



Classics in Short No.27: Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse

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Brian Alderson on Ursula Moray Williams' **Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse**.

Brian Alderson

Classic storytelling in bedtime-sized chunks?

Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse

Bedtime stories,

I see, have got a government seal of approval. Our new Enlightenment is in process of acclaiming and supplying consumer-tested advice for what past generations regarded as a natural human activity. (How it will ever work though, with most children going to bed at 11.15pm may need explanation.)

What to choose

for them is also easy enough for anyone who does not have a tin ear for language and can discriminate between the genuine and the meretricious in today's vast output. But the transitions are worth noting: from simple to more complex picture books, from picture books to story collections and to those full-length stories that split up naturally into bedtime-sized chunks.

The Little Wooden Horse

and his adventures are an ideal example of this last. The book has nineteen chapters, none of which is longer than eleven pages of generously-spaced letterpress (in the first edition anyway), and all of which are organised in classic storytelling fashion ? one crisis after another down to the happy resolution.

But there is more to it than that.

The story begins by establishing the bond of affection between the little wooden horse and Uncle Peder, the toymaker who constructed him. The horse's efforts to help his master, who falls upon hard times, lead to a series of accidents which carry him further and further away from his home surroundings (perhaps with Carlo Collodi somewhere in the background, influencing the proceedings). Some of these accidents themselves result in the little horse incurring debts of gratitude which amount to stories within the story. Thus, he is diverted from taking a reward to the miner's son, who cleaned him up after a pit explosion, by having to run in a royal horse-race and then by getting a job as a tightrope walker (!) in a circus. Such divagations supply tensions of their own and help to give an organic unity to the whole narrative as the ravelled-up incidents are finally unravelled.

So who wrote it, and when?

Ursula Moray Williams, who was born in 1911, is what you might call the doyenne of today's children's authors. Her first book, **Jean-Pierre**, illustrated with her own scissor-cuts, was published exactly seventy years ago and was rapidly followed by a succession of stories and plays for younger children, including two collections for Brownies. More adventurous experiments, like **The Pettabomination** of 1933 were precursors for **Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse** which came out in 1938 with illustrations by Nina K. Brisley, sister to the author of **Milly-Molly-Mandy**. Later the little horse was to team up with another particularly engaging Moray Williams character, **Gobolino the Witch's Cat**, who first arrived in 1942.

Storytelling all the time.

Having been told stories and lived with stories from childhood on, Ursula Moray Williams seems never to have needed to learn her craft, and the secret of the **Little Wooden Horse**'s success lies in its plain, undemonstrative telling. Nothing else would have done, for managing the suspension of our disbelief involved writerly feats rather like the wooden horse negotiating his tightrope on two wheels. Readers and listeners must be persuaded that her hero is not only a walking, talking, living wooden horse, but one who can pull barges, shift coal, and outrace stallions. And indeed, at the point when he has, literally, lost his head he more or less functions as a disembodied spirit. Only Ursula Moray Williams's self-assurance, 'quiet and strong' like the horse himself, and her unadorned language can do the persuading.

'Long out of fashion?

says the shopkeeper to the gentleman who wants to buy the little horse to try to quell his unruly children, voracious for new toys. But, rough and rowdy though they be, they never want to give him up, and the incident is emblematic of the potential that extremely simple things may have for nurturing the child's imagination. This horse belongs with Edward Gordon Craig and **The Book of Penny Toys** (1899) and Lovat Fraser with the tumblers and whistling larks of his **Book of Simple Toys** (1917) – an assertion of creativity against the ersatz products of the plastic mills.

Sadly **Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse** has recently gone out of print. The illustrations, by Justin Todd, are taken from the 1994 Young Puffin Modern Classics edition.

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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