Crossing the "Great Gulf": Narration, Nostalgia, and "Contraband Memory" in Edith Nesbit's The Story of the Treasure Seekers

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Abstract

During the nineteenth-century “Golden Age” of children’s literature, many British writers conceptualized childhood through the lens of restorative nostalgia, writing books that attempted to re-create an idealized version of childhood that never actually existed. This has led critics of children’s literature from this era to characterize many Victorian authors’ depictions of childhood as a fictionalized adult product that serves to colonize child readers, interpellating them into adult narratives and ideologies. Edith Nesbit was well aware of this tendency, and in The Story of the Treasure Seekers (1899), she attempts to subvert it with her child narrator, Oswald Bastable. With Oswald, Nesbit works to create a version of childhood that crosses what she calls the “great gulf” separating adult writers and child readers by activating “contraband memory.” Contraband memory is, for Nesbit, memory lacking the cloying nostalgia that makes other authors’ versions of childhood falsely idealized. Oswald begins the novel seeking to mimic the idealized memories he finds in children’s books, stealing them and reshaping them to fit his everyday life. But he soon discovers that many of these stolen memories do not play out in real life as they do in books, and Oswald ends the novel with an archive of unidealized memories that offer readers a model of resistance to the literary colonization common in children’s literature. By archiving his childhood memories before they have time to be distorted by adult nostalgia, Oswald creates the kind of contraband memory that Nesbit feels will lead to something new: the representation of more realistic versions of childhood.

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Then a great many people used to come to the door with envelopes with no stamps on them, and sometimes they got very angry, and said they were calling for the last time before putting it in other hands. I asked Eliza what that meant, and she kindly explained to me, and I was sorry for Father.