



# 500 Million Readers Can't Be Wrong

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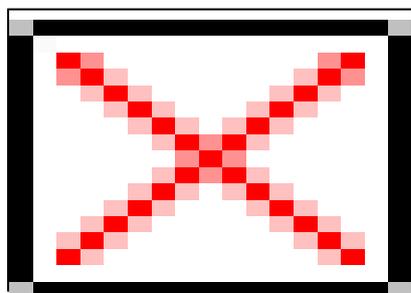
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Byline:

**500 million readers can't be wrong** Laura Fraine asks 'How relevant is Enid Blyton?'

As a new **Seven Stories** exhibition opens celebrating our most successful author, **Laura Fraine** asks 'How relevant is Enid Blyton?'

Any adult might reasonably question Blyton's relevance today, remembering tales which were old fashioned, or ? in my own case ? banned from the local library, in their own youth. The answer may surprise you.



Blyton was first published in 1922 and has never been out of print. The exact number of works she has published is unknown, but she wrote in excess of 700 full-length books, plus 4,500 short stories. At the height of her fame in 1951-54, she was producing a book a week. She published her own magazine and worked for several different publishers, who were so keen to get her bestselling books to market, they edited her work very little (some might say this shows).

Today Enid Blyton continues to sell a book a minute with total sales of more than 500 million books worldwide, making her one of the best-selling children's authors of all time. She is the fourth most translated author in the world. She regularly tops 'best-loved author' lists; her books were most recently voted by readers of **The Guardian** as 'the UK's favourite children's books'.

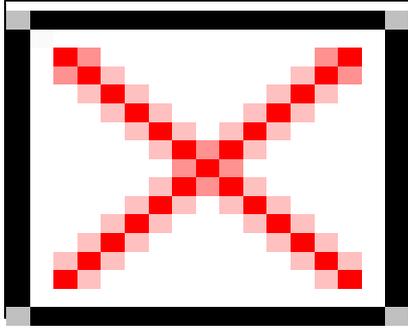
It is hard not to get caught up in statistics when considering Enid Blyton's career, but the sheer volume of her output and sales is one of the most fascinating things about her work, and something of a salve to that other area of interest ? her controversy.

However frowned upon she once was, a scan of my local WHSmith shows the obligatory wall of **Beast Quest** and **Rainbow Magic** books alongside a wall of Enid Blyton. Today's children are devouring books written in the 1940s, with the same enthusiasm as for the latest craze.

'Devour' is a word that comes up often in conversation about Enid Blyton. Her work has been criticised for its limited vocabulary and formulaic characters. They are, perhaps, not books to savour, but ones that feed a voracious appetite for a good story.

The retrospective on Enid Blyton's work that has just opened at Seven Stories, National Centre for Children's Books aims to sum up the vast Blyton empire within the space of one room. There are typescripts, manuscripts, letters, photographs, her typewriter, diaries, accounts, different editions of books, copies of Enid Blyton's own **Sunny Stories**

magazine, video clips from the television series, and original illustrations.



‘It was a really difficult exhibition to curate because her work covered so many different themes. We had to work out a way of representing her work which made sense,’ said Gillian Rennie, senior curator at Seven Stories. The centre bought part of Blyton’s archive in 66 lots at auction in 2010. The material came from the estate of Gillian Baverstock, Enid Blyton’s elder daughter, and is the largest public ‘accessible archive of her work. ‘Despite the enormous output, the archive of her work is actually quite small. Perhaps because she was working for a number of publishers and producing so much work, nobody put much value on the actual typescripts.’

The **Famous Five** gallery is based around a map of Kirrin Island, there is a den for the **Secret Seven**, and a gallery for the other mysteries and adventures. A classroom setting complete with desk and lacrosse stick represents the **Malory Towers** and **St Clare’s** books, while **The Magic Faraway Tree** offers a video wall where children can choose to enter different worlds at the top of the tree, and a slide to get down to the bottom. In the **Toyland** area there’s a sturdy wooden car children can ride in and a host of bright fancy dress costumes. In the **Green Hedges** gallery we learn more about Enid Blyton’s private life and her love of nature. A sensory wall formed from one of the hedges offers children fabric flowers in different textures to touch, following the centre’s aims to make exhibitions accessible to all.

