Afterword: In Search of a Theory: from Potter, B. to Beaker, T.

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1908

Jemima Puddle-duck was a simpleton: not even the mention of sage and onions made her suspicious. She went around the farm-garden, nibbling off snippets of all the different sorts of herbs that are used for stuffing roast duck.

(Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* 39).

1950

And really it was a wonderful tea. There was a nice brown egg, lightly boiled, for each of them, and then sardines on toast, and then buttered toast, and then toast with honey, and then a sugar-topped cake.

(Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 19-20).

1991

I used to have this horrid foster mother called Aunt Peggy and she was an awful cook. She used to make this slimy stew like molten sick and we were supposed to eat it all up, every single bit. Yuck…. [But today] I ate a Big Mac and a large portion of french [sic] fries, and washed it down with a strawberry milkshake.

(Wilson, *The Story of Tracy Beaker* 13, 141).

Texts for children have a symbiotic relationship with the culture of which they form an inextricable part: they feed off each other, react to each other, and influence each other. And within texts for children, food is a ubiquitous trope, theme, motif, and flavor: it has been seen as a substitute for sexuality and a *disguise* for sexuality; as a metaphor for home, love, comfort and motherhood, or for dysfunctional families and society; as a symbol of freedom and a means of repression; as sacramental and redemptive and as a focus of carnival; a signifier of class and gender and national differences, and much else

– with, it must be said, different degrees of plausibility. "Food and children's literature" would therefore seem to be ripe for an overarching theory – but any such theory is likely to founder on the intricate *specificity* of every manifestation of food in texts. Food might seem to be a universal feature of texts for children, like power-imbalance, or variations of cognitive development, or the use of structures from folklore. But food in books is not an abstract: it takes a specific form – so much so that it could be seen as a powerful way of reading texts for children precisely because it *does not* transfer across cultures (see Tosi 88-94). Thus, when Harry Potter sits down to his first meal at Hogwarts school, he is overwhelmed by food:

> Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were piled with food. He had never seen so many things that he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, chips, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup... (Rowling 92)

At first sight, this may seem to simply appeal to a (widely assumed) universal need (or greed) for food by children. An acquaintance of C. S. Lewis, commenting on the food in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.* summed up this prejudice:

> Ah, I see how you got to that. If you want to please grown-up readers you give them sex, so you thought to yourself, "That won't do for children, what shall I give them instead? I know. The little blighters like plenty of good eating." (Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* 22)

Yet, as translators into some 80 languages have found, the Hogwarts menu is widely incomprehensible, revolting, or culturally unacceptable. "Should it be read in the context of nation – this is what the True English eat, if perhaps a "retro" version of it; or as part of the timeless (or out-of-time) ethos of the Potter universe; or as nostalgia by (and for) a generation of (adult) readers for whom food was important, as opposed to a generation of younger readers for whom food is not particularly important? After all, in 1946 British families on average spent 34% of their income on food, while in 1997, that figure was around 10% (Bulman; Hickman).

Context, then, is all – but far from leading to debilitating complexity, contextualization liberates children's literature from its critical isolationism: reading *through* food opens up, as it were, a banquet of critical investigation. This rich à la carte feast, which may or may not yield a coherent (table d'hôte) theory, can be illustrated, summarized, by a brief trip through the cultural context of twentieth century texts for children – bearing in mind that

as around 500,000 such texts were published in Britain in that period, we must proceed by honestly and pragmatically admitting the partiality of any history.

The manipulation of food in children's books of the first thirteen years of the twentieth century in Britain reflects very closely the suppressed national anxieties of the period. The "popular press" – children's magazines and periodicals – had been anticipating war with Germany for at least twenty years before it broke out (Clarke; Hunt "Afterword"), but a general anxiety is pervasive in the supposedly gentle and bucolic "children's classics." Holdovers from the nineteenth century, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) and *The Secret Garden* (1911), and E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children* (1905*)* pivot on (often melodramatic) food scenes. Rudyard Kipling's parable of the rise and decline of the British empire, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) uses food symbolically in terms of nation, loyalty, and family.

