Angela Brazil and Enid Blyton's School Girl Stories: their appeal to children.

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Trease states that ‘A good children’s book is one which uses language skilfully to entertain and to represent reality, to stimulate the imagination or to educate the emotions’ but recognises the responsibilities of children’s authors and quotes Malcolm Saville: ’we who write for the men and women of tomorrow, have great responsibilities and must recognize them’ (Malcolm Saville, in Trease, p9-10). Whilst children’s literature, as Peter Hunt has suggested in his ‘*Criticism and Children’s Literature’,* was unfortunately seen as less academic and important for critics and than that of adult literature (Hunt, p6) and Frank Eyre stated in 1964 that: ‘Writers of children's books still achieve little recognition in any but their highly specialised professional circle, and writers *about* children's books are still regarded, consciously or unconsciously, as a kind of sub-species of critic - doing a secondary task from which the most successful of them may one day hope to be promoted to more responsible work’ (Eyre, p158), more recently the study of literature for children and young adults has become more recognised as an academic endeavour. However, it is my argument that Brazil and Blyton especially have influenced, and are still an influence on, British literature with such authority that their role in the formation of ideas of gender go far beyond that of pure entertaining children’s literature. It was unfortunate that ‘Realism’ took hold of children’s literature and the school story declined in popularity in the middle of the twentieth century despite its own very realistic view of life for some children. But by looking at Angela Brazil and the most famous and prolific writer Enid Blyton as progressive women who wrote about teenage girls from their own point of view without the constraints of

parents and in the company of other like-minded teenage girls, we can show how timeless the School Girl Story as a genre is.

Literature for the child who was an innocent, vulnerable and impressionable person is thought to date from John Newbery's '*A Little Pretty Pocket Book'* published in 1744 (Trease, p2). Following on from the medieval idea of children being merely miniatures of their adult counterparts reading the same books, to a social recognition of children as a separate section of society, this concept was the result of the Romantic and Enlightenment eras. As society came to terms with the idea that childhood was a separate age in which the young have no responsibilities and were to learn how to behave or imitate their elders, discourses aimed at children started to appear. From the latter half of the nineteenth century a distinction formed between those books aimed at adventurous pioneering boys and homely sweet girls, emphasising the new roles that British middle-class society expected their offspring to fulfil. Moralistic school stories as a genre arose for boys who were to be part of this new British Empire became popular. School stories for girls started at the turn of the twentieth century, just as women and young ladies were gaining a foothold in the privileged English education system.

Trease draws our attention to the 'Britishness' of this genre when he quotes George Orwell as writing that 'the school story…. Is a thing peculiar to England. So far as I know there are extremely few school stories in foreign languages' (Trease, p107). Whilst the authors of the genre are usually British the reach of these books was global. As the British Empire had expanded the school girl story travelled with parents and their children

worldwide. Other girls whose parents wished them to take advantage of the English education system, found comfort in the community aspect of school-girl stories shaped by Brazil, Brent-Dyer and Blyton. From Hong Kong to Australia the school-girl story became fashionable.

This initial popularity of the girl-centred school stories, which was well established by the early 1920s, led to numerous authors of the 1930s and 40s following the successful pattern created; the reader's expectations for the development of the genre and inter-textual referencing only served to promote and self perpetuate it. This is not unlike all popular canonical literature: One only looks at Chaucer, Walpole and Shakespeare to see that other authors have followed their lead.

Brazil tweaked this genre of school stories with '*The Fortunes of Philippa*' (1906), '*The Third Class at Miss Kaye's*' (1908) and '*The Nicest Girl in the School*' (1909), and is thought to have established the core themes of an all female cast, villains and heroine's who were ordinary girls, community self-regulation and a strong moralistic value system. Elsie J Oxenham's '*Abbey*' stories and E Brent-Dyer's '*Chalet School*' stories are still popular examples of the rapid growth in the genre, and during the inter war years, this genre became the most popular form of fiction for girls, with Brazil alone selling over three million copies. The scope of the genre had reached not just middle-class homes but all girls who were now enrolled in state schools. Libraries were well stocked for the 'ordinary' girl who devoured these books as can be shown by the copious memories shared on Facebook and other social media sites.

