

# Under the Covers

How children's literature has shaped ideas of childhood.





# In this session we will look at:

- The ‘Golden Age’ of children’s literature – the first time children’s books were seen as an important window on the nature of childhood.
- Look at the issue of how ‘gendered’ literature for children shaped the expectations of subsequent generations.
- How some modern children’s literature both draws from and challenges this heritage.

# Before the 'Golden Age'

- Books for children were largely didactic – they told essential moral and religious tales.
- Illustration was common because for children too young to read (and illiterate adults) the story had to also be carried in pictures.
- Reading aloud was common – so the stories needed to be simple and use simple sentence construction.



# The coming of the 'Golden Age'

- It wasn't until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century that an identifiable 'children's literature' started to emerge.
- The first 'golden age' of children's literature – Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Grahame, Frances Hodgson Burnett, E.Nesbit
- Not only did they write for children specifically but they wrote about a certain 'idea' of the child.
- Books *from* a child's perspective – not patronising


<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-Hmfkve3pQ>

# The 'Alice' books : 1865

- 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'Through the looking Glass'
- From a rational, adult perspective these books can be seen as extended exercise in amiable nonsense.
- That is to misunderstand the author's intension.






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- The Alice books are an exploration about the differences between the world of the child and the world of the adult.
  - To children the actions of the adults are crazy and inexplicable.
  - Alice, the child, is the sane and logical one in this world.
  - She is the embodiment of the child's mind's-eye ordering the insane adult world with sensible logic.

# The 'Secret Garden' of the mind


- Published 1911 and written by Frances Hodgson Burnett
- Offers a much darker interpretation of the child's-eye view of the world.
- Informed by emerging ideas about the new science of psychology.



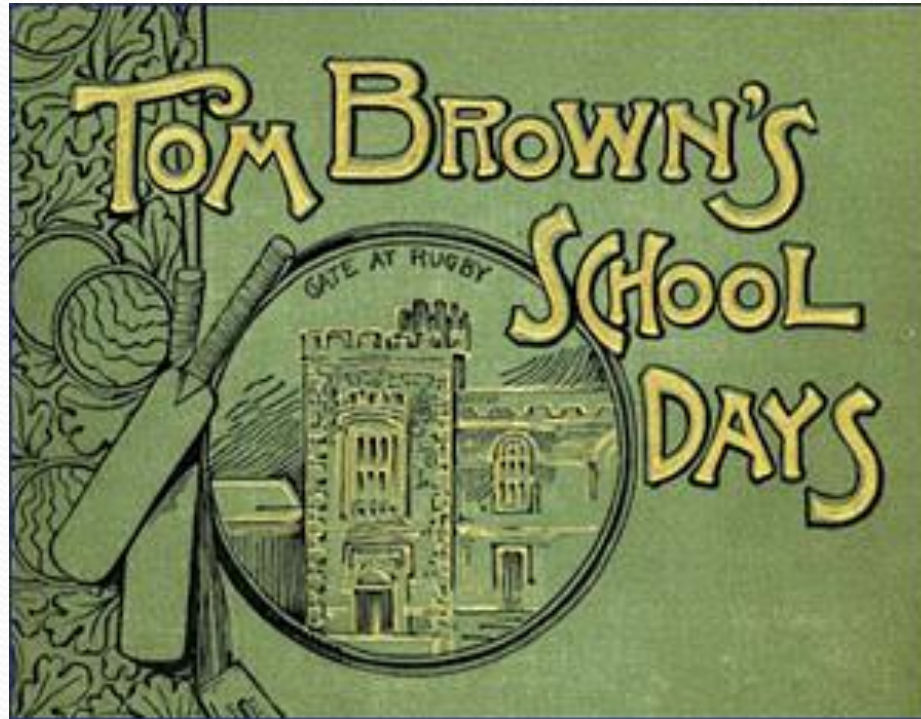


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- Mary Lennox – not a loveable child but spoiled and rather unpleasant
  - Orphaned – sent to uncle in the country
  - Class-conscious – she calls the house servant the ‘daughter of a pig’
  - She is transformed by wandering a neglected garden she finds behind a hidden locked door.
  - But she is also transformed by interaction with other children – including one with a disability (Dickon) and Colin (who is even more horrible than her)



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- The Secret Garden is in fact a metaphor for a healing space for all of the children – physically, mentally and spiritually.
  - It is also a metaphor for the creative power of the imagination.
  - Thought of now as a children's classic but actually serialised for an adult audience.


