

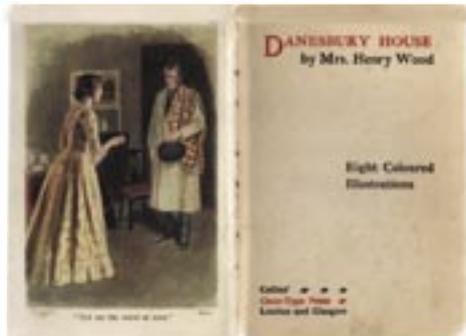
Pat Jenkins, a former teacher and reviewer for *Carousel*, shares her childhood reading experiences.

# The Mouldiwarp and Me

I was never keen on the Chalet School, or Mallory Towers, or any other school story. Midnight feasts in the dorm just didn't do it for me when set against marching through the desert with Beau, Digby and John Geste, keeping a weather eye open for Tuaregs and Sergeant Lejeune. No crush on the games mistress at St. Fanny's for me, I was in love with Allan Quatermain. *Prester John* by John Buchan, swept me away to darkest Africa. To my sorrow I never managed to get any of my eleven-year-old friends to read it, although I must have bored for England on the wonders of this grand adventure story.

body goes past on a cart, but I cannot remember any more of the book. I loved *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and still do, especially the chapters where Mary and Colin are at their crabbiest.

As I became a teenager, I suppose I realised that I was never actually going to join the Foreign Legion, sail with the Argonauts, find Eldorado, or King Solomon's Mines and I turned my attention closer to home. Being stage struck, I loved *The Swish of the Curtain* and its sequels, by Pamela Brown, and enjoyed everything Noel Streatfeild wrote.



I was deeply affected by Howard Spring's *Fame is the Spur*. The story of two working-class friends, one who remains true to his roots and the other, who while professing his socialist beliefs, is seduced away by power and money, confirmed me as a life long socialist. I read it again as an adult and still found it a powerful book.

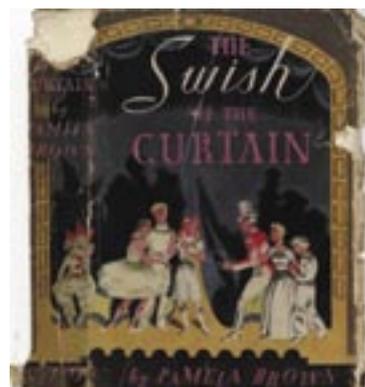
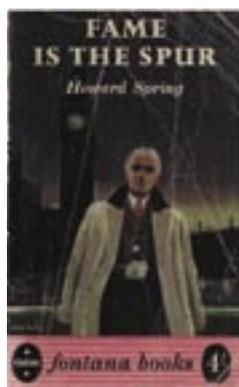
I was not a discriminating reader. If it was in English, I read it. Very quickly. Most of the books I read came from Dudley Public Library. Only one allowed at a time and no returning it on the same day. My parents bought books for me and I saved my 2/6 a week pocket money and bought my own, often from a stall on the market. I can't remember how much books cost in the 1940s and early 1950s, or how much the shortage of books during and just after the war affected me.

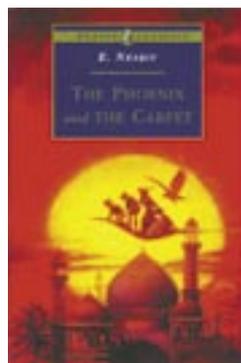
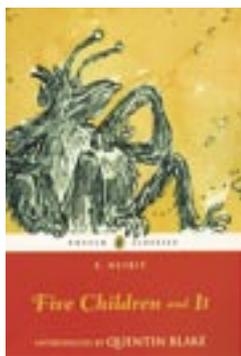
An article in *Everybody's Magazine* about Queen Juana, the daughter of Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, took me by the throat. It gave, (I discovered later), a very highly coloured description of Juana taking her dead husband's coffin for a tour of Europe, refusing to allow any females near and having it opened occasionally to check if he was still there. I loved it. If that was history, then history was for me and has been ever since.

The book above all others that I remember from my childhood is *The House of Arden*, a time-travel book by Edith Nesbit. It was in this book that I met the Mouldiwarp who takes the children into the past. It was dramatised on Children's Hour and I loved it

I read everything that was in our house, especially my mother's Sunday School prizes. Wonderful books they were, full of death beds, orphans' kittens dropped into boiling water and the evil effects of drink. How I wept over *The Lamplighter*, Mrs. Henry Wood's *Danesbury House* and Gene Stratton Porter's *Girl of the Limberlost*. Happy days!

