



The evolution of the children's mystery story

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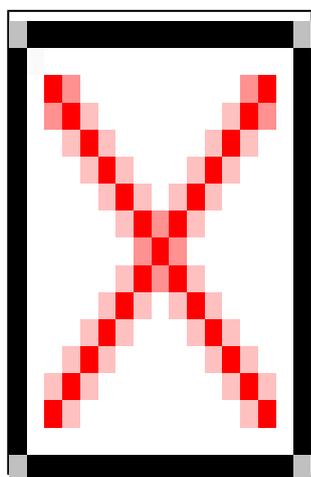
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Byline:

Imogen Russell Williams plays detective

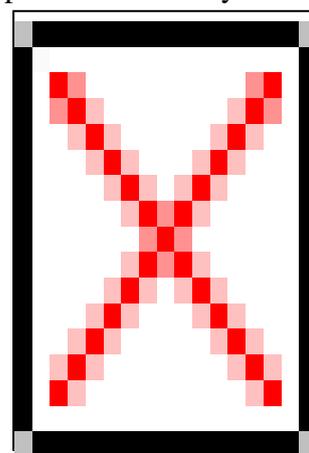
As mystery stories for children enjoy a resurgence, **Imogen Russell Williams** plays detective.

Mystery and detection have been a staple of children's literature almost from its beginnings - at least from the point at



which child characters are first given individual agency, rather than acting as moral archetypes or the stars of cautionary tales. E Nesbit's *Treasure Seekers*, for example, take a (disastrous) turn at being detectives; Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn track down Injun Joe's buried treasure and prevent an innocent man suffering for another's crime; and Erich Kästner's **Emil and the Detectives** perhaps the first mystery story written for children, was first published in 1929 and has remained hugely popular ever since - in English, it has never been out of print.

Hard on Kästner's heels comes Enid Blyton. From the **Five Find-Outers** to the **Secret Seven** and the **Famous Five**, all of whom appeared in the 1940s, the prolific author is best known for her freewheeling detective children, solving crimes which baffle the regular police between voracious consumption of biscuits, sandwiches, cherry cake and lemonade. Murder never features in Blyton's cosy conundrums, but kidnap, theft, poison-pen letters, insurance fraud and scientific espionage are fair game, as well as sneaky little dodges like disguising prize cats with paint; her juvenile crime-fighters boast skills such as ventriloquism, code-cracking and escaping from locked rooms. Taking up where Blyton leaves off, Anthony Horowitz's humorously hard-boiled **Diamond Brothers**, a.k.a. the world's worst detective and his considerably cleverer thirteen-year-old sibling, appear in the 1980s, as does Philip Pullman's Sally Lockhart, sixteen-

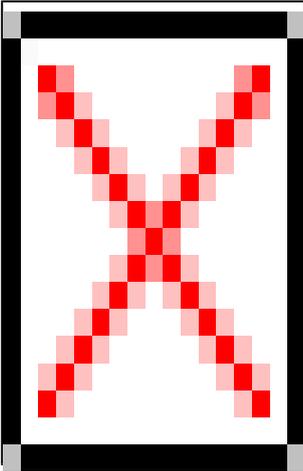


year-old star of **The Ruby and the Smoke** and its sequels. And, from the 1930s almost to the

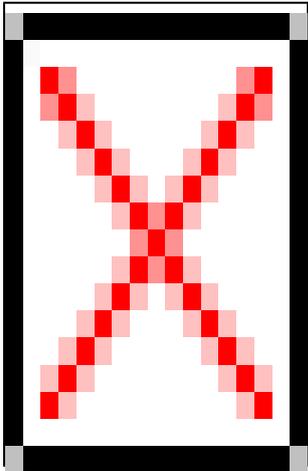
present day, the quick-witted, well-turned-out Nancy Drew holds sway in America and beyond, occupying a charmed overlap between the worlds of coddled childhood and independent, well-resourced maturity.