With Brent-Dyer's Austrian '*Chalet School'* stories covering a period of almost sixty years, the school story for girls expanded from Europe when war forced the girls to move to safe surroundings back in England. This expansion in area shows how versatile the stories are in inclusion, and even stories set in 'Blighty' still had an international flavour with characters from a variety of countries. Both '*Malory Towers'* and '*St Clare's'* have French mistresses whose nieces, Claudine and Suzanne, attend the schools. The genre also expanded in terms of financial backgrounds of the characters during this period with boarders from the aristocracy, doctors children, and even through to daughters of circus performers all being equalised by the great levelling boarding-school community. The whole emphasis now was on 'happy memories' of the school girl experience.

With the end of the Second World War girls had far more literature to choose from and criticism of this genre, as being full of stock elements and glib language which was unsuitable for children, became more vocal.It has been suggested by Eyre and other critics that the school girl story has 'rightly been criticized' (Eyre, p85) for its deliberate commercialism and artificial construction (Hunt, Gosling, et al). The genre declined after the 1950s with publishers such as Chambers halting publication of Brent-Dyer's books. It was thought by some that children's literature would be better off 'without the school story' (Eyre, p87). This belief did not deter strong women writers such as Blyton writing of midnight feasts, beastly girls and jolly nice people. Remembering the dire times which these books were published, it is not surprising that young readers engrossed themselves in the middle-class books in which girls were encouraged to become wealthy and wise through

self-improvement and education. Between 1946 and 1951 Blyton published her famous '*Malory Towers'*, '*The Naughtest Girl'* and '*St Clares'* series of books. Children identify with the genre as they reflect the realism of their own lives but allow them an escape into a world of simpler middle-class values and fantasy. The re-launching of the '*Chalet School'* series by publishers Collins sold nearly two hundred thousand books between May and October 1967 alone (McClelland, p269, quoted in Gosling).

The gritty realism of one-parent families, problem siblings, gangs, and racism as portrayed by Jacqueline Wilson, Malory Blackman, Mildred D Taylor and Lois Lowry has been balanced by a recent return by children to the classics and school stories. Both are once again popular as the initial readers of these books become adults and take their place as censors and the'gate-keepers' of what children should read. The roller-coaster ride with 'Morality and Instruction' (Trease, p3) which literature for children has travelled for 250 years seems now to be equalised by entertainment value and 'what children like' to read (Eyre, p18). All is now available through mass distribution centres and local cash-strapped libraries. No longer are children censored or restricted by what adults believe to be 'good' literature but are taking control of what they want to find in their sectioned-off part of the real or virtual book shelf and school story books have resurfaced most recently with such books as the '*Trebizon'* series by Anne Digby. The World Wide Web (www) is inundated with sites such as www.fanfiction.net which allow authors to publish work in this genre. Children's recent emancipation from adult censorship is now again under threat this time from the rise in

technology which sees the bookshelf being replaced with the television set and the laptop or even the kindle which adults control.

At the turn of the century this genre's authors did not promote 'bad grammar or slang, blasphemy or foul language [with]….no hint of affection between the sexes… [to be] patriotic… [with a] Christian morality of evangelical type' (Trease p118) and their stories centred upon the new middle-class girls who were able to attend these aspirational schools. This difference in language is believed to be one of the fundamental distinctive attributes of children's literature. The vocabulary used by Brazil and Blyton was simpler as reading experiences of children was thought to be less than adults. This has led to criticism that the books are not challenging the readers. It could be argued that men read 'military' or 'detective' novels and women read 'chick lit' for pleasure and enjoyment. These genres are also easy reading and, just like easy listening music, the audience is lost in the moment, forgetful of the world around them, and therefore at ease with these genres. Thus it could be argued that the school girl story enables the child to escape from the realities and stress of the world in which they live and therefore they become attached to the genre as it gives pleasure.

First person or third person narratives are more appropriate to the genre which has a style centred upon speech and dialogue. This style of writing for the genre brings characters to life and makes them intense: one can hear Patty Hurst crying in '*The Nicest Girl in School'* when she returns with her cousin for Christmas or when she is accused of cheating in class.

Juvenile language, colloquialism and slang all date these books to an era when life was jolly good and ‘fab’.

