it for very much longer, not unless they bought up the next farm, and the farm after that, and within 10 years put the whole lot down to oil seed rape and become Philpots Rape Inc.

It should also be noted, of course, that if the maintenance of an unchanging world *within* the novels is an issue, it is also an external imperative, i.e. the requirement for series fiction (echoed of course in public expectation and the consequent pressure from the publishers) that the formula not change from novel to novel. So in one sense the characters *can't* change, and other things have to remain in place too. Kirrin Island can't be sold because it must still be there in the next novel. And the authors themselves have to keep the production line rolling. Even Conan Doyle, 'by popular demand', had to rescue Sherlock Holmes from apparently certain death at the Reichenbach Falls[51] and go on to write a further 30 or so stories featuring his famous detective. Any series fiction writer is faced with the same problem, and presumably the same pressures.

So far I will perhaps have given the impression that all series fiction features unchanging characters, but such is not the case. In the *Malory Towers* series, which consists of just 6 books, Blyton's protagonist, and some have argued, avatar, Darrell Rivers,[52] grows from being a cheerful 12 yr. old into a no less cheerful but much more responsible 18 yr. old, head of the

school. Here she is at the beginning of *Last Term at Malory Towers* (1951) reflecting on the fact.

> 'My last term! thought Darrell, as she got ready to go downstairs. My very last term! I shall be eighteen on my next birthday – I'm almost grown-up!'[53]

And with a few pages she was remembering what she was like when she started, back in *First Term at Malory Towers* (1946)

> 'It seems no time at all since I was first setting out, six years ago, a little shrimp of twelve.'[54]

She is, as I say, aware of her responsibilities; she has learned to control her temper; no longer can she play tricks on the teachers, those have to be left to her little sister, Felicity, even though Darrell can still enjoy hearing about them. By comparison with Felicity she is now 'sedate'. As they arrive at the beginning of term:

> Felicity plunged into the milling crown and was lost. Sally and Darrell went more sedately, as befitted two sixth-formers.[55]

A more modern example is Rowling's Harry Potter, who, like Blyton's Darrell Rivers, grows from being a nervous if excited new boy of eleven years old in *Harry Potter and the Philosophers Stone* who, confronted for instance with the task of getting onto platform nine and three-quarters at Kings Cross has 'no idea how to do it' and is 'trying hard not to panic', and having surmounted that first barrier, so to speak, and is on the train being befriended by Ron Weasley, is confronted by his own ignorance and bets that he'll be 'the worst in the class.'[56] By the time we get to *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, by contrast, Harry is a very confident seventeen year old and has become *the* decision maker, telling his various helpers what must be done: 'He heard the authority in his own voice.'[57] And by the time we get to the end of the book and with all the idealism of late adolescence, he recognises that he has to sacrifice his own life in order to save everyone else's. 'Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into death's welcoming arms'[58]

<u>The Tourist Brochure</u>

Finally a brief look at examples of the more conventional notion of the idyll, what I have called the tourist brochure idyll of sun, sea and sandwiches. It too is to be found in children's literature, whether it is on a desert island, in the rolling Dorset countryside, or in a cityscape at night. Here are three examples from, respectively, *Masterman Ready*, *Five on Finniston Farm*, and *Pirate Cinema*, in the case of the latter an extract where Trent and his sister are driving through London at night in the back of a taxi.

> Perhaps a more lovely scene could scarcely be imagined …. dazzling white sand … the water was a deep blue …. the reefs, which extended for miles from the beach … crowds of gannets and

> man-of-war birds … which rippled the water or bounded clear of it in their gambols … The line of the horizon, far out at sea, was clear and unbroken.[59]
>
> Below them spread the Dorset country-side, shimmering in the heat of the day, the distance almost lost in a blue haze . . . Dick, gazing down into the valley, where cornfields waved in the little breeze . . . They all went up the little winding lane, where red poppy heads jigged about in the breeze . . . [60]
>
> It seemed she knew the city better than I did, and she excitedly called out the name of each bridge as we passed it . . . and I found myself sharing in her excitement. Something about all that steel and fairy archways, lit up in the night, over the lapping black water, everything prismed by the rain spattering the windows.[61]

Conclusion

In this chapter I have taken aspects of the discourse of the idyll of childhood that are to be found in the culture at large, and extrapolated them into children's literature itself to see where that took me. I have looked for paradigm examples to illustrate my points rather than at a wider range of children's literature. In the case of the discourses of self-sufficiency and timelessness, in the examples that I have discussed, those discourses have an important structural function in the development of the narrative.

