

Kate Saunders

Brings Back the Psammead

Kate Saunders is celebrating the publication of her latest children's book – *Five Children on the Western Front* – with good reason. It is an excellent read although heart-wrenching at times. She returned to the world of 1902 created by E.Nesbit in *Five Children and It*, then moved on twelve years. Nesbit had potent skill as a story teller and it is almost as though you can hear her voice. Life-long fan Kate couldn't agree more. "Many nineteenth century children's authors only wanted to improve their readers' minds. Nesbit, on the other hand, was eager to tell something that was interesting and entertaining." Nesbit described the five children perfectly and it comes as no surprise that they were largely based on her own family – warts and all. Nesbit introduced possibilities of fantasy: the idea that children could make wishes, and accept what happens to them as a result and she had to create someone able to grant those wishes. Inventing the Psammead was a brilliant achievement; someone almost the opposite to what you might expect of a benevolent fairy. Strange in appearance and very similar to a temperamental adult, it meant that the children had to learn how to humour the character. She tells the story of a Psammead who grudgingly grants wishes and the children discover this can be fun, but it can also cause problems.

In Kate Saunders' sequel, the Psammead is even more grumpy and temperamental than the earlier one as he declares he has been 'demajicked' and his powers confiscated. He doesn't even have enough power to get himself home. He is still living in the sandpit and grants wishes reluctantly. Unlike Nesbit's novel, this is not a series of events. The new story has also moved to a fresh setting. It begins on the eve of The Great War when the Lamb and his little sister Edie find their Psammead at the bottom of the garden. They realize it is the magical creature resurrected from their older brothers' and sisters' stories. All the children are delighted to see him again, forgetting for a time that Cyril is about to go off to fight in the war against Germany. It soon becomes apparent that there are serious problems with this sand fairy as he keeps appearing in all the most unlikely places.

When the Lamb wishes that they could see Cyril, this is exactly what happens and they find themselves at the front line. Although they can see and hear Cyril, he is not aware of their presence whilst they witness the Christmas truce. The story



continues with the Psammead still not being sorry for his past and the war 'that was going to be over by Christmas' continues with more and more soldiers being killed.

Kate has created a very believable story and written it in the style of Nesbit herself. She has captured that voice and it is almost possible to believe that Nesbit has written this later story. When Edie and the Lamb find themselves in the midst of danger and much closer to the war than they ever thought possible, readers feel that great conviction and belief. "I always knew that I had to write this story. The book was

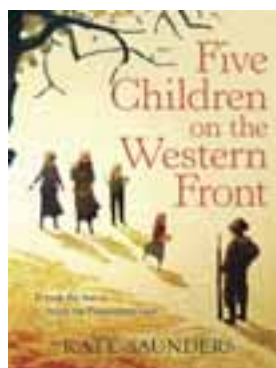
lying in wait for me. I think it was the wholesale remembrance of the start of The Great War that was the catalyst to it finally emerging. I wanted to express, in some way, the agony and heartache suffered by those left behind at home when young men had left to fight for their country."

Kate started writing the novel just over a year ago and is amazed that it has now been published in a beautifully sized pocket book. "I love the size and beautiful presentation. It is so inviting. I think it will be a book that people will want to keep for ever. I still have books from my childhood and they are like this – the right size for smaller hands."

When young, Kate wanted to be actor and left school at sixteen to follow her ambition. That dream came true in 1982 when she was selected to play a policewoman in *Only Fools and Horses* and became Rodney's girl friend. A short career in the professional theatre followed but it was a risky profession. She found greater satisfaction – and security – from her career as a writer for both children and adults. Her younger books include *Beswitched*, *Magicalamity*, *The Whizz Pop Chocolate Shop* and *The Curse of the Chocolate Phoenix*. She is also a regular contributor to radio and television programmes and enjoys writing for newspapers and magazines.

Kate is a dedicated storyteller and her novels allow young readers to escape everyday life. She wants them to experience a wonderful world of books and to be empowered, as she was, when reading E Nesbit's writing as a child. This book is homage to her inspiration and is also for young readers who are keen to gain an understanding of what it was like to be devastated by the loss of family and friends in war.

David Blanch



Five Children on the Western Front
Faber & Faber £10.99 ISBN: 978-0571310951

Five Children and It Written by E.Nesbit
Faber & Faber £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571314768