Indeed, with Blyton’s work covering such a wide age range, this is likely to be Seven Stories’ most accessible exhibition yet. ‘It will certainly be its most controversial,’ says Gillian. The exhibition doesn’t shy away from controversy. A wall of newspaper cuttings gives some insight into the charges of racism, sexism, snobbery and just plain bad writing that dogged Blyton from the 1960s onwards. ‘At Seven Stories we encourage children to be critical readers.’

While edits took place in the 1990s to remove clearly offensive material, which would certainly be considered racist or xenophobic today, Enid Blyton’s works are still very much of their time and there remains a certain uneasiness about Blyton’s tone. Take this paragraph from the opening chapter of **Five on a Treasure Island**, the first of the **Famous Five** books, published in 1942.

*‘I’m George,’ said the girl. ‘I shall only answer if you call me George. I hate being a girl. I won’t be. I don’t like the things that girls do. I like the things that boys do. I can climb better than any boy, and swim faster too. I can sail a boat as well as any fisher-boy on this coast. You’re to call me George. Then I’ll speak to you. But I shan’t if you don’t.’*

The speech highlights not only the social expectations for girls at the time, but a crisp, black-and-white character assessment that is distinctly Blyton. There is little room for nuance or reflection. George, a girl who acts out of type, is depicted as a straightforward anomaly, a ‘boy-girl’. Perhaps not the world view we are keen to pass on to our children. Yet, read on and it is increasingly difficult not to get caught up in George and the gang’s adventures, or to admire George’s strength of character. Blyton’s worlds have a sense of clarity and display an ethic that a sensible, can-do spirit wins the day. Her adventurous optimism is most persuasive.

For her own part, Gillian says that finding out more about Enid Blyton’s childhood helped her understand the author’s body of work. ‘Her parents had a terrible marriage and there was a lot of fighting at home. Enid used to sit upstairs with her brothers and tell them stories. Then when she started teaching it was obvious that she had a talent for telling stories to her pupils. The criticism of her books ‘ that her characters are two-dimensional ‘ ties in with that oral storytelling tradition: she keeps the child with her. Her books are exciting and they keep the pace going. She knew exactly what

children wanted and she knew how to give it to them. I felt that her work made much more sense when looking at it from the background of oral storytelling.?

And praise must be given for an author who so successfully hooked children into reading. ?Enid Blyton was one of the first authors to communicate directly with her readers. She really cared about what they wanted,? says Gillian. She was also one of the first to sell directly to children, without the need to please both parent and child that shaped children?s authors before her. Her aim was entertainment, not didacticism. She understood children?s fantasies, and the importance to them of an escape from interfering adults. While Enid Blyton is often compared to JK Rowling for her popularity, her books were certainly not aimed at crossing over into the adult market, and it has been said that she wasn?t interested in any critic over the age of 12. Her influence today is seen far and wide in contemporary writers, in Francesca Simon?s **Horrid Henry** series, in Gwyneth Rees? fairy books, in Jacqueline Wilson?s creation of a vast and loyal fan base.

?It?s impossible to celebrate Britain?s literary heritage for children without including our most successful author, Enid Blyton,? said Seven Stories? CEO Kate Edwards. ?There is no doubt that she was a complex person - a keen naturalist, progressive teacher, working parent and canny business woman. Her work has endured, constantly re-interpreted through its decades in print, and enthralling generation after generation of children.? It is the complexity of the woman behind the work, as well as the chance to re-enter that clear and optimistic world of adventure, that makes this exhibition of such interest.

*Mystery, Magic and Midnight Feasts: The Many Adventures of Enid Blyton is at Seven Stories, National Centre for Children?s Books until spring 2014. In summer 2013, a digital exhibition will be launched at [www.sevenstories.org.uk/](http://www.sevenstories.org.uk/)* [3]">[www.sevenstories.org.uk](http://www.sevenstories.org.uk) [4]

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