Looking firstly at the discourse of independence from adult surveillance, it is in one sense a discourse of all children's literature, where by very definition the focus is inevitably on the children rather than on the adults, but here I have chosen three examples where that independence is near total. In two of them, the Ballantyne and the Blyton, the children's independence is emphasised by the fact that both books feature children taking up residence on islands that are essentially deserted, i.e. deserted by adults, and thus entirely without adult surveillance, and which coincide perhaps more obviously with conventional notions of the idyllic. In both cases the discourse is an integral part of the plot: in *Coral Island* part of the narrative, particularly in the early part of the book, is actually about surviving without adult support, even adult support at one remove in the form of a wreck that provides the boys with a supply of tools and livestock, and Ballantyne gives an account of what they have to do in order to establish that self-sufficiency Blyton offers an equivalent account, describing how the children gather together provisions and get a boat to take them to the island, and once there to set up house. In neither case is the discourse the major discourse of the plot, but in the case of *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, I would argue that it is the dominant discourse of the entire book, it is what the book is *about*: it is about how the children survive and navigate the boat across the North Sea, or indeed whether they will be able to manage it at all, without any adult help whatsoever. And the discourse at one and the same time constitutes the emotional trajectory of the book too. The reader, or this reader at any rate, feels a palpable sense of relief once they arrive in Flushing and are met by the pilots, and subsequently by their father himself.

I have also argued – picking up on Rudd's suggestion[62] and running with it – that the discourse of home-building and the establishment of the domestic is an important element in the narrative of self-sufficiency that is to be found in all three books, and I have even gone so far as to suggest that home-building plays a crucial role in the establishment of the identity of the characters, whether it is the identity of a little gang of children solving crimes in the adult world that the adults are unable to solve, or the identity of a family of children disenfranchised by the historical circumstances in which they find themselves, or the identity of a group of teenagers fighting for the rights of individual creativity against the increasing powers of regulation and constraint being enacted by a government at the behest of the vested interests of the mainstream entertainment industry; but in all three cases it is an identity that is in counter-distinction to the dominant identities offered to them by the adult world within which they would be otherwise contextualised; and Blyton, Marryat, and Doctorow respectively devote a fair chunk of the narrative to describing the process of that establishment of the domestic.

Looking next at the discourse of timelessness and the sense of a permanent present, it is most clearly identifiable in series fiction. Both the form and the content of the Famous Five's adventures are totally dependent upon a fixed relationship between the adults and the children in the books, and it is a narrative necessity that they not age, if they did they simply could not go on having the same sort of adventures. The same is true of William. For William to cause the chaos he does from book to book, it is again a narrative necessity that his family relationships remain unchanging. But in my final two examples, *Five on a Treasure Island* and *Five on Finniston Farm*, the discourse of the permanent present is not just a necessary narrative prerequisite, it becomes part of the plot itself, in so much as the plot involves a threat to that permanent unchanging present that has to be resisted and successfully overcome. And again the discourse has its own emotional trajectory, lending weight to the emotional trajectory already inherent in the adventure genre itself.

Finally there is the discourse of the picture postcard idyll, whether it is sand sea and sun or the rolling English countryside or a cityscape at night. Since such descriptive discourses are clearly important in creating an idyllic feel to the book, it was necessary to pay them some attention, not least because it is those descriptive passages that most immediately come to mind when considering the idyllic in children's literature. But they do not otherwise have a narrative function, and it is discourses with a narrative function that are my central focus.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed examples of books where there is an absence of any adult with the ability to constrain or monitor the actions of the children, but in much children's literature adults are very much present and in a whole spectrum of relationships with the child characters, and the absent adult is but one end of the spectrum. It is to that spectrum that I next turn my attention.

