



Why was Billy Bunter Never Really Expelled? And another twenty-five mysteries of children's literature

Books Reviewed:

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New to Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3

There were twenty-seven 'mysteries' in the predecessor to this new bundle, pushing the boat out with 'How did Long John Silver lose his leg?'. There was a proper acknowledgment to John Sutherland who had floated the idea with his pieces on Victorian literature, and the cheerful posing and answering of the textual questions concealed a deal of valuable insights into the trials and shortcomings present in a train of classic stories. Each essay was attributed to one of the two presenters and it might be noted that Peter Hunt was perhaps more inclined than Dennis Butts to allow his pieces to drift towards broader questions about the nature of children's literature. His piece on William Mayne, for instance, focused less on the authorial work than on 'the relationship between books and life', while two other efforts break purposefully into the wider subjects of 'Does anyone really write for children?' and 'The mysterious death of the children's book'.

There are signs in this successor volume that the search for entertaining and instructive textual issues in individual books has proved trickier for our authors who had allowed Long John and the earlier heroes to rather hog the pitch. Dennis Butts is the foremost analyst for specifics (Henty's **With Lee in Virginia** and Burnett's **Little Lord Fauntleroy** are excellent) but precision slips elsewhere. **Lorna Doone** is too big for comfort; he hasn't done his homework on **Tommy** [not 'Tom?'] **Thumb's Pretty Song-Book** while a view of Kingsley as a sexual sadist is confined to a picture which is given no explanation. Peter Hunt confines himself only (thanks to his daughters) to Blyton's St Clare's and a rather lumbering piece on Narnia while his other ten articles (five of which stem from previously published work) beg many questions in unsatisfying generalisations: 'What makes a children's classic...?' 'Why on earth are there children's books about war??...' 'What image of the British do children's books give the world?' (an astonishingly sloppy piece from a scholar with an international reputation).

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