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E. Nesbit, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899)

The Story of the Treasure Seekers (1899) is the first full novel for children published by Edith Nesbit. It concerns the experiences of the Bastable children, a middle-class family whose 'fortunes' have been diminished by the death of their mother and the uncertain financial situation of their father. Withdrawn from formal schooling, they are left unattended and devise a series of (largely unsuccessful) schemes to discover treasure in one form or another and re-establish the household. In the earliest chapters of the book, their adventures are largely physical and high-spirited: digging for treasure in their back garden, they manage to bury their friend, a neighbouring child when their tunnel collapses. But Nesbit's fiction is thoroughly rooted in the imaginations of her child characters too. Walking in Greenwich park, the children stray unwittingly onto private grounds, where they encounter a young member of the aristocracy. They absorb her into their games and admire, in their ignorance of her true status, the speed of their new friend's capacity to join in their imagined scene of princes and princesses: 'it is so seldom you meet any children who can begin to play right off without having everything explained to them' (p.59). When her guardians arrive and angrily reclaim their ward, the children realise their mistake, but the sovereign power of the imagination persists and through episodes such as this, Nesbit plays with the transformative capabilities and creativity of children's play.

Early readers found some liberties in Nesbit's novel shocking. Freed from adult supervision three of them travel from their home in Lewisham into central London in order to sell their efforts at poetry to the editor of a magazine. Instead, they end up passing on gossip about their neighbour, Lord Tottenham. A reviewer in the *Athenaeum* praised Nesbit's capacity to capture 'the distinctive charm of the modern child', but demurred at this episode, regretting that her characters are paid 'five shillings by an editor for retailing personalities about an old man' (quoted in Fitzsimon), as a vulgar incident. But as they take advantage of the liberties afforded to them by their situation, so the adventures of the children become more risqué: they visit a moneylender; they join a postal scheme to sell sherry on commission; and they fake an attempted assault on Lord Tottenham as he walks in the park. On each occasion they scrape through relatively unscathed due to the forbearance and understanding offered towards these motherless children by the adults they encounter. The novel concludes when the children manage to win over a wealthy relative by involving him in their imaginative play. He agrees to help resolve the father's financial and business difficulties and they all move into a new house together.

As this summary indicates, the narrative is largely episodic, with chapters relating self-contained adventures. This reflects the origins of the novel in serial form. Nesbit published chapters

in a variety of magazines and periodicals: the earliest material appeared in *Nister's Holiday Annual* during 1894, 1895 and 1896, before more extended sequences of stories appeared in the *Pall Mall Magazine* and *Windsor* during 1898 and 1899. Prior to this, Nesbit was known as a poet and novelist for adult readers. Her biographer, Julia Briggs suggests that her transformation into a writer for children was closely linked to her relationship with a younger man, Oswald Barron. Conversations with Barron about her own childhood, led to a memoir, 'My School Days' (serialised in the *Girl's Own Newspaper* during 1896 and 1897), but also prompted a deeper imaginative engagement with a child's perspective in her work. Certainly, Nesbit dedicated *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* to Barron and adopted his name for the narrator, Oswald Bastable. A late Victorian and early Edwardian vogue for writing about childhood may have been instrumental here too: in his classic study, *Secret Gardens* (1985), Humphrey Carpenter sets Nesbit alongside Kenneth Grahame's fictive recreation of a child's experiences in "The Golden Age" (1895).

As their unwitting encounter with the princess in the park shows, Nesbit's creation or recreation of a child's voice as narrator is, however, richly complex and filled with irony. In its earliest incarnation, within *Nister's Holiday Annual*, the narrative took the form of a newspaper, collectively produced by the children. But in later stories and throughout novel, Oswald Bastable seeks to obscure his identity and this is reflected in the opening chapter where he challenges readers to guess which member of the family is narrating the story: 'It is one of us that tells this story – but I shall not tell you which: only at the very end perhaps I will. While the story is going on you may be trying to guess, only I bet you don't' (p. 11). Although it may seem childish, this gambit introduces a reflexive element that pervades the novel. Oswald frequently comments on his own narrative devices: 'The next thing that happened to us was very interesting. It was as real as the half-crowns – not just pretending. I shall try to write it as like a real book as I can' (p. 26). But he also offers wry commentary on the efforts of adult writers: 'I have often thought that if the people who write books for children knew a little more it would be better' (p. 19). Marah Gubar has drawn attention to how deeply the novel alludes to its own debts to other authors for children: the schemes the Bastables devise for restoring their fortunes frequently derive from their reading in Rudyard Kipling, the Sherlock Holmes stories or the cheap popular fiction they are able to pick up a railway station booksellers. Like *Madame Bovary*, they dream of escaping their dreary circumstances by realising the romantic worlds they encounter in fiction. And like *Madame Bovary*, their efforts expose the shaping influence of clichés and stock notions (such as treasure-seeking) upon human experience, in the process.