[1] Blyton, Enid 1942a p.1

[2] We are, as will be clear enough, in the world of the Victorian English upper middle classes.

[3] ibid p.45

[4] ibid pp.110 - 121

[5] ibid p.169

[6] ibid pp. 11,12

[7] ibid p.12

[8] ibid pp.156, 157

[9] ibid p.157

[10] ibid p.163

[11] ibid p.217

[12] ibid p.66

[13] Ballantyne 1858 pp. 28, 29

[14] ibid p.112

[15] Interestingly for some reason the dog starts off being called Timothy in the first book of the Famous Five series, but by the time we get to this, the third book, his name has segued fairly permanently into Timmy.

[16] Blyton 1944 p.71

[17] ibid p.75

[18] ibid p.77

[19] ibid p.81

[20] In *Swallows and Amazons* (Ransome 1930 p.11) we are told that Roger is seven. We are never told the ages of the other children, though we may guess that there's about a year or so between each of the them, which would put John at twelve or thereabouts. In *We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea* we find John remembering an adventure in the earlier book and reflecting that 'the wild night in the dark on the lake had been a whole two years ago,' (Ransome 1937, pp 154/155)

[21] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cutter_(boat) And if you want to know what one looks like, go to Wikipedia, and in Lewis Carroll's words, 'look at the picture'.

[22] Ransome 1937 pp 143/144

[23] ibid pp 199/200

[24] Rudd 2000 p.184

[25] Marryat 1847 Ch. III

[26] ibid Ch. II

[27] ibid Ch. III

[28] ibid Ch. III – Marryat devotes the chapter to it.

[29] Blyton 1959 pp 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 21.

[30] I don't have an original edition, my copy is a Hodder & Stoughton paperback reprint, though re-write would be a better term, dating from 1972, and I'll lay odds that it was mugs in the original rather than plastic cups, in which case it would be one of the many disgraceful examples in which successive editions have quite arbitrarily changed Blyton's original texts in all sorts of ways (See Rudd 2000 for many further examples).

[31] This passage is almost identical to the one that Rudd found in *Look Out Secret Seven* Blyton 1962 and is characteristic of the series.

[32] Doctorow 2012 p.44

[33] ibid p.44

[34] ibid pp.47,48

[35] ibid p.62

[36] ibid pp. 76,79

[37] ibid pp. 123, 124

[38] Interestingly for some reason the dog starts off being called Timothy in the first book, but by the time we get to the third book his name has segued fairly permanently into Timmy.

[39] ibid pp.10 & 15

[40] ibid p.21

[41] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_William_(series)

[42] Crompton 1922, p.169. It is important to note that the books consist of separate stories, which were initially published separately as magazine stories, then collected into books. This story is out of the first book, *Just William*.

[43] ibid p.34

[44] Blyton, 1942b

[45] ibid p.2

[46] Yes indeed, that is their surname, though I never knew that until I discovered it the other day in *Five Are Together Again* (Blyton 1962 p.24)

[47] ibid p.22

[48] op.cit. p.23

[49] op.cit pp. 94, 95

[50] ibid p.177 (Blyton's capitals)

[51] The story is 'The Final Problem', 1893: first published in Strand Magazine, it was republished in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* Doyle, Arthur Conan (1894)

[52] By the time Blyton came to write the series her married name was Waters, and one of her husband's first names was Darrell – go figure.

[53] Blyton 1951 Ch. 1

[54] ibid Ch. 1

[55] ibid Ch. 1

[56] Rowling 1997 pp 69 & 76

[57] Rowling 2007 p.531

[58] ibid. p.757

[59] Marryat 1841 pp. 68,69

[60] Blyton 1960 pp. 11, 13, 21

[61] Doctorow 2012 p.197

[62] Op. cit.