# Wacko! The schoolboy story



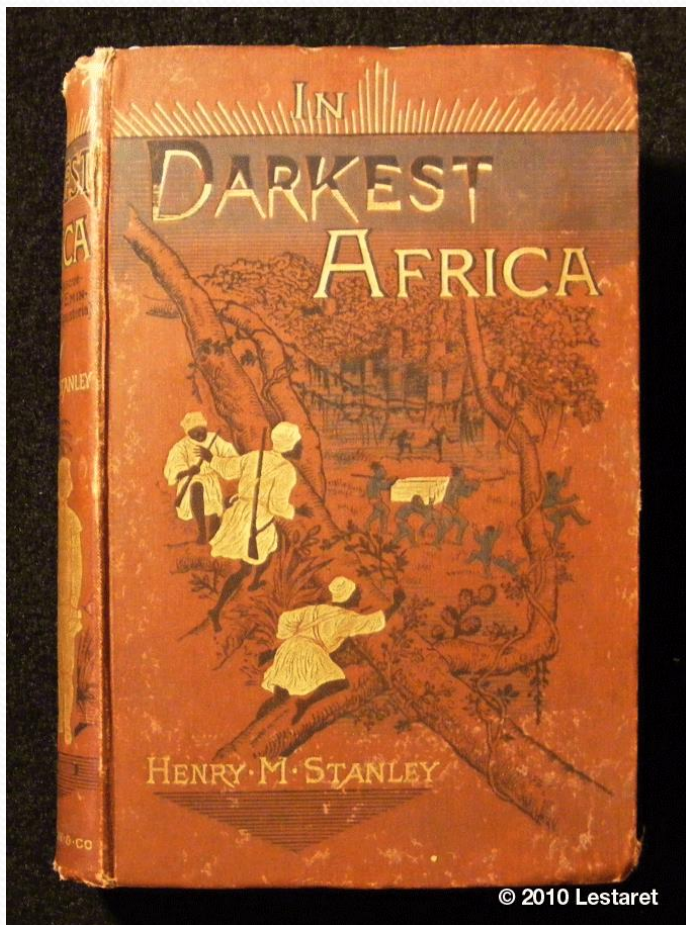


# Gender differentiation: the school tale

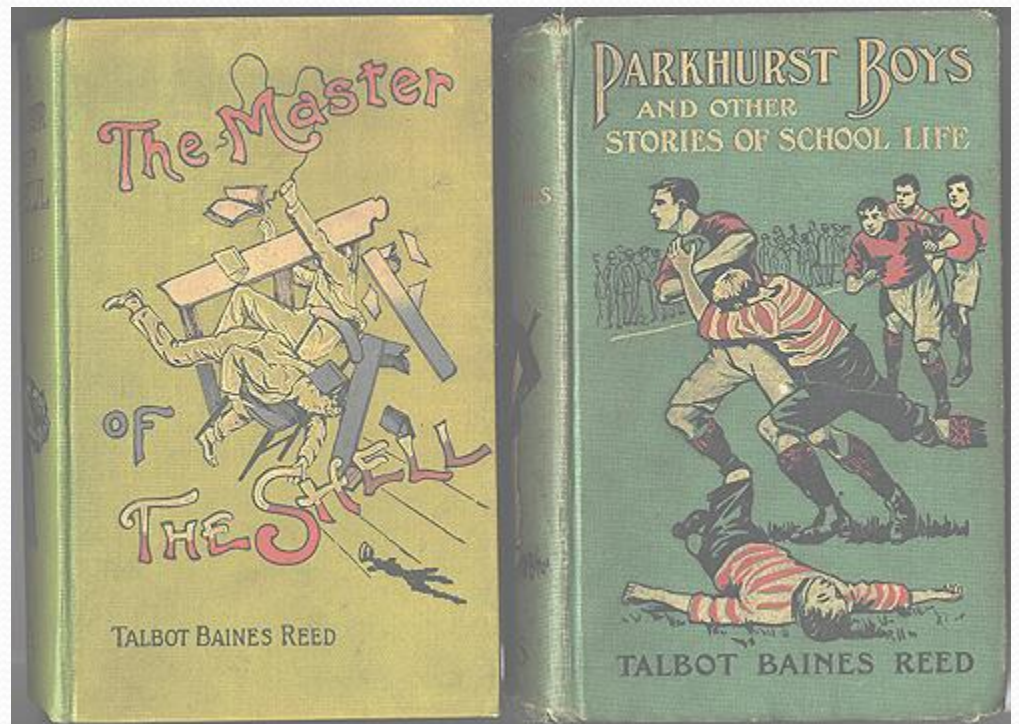
- Victorian Britain was concerned with Empire – how would the young learn their duty?
- Boys books began to explore popular ideas about what it meant to be a man – adventure stories addressed issues like how to behave in times of war, how to defend your family [ especially the weak women], how to survive in the wilderness.
- These books were clear about issues such as class, social status and order, decency and morality.