Of the nineteen innocent-looking books published by Beatrix Potter between 1902 and 1913, almost all are about eating and being eaten, and they grow progressively darker as war looms. And that quintessentially Edwardian book for adults, masquerading as a children's book, and fraught with the social and gender issues of the day, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) is built around food – much of it uncomfortable and ambiguous. It may substitute for heterosexual sex (the gaoler's daughter and the buttered toast), or gay sex (Badger's supper); for the longing to escape (Rat's lunch with the Sea Rat); for nostalgia (Mole and the mouse choir); or for the violent assertion of power (the final banquet) – and a good deal more. Texts for (or appropriated by) children therefore shadowed the uncertainties of the period, and food focuses this very vividly.

It also contributes to pure history. During World War I, food in boys' stories became part of the propaganda machine, with scant regard for the deadly reality. In Henry Newbolt's *Adventures of a Subaltern* (1915), where things were "all very jolly," an officer in reserve in France enjoys "first-class pic-nic teas spread out on sheets in the corner of a field" (cited in Paris 33). By 1916, when supplies to British front-line troops meant that meat was a rarity (and sometimes – an anathema to most British – horsemeat), and bread might be made from ground turnips, the front-line soldiers in boys' books, according to Capt. F.S. Brereton in *Under Haig in Flanders* ate "frizzling bacon not to be beaten anywhere, bread that might have graced the table of the Ritz hotel, and jam that would have been the envy of any housewife" (53).

Children's literature histories have until recently tended (for good academic reasons) to ignore what was going on in adults' texts, but to use food as part of comparative studies is invariably instructive. Thus, in 1922, James Joyce's modernist masterpiece, *Ulysses*, was published, full of new narrative ideas, and passages such as this, emphasizing the rawness of human nature, and saying the usually unsayable.

> Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liverslices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencods' roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine. (57)

In contrast, A. A. Milne, who had once described World War I as "a nightmare of mental and moral degradation" (Thwaite 161), was creating a retreatist, pacifist, protected, idyllic, and domestic fictional world for children. Food is integral, and can be part of a shared joke, as in *When We Were Very Young.*

> *What* is the matter with Mary Jane?
> She's crying with all her might and main,
> And she won't eat her dinner – rice pudding again –
> What *is* the matter with Mary Jane? (48)

Similarly, in 1928, a year that saw the publication of two radical, and subsequently banned books, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, children could be reading Joyce Lankester Brisley's Milly-Molly-Mandy series. No scandal here: Milly-Molly-Mandy's nuclear family lives in a thatched cottage with a large garden, where they grow their own food.

> Once upon a time, one fine evening, Milly-Molly-Mandy and her Father and Mother and Grandpa and Grandma and Uncle and Aunty were all sitting at supper (there was bread-and-butter and cheese for the grown-ups, and bread-and-milk for Milly-Molly-Mandy, and baked apples and cocoa for them all). (24)

Food as social history is a sub-menu in itself. In the 1930s, the vogue for "camping ad tramping" (the fashion for healthy outdoor activity owing something to the German *Wandervogel* movement – with its fascist overtones) produced its own genre, best remembered, perhaps, for the "Swallows and Amazons" books by Arthur Ransome (Bird 18-34). This was typically a middle-class genre, with groups of children roaming the countryside – in the case of Gary Hogg's *Explorers Awheel* (1938), by bicycle – and experiencing rural hospitality on a scale not seen again until nostalgic post-World War II days.

> There was porridge in a huge bowl, with a mound of Devonshire cream near it…; there was another bowl of corn flakes, with bowls of raspberries, loganberries, apples and early whortleberries ringing it round. Piles of

> scones and home-baked bread and oatcakes and pancakes filled the middle of the table, and the blocks of butter were exactly the colour of buttercups. ... Honey from their own bees, and damson jam and bilberry jelly and lemon curd. [They sat] wolfing coffee and slice after slice of bread and bilberry jelly with cream on it almost as thick as the bread beneath! Good stuff! (101-102)

But this was children's book land. Conditions in the real world, observed by social(ist) activists such as George Orwell, were somewhat different, and often described in terms of the disgusting food consumed by the workers. Orwell's analysis in 1937 reads uncannily like a riposte to the campaigning celebrity chefs of the 2020s, who seek to change the eating habits of the lower classes:

