

## CONCLUSION:

### REFLECTION AND CONSIDERATION OF OBSERVATIONS

“Remember, if you please,” said my friend, looking at me over his spectacles, “that I am a Victorian by birth and education, and that the Victorian tree may not unreasonably be expected to bear Victorian fruit”

M.R. James *A Neighbour’s Landmark*

“[A]ll literature takes colour from its surroundings and at the same time gives them a further element of meaning” (Symons 1992:178). The society in which Blyton and Christie were born, raised, lived and wrote influenced them, therefore it is only natural that they, in turn, bore fruit that reflected their world – both in terms of the dominant discourses of their time and the discourses that emerged during their time as these discourses shaped and moulded their horizons of expectation and are embedded in their writing. As Symons ascertains that,

[t]o ask whether Agatha Christie would have written differently if she had been born half a century later is like asking whether a modern Shakespeare would have written in blank verse. The questions beg themselves by their absurdity. Nobody born in 1940 could possibly have thought like Agatha Christie, and so would not have written like her.

(1992:177)

While there is evidence of emergent, oppositional and alternative discourses in their writing Blyton and Christie did not directly and overtly challenge or resist the dominant discourses and/or the attendant status quo; perhaps, not only because their own horizons were formed by these dominant discourses, but also because the horizons of their readers were. Even though significant social changes took place in society in the years between the publications of their different books, the dominant discourses of the early twentieth century remain apparent in their writing. Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie did not write to challenge ideas and change systems of thought; they wrote popular literature, escapist literature for readers to enjoy. By overtly challenging the dominant opinions of society at the time they would likely

have offended their readers while also making it difficult for them to relate to the stories. This would also have had an impact on their success and popularity as authors, and on their income. Certainly, part of the reason for their popularity at the time was because they were not controversial authors. They offered readers fun and easy reading: readers did not have to contemplate or evaluate the social structures of the society in which they lived.

The Golden Age of detective fiction influenced the prevailing opinions about the genre of detective fiction. In addition, the repetitive formula and artificial nature of detective fiction creates a set of expectations in the reader that can be said to operate outside of their social situation and its values, at least to some extent. Detective fiction as a genre was popular long before the Golden Age of detective fiction even began, and the genre was popular among adults and children long before Blyton began writing detective fiction for children. Therefore it stands to reason that there are certain characteristics of detective fiction that contribute to the immense popularity of this genre that appeal to both child and adult readers alike. Even though Enid Blyton was writing for children, it is possible to assume that the popularity of the detective fiction genre at that time influenced her writing. Which, in turn, influenced her popularity – she adapted her writing to fit in with market trends.

While Blyton and Christie portray stereotypical social conventions and traditional expectations about heteronormative gender roles in a patriarchal society in their writing, they also present alternatives to this. However, even though Blyton and Christie provide their female characters with an opportunity to exercise power within a male-dominated world, their portrayal of this exercise of power does not overtly threaten the status quo or challenge the patriarchy.

Similarly, while Blyton and Christie present alternatives to the dominant social expectations with regard to the behaviour of individuals of a different race, class, nationality, religion and

ethnicity – an indication that they do not completely support and endorse the prejudiced dominant discourse of their time – they often portray some of the social prejudices of that time. War-time culture permeates their writing and perpetuates patriotism. The ease with which they use derogatory terms to describe individuals of a different nationality or skin colour reflects their assimilation the hegemonic ideological practices of the time.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The scope of this study does not allow for a detailed examination of the objections that have been made against the writing of Blyton and Christie, or an examination of the criticism of detective fiction and popular culture in general. The description of fiction by Blyton and Christie as part of popular culture, therefore ‘sub-literary’ and inferior also allows scope for further research into the genre of detective fiction as part of larger culture and the widely accepted argument that “massive popularity is frequently equated with poor quality” (Druce 1992: 38). This discussion can be related to Thompson’s comment that “in most circles, the work of [Christie] is generally regarded as sub-literary, mere pulp, a disposable product whose inferiority can be inferred from its large sales” (1993:27). Thompson goes on the remark that

[t]he usually unspoken assumption behind the dismissal of crime fiction seems to stem from two beliefs: first, that when it comes to popular fiction, quantity and quality are mutually exclusive, and second, that crime fiction suffers from formulaic restrictions that true fiction or literature transcends.

(1993:27)

Terry Eagleton argues that literature is “any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly” (Eagleton 1996:9). Literature is a “*functional* rather than *ontological* [term]: [it] tells us about what we do, not about the fixed being of things” (Eagleton 1996:9). This argument is supported by Tony Bennet who concedes that while “there is a difference between the writing of, say, [James] Joyce and Conan Doyle... we cannot attribute value to one form of writing or another on this basis” (in Thompson 1993:31).

While there has been an “attempt by some critics to judge Blyton as a literary writer, [this is] something she herself never claimed to be” (Rudd 2000: 46). This is also true of Christie who

also disregarded critical comments about her work, after all, as she points out in her autobiography, “[her] writing was for entertainment” (Christie 1993:445).

