

6.03 Childhood Favourites: 2007

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[upbeat, twinkly piano music fades in]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library, a podcast about stories and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fades out]

Angourie [host]

I have been on this earth for twenty-two years, and I've been able to read for about eighteen of those. When I joined Goodreads in 2016, not only did I begin tracking my current reads, but I also started to remember books I read in my childhood and logging them on my account so I wouldn't forget. And as of the time of recording, I have read at least 559 books in my life, which equates to about 25 books for every year I've been alive. If you haven't visited The Community Library before, welcome! I am so happy you're here. My name is Angourie, I'm an actor, podcaster, soon to be published author, and a big book nerd. I'm also quite a sentimental person. I keep trinkets, I stick things in my journals, and when I want to feel safe, I return to the books and movies I loved as a child. And I'm interested in looking back on what I loved as a kid, because the more I interact with new art, the more I want to understand how my opinions, biases, and tastes were shaped. So this episode is the first in a series of me revisiting my childhood favourite books, year by year. And when I think about the past, and how our culture views the past, I think there's a tendency to be either overly critical of it, or to look at it through rose-tinted glasses. And I wonder if, in this endeavour of revisiting my childhood favourites, we can find a balance of both. This series is completely inspired by one of my favourite YouTubers, Kayla, from BooksandLala. She did a series of videos on her channel in which she re-read her childhood favourites, beginning in the third grade and going through to twelfth grade. So this is my version of that series.

2007

We're going to start in 2007, when I was in grade one and six years old. Now, how do you remember what you were reading when you were six years old? I was born in 2001, and so I remember a time before iPhones, and I remember when our TV was a box and so was my dad's computer. But I also grew up with technology rapidly evolving around me. I remember when my dad got the first iPod, which, by the way, still works. And I remember my mum's first brick of an iPhone, which doesn't work anymore. And I remember getting Instagram when I was thirteen. So a lot of my life is documented digitally, and I have evidence of the clothes and toys I used to have as a kid. But 2007 was before I had my own technology and before I was consistently writing in a journal. So it's a murky time in my memory, and what

we're looking for in the wishy-washy depths of memory, is the obsessions I had as a kid. Because that is what really sticks with me.

Enid Blyton

Some of my earliest reading memories are of old books handed down from my mum's childhood. Enid Blyton was a highly represented author in my early years of reading. Born in 1897 in London, Blyton was a prolific children's author from the 1920s up until her death in 1968. She wrote both fantastical and realistic fiction for children. She wrote stories set in enchanted woods with fairies and pixies, stories set in toy cupboards with toys who came alive, and stories set in boarding schools with mischievous children. She was probably most well-known for her mystery series, though. *The Secret Seven* series is about a group of seven friends who form a secret detective society and solve mysteries around their neighbourhood. And *The Famous Five Series*, a particular favourite of mine, is a series of twenty-one books published from 1942 to 1963. The mysteries are never particularly scary and never deadly. We're often dealing with missing jewels, secret passageways and disappearances.

Five Run Away Together is the third book in the series and was my favourite as a child. Julian, Dick and Anne are staying with their cousin George and her dog Timmy for the summer. When George's mother gets sick and her uncle has to leave to accompany her, the children are left in the hands of the mean new housekeeper. Luckily, the children run away to George's private island, Kirrin Island, and hide in the ruins of the old crumbling castle. One of my favourite sequences of the book was always them organising everything they're going to pack in their little boat for the journey.

"Soup – tins of meat – tins of fruit – tinned milk – sardines – tinned butter – biscuits – tinned vegetables! There's everything we want here!"

[...]

"I've got my little stove for boiling water on, or heating up anything," whispered George. [...] "And the matches for lighting it. I say – what about candles? We can't use our torches all the time, the batteries would soon run out."

They found a packet of candles in the kitchen cupboard, a kettle, a saucepan, some old knives and forks and spoons, and a good many other things they thought they might possibly want.

