



# Classics Wonderland

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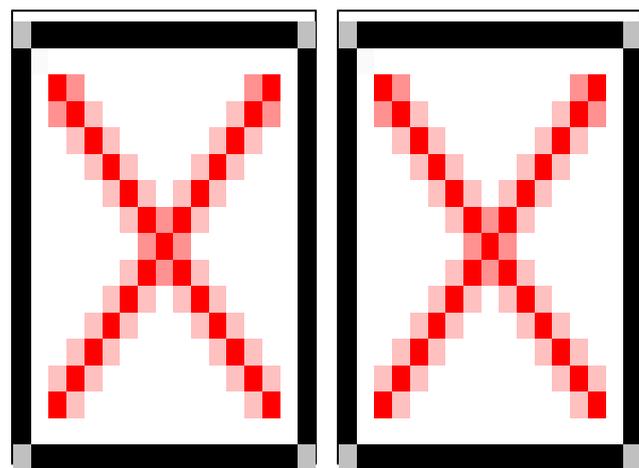
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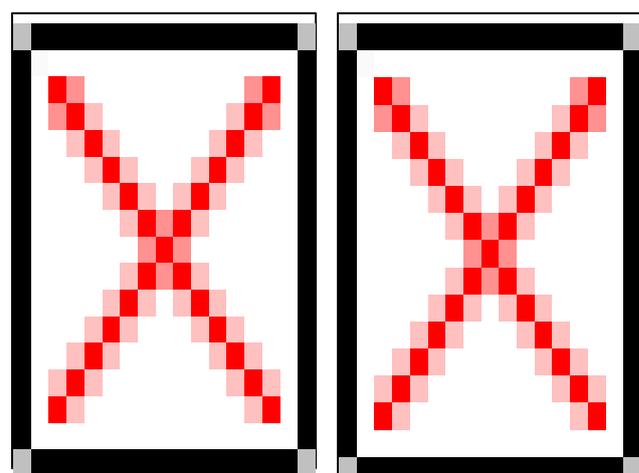
## Classics for Christmas chosen by **Imogen Russell Williams**

Christmas is a time for sharing and Imogen Russell Williams is delighted to discover old favourites in new jackets.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the publication of **Alice in Wonderland**, and, unsurprisingly, new editions of this compelling and copyright-free children's classic have instantly mushroomed to mark the occasion. Macmillan, **Alice's** original publisher, has made most of a fanfare, with editions ranging from enormous to tiny, ornate to sparse, and pitched at every age from infant to adult. And Faber, Egmont, Penguin and others have all been in on the **Alice** action, too.

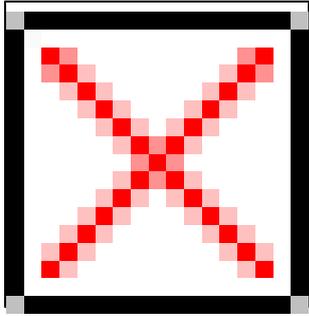


Carroll's masterpiece, though, is far from the only classic title to have been reissued recently. Taking a leaf out of Jane Nissen's book, and building on Catnip Publishing's determination to bring old favourites back from obscurity, Macmillan have also been putting out hardbacked, sweet-shop-bright editions of favourites such as **Gobbolino**, **The Witch's Cat**, and the delightful **Milly-Molly-Mandy**, with forewords by luminaries such as Shirley Hughes and Joan Aiken. (Disclosure - I have recently contributed a foreword for [The Water Babies](#) [3], a bit overawed by the company I'm keeping.)



Egmont has also produced several classic reissues, including **The Hundred and One Dalmatians** (divertingly illustrated by Alex T Smith, of 'Claude' fame), **Just So Stories** and **A Little Princess**. And it's put serious re-jacketing muscle behind more recent classic-feeling titles, including the four Michelle Magorian novels to which it owns the rights (**A Spoonful of Jam**, **Cuckoo in the Nest**, **A Little Love Song** and **Just Henry**).

Meanwhile, Magorian's most famous novel, **Goodnight Mister Tom**, has recently been reissued by Penguin as part of its **A Puffin Book** series of 'Stories that last a lifetime' - a brilliantly eclectic list, including titles like **Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH**, **The Ordinary Princess**, **The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm** and **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry**. True to their billing, none of these books have quietly yellowed, dated and passed their best - all are still just waiting to be read to spark transporting joy.

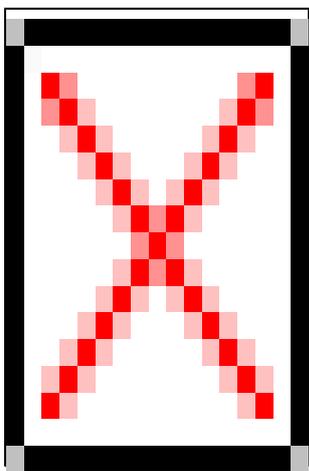


Faber have been raiding the treasures of their backlist, too; but as well as the ghostly, evocative **Moondial**, the anarchic **Tyke Tyler** and the merry, surreal **Land of Green Ginger**, they've been prioritising poetry. TS Eliot's cat poems have reappeared successively

in cheerily accessible picture-book versions, illustrated by Arthur Robins; similarly, a series of four Walter de la Mare poems kicked off last winter with [Snow](#) [4], and has now been followed by **The Ride-by-Nights** this autumn. My old favourite de la Mare collection, **Peacock**

**Pie**, of which I possessed a thoroughly grown-up edition, has also reappeared in a more child enticing format - as has the splendid **Complete Nonsense** of Edward Lear.

The possessor of a barn-wide nostalgic streak, I'm delighted that the tendency to curate and preserve children's-book treasures of the recent and not-so-recent past has now gone mainstream. The most heartening thing about the trend, though, is how excited contemporary children appear to be by the discovery of old favourites. The brightly-coloured Macmillan Classics editions, for instance, aren't just for dewy-eyed parents and grandparents to keep jealously unread on the shelf, away from sticky fingers - my daughter has rapidly become a Milly-Molly-Mandy addict, clamouring nightly to hear more about blackberrying, errand running and little-friend-Susan.



The recent round of reissues is generally sensitive to the needs of today's readers, as well as reassuring adult buyers of the 'heritage heft' it packs. Reading OUP's welcoming, well-designed **Treasure Island**, with its enticing cover and manageable text size and spacing, reminded me of the onion-skin paper and tiny font of my own childhood edition, which I found so intimidating that I didn't read the whole book until my late teens. Both **Treasure Island** and the new

OUP **Anne of Green Gables** were read to shreds, however, within a couple of weeks of arriving in my daughter's school library.

There seems to be a sense in children's publishing at present that the sector can't focus simply on the new next best thing, or on protracted, disposable-feeling series, written to a formula without any feeling of inherent longevity. As reading habits change, and printed books come under greater pressure to justify their existence, the tendency to produce beautiful volumes, showing off the best in illustration, design and production values, is combining with a Noah-like need to preserve stories threatened by the extinction of obscurity ? exemplified by Pushkin Press? **Save the Story** initiative, featuring complex, challenging stories retold by notable writers and illustrated vividly by handpicked artists.

Although I might, at present, be somewhat **Alice**-d out, I find the plethora of old favourites in new jackets a pure delight ? for me, for my daughter, and for most of the young readers I encounter, who I assumed at first would be uninterested in books old enough to be considered classic, but who instead prove both their reading mettle and the staying power of a really good story. Now, if someone will just republish **What-a-Mess**, I can hang up my hat.

**Imogen Russell Williams** is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA. She writes a trend-spotting biog for the **Guardian Online**, and seasonal round-ups for **The Metro**.

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