



Classics in Short No.53: The Magic Pudding

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Brian Alderson on Norman Lindsay's **The Magic Pudding**.

We?ve Puddin? here a treat, we?ve Puddin? here galore; <!--break-->

Do not decline to stay and dine, *The Magic Pudding* you?ll adore.

F-words are needed for this introduction.

Mr Norman Lindsay (1879-1969), the long-lived and prolific Australian writer and cartoonist, was once arguing (he liked to do that) about Fairytales. A critic claimed that these were the preferred reading of children, a point which Lindsay challenged, saying that what really appealed to them was Food and Fighting. So the critic told him to test the theory out with an example.

The result was the Fanciful Fantasy of The Magic Pudding.

which was first published in Sydney in 1918 and which, in his Introduction to a recent new edition* , Mr Philip Pullman calls 'the Funniest children?s book ever written' ? an assertion endorsed in almost exactly the same phrasing by Mr Lance Salway in his booklist **Humorous Books for Children** , first published by the Thimble Press as long ago as 1978.

?Fast and Furious? says Mr Salway

is the plot of this Frenetic story ? and that is as precise a summary as one could wish for. Norman Lindsay supplies the provender in four slices (which have sometimes been handed out in separate booklets) and consumption begins when Bunyip Bluegum, a smartly-dressed and intelligent koala bear, is driven from his tree-house through the incivility of his Uncle Wattlebury. The latter?s whiskers take up much of the dwelling and get into Bunyip?s soup and Uncle will do nothing to remove them: 'Shaving may add an air that?s somewhat brisker,' he avers, 'For dignity, commend me to the whisker.'

Setting off on his travels

Bunyip soon encounters Bill Barnacle, an old salt, and Sam Sawnoff, a penguin. They are the owners of Albert, a cut-and-come-again Pudding, whose magic qualities consist of his supplying inexhaustible amounts of whatever variety of pudding his possessors might be partial to at any particular time: 'All you had to do was to whistle twice and turn the basin round.' Albert himself is never particularly happy, except in the most sardonic way: 'a spoilt child' says Bill. He is apt to complain about his fate ('O who would be a puddin?', / A puddin? in a pot?') but then, perversely, to castigate owners who do not do justice to what he has to offer. He is also given to running away on his long spidery legs and to insulting all and sundry: 'Too much style about you,' he says, chucking a glass of port over Bill, 'take that for being a pumpkin-headed old shell-back.'

The servings of narrative

consist primarily of the Puddin' Owners' efforts (unhelped by their charge) to protect him from a Possum and a Wombat who have set themselves up as devious but ineffectual Puddin' Thieves. Their adventures are recounted in a manner proper to slapstick farce with a regular injection of comic rhymes and bab-balladry. Incident follows incident with an authorial generosity akin to that of the Pudding itself and there is no reason why the swaying contest should not continue indefinitely except that, as Bill says when they flee the Court of Justice of the town of Tooraloo (where the port-chucking incident occurred): 'we are pretty close up to the end of the book, and something will have to be done in a Tremendous Hurry, or else we'll be cut off short by the cover.'

'Robust and rollicking' indeed

says Mr Salway, defecting to the r-words, and the pleasure of reading Lindsay's galloping text (especially aloud) is enhanced by the joy of his accompanying illustrations. He was a skilled caricaturist and the vigour which he brings to page after page of action portraits gives the book an almost cinematic quality, the imagined characters completely in tune with the crazy events in which they are involved. The reproduction of these drawings, done originally, I think, in pencil and charcoal, is especially commendable in the new edition of the story. Early printings suffered from a muddy finish, later ones have been unnecessarily coloured [some actually tinted by Lindsay himself] and the first Puffin edition of 1957, from which I read to my own children, was seemingly, but not all that noticeably, redrawn. That drove its temperamental author to forbid its sale in Australia.

He wrote nothing else for children

although his son Jack, Marxian idealist, founder of the Fanfrolico Press, and a seriously underrated literary questor, wrote four historical novels for boys in the 1930s (another son, Philip, was a popular historical novelist). Whether though **The Magic Pudding** is beyond competition as 'the funniest children's book ever' could give rise to a stimulating debate. Any alternative offers?

*The illustrations are taken from The New York Review Children's Collection edition, with an introduction by Philip Pullman, 1 59017 101 2, £10.00 hbk

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