There was something so exciting to me about getting ready for a journey, packing everything up, and braving it in the wild. Although the wild in Enid Blyton's world is never really wild. She likes writing about nature a lot, it's a theme that runs through many of her books. But she writes about a safe, cosy, quaint version of nature. A nature very different from the one I grew up experiencing in Australia. Another favourite Enid Blyton of mine was *The Children of Cherry Tree Farm*. You'll begin to see a theme in these books, as I describe them. This one is about four siblings, Rory, Benjy, Sheila and Penny, who move to the English countryside for their health.

*“No more London! No more noise of buses and trams! No more poor sooty old trees.
But clean sweet bushes and woods, bright flowers, singing birds and shy little animals
slipping by. Oh, what fun!”*

Interestingly, this book was published in 1940, when many children were being evacuated to farms in the English countryside for fear of London being bombed. Though the book, of course, says nothing of the war. While living on Cherry Tree farm, the children learn about Tammylan, a “wild man” who lives in the woods. They befriend him, and he teaches them about the local wildlife. Water voles, badgers, deer, and foxes. Animals I had never seen before and could only imagine from the little black and white illustrations in the book. The children in this story get the best of both worlds: they get to experience animals in the wild, while also enjoying the comfort of going back to their farm to eat tea and cake, jam and scones, treacle tart and bread and butter pudding.

The Boxcar Children

In a similar vein, I was also obsessed with *The Boxcar Children* by Gertrude Chandler Warner. This is an American children’s novel published in 1924, also a series of books now amounting to more than 160 titles, though the newer stories are not written by Warner, who died in 1979. *The Boxcar Children* tells the story of four children named Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny. When they are suddenly orphaned, they run away for fear of having to live with their grandfather. With no home to go to, they find an abandoned boxcar in the woods. A boxcar is like a shipping-container-shaped train carriage for freighting goods by train. The children make the boxcar their home with kitchen items from a junkyard, foraged berries for food, and water from a nearby stream. Life in the boxcar is cosy and cute. Survival is turned into a game of play-pretend, and once again, solace is found in amongst nature.

All three of these books are about children living on their own in nature. And this is interesting to me, because when I was six years old reading these books, city life was all that I knew. And it’s still all I know. My family didn’t go camping, and we always lived close enough to downtown to visit museums, galleries, libraries, theatres, and cinemas. These books enveloped me in a world I’d had no experience of, and I was fascinated by it. I had visions of babbling brooks, purple heather and bracken, green moss soft enough to sleep on. So the setting of the English countryside fascinated me, and I think about what that means in relation to my connection with Australia’s landscape and wildlife. Growing up, I got to see Australian wildlife every few years when we spent summer at the beach. This particular beach we went to is surrounded by a national park, home to wallabies, goannas, snakes, lizards, cicadas and spiders. And that’s just on land – the water is home to fish, stingray, bluebottles and sea snakes. I was fascinated with these animals as a kid, for sure, but I was also scared of them. And I think that was the difference between learning about Enid Blyton’s British nature, versus experiencing Australia’s nature. Enid Blyton cosied everything up, made everything safe and cute and friendly. In Enid Blyton’s world, birds don’t carry disease, water voles can be your friends, and deer don’t startle when you’re close by. What I learnt growing up is that nature is beautiful, but can also be dangerous, and you have to treat it with respect. Seeing a snake up close is thrilling, reading about a badger building its nest is cosy. And maybe that’s why I obsessed with it so much as a kid: Enid Blyton’s nature was comforting. I was a sensitive kid who got scared easily, and Enid Blyton was never scary,

always predictable. The animals I encountered in Australia in real life were always unpredictable, and that made the reality of it scary.

So with Enid Blyton, I think this was the first time I experienced the escapism of reading. It offered a world that was completely different to my own, and a world that made me feel safe and comforted. I don't want to psychoanalyse my child self. You know, I think when you're a kid, you don't necessarily have an idea of what you like yet. You obsess over anything that's put in front of you, and I think that's the case with Enid Blyton. We had some of her books in the house, and I could get more from the library. So it was easy to be obsessed with her. But I do think it's interesting what these books have in common, and what that might say about what I wanted as a child. The children in these stories are all put in situations where they have to play pretend as grown-ups. They are independent, little adults. And when you're a kid and you're first become aware you're a kid and you'll one day be a grown-up, you want to speed up that process. You suddenly become so aware of everything you're not allowed to do, you can't do, because you're a kid. I think I loved how these stories featured children being completely capable on their own. They're able to have their own adventures and survive in the elements, and still come back for tea time when they wanted to.