Gubar points out how much Nesbit's characters adapt and change what they read, praising such literary thefts as a source of creativity and innovation. But significant doubts hang over the

agency Nesbit imagines for them. Oswald, for example, makes frequent slips that give away his identity as narrator. For Mavis Reimer, Erika Rothwell and others, this becomes typical of what they call Nesbit's 'cross-writing'. Whilst *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* places the perspective and experiences of children to the fore through Oswald's story-telling, his slips and mistakes are representative of narrative ironies that may escape some child readers. They hint at another, potentially adult perspective. For Rothwell, this is characterised by 'sidelong glances of condescending sympathy, amusement, and understanding' (p. 68), her point being that the texture of Nesbit's narrative style refuses to indulge any idealisation of the child characters. But not all sympathy is 'condescending' and such effects are also important to the pathos of the story. The precarious economic position of the family is registered at key moments in the narrative within small details that the children perceive, but may not fully comprehend. Oswald and his siblings notice material details about, for example, the cutlery that they use: 'the silver ... went away to the shop to have the dents and scratches taken out of it, and it never came back' (p. 12). So they have some basic grasp on the implications of their reduced financial circumstances. They are, however, naïve about money matters in general: when they visit a Jewish moneylender, they dub him the 'Generous Benefactor' and explaining: 'we thought it was so very kind of you to try to find out the poor people who want money and to help them and lend them your money' (p. 97). They are blind to his real motives for lending money and innocent of any understanding of interest. In this instance, Nesbit's creation of adult ironies may also be tainted by hints of unspoken Anti-Semitism on Nesbit's part.

More recent critical work has sought to locate such material details in terms of the class and social values during this period. Although Nesbit and her husband, Hubert Bland, were prominent members of the Fabian society with strong socialist connections and interests, Christopher Parkes reads *The Treasure Seekers* in terms of its bourgeois values. The high-spirited tone of *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, he suggests, bespeaks a confidence in the immutability of the English middle classes. The Bastables may, temporarily, suffer from financial embarrassments, but their social and cultural class status never diminishes. So, for example, in one chapter the children encounter two very different burglars: an authentic working-class burglar and a friend of their father's, whom they mistake for a thief. Taking pity on the real burglar, they let him escape, whilst they co-opt their father's friend into more of their imaginative games. For Parkes, Nesbit is 'more interested in the economic well-being of the middle classes than a radical redistribution of wealth or a change in the ownership of the means of production' (p.103). Certainly, the adults in her novel extend considerable leeway to the children when they get into scrapes. When Lord Tottenham discovers that the assault on him is a sham, intended to induce him to reward the children for rescuing him, he is outraged. But the children win him round with a promise 'never to do a dishonourable thing, for

money or for anything else in the world' (p. 111). From Parkes' perspective, Nesbit would never extend such generosity to children of lower class status than the Bastables – the sequence serves to underscore how much their seeming invulnerability is sustained by class interests.

Julia Briggs offers a more generous assessment. The novel balances 'the power of the life of the imagination and the irreducible chaos of experience' in ways that are 'inconsistent at times but also necessarily complex and convincing' (p. 190). Whatever the case, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* certainly proved profitable for Nesbit: the misadventures of Oswald and his siblings were highly popular and featured in two more novels, *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904). The novel established her as a popular children's author and improved her own financial circumstances to a degree that her writings for adults never achieved. Her stories about the Bastables have remained in print for over a century now, suggesting that, however cynical her motives or methods, this novel has had a lasting appeal.

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