



Five Children on the Western Front

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Editor's Choice:

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5

As the title suggests, this is a sequel ? of sorts ? to E. Nesbit's **Five Children and It** (1902) and to the final novel in her trilogy, **The Story of the Amulet** (1906). The young Cyril, Anthea, Robert, Jane and the baby, the Lamb, who embarked upon a series of magical and comic adventures following their discovery of the ancient sand-fairy, the Psammead, would have faced futures overshadowed by the Great War. In a Prologue which adapts a chapter from **The Amulet**, the children now travel forward to 1930, where they meet their ? by now ? very aged friend, the Professor, dozing between dreams and tears and surrounded by photographs of his ?family?, the children. Anthea realises that more recent pictures included women who might be Jane and herself in adulthood; ?but I didn't see any grown-up men who looked a bit like you boys ? I wonder why not.? Alert readers will not wonder why too long, especially when they turn the page into the novel's opening chapter, set in ?Kent, October 1914?.

The Five have been joined by another sister, Edie, and the Lamb is now a lively eleven year old. These two are at the centre of the story, while Cyril is in the Army, Robert at Cambridge (facing enlistment once his exams are over), Anthea at Art College but about to become a V.A.D., and Jane is still at school, arguing with her conservative mother about training as a doctor. Those adventures with the Psammead have faded into little more than bedtime stories.

Not for long. In fact, the extraordinary ?furry brown head? emerges from its old home in the gravel pit ? to its own surprise ? in the novel's first sentence. Kate Saunders must have worked through a series of fascinating decisions. She retains the comic tone of the original, but now it must be less self-conscious, for Nesbit's narrative voice would surely prove too arch, laboured even, for modern tastes. Saunders avoids the lengthy asides from writer to reader. She celebrates the language and high spirits of young people of a hundred years ago without turning them into Bertie Woosters. The original drew together separate adventures through time and space ending in comic catastrophe which first appeared in Strand Magazine in 1900. Here the taut plot drives towards conclusions foreshadowed in that photograph in the Professor's room; and now each of the wished-for journeys - glimpses of other places, other times ? advances that plot, often leaving Edie and the Lamb considerably the wiser. They see Cyril in his dugout, writing to his loved ones before he goes over the top in the morning; and Anthea, suffering the strict discipline of the training hospital. This family has outgrown childish squabbles; their love for each other is deeply grounded and they are aware how fragile things can be. The older children are of an age to fall in love, and they do, within the conventions of the day, probably to the pleasure of readers who themselves may well be older than those of the trilogy.

If the children learn, then so must the irascible Psammead; this is his journey as much as the family's. We learn that he had been the most cruel of tyrants, killing off hundreds of inconvenient slaves or enemies. Now, the Cosmos has decided to insist upon his repentance before he can be released from his present circumstances. At one point, for instance, he must learn from a visit to another tyrant, the aged Kaiser, in exile in Holland in 1938.

Among all this, Saunders can explore the shifting nature of social class, the empowerment of women, the war itself; she balances the values of the times against the advantage of long hindsight. This is a finely layered novel, which goes well beyond an imitative sequel while still honouring its inspiration.

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