The Enchanted Wood

Around this time, my favourite Enid Blyton book was definitely *The Enchanted Wood*. This also featured elements of children going off on adventures on their own in nature, but this one was different and special because it had magic. This is the first of *The Faraway Tree* trilogy, published in 1939, and begins with three children moving to a little cottage in the countryside. At the back of their cottage is a wood, but not just any old wood, this is an enchanted wood, home to the magical faraway tree. And at the very top of this tree, through the clouds, is a new land every week or so. There's topsy-turvy land, giant's land, the land of take what you want, and my favourite, birthday land. Our characters are quintessential Enid Blyton: three good children, a kind mother who bakes delicious treats, and a father you barely see. The magic folk in the wood include brownies, pixies, fairies, and other strange characters such as Moon-Face, named for his large round face, and the Saucepan Man, named for, you guessed it, all the saucepans he carries on his body like clothes.

The Enchanted Wood is probably one of the most magical books I've ever read. The childlike wonder I felt when I first read it has not gone away, and it strikes me every time I re-read this book. The possibility of new magical lands to visit every week! A tree so large and so magical it has homes carved into its trunk! And fun and friendly characters with magical powers! It's just – it's so exciting! Silky was my favourite character – she's a dainty fairy with a beautiful cloud of golden hair, hence the name. She was my favourite because she was pretty, and I was a shallow kid and liked pretty things. Each chapter of the book is like a little short story, telling of the children's adventure to a different land. Some lands are good, some are scary, but all are thrilling. The Land of Birthdays was my favourite, because the birthday cake is magic. Each slice offers you a wish. One of the children, the birthday girl, wishes for a pair of real fairy wings which she can put on and fly around with. Though the Land of

Birthdays was my favourite chapter, it was so painful, too, because my heart would break every time I remembered it wasn't real.

It's hard to view this book objectively, because it elicits such a big emotional response every time I read it. I'm taken back to being six years old, desperately wishing for a pair of fairy wings. To me, *The Enchanted Wood* is one of the most comforting and cosy books. But, logically, I understand and I know that it isn't always like that. Enid Blyton is old-fashioned. Her books always involve clear-cut heroes and unequivocally bad villains. Spoilt children are mean and poor children are nice. But she was even old-fashioned for the time in which she was writing. She never engages with politics, which is somewhat predictable for a children's author of that era, but beyond that, she rarely includes technology. She rarely mentions radios, which every household would have had one since the 1920s, and she also doesn't mention television, which became a huge sensation in the 1950s. Also, her characters never age. Despite appearing in 21 books over 21 years, the characters in *The Famous Five* are perpetually pre-teen. What a nightmare.

And because of this conservativity of her books, there are many offensive things in there. There are racial slurs, even included in the names of toys and the games children play. She leans into gender stereotypes, as well. The boys are brave and the girls are weak, even if they all go on the same adventure together. Enid Blyton's books are not unique in this aspect, they have many of the same problems as other books from this era. The wilful ignorance of oppression is pervasive in the language she uses and the story-telling frameworks. And it's not that these words or phrases used to be fine and now they're offensive. They were always offensive, it's just now people have the opportunity to talk about it and be heard. So what do we do with books like this? Well, Enid Blyton continues to be one of the best-selling children's authors, and many of her books are still in print. But not without revisions.