> The basis of their diet, therefore, is white bread and margarine, corned beef, sugared tea and potatoes – an appalling diet. Would it not be better if they spent more money on wholesome things like oranges and wholemeal bread or … ate their carrots raw? Yes, it would, but the point is that no ordinary human being is ever going to do such a thing…the less money you have, the less inclined you feel to spend it on wholesome food. (88)

Food may also be a key to unsettling established historical and literary narratives. Thus, almost all the most distinguished British children's fiction about World War II was written in the 1960s or later, most famously, perhaps, Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War* (1973) and Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mr Tom* (1981). The theme of many such books was the sad plight of the poor displaced city children, who were evacuated to a strange and hostile environment in the country. This was not, however, how appeared in 1941. Richmal Crompton's William Brown, the *enfant terrible* of children's books, who had first appeared in 1922 and who remained the same age through the war and beyond, attended, in *William Does His Bit*, a birthday party for local village children, organized by a well-meaning mother.

> "Remember, dear children," she ended, "that we are at war. Let us show a spirit of comradeship this afternoon by eating as little as possible – as little as possible, dear children – so that what is left may go to the strangers we have welcomed into our midst, the evacuees."
> As one man the little guests fell upon the feast… The thought that the residue was to go to the evacuees had whetted their appetites. Not one but had suffered from the hands of the evacuees (tough young guys from the

> East End of London whose methods of warfare were novel and unpleasant) and the thought that their tormentors might profit from their abstinence urged them on to yet greater feats of gastronomy. (212-213)

The 1950s and 1960s in Britain have the reputation of a period of radical change, the era of the "angry young men" challenging norms in theatre (John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956)) and the novel (Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954)), and "youth culture" characterized by the music of the Beatles. And yet children's books remained deeply conservative – as indicated by their use of food. Enid Blyton, still the bestselling children's author in English, became famous (or notorious) for descriptions of rural eating almost identical to those Gary Hogg. C. S. Lewis's Narnia series was even more reactionary: good plain food means stability; exotic food is positively evil. Foods of the past were *wholesome*: the eponymous hero of Philippa Pearce's much vaunted and supposedly revolutionary *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) is nearly poisoned by his aunt's over-rich fancy modern food – "shrimp sauce and rum butter" "being particularly indigestible" (7)

The final years of the century were characterized by the homogenization of food and the homogenization of publishing. The first McDonald's opened in London in 1974; today, the fast-food market in Britain is worth around £25 billion, and McDonald's alone has over 1300 outlets. In the 1960s there were 72 independent children's book editors (Reynolds and Tucker); by the 1990s more than 65% of publishing was in the hands of five conglomerates (Hunt, "Children's Novel" 318-323). The "commodification of childhood" (Zipes 93-80) made texts more predictable, tropes more standardized. Possibly the most famous (and influential) book of the period, Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1967) ruthlessly borrowed eighteenth and nineteenth century devices of food as melodrama – Charlie's parents, virtuous but poor, survive on bread and margarine and cabbage: greed is punished, and virtue rewarded with … food (Dahl 14 and *passim*; Hunt "Roald Dahl"). In Dahl's *Matilda* food is a class marker (the Wormwoods eat in front of the television); is punishment (the evil Miss Trunchbull makes the hapless Bruce Bogtrotter eat a huge cake) – and is a symbol of rural redemption and purity, in the frugal diet of the anorexic Miss Honey.

Such crude manipulations of food became common – and sometimes confusing. The neo-realism (or pseudo-realism) of the end of the century was epitomized by the work of Jaqueline Wilson, a good many of whose 40 million sales featured the serial foster-child, Tracy Beaker. As we can see from the extracts quoted at the outset, the Victorian horrors of vile food are replaced by junk food - an improvement in the eyes of the protagonist, but not necessarily in the eyes of other readers.

Literary food as an emotional, dramatic, and political trope has lost little of its potency, but a comprehensive theory must evade us because of the complexity of context,

and the complexities of power involved. As Lewis Carroll noted of *The Hunting of the Snark*, "words mean more than we mean to express when we use them" (22), and the same might be said of food in texts for children. To adapt the novelist L. P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country: they eat things differently there."

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