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- These have a very clear class bias
  - The school setting is a public school – the next generation to manage the Empire will be the sons of the current elite.
  - No social mobility here
  - Working class and foreigners are routinely mocked
  - Reality for the boys reading these books – civil service, army or church





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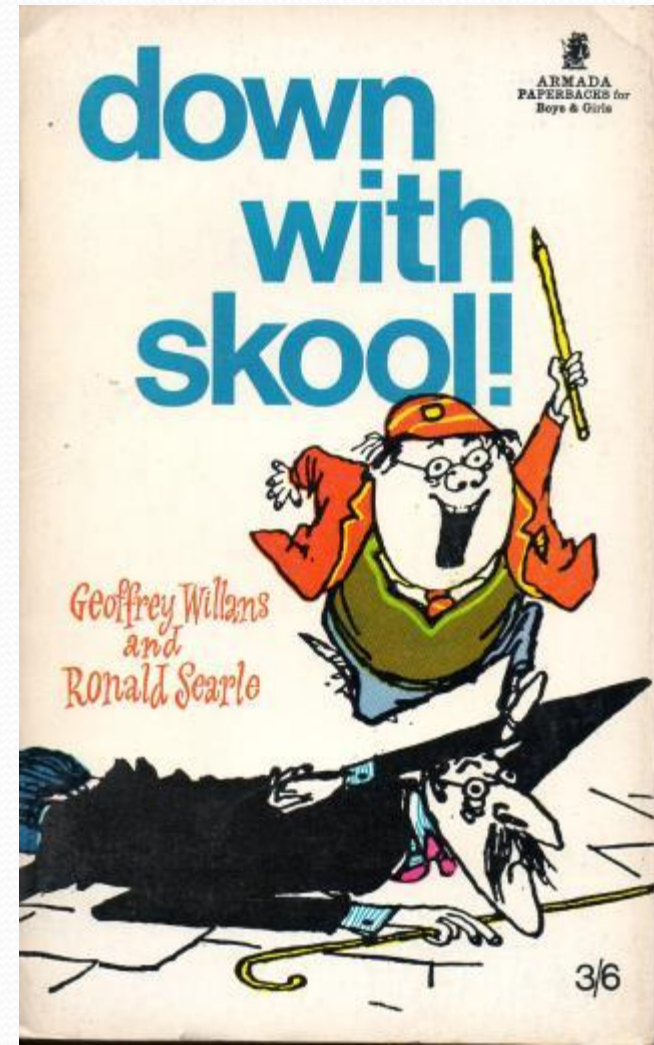
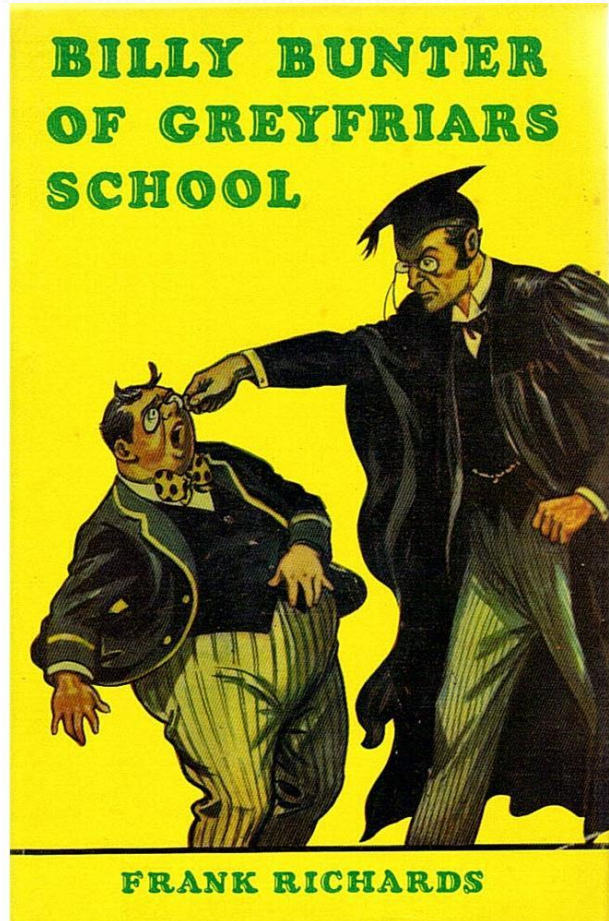
# Hang on! What about the girls?





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- Just like the boys, assumption that school life is public school life.
  - The rules are clear – you can have modest adventures while you're of school age but you have to learn how to become a woman.
  - Some stories smuggle in dangerous stories of equality or suffrage – but they are the minority.
  - These girls will grow to be women of the Empire – bearing the children of the Empire.

