

Swinging the Wartime Lamp

Dear Editor

Many who read Arthur Ransome's novels speculate privately as to what happened to his characters. With war on the horizon and such a varied and talented cast, the possibilities are almost endless. These are, however, personal to each reader's imagination. In the land of fiction, no one set of ideas is more or less valid than those of another person, although some suggestions are more intriguing and ingenious than others.

John Fletcher's contribution, *What Happened Next*, in the 2021 edition of *Mixed Moss* is certainly inventive and enjoyable if, in places, slightly frustrating. Enjoyable because John's suggestions trigger new lines of thought, but frustrating because in order to be plausible the details need to be accurate. For Nancy to reach the rank of Chief Officer – equivalent to the rank of Commander in the Royal Navy – within one year of joining the WRNS would have required regal (if not divine) intervention. The system of promotion, even in wartime, would have precluded such rapid advancement. Her code-breaking skills surprised me, and probably her. She is imaginative and impulsive, rather than analytical, and in Ransome's novels deferred to Dick when it came to 'stinks'.

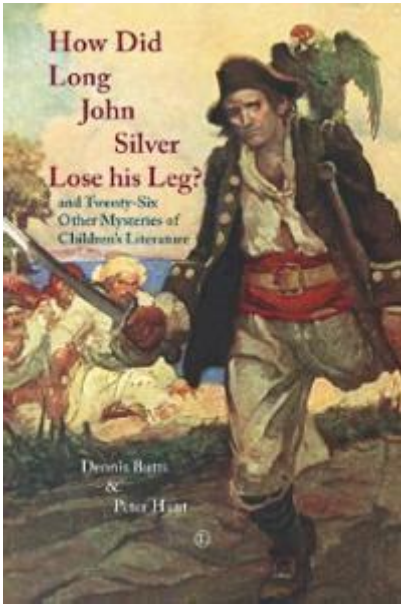
Dick's scientific approach could certainly have been useful to the Special Operations Executive (SOE) when devising technological solutions, but the SOE was not, as stated by John Fletcher, a forerunner of the Special Air Service or the Special Boat Service. In their earliest forms these were conceived by Army officers. The SAS had its genesis in North Africa as David Stirling's L Detachment Special Air Service Brigade, and SBS-style operations were conceived originally by Roger Courtney as a specialist Army unit. As small boat operations evolved, they fell eventually under the control of the Royal Marines. Lack of liaison between SOE and Combined Operations, jeopardised Operation Frankton in December 1942 when Royal Marines, who became known as the 'Cockleshell Heroes' used folding kayaks to attack shipping in Bordeaux. It was the Royal Marines Boom Patrol Detachment that morphed into the SBS.

Perhaps it is nit-picking to point out these errors in what, after all, is light-hearted conjecture, but Ransome was a stickler for accuracy.

Yours sincerely

Paul Flint, Cumbria

Dennis Butts and Peter Hunt,
*How Did Long John Silver
Lose His Leg? And Twenty-Six
Other Mysteries of Children's
Literature* (The Lutterworth
Press, 2013) ISBN:
9780718893101



THIS book from 2013 is a useful addition to the study of literature for children, and is an easily accessible book for anyone interested in the subject, or who may have read any of the 27 novels discussed in its pages. Ransome is liberally mentioned across the book.

However, I wonder if this is a collection of older essays rather

than fresh thinking. I was mildly irritated by the reference to 'schoolboys' throughout the book (don't the authors realise that girls go to school these days?) and the perpetuation of the idea that the internet is somehow a bad thing for children's reading. Just because children read on a device doesn't mean they aren't engaging in good quality literature!

Anyway, I digress. This book caught my eye as the authors were involved in my education as an MA student back in the 90s, which ages both me and them, so I was keen to see what they had to say. Nothing much new, as it turns out, and on some old themes; namely the classics (mainly Victorian and Edwardian literature) and mainly male authors – only six women get a full profile here.

However, there are some useful chapters on 'Does anyone really write for children?', discussing whether the best books are written for a specific child in mind (as opposed to being written for him- or herself) and whether writers for children have to be nicer than other writers. Now they could have chosen a plethora of writers for this chapter – including the

curmudgeonly Ransome – but especially Blyton or Dahl, or even Lewis Carroll or J. M. Barrie. By today's standards, these would have very different reputations when it comes to their relationships with young children – but they chose William Mayne, probably one of the best twentieth century writers for children ... who was convicted of child abuse in 2004. As he has been punished, should his books also be? For me, the discussion doesn't go far enough. What happens if you remove an influential author from the canon? How can you explain what comes after? What justifies continuing to publish some authors with questionable private lives?

Chapter 17 discusses nicely 'How old was the great aunt?' but goes on to discuss whether she was an anachronism at the time of writing.

Chapter 16 on 'Why didn't children's books notice the approach of two world wars?' has a paragraph on Peter Hunt's thoughts on Ransome's politics and *Pigeon Post* presaging the war. For the record, I don't think Ransome had any idea that war was coming; even if he did, he

surely would have had the good sense to keep quiet about it with his obviously Russian wife in a still very conservative country.

The good thing about this book is that it has positive things to say about literary societies, and the TARS website gets a specific mention. I do wish they had gone a little deeper rather than skirting round certain issues, but this book is a good launching point into further study. The 'classics' (define a classic!) will remain in print and film as long as there are audiences to read and watch them, and there is still enough appeal to make money from them; however, I will end with this quote:

'It is sometimes (romantically) said that the classics are timeless. It is perhaps more entertaining and enlightening to see them as being of their time – of a very precise time, so that we can trace their fabric, and see how they grew.'

This book is available from the TARS library, so please make use of this excellent lending facility if you don't wish to purchase a copy.

Cheryl Paget