The widespread and vehement criticism of Enid Blyton would also offer scope for further research. Blyton was criticised by a number of sources for reasons that include literary criticism – simplistic language and style, a predictable plot and events, stereotypical characters, and a lack of imagination and intellect – and social criticism – her portrayal of racist, xenophobic and ethnocentric attitudes, classist attitudes, and sexism, among others. It is interesting to note that regardless of this criticism Enid Blyton is one of the most popular and prolific children’s authors ever, she is “arguably the best-selling children’s writer of all time” (Watson 2001:91). While Blyton was widely respected as an author of children’s literature in the early part of her career, “those that came into the developing field of children’s literature after the war were heavily influenced by Leavis and American ‘new criticism’, which tended to foreground the literary text at the expense of the reader” (Rudd 2000:32) and, therefore perhaps also to the detriment of a child-oriented approach. Many modern editions of Blyton’s books have been modified to conform to contemporary discourses – the names of the characters Dick (in the *Famous Five* series) and Fanny (in the *Adventure* series) have been replaced with Rick and Frannie<sup>15</sup>, while the golliwogs in the *Noddy* books have been replaced with teddy bears. However, these changes have also been criticised as tampering with an important piece of children’s literature history. Further research on the implications of, and reasons for, modern changes to Blyton’s work, such as the removal of racist and sexist connotations, would be significant, as well the considerable changes in Blyton’s reputation and the reception of her books by the public which present evidence of changing discourses

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<sup>15</sup> The replacement of the names Dick and Fanny is most likely because these words now have new connotations and are slang terms for penis and bottom.

over the years since she lived and wrote. While her writing was widely criticised after the Second World War and in the years towards the end of the twentieth century, recently there has been a greater “readiness to think of Enid Blyton as a great classic writer and to regard some of her works... as great classics of their time” (Watson 2000a:4).

In addition, because of the prolific number of work by these women, there are several opportunities for further research into other texts by Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie. These might include Blyton’s school stories, the *Malory Towers* series and the *St Clare’s* series, as well as the popular *Secret Seven* series, and the *Adventure* series, among others. It could also be of interest to consider fiction featuring other detectives created by Christie such as Tommy and Tuppence, Parker Pyne, as well as her romantic fiction, published under the pen name Mary Westmacott.

A further examination of Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie from a social perspective may be of interest to students of social and historical criticism who are concerned with what is viewed as acceptable by society and the influence of changing discourses on society at large. Furthermore, Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie were not the only writers to reflect the prevalent discourses of their time in their writing. Similar reflections of discourse may be found in detective fiction by other authors and in children’s literature. In particular, the portrayal of gender discourses in Edward Stratemeyer’s *Nancy Drew* series with reference to feminine Bess and tomboy George might be of interest, as would a comparative study of the portrayal of the tomboy George in the *Nancy Drew* series and George in the *Famous Five* series. Comparative studies of Christie and other British women writers of detective fiction from different eras such as Dorothy L. Sayers, P.D. James and Ruth Rendell would also be relevant. The portrayal of dominant discourses in British authors of detective fiction, such as

Arthur Conan Doyle, and British authors of children's literature, such as Edith Nesbit could also be revealing. In addition, studies of the portrayal of discourses in the writing of British authors of detective fiction might be compared to American writers of the same period, in particular taking into consideration the difference between the British 'cosies' and the 'hard-boiled' detective fiction of the United States of America. A comparison of Christie and other Golden Age writers with writers of modern detective fiction such as Patricia Cornwell, Ian Rankin, Kathy Reichs, James Patterson and Jeffrey Deaver may be thought provoking, as would a comparison of Blyton with successful modern authors of children's literature such as J.K. Rowling.

An exploration of how Blyton's books give children a chance to be powerful would be engaging, especially in relation to the dominant discourse of ageism prevalent at the time of writing. The portrayal of ageism in relation to Miss Marple in Christie's writing would also be of interest.

## CLOSING REMARKS

We have become too tied up over whether Blyton is racist or sexist. Books should make you happy. I remember Enid Blyton making me happy and we must hang onto that.

Fred Inglis (in Greenfield 1998:85)

Not only did Christie successfully create two exceptionally memorable detectives who remain household names today, Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, but she succeeded as a playwright too, with *The Mousetrap* famous as the longest running show in the world. Her fiction has also been filmed for television and made into movies.

“Even though there are numerous critics who find fault in her work, for every critic of Blyton there are a number of readers who vehemently defend her” (Coetzee 2003:199). Anne Fine ascertains that

Enid Blyton should be saluted for her contribution to children’s literacy by hooking millions of us on reading.... She knew what we were dreaming about. You wanted to be in her free, airy world of caves and coves and secret tunnels and, most importantly, absentee parents.

(in Greenfield 1998:85)

In addition to having her series turned into television series, and even updated and “given a modern makeover” (Revoir 2008) by the Disney Company for modern audiences, Blyton and her characters have become cultural reference points and are even used in the names of music bands such as ‘Noddy’s Puncture’, ‘Die Fünf Freunde’ and ‘The Enid’ (Rudd 2000:38).

The extraordinary output and enduring influence of Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie on readers and their subsequent influence on the genres of detective fiction and children’s literature cannot be overlooked. That Christie and Blyton remain in print today, long after many of their contemporary writers are out of print, stands as testament to their success and



to the value of academic and social projects on their work. They remain widely read. This is particularly significant when the writing of these women is considered in relation to the vast changes in discourses and socially acceptable systems of thought since their time. It is clear the Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie have stood the test of time.