



Two Children Tell: The Moomins, Rebecca and Nicholas

Article Author:

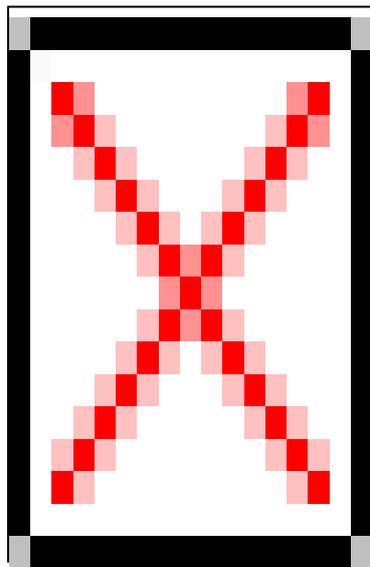
[Virginia Lowe](#) [1]

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Byline:

by Virginia Lowe

?I wish I was really Snufkin, Mum? said Rebecca wistfully. In her latest article drawing on her records of her



children's responses to literature, **Virginia Lowe** observes the different ways her young son and daughter took on fictional alter-egos.

Rebecca had tried on several alter-egos by the time she announced her desire to be Snufkin (6y5m or six years, five months). They had begun at just 2y10m with Tigger (for some days, V: Come on, Becca. R: No, Tigger!), then Piglet. The confident, supremely independent, 'big' or 'medium-sized' Rebecca determined to be, for weeks, the smallest, weakest, least secure of Milne's characters, noting 'I'm going to be Piglet all days?' (meaning forever ? 2y11m).

For several years afterwards she became characters only for the length of the pretend game. McCloskey's Little Sal, Hoban's Frances, Hughes' Lucy (with baby Nicholas designated as Tom, of course) were all favourite roles, and it wasn't until she began her love affair with the Moomins that she took on a genuine alter-ego again. As with Winnie-the-Pooh, she changed her allegiance early on. Initially, after reading our first book **Finn Family Moomintroll**, it was Sniff and by our second, **Comet in Moominland**, she was identifying with him very intensely. I asked her why Sniff?

R: Because he's the littlest and because he doesn't really belong to the family.

V: Do you feel sorry for him because he doesn't belong?

R: (very surprised) No! (This was obviously why she had chosen the identification - 6y4m)

By our fourth in the series she had changed to Snufkin, except when it came to licking out baking bowls (**Moominsummer Madness**).

V: I thought you were Sniff!

R: (with dignity) I'm Snufkin and Sniff? (6y5m).

Unlike his sister, Nicholas did not take on alter-egos. He only identified with characters when he was looking at the book. The person who spoke to him most directly in Jansson's series, was Little My.

He had encountered the series at a much younger age than his sister had, because he often listened in as they were being read aloud to her. He had been allocated the role of Moomintroll by Rebecca in their games. At the illustration of her sliding on the ice in **Moominland Midwinter**, he remarked "I'm the Moomintroll. I very much like her, don't I?" (4y2m).

The first one which was read specifically to him (when he suddenly realised, apparently for the first time, that novels continue the story from chapter to chapter. With delight: "Does it go on and on and on?") was **Moominsummer Madness** at 4y4m. At one illustration he exclaimed

N: Little My again! What's she doing? She's talking to an ant! Little My is always cross. Little people are usually cross. I'm quite cross sometimes. (Which was perceptive of him).

Walking back from the station, he asked to be carried. I obliged for a bit, remarking on how heavy he was, then putting him down.

N: Little My wouldn't be heavy!

V: No, she would be easy to carry.

N: She could go in your pocket. Little My never grows big, does she? I wish I could ride in your pocket!

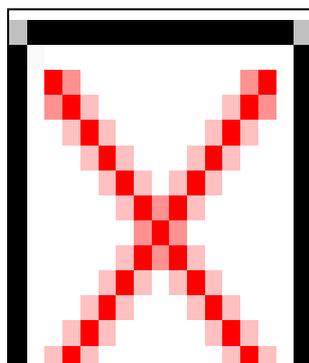
All Rebecca's alter-egos were male (later for instance, she was Dick for a full school year, from Dickon in **The Secret Garden**, (7y2m onwards) but Nicholas could never bring himself to "be" a female, even when just identifying with a character during an actual reading. "Dat's me. No, dat's a girl. Soyee?" (2y3m). So Little My was never his alter-ego as Snufkin was Rebecca's.

The **Moomintroll series** was very important to Rebecca. She bought the books one by one, with her own sparse pocket money, carried them around in a little blue case, and slept with the current one under her pillow (which often made writing up the night's episode, difficult to organise). Much of her time at home, she went around playing a recorder (Snufkin's "flute" or "mouth organ"), carrying a "tobacco pouch" and a backpack.

She had "been" Snufkin for several months at six, and Snufkin was the only character she actually physically copied outside games. At 7y6m she remarked "I like being by myself" like Snufkin" and she wanted to camp like Snufkin, so we helped her set up a "tent" outside the front door of the house in the country where we were holidaying, and she slept out there. At 18y0m, she took herself off with her pack to live in the forest, fighting for the trees that were being logged. (See Crago's 1993 article, below).

At 18y9m she told us that we were like Moominmamma and Moominpappa because we were accepting and encouraging and because we welcomed anyone to stay. Then she continued, of an incident in **Comet in Moominland** that had amused her in her childhood ?

R: It's rather Monty Python that. They're on quite different wave lengths.



Kids? Book, a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children?s literature generally. See [3] www.createakidsbook.com.au [4] for further details. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978 0 415 39724 7, £29.99 pbk).

Finn Family Moomintroll, Tove Jansson, Puffin, 978-0140301502, £6.99 pbk

Comet in Moominland, Tove Jansson, Puffin, 978-0140302868, £6.99 pbk

Moominsummer Madness, Tove Jansson, Puffin, 978-0140305012, £6.99 pbk

Moominland Midwinter, Tove Jansson, Puffin, 978-0140305029, £6.99 pbk

The Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Puffin, 978-0141321066, £7.99 pbk

See also

Why readers read what writers write, H. Crago, *Children?s Literature in Education*, 1993.

Snufkin, Sniff and Little My: The ?Reality? of Fictional Characters for the Young Child. V.Lowe (Papers: *Explorations into Children's Literature*, 1991).

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