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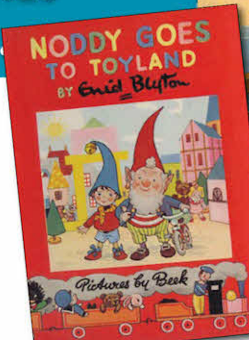

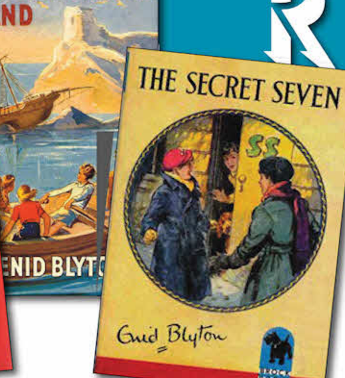

Sir John Tenniel's drawing of *Alice in Wonderland's* White Rabbit

SHELF FULFILLING PROPHECY

Dan Carrier talks to Lucy Mangan about the magic of revisiting childhood literature

As a child, journalist Lucy Mangan imagined the bedroom bookshelf containing her favourite stories would quietly talk to each other as she drifted off.

A natural reader from an early age, Lucy's world was shaped by the children who found a mythical world behind the back of a wardrobe, by the *Five* adventurers created by Enid Blyton, and the tales told by Roald Dahl.

Many years later, the *Guardian* columnist was commissioned to write a year-long series covering a children's book each week – a kind of must-have guide.

And it made her look back at a childhood where she spent most of her time nose-first into a book.

The result is a memoir called *Bookworm*, which both explores her own relationship with the great stories we have shared and have come to define so many childhoods, to their historical significance and the lives of the people who wrote them.

On Thursday, Lucy spoke about her work to the Friends of Highgate Library, which has been running talks online since the start of the pandemic.

"I still have all my childhood books," she writes in the introduction. "I may no longer imagine them, as I did 30 years ago, whispering companionably together at night when I have gone to bed, but I love them still. They made me who I am."

Her story starts in earnest in the 1700s.

The early beginnings of the print trade did not immediately recognise there could be a market for children – partly due to low literacy levels.

Yet, as Lucy discovered, children would simply read tomes aimed at adults. "As soon as you start getting printed books and printed matter, bookish children, read whatever was there. This meant they picked up things like *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, with bloodthirsty illustrations."

As literacy levels increased and production costs dropped, the publishing industry recognised the opportunity.

"Gradually you got the development of specific materials," adds Lucy. But entertaining was not a primary aim.

"It was very moralistic and Sunday School tract-ish. They had wonderful names like *The History of the Fairchild Family and Their Terrible Lives and Beautiful Deaths of the Children Therein*, because they all repented for their sins and were good Christians on their death beds."

Even as writers and publishers gradually realised the need for some pizzazz, Georgian and early Victorian books would contain a pay off line.

"Eventually the entertainment takes over, and the seriousness drops a bit," she says. "There were people who are still very religious in their approach, but you can see they want to invent things and create an appealing side.

"But then, before the story ends, they would take a step back and say: Remember kids, everything is in its place, God is in his castle and all is right with the world."

Lucy Mangan

What catapulted children's literature in a new direction was the 1865 publication of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

"That is the start of authors wanting to address the child and give the child a good time," she says. "You can feel this tangible sense of modernity with it."

How artistic trends are reflected is also discussed.

Lucy revealed her young self was more aware of the words on the page than the images that accompanied them – yet for the majority of people, a childhood memory is sparked by seeing an illustration.

"Many have told me how they recall a certain picture," she says.

For her, the one that stands out is Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are*. Featuring a little boy called Max who is sent to bed without any supper for "making mischief of one kind or another," he is banished to his room and then embarks on a journey to an island where the Wild Things live.

"Going back to *Where the Wild Things Are,* you realise that as the adventure grows, so do the picture's frames," she says.

It is recognising little details such as these that make re-reading childhood favourites a joy.

"I recently picked up a Richard Scarry book and, I saw Lowly Worm in the corner. I said immediately said: 'Lowly!' It was like seeing a friend I haven't seen for 40 years," she says.

How books capture a collective mood of a period can be shown through the work of Frances Hodgson Burnett and *The Secret Garden*, as well Enid Blyton's prolific output.

"The Blyton phenomenon is interesting because I think it is very telling that she gained her great popularity and really got her start during the war," says Lucy.

"Everyone – and children particularly – wanted something comfortable and to find something safe. I wonder if she had not started then, would she have become so popular and so enduringly loved?

"She fulfilled a need at the time."

The Secret Garden, published in 1911, was not an immediate success. But in the post-1945 period it found a new audience. Offering a sense of escapism, and of nature putting right things that had gone so wrong, it chimed with its readers: a devastated Europe and the Secret Garden could be seen as a metaphor for starting over, and from rubble would spring flowers.

She considers her responses to books and believes youngsters should be allowed to re-read as much as they want to.

"Re-reading gives you real value," she says.

"Every time you re read a book, you get something more out of it – you drill down. It is not conscious, it just goes in much more.

"You will read it first as a page turner – then the next time, you sink in further, you learn how the language works, how the plot is built. You get a sense of pacing. It is not calculable, it is not teachable, and it is intangible. That, in turn, helps you learn how to write and how to read yourself."

● Bookworm: A Memoir of Childhood Reading. *By Lucy Mangan Vantage, £8/99*

● You can see Lucy's talk for the FoHL at *https://vimeo.com/47927 4815*