I also remember weeping over the scene in *Black Beauty* where poor Ginger's tortured





by schoolgirls, Pamela Hull and Katherine Whitlock. What happened to them, I wonder?

I never cared for books about animals. *The Wind in the Willows* made no impression and *Winnie the Pooh* never crossed my path. Anything about little girls and ponies was past my understanding since the only horse I had ever met was a vicious beast belonging to the milkman. I thought *The Hobbit* was plain daft. I was given what may have been a first edition and I swapped it on the book stall on Dudley Market. I have read it since, and haven't changed my opinion, though I wish I had kept the book. I lived in the Midlands and had never been on a boat of any sort, yet I loved the *Swallows and Amazons*, and could, if required, have sailed across the North Sea in a force ten gale. No problem there, I had read *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea*.

without knowing that it was a book. I came across it by accident in Dudley Library and I can still feel the twang I felt in my head when I realised what I was holding. I read it going down the Library steps, through the town, on and off the bus, and home. I finished it and burst into tears because I had finished it. (The ability to read quickly can be a curse). So I straightaway read it again. And have read it and its companion *Harding's Luck* many times since. I read other books by E. Nesbit and especially loved the ones about the treasure-seeking Bastable family and *The Phoenix and the Carpet* and *Five Children and It*. Is there another author who can make the children in her books such distinct characters? All the members of each family she writes about are individuals and you could never mistake one for another.

It seems to me, looking back over sixty-five years of reading, that as a child I took what I read very seriously at the time I was reading it. I really was in the desert with the Gestes. I did go looking for Troy, and elephants' graveyards. I did believe that my father's one glass of beer with his supper was the beginning of his drunken decline and in me, as a result, trudging to the workhouse, clutching my ragged shawl around my bony shoulders.

*The House of Arden* was the beginning of my lifelong interest in time travel. E. Nesbit's successor for me is Jack Finney, whom I regard as the best modern writer on the subject.

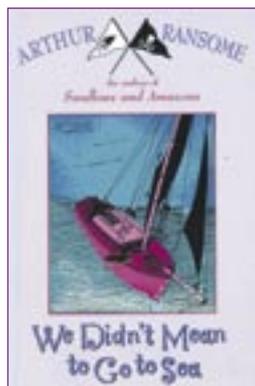
Reading over what I have written, it is apparent that all the memorable books in my life have been about people, places and happenings far removed from real life and my own experience and age. I have read many of these books over and over again throughout my life and still enjoy most of them. Is this arrested development, or are they just great books?

I am sure that I did read and enjoy Enid Blyton and other similar writers for girls but I have no clear memory of them at all. Racking my brains, I can also come up with a girl called 'Dimsie'. Who was she for Heaven's sake? There was also Biggles and Biggles-in-a-skirt, Worrals, but anything that happened in any of the books – gone, completely.

When I became a teacher I was told that books for children had to mirror their lives. There had to be children of their own age and class, with whom they could relate. So out with middle class Janet and John, and in with back-to-back terraces and Dad taking his whippet to the pub. Well maybe, but as a child I wouldn't have given tuppence for a book about a little girl living in an ordinary street in Dudley. Give me Achilles, Helen of Troy, strange white queens ruling over savage tribes, and Sir Percy Blakeney any time.

I remember William and the Outlaws with pleasure, and enjoyed reading the stories to my children and grandchildren. The stories about William's female equivalent, Jane, by Evadne Price appealed even more. I bought one at a book fair recently and it still made me smile. I enjoyed books by David Severn, Kitty Barne and Vera Barclay. Also *Oxus in Summer* and *The Far Distant Oxus\** written

I still read at every chance I get and wherever I am. Packing for holidays, the books go in first, and the clothes go in the gaps. Any train or bus journey, no matter how short, needs two books, just in case of delays. Reading quickly is not such a curse now, since I am getting forgetful and can happily read the same book over again, since I will have forgotten the end and most of the middle. Do I still live the lives of the characters? Well, I'm not admitting to that, but if Allan Q. wants a companion on his next trip up the Zambezi, I'm ready as soon as I've packed the books.



A check on the online book sites shows all the titles mentioned are still available second hand and several have been reissued. You will even find the 'Dimsie' books by Dorita Fairlie-Bruce. \* Reissued by Fidra Books in Edinburgh.