The norms of children's mystery fiction up to the end of the twentieth century include predominantly middle-class or privileged juvenile heroes; a male leader or protagonist, with exceptional cleverness and daring usually remaining male preserves; and little to no bloodshed. There are exceptions - Kästner's hero, for instance, is the son of a hairdresser, a single mother who can ill-afford to lose the money of which Emil is robbed; and Pullman's Sally Lockhart deals unflinchingly with murder and other grim realities. In the main, though, the genre is marked out by a sense of formula, safety and reassurance ? comfort, rather than challenge, is the order of the day.

In the twenty-first century, however, a boom in children's mystery fiction has seen these norms undergo significant change. In the work of Robin Stevens, Katherine Woodfine, Lyn Gardner, Julia Lee, Tanya Landman, Frances Hardinge



and others, blood is frequently shed, and young characters ? and readers ? are not shielded from the realities of violence and death. Echoing Pullman's trailblazing series, there is a definite pull towards historical settings, especially the Edwardian and Victorian (although Stevens' books are set in a 1930s boarding school), and the heroic detectives are now overwhelmingly female. Most notably, perhaps, the mores of the times during which these stories are set are not comfortably accepted as the default, as in the crime dramatisations where luscious lipstick and crisp tailor-mades are spot-lit at the expense of social inequality and casual racism. Here, everyday unpleasantness is held up to scrutiny ? not heavy-handedly, with contemporary filters anachronistically applied to the past, but with thought-provoking, delicate nuance. Robin Stevens' narrator Hazel Wong, for instance, is marked out as an outsider, just as Christie's Poirot is, by 'foreignness'. Where Poirot's outsider status works frequently in his favour, however, putting the unrighteous off their guard, Hazel's means that she must remain perpetually braced for insult or putdown in the coldly insular world of Deepdean School for Girls ? and fight harder, too, for her achievements to be recognised.



Murder itself is not treated cosily in contemporary children's mystery fiction, either. In **Murder Most Unladylike**, the moment at which Hazel discovers the broken body of Miss Bell in the gymnasium is not soft-focused or downplayed, but given a vivid sense of shocking reality; and the retrieval of a drowned woman from the Thames in **The Mystery of the Jewelled Moth** packs a similar tragic punch. The body-count is high in Tanya Landman's **Poppy Fields** books, too ? although their sardonic hardboiled humour prevents their goriness becoming overwhelming, they are emphatically not for the squeamish.

The social status of many young detectives has also changed since the solidly middle-class Blyton heyday - and the expected Cinderellaesque shape of their stories has changed alongside it. In a Nesbit or Hodgson Burnett universe, a 'genteel' girl like Katherine Woodfine's Sophie Taylor, having 'lowered herself' to work in a shop, would probably be raised again by mysterious pecuniary benefaction - but, in Woodfine's world, hard work (and skilled, courageous deduction) is its own reward, and Sophie is happy to remain part of the intoxicating world of Sinclair's department store. Lyn Gardner's foundling Rose Champion is deeply loyal to the gilded, gaslit music hall where she grew up, proudly declaring that 'Champion's will always be my home' amid melodrama, murder and mistaken identity. And, in **The Lie Tree**, Frances Hardinge's fourteen-year-old heroine Faith Sunderly, having cut herself off from society by practising scandalous, scientific, free-ranging detection, shows no inclination to mend her ways; rather, she faces the censure and uncertainty the future almost certainly holds for her with tenacious, total resolve.

Sales of mystery fiction aimed at young readers are currently booming, with more examples appearing all the time. Perhaps it's because mystery fiction operates along the same wish-fulfilling lines as magical fantasy - but detective stories are, thrillingly, possible in a way that receiving a Hogwarts letter isn't. If they can't be born wizards, children can undoubtedly be quick-witted, allowing for the realistic triumph of youthful courage, tenacity and ingenuity over adult ineptitude or injustice. It's particularly appealing, too, to see girls' gifts for ratiocination - and sheer bloodmindedness - well-represented. To me, the newest young mystery fiction is compelling because it takes the best of the Blyton era - including a boundless sense of belief in kids' ability to function alone - and couple it with the thoughtfulness and diversity she lacks. These are stories that refuse to pull punches or sugar-coat the unpalatable, but celebrate youth's ability to outthink adult authority, even in the most stifling or oppressive of times

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA.

Books mentioned

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