

FAMOUS FIVE 75



From left to right: Laura Ellen Anderson, Alison Padley and Alex Antscherl.

There can be very few adults who are unfamiliar with the distinctive book jackets that originally adorned *The Famous Five* series. Eileen Soper's lively depictions of some of Enid Blyton's most-famous characters are etched in our minds, frequently set against enticing backgrounds such as Kirrin Island and Mystery Moor. The extent of our familiarity with the classic illustrations which accompany these vintage stories has recently been demonstrated by a series of spoof titles, including *Five On Brexit Island*, released for the adult gift market. This year sees the 75th anniversary of the publication of the first 'Famous Five' adventure, and to mark the occasion Hachette Children's Books, who acquired the Blyton estate in 2012, are reissuing the complete book series with brand-new covers.

Unlike the special editions produced for the 70th anniversary, which featured a range of leading children's illustrators who were invited to reimagine the classic characters of Julian, Dick, George, Ann and of course, Timmy the dog, this latest project will feature the work of just one illustrator. Laura Ellen Anderson has produced all twenty-one covers spanning the entire series, plus a World Book Day title. Surely a mammoth project - and not one to be undertaken lightly!

In conversation with Alison Padley, Art Director for Hodder Children's Books, imprint of *The Famous Five* titles, it appears that choosing Laura for the task was a relatively easy decision to make. She had worked with many illustrators over the years and knew that Laura was the perfect match for this project. Everyone at the Blyton Estate agreed.

Laura studied illustration at University College, Falmouth and graduated in 2010. She has previously illustrated several picture books, comics and fiction series including *Snowflakes* and *Mermaid* by Cerrie Burnell, the award-winning, *My Brother is a Superhero*, by David Solomon and the *Witch Wars* and *Harper* series. Alison recognised that Laura's ability to capture character would be essential for *The Famous Five* series as everyone has an opinion of how the five individuals should look. Key to the task would be striking the balance of a contemporary appeal without seeming at odds with the authentic Blyton qualities. It seems an almost impossible challenge to create twenty-one covers that all feature the same characters wearing almost identical clothing in a way which makes them

instantly recognisable, but that all look different to each other. Alison notes, "Laura has done this beautifully. I especially love her interpretation of George, I think it really shows her tomboy qualities without her actually looking like a boy."

Reflecting on the project, Laura confesses that she didn't read *The Famous Five* books as a child. "I was more into comics as a reader". She believes that this probably helped in her approach to the brief as she could come to the stories with a fresh, unbiased eye, and without any childhood preconceptions of the books.

"I wanted to give them my own spin. I like drawing characters that child readers of today can associate with. My favourite character to draw was George because she is a bit like me - a bit messy, but full of energy and ideas - although I do have a soft spot for Timmy the dog!"

Laura explained there were many discussions about what the children could be wearing, making sure that this felt right for their characters. This ensured that both the traditional content of the books was maintained and that they were relatable to the reader of today. It was also important that the composition of the covers worked right with enough drama to complement the depiction of the Five.

The illustrations were commissioned in April 2015 and completed in six months. Laura worked on batches of titles at a time. After the first five roughs were produced and minor tweaks were made, she completed the final art on those while at the same time working on the next batch of roughs. Alison notes, "Laura is incredible at working at an impressive rate whilst still keeping everything perfect and accurate".

The resulting covers are clear winners and immediately striking. The individual personalities of the Five are conveyed through subtle aspects of their physical appearance, stance and dress - Julian, sporting a rather fetching blue waistcoat and owl-rimmed glasses is clearly at the centre of things, whereas Ann, in a decorative, 'hippy-chic' blue pinafore with red-striped leggings strikes you as an interesting individual, her body language frequently questioning what's afoot - these are characters young readers will want to pal up with. Suspense is conveyed through the torchlit areas of several of the jackets, while others convey the excitement of discovery as the



characters peer towards unknown territory outside of the cover. And yes, Timmy is depicted as the perfect pet, clearly loveable, ripe to have an adventure with and sporting a cute collar featuring a dog's bone pendant.

The World Book Day Title which heralds these new editions is *Good Old Timmy*, a collection of three short stories about the Five. In addition to the cover artwork, Laura has provided further illustrations inside.

As part of the anniversary celebrations, there are also plans for a partnership with the Royal Horticultural Society including a family trail, *Five Go on a Garden Adventure*, which will feature in each of their gardens: Harlow Carr, Hyde Hall, Wisley and Rosemoor. All four gardens will also hold a picnic party on 11th August to celebrate Enid Blyton's 120th birthday. There will also be a cookbook, *Jolly Good Food*, containing recipes inspired by the Five and other favourite Blyton characters. Alex Antscherl, Editorial Director for Enid Blyton Entertainment, spoke to me about the celebrations and the continuing appeal of *The Famous Five* stories.

"I am sure that the books endure because they are every bit as thrilling, page-turning and accessible as they were when they were first published in 1942. Young readers still love the pacy adventure stories where the children have real power over their actions and the outcomes of the drama. The heroism and daring of the four children and their beloved dog, and the devoted friendship they share, are every bit as appealing now as they were seventy-five years ago."



Laura's depiction of Enid Blyton.



Alex considers there are no significant issues surrounding making the stories appropriate or relevant for today's young readers. Describing the stories as "evergreen", she notes that although the circumstances may not be exactly like their own lives, today's children, many of whom are city-based, can still take pleasure from the outdoor adventures of the Five. "Friendship, loyalty and pets remain central to children now as they did then". She is certain that today's readers can appreciate that these stories were written and set in a different era and that this doesn't detract from their enjoyment of them.

For those nostalgic readers who still treasure Eileen Soper's original covers, these editions are also being redesigned to showcase her artwork at its best with a Christmas publication of a luxury edition of the first title with coloured illustrations. Both Alex and Alison are keen to stress that having the Blyton estate in-house ensures that the Blyton brand doesn't become damaged. There is a shared clear idea of the core values of each strand of her classic series and a clear sense of what will and won't be allowed. This latest reissue of *The Famous Five*, complete with Laura's eye-catching illustrations which remain true to the stories, is clearly taking the enjoyment of the series to a fresh, young audience.

Elaine Chant

Select Bibliography
 Published by Hodder Children's books:
 World Book Day title 2017: *Good Old Timmy and other Stories* £1.00
 ISBN: 978-1444937190
 The Famous Five Series £6.99 each
Five on a Treasure Island ISBN: 978-1444935011
Five Go Adventuring Again ISBN: 978-1444935035
Five Runaway Together ISBN: 978-1444935042
Five Go to Smuggler's Top ISBN: 978-1444935059
Five Go Off in a Caravan ISBN: 978-1444935066
Five on Kirrin Island Again ISBN: 978-1444935073