# Post-war irony

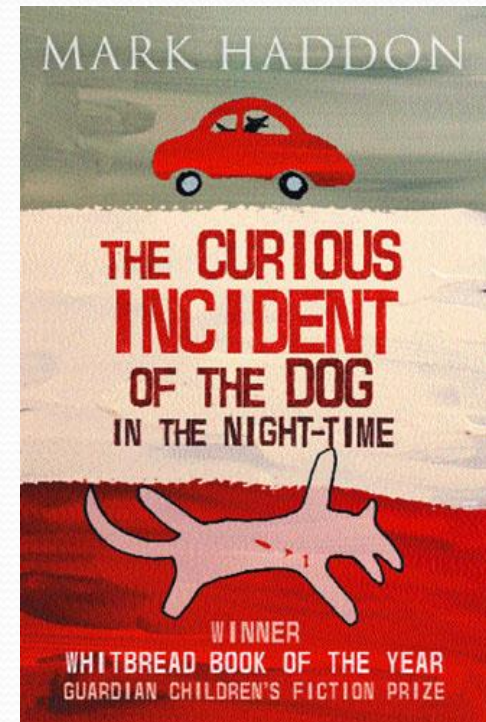
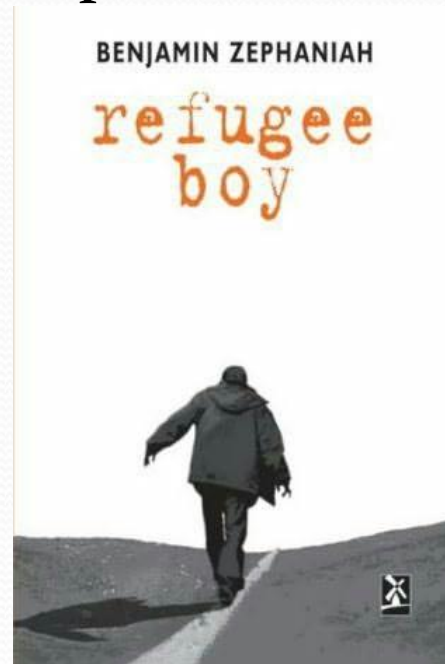
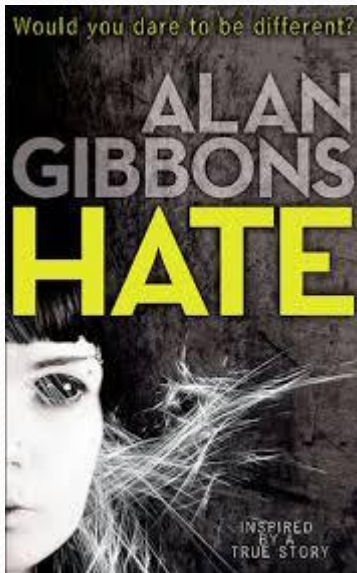





# The modern child

- The emergence of children's literature as a recognised genre on par with adult writing is partly about the quality of the books and partly about the way we now think about children and childhood.
- Children's literature still draws on past ideas (*Harry Potter* is, of course, just the school adventure redrawn and *Twilight* is just *Dracula* & Brothers Grimm recast)

- However, one of the key changes has been the emergence of social realism and ‘issues’ books that address contemporary concerns not previously thought ‘appropriate’ for children.





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- Children's books can now use the outsider as the hero. Children previously seen as 'damaged' are shown as having very special qualities of their own – a good example being *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*
  - Ethnic diversity is also treated more positively than in the past.
  - In early children's literature and continuing into the 1960s, it was common to see black characters portrayed as evil, wicked or stupid.
  - Now we have much more positive portrayals – see Benjamin Zephaniah – or very thoughtful commentaries on ethnic conflict – Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* for example.

# Modern children's authors have an awareness of their political role...

“Anyone interested in how ideas – political ideas in the broadest sense – are fostered and grow up in a society cannot afford to neglect what children read.” [ Bob Dixon 1978]

“Literature is political and ones choice of literature is political, although the reader may, of course, ignore or simply not see the meanings that are there.”  
[ Beverley Naidoo 1992]



# Useful books

- Foster, S. & Simons, J. [1995] *What Katy read* Basingstoke : Macmillan
- Goodwin, P. [2008] *Understanding children's books* London : Sage
- Hollingdale, P. [1988] *Ideology and the children's book* Stroud: Thimble Books
- Hunt, P. [1994] *An introduction to children's literature* Oxford: OUP
- Lurie, A. [1990] *Don't tell the grown-ups* London : Bloomsbury
- Nodelman, P. [2008] *The Hidden Adult* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP