



Classics in Short No.14: Peter Pan

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Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on J M Barrie's **Peter Pan**.

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Ain't it absurd; ain't it a pain. No! It's not superman but?

Peter Pan

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Author

James Matthew Barrie (b. Kirriemuir 1860, d. London 1937; created baronet 1913, OM 1922); founder/captain of the Allahakbarries cricket team, novelist etc. but not otherwise implicated in children's literature.

Genre

A multivalent dreamscape.

Evolution

1902 - The Little White Bird: a fragmented novel, whose chapters 13-18 are later published separately (see below).

1903 - Peter Pan: a kind of scripted pantomime first produced at the Duke of York's Theatre, but no text then published.

1906 - Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens: separate publication of the **White Bird** chapters, garnished with illustrations by Arthur Rackham. *A succès d'estime*

1906 - The Peter Pan Keepsake: a prose version of the play edited by Daniel O'Connor with Mr Barrie's kind assent, to enable children to revive their memories of the story. A slightly amended version appeared in 1907 as **The Peter Pan Picture Book** (illus. Alice B Woodward) and this text remained in print for over sixty years.

1911 - Peter and Wendy: Barrie's own novelization of the play, including much material that also appears in its elaborate stage directions and explanations.

1928 - Peter Pan: the eventual publication of the play-text, with a 26-page Dedication to the Five who inspired it.

Copyright

In 1929 Barrie gave rights over all versions of **Peter Pan** to the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children. In 1987 the legal term expired and Lord Callaghan succeeded with a Bill in the Lords to restore the Hospital's continuing right to royalties (but not its control over variant interpretations). Presumably now, Europe's harmonization of

copyright has returned **Peter Pan** to full protection till 2007 (where will the Lords be then?).

So what's Peter's story?

As a 1902 resident in Kensington Gardens he is shown to already possess three attributes which will figure in his stage career: an initial capacity to fly (stemming from his new-born consciousness of pre-natal life as a bird); a consequent desertion of his mother in quest of liberty and 'fun' (hence his status as 'eternal child'); a bizarre knowledge that babies who fall out of their perambulators are rapt away by the fairies 'Peter's removal from W8 to the Neverland in the play engenders a multiplication of fantastic events, many deriving from Barrie's attachment to, and larks with, the five sons of Arthur and Sylvia Llewelyn Davies. Peter intrudes upon the Darling family while the nursemaid, a Newfoundland dog called Nana, is unfairly in disgrace. He shows them how to fly and they zoom off to the Neverland along with Peter's pugnacious coadjutrix, the fairy Tinker Bell. Here they meet Peter's tribe of Lost Boys who survive in a landscape of boyhood romance circa 1900: an underground house and a varied population of redskins, wolves, fairies, with a regular threat from pirates led by Captain Jas. Hook. The antagonism between Peter and this Old Etonian scoundrel forms the theme of the most dramatic action, but it is underlain by the tensions between Wendy, as child-mother, and Peter, as amnesiac Gauleiter. Whether his cocky intransigence becomes tragic when the children return home is matter for debate. (The best-realized characters in the whole show are Nana and the Lost Boy, Tootles.)

Reception and criticism

Beerbohm got it right when he called the first production of the play 'a riot of inconsequence and exquisite futility'. While the Kensington Gardens story may be ridiculous, its rootedness in a known place and its controlled register of satiric whimsy give it a comic charm. But the play, and the narratives derived from it, present a farrago of happenings 'in such wise that one can conceive nothing that might not conceivably happen' (Beerbohm again). Nevertheless, the play itself has always been able to overcome this deficiency through spectacular 'business' 'just as Peter's fascist tendencies have been disguised by usually having him played by a Principal Girl. And, undeniably, the psychological dilemmas at the heart of the story 'tortuously articulated by Jacqueline Rose in **The Case for Peter Pan** (2ed. Macmillan, 1992) 'have an inexhaustible interest. **Peter and Wendy** does plug some narrative holes in the play, experiments like **Hook** show a potential which Barrie did not exploit, but his home made myth of the gains and losses of maturation and the fragility of child/adult relationships cannot help but endure.

The illustrations are taken from the ACC (Antique Collectors' Club) Children's Classic edition illustrated by Greg Becker (1 85149 702 1, £12.99 hbk) For a fully edited text of **Kensington Gardens** and **Peter and Wendy**, see the one-volume World Classics edition, **Peter Pan and Kensington**, ed. Peter Hollindale (OUP, 0 19 283929 2, £5.99 pbk).

Brian Alderson is Chair of the Children's Books History Society and the chief children's book consultant for **The Times**.

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