Revisions

The three children in the *Faraway Tree* series are called Jo (spelt J-O), Bessie, and Fanny. In modern reprints, their names have been changed. Jo becomes Joe with an E to reflect the common spelling for boys. Bessie becomes Beth, once Bessie fell out of fashion, though both are nicknames for Elizabeth. And Fanny, for more obvious reasons, becomes Frannie. Cousin Dick, who appears in book two, is now cousin Rick. But there are changes to more than just the names. Dame Slap is a particularly terrifying character in the series, a teacher who runs a disciplinary school for bad pixies. You'll never guess why she's called Dame Slap. In modern reprints, however, her name is changed to Dame Snap, and any scenes of or references to corporal punishment have been changed or omitted. But what about the racist slurs?

Hachette, the current publisher of Enid Blyton's works, is transparent about the editorial changes to Enid Blyton's work, but not the specific words. Underneath each book description on their website is an "Editorial History" section. Any information about the editorial history of the text is bookended by two identical paragraphs:

"Reviewing and editing the text of Enid Blyton's books has been an ongoing process, beginning in her own lifetime and continuing now and, we anticipate, into the future."

At Enid Blyton Entertainment (owners of the Enid Blyton estate and copyright, and part of Hachette UK), our intention is to keep Enid Blyton's books and stories at the heart of every childhood, as they have been for generations. To do so, we work to ensure that there are no offensive terms in the books – changing words where the definition is unclear in context and therefore the usage is confusing, and where words have been used in an inappropriate or offensive sense – while retaining the original language as far as is possible. This enables a very wide international audience of children to enjoy the books, while also understanding that they were written and set in the past."

The last paragraph is as follows:

"In new editions of Enid Blyton books, we do not change language for the sake of modernising it. The books' period setting is part of their charm and is enjoyed by readers of all ages. Any historic changes previously made to new editions, which come under the category of 'modernisation' in this context, have been or are being restored to the original text at the point of reprint."

So there's a lot of language and information in those two paragraphs, but I think what Hachette is making clear is that while they don't 'modernise' the text – for example, they haven't changed Dick's name in *The Famous Five* to Rick – they do take out offensive language and slurs. The conversation of erasing the past vs. honouring it vs. not recreating it vs. treating it with nuance is complicated and ongoing. How do we look at and talk about art from the past when it contains offensive content? Viewing anything from the past – even something as recent as ten years ago – requires an understanding of historical context. Political context, social context, an understanding of how things were then, how they are now, and all the things that happened in between. You need to be able to separate yourself from it. But children don't necessarily have those skills yet. Children are wholly enveloped in whatever world is placed in front of them. I know I was. I received information without context. That's what I did. For a while, I thought you could find badgers in Australia. So I think, if we are to continue to publish Enid Blyton's books, it's very important that certain vocabulary is changed. It's not going to change the conservative ideals rooted in her stories, but it is a protective measure against kids internalising harmful words and phrases without understanding context or meaning. The discussion of erasing history vs. offering historical context is going to continue on, but I think we can leave kids out of it.

Do I recommend Enid Blyton's works, even with these minor changes? Not necessarily. As I said, you can change a few words here and there, but the fact of the matter is, she was a conservative white woman writing stories in 20th Century England. And her ideas are, inevitably, baked into her work. Nostalgia is a nice feeling, but I think that's because it reminds us of a time of blissful ignorance. As a child, I wasn't aware of how complicated the world was. I devoured stories without context or opinion. I was scared of Dame Slap and I wanted fairy wings, and it was as simple as that. And now that I'm older, stories are heavier. Stories carry more weight and meaning, because there's a responsibility to engage with what we consume. We must understand and analyse how media informs our values, morals, opinions, biases, judgements, and weaknesses. And I guess that's what I'm doing now. I'm engaging with the books I read as a child in a more meaningful way, because I couldn't when

I was that age. And this new responsibility to deconstruct and understand everything I read and watch now and everything I read and watched as a kid, that doesn't feel like a burden to me. It's part of growing up, something Enid Blyton's characters never get to do ...

Outro

Thank you for listening to today's episode. In my next childhood favourites episode we'll dive into some journal entries from 2008, and talk about one of my favourite authors, Jacqueline Wilson. In the meantime, I've got an episode on *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel coming up, and of course when I'm not podcasting, you can find me on Instagram @the_community_library. I hope you're all staying safe out there and reading good books. Bye.