The rapid action of sub plots within the story holds the child’s short attention. Just as Dickens serialised his books, Brazil and Blyton both serialised their stories. Each chapter holds another episode for the group and another opportunity for the reader to connect with both heroines, for example ‘*Malory Tower’s’* Darrell Rivers, and villains, such as the spoilt lying thief Gwendoline Mary Lacey. It is the interactions between the heroine and the other boarders of the school that fascinate. The fact that all the girls wear identical school uniforms; shared the same ‘orphaned’ position in term-time; are autonomous and regulate their own clubs and societies; all study and eat together; and make the rules and determine which girls are ‘sent to Coventry ‘created a sense of community. This is the most important aspect of the genre and the character’s lives. The school girl genre exists in just as closed a community as the previous occupiers of the nunnery where ‘*St Clares’* was set.

An almost narrator-style of storytelling is apparent in most books of the genre: Blyton’s numerous books have been read by parents to their children with a ‘1950s BBC news reader’ tone and quality. As the most popular British children’s author, Blyton believed herself to have ‘written, probably, more books for children, than any other writer’ and had ‘two million child-readers’ in 1936 (Blyton). Authors were influenced by the era in which they lived which is only too evident within their novels. However, as Townsend states ‘a text does not exist in isolation’ and it is not read in

isolation either, reception theory states that whilst all literature is a product of its time, its reception is individually singular as every reader is a product of their own time as well as their own particular experiences . This is very true of Blyton's work as it is children who adore her books and adults who criticise her believing that the content is inappropriate following '*The Little Black Doll'* (1966). She has been accused by such adults as racist, sexist and generally an inferior writer and has been withdrawn from more libraries than any other author. It should be noted that for a time the Indian and not English post-colonial writer Rudyard Kipling, 'the unrepentant defender of empire … who coined the ignominious phrase "the white man's burden" in an 1899 issue of *McClure's Magazine',* was also banned from libraries as racist despite being nominated for the Nobel Prize for 'English' literature.

At the turn of the century Brazil champions this new genre. It is in her books that the girls took charge after being separated from their middle-class families. In the '*Nicest Girl at School*' Patsy Hurst's mother and all seven siblings missed her tender affections and she missed being a second mother to them. But Patsy's extraordinary good luck at being sent to a boarding school could only be embraced by her family despite the fact that in its society she would become a wife and mother and never need an education, especially one that included Latin or lacrosse. The new uniform that Patsy's mother is packing is unusual that it deserves the time and place at the start of the story. It will unite Patsy to her fellow students and marks her out as the new style of girl.

Brazil's books were so shocking for her historical period that they were not only banned but according to Gosling 'On the first day of the autumn term in 1936, a new girl to St Paul's in London was stunned by a dramatic address from Ethel Shrudwick, the principal, who at morning prayers expressed the wish to collect the books of Angela Brazil and burn them' (Gosling) possibly as they were viewed at the time as disruptive, immoral, and anti-establishment with feminist undertones when literature for children was supposed to be instructional. Blyton's criticism is recognised as misplaced with Trease stating that 'If children go on reading such stories long after the age at which they should be getting their teeth into something more nutritious, it is pointless to disparage the author who produces them' referring specifically to commercially formulaic authors such as Blyton (Trease, p118). The school girl story is now considered reading for a much younger audience, from 7 through to 10, than initially aimed at with heroines being aged between 14 and 16 years of age. But, this does not explain the new fan sites populated by middle-class, middle-aged women. In '*A World of Girls'* Auchmiuty explores why this genre still holds its appeal for girls and women in general. In her conclusion she states that for her 'they depicted a virtually all-female world of strong role models, close and primary friendships, and community…[and secondly as] .a temporary escape and refuge from the pressures of that profoundly heterosexual society I lived in… ' (Auchmuty, p204-5).

As a gender-role setting the school girls stories could not be more powerful, with the independence of all characters vital to the community growing with the characters who were once criticised as being flat. Girls

recogniesd that they were not the ‘weaker sex’ but could achieve anything including combating villains and gaining the upper moralistic ground. As all female spaces are limited in this modern age it is not surprising that girls and women are returning to this genre. A single-sexed space where this independence and potency of the ‘girl’ is so valued is limited and not reflected in modern literature. Whilst some school stories were set in schools which were co-educational and thus representative of the modern school experience, together with the fact that boarding schools are now almost non-existent for most middle-class girls, it is noticeable that libraries and schools are restocking the genre with abandonment as girls vote with their own choice of reading.

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