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Ordinary Magic: D.W. Winnicott and the E. Nesbit Tradition in Children's Literature

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Ordinary Magic: D.W. Winnicott and the E. Nesbit Tradition in Children's

Literature

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Sarah Alice Pincus

to

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Abstract

In this thesis, I look closely at four particular children's books as representative of a genre within children's literature, one that I call "ordinary magic." Whereas most children's literature can be categorized either as realistic fiction or as fantasy, I examine a group of books that resists such classification. Drawing on the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena, I discuss the ways in which the novels within this genre navigate the boundaries between fantasy and realism, exploring related oppositions such as home and away, childhood and adulthood, reading and real life, and rebellion and compliance. I argue that a frank and playful exploration of these boundaries creates an environment in which deep and authentic enlivenment and enchantment can be felt.

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“I do not mean to equate genius with arrested mental or emotional development. But there are lucky people who never lose the gift of seeing the world as a child sees it, a magic place where anything can happen next minute, and delightful and unexpected things constantly do” (Eager, “Daily Magic” 351).

“Here is no land of dragons and ogres or Mock Turtles and Tin Woodmen. The world of E. Nesbit ... is the ordinary or garden world we all know, with just the right pinch of magic added. So that after you finish reading one of her stories you feel it could all happen to *you*, any day now, round any corner. The next time you pick up what you think is a nickel in the street, make sure it *is* a nickel and not a magic talisman. And don’t go scrabbling about in sandpits unless you want your fingers to encounter a furry form and your startled ears to hear the voice of a Psammead begging to be allowed to sleep undisturbed for another thousand years.

But of course you *do* want your fingers and your ears to encounter just that; all right-minded people do.

The next best thing to having it actually happen to you is to read about it in the books of E. Nesbit” (Eager, “Daily Magic” 351).

From the very first steps of my thesis, before I could imagine or articulate my particular project and its parameters, I knew what I was trying to capture. The books I wanted to study were clear to me as well, and though I couldn’t yet identify the specifics of what connected them, I had a strong sense of what it was that they shared at the most fundamental level; I simply knew this elusive quality when I saw it, and I knew that it was what I wanted

to chase after. I decided very near the beginning of my project that I would focus on Edith Nesbit's *The Five Children and It*, Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, Edward Eager's *Half Magic*, and Hilary McKay's *The Exiles*, and though I could not pin down what it was that they shared, I knew that something was there to be explored.

After two semesters of work, I find that in articulating what lies at the center of the books that I have studied, it is this concept that I initially felt but could not describe. I had intuitively recognized a sense of enlivenment and enchantment in these books, a sensation that permeated their pages from beginning to end. The more I delved into my project, the more I realized how central this quality was to each of these novels; these books are precisely *about* a frank and explicit pursuit of this feeling. These authors are truly invested in the question of how one comes to feel authentically and richly alive in the world, and these texts are a joyful exploration of this question.

Others have written about the same books that I focus on, both individually and as a group. Brian Attebery, for instance, discusses a similar grouping of books, defining their genre as that of the "family story," (114) and his work with genre is particularly relevant to my thesis. Attebery's attention to these texts through the lens of genre is a useful and illuminating tactic; by placing these books in conversation with each other, he elucidates something new about them, providing a powerful new schema within which to read them. Without contesting Attebery's focus on family, I would like to expand his premise and explore another central focus of the genre.

This question of aliveness and enchantment is central to the particular books that I study, and I argue that it also frames the genre to which they belong. As I have begun to examine how these novels produce such a permeating sense of enlivenment, I have realized

that they do so through playing with the boundaries between the fantastic and the real along with many other related dualities, navigating these with a particular pleasure, fluidity, and frankness that allows for both sides of each dyad to be most richly accessed.

Whereas most children's literature can be categorized either as realistic fiction or as fantasy, I examine a group of books that resist such classification. Instead, these books seem to have a foot in both worlds. The children that fill their pages yearn for the type of adventure and fantasy that they have read about in books, and while their wishes are fulfilled, the adventures that unfold do so within realistic settings, surrounded by non-fantastic elements at each and every turn. The child protagonists of these stories are living out any child reader's dream, that they might get the chance to act out the thrilling events of their favorite books, but within the spaces of their real lives.

It is no coincidence that these novels straddle the genres of realistic fiction and of fantasy, and they are neither watered-down fantasy nor unbelievable depictions of reality. The magic and adventure present are just as extraordinary and powerful as in any fantasy, and the realist elements are just as believable as in any work of realistic fiction. Just as the presence of salt in a chocolate brownie enhances both flavors without compromising the integrity of either component, the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality in these books allows for greater access to each rather than lessening the intensity of either entity. The fantastic elements provide an enchanted lens through which to experience the world, while the presence of realist elements provides a rootedness and manageability that pure fantasy lacks on its own. These authors allow their protagonists to transition between the two modes, and

out of these seemingly incompatible poles, they create a rich and productive third space, one that is greater than the sum of its parts.

I propose that it is this enchanted middle space that defines these novels, both as individual books and also as a genre. Not only do these novels juxtapose realism and fantasy; they also set up several other ancillary contrasts: home and away, adulthood and childhood, real life and books, obedience and rebellion. In exploring these topics, they evoke broader questions of the objective and the subjective, the external and the internal, the found and the created. Just as is the case with their treatment of the overarching question of fantasy and realism, these novels do not simply accentuate the differences between each pair, but instead create spaces in which they come together. This productive tension lies at the heart of each of these novels. As I have stated, in this thesis, I will examine the boundaries where these various opposites come together, and I will use these juxtapositions as the lens for examining these books.

I find the work of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott to be particularly helpful in establishing a framework within which to address the way that these books intentionally chase after a feeling of enchantment. I take care to avoid using Winnicott's ideas as a reductive code through which to translate the books and pin down specific meanings. Instead, I use the concepts that Winnicott establishes and explores in his writing as a lens through which to illuminate new spaces, enriching my theoretical framework in productive ways. Particularly because these books are typically read by children and not by academics, I think it is important that my analysis incorporate the playfulness and joy that is traditionally part of

their reception; I avoid a rigid analysis and instead seek out a fluid reading that elucidates the ways that these books can be accessed most powerfully.

Like the authors within this genre, Winnicott articulates a search for enlivenment as a central focus of his work. Adam Phillips, an object relations psychoanalyst strongly influenced by Winnicott, describes Winnicott's focus, both in terms of his own body of work and in terms of his broader place within psychoanalytic scholarship: "[Winnicott] would elaborate what it was in the mother that the child depended upon, and this would lead him to questions that were rarely addressed in psychoanalytic theory: what do we depend on to make us feel alive, or real? Where does our sense come from, when we have it, that our lives are worth living?" (Phillips 5). As Phillips points out, Winnicott asks questions that aren't traditionally asked, establishing a viewpoint different from that of traditional psychoanalysis as to what constitutes well-being. Winnicott writes that the "absence of psychoneurotic illness may be health but it is not life" and that "when we have reached this point [of separating illness and wellness] we have not yet started to describe what life is like apart from illness or absence of illness. That is to say, we have yet to tackle the question of *what life is about*" (Winnicott 370). Winnicott does not understand well-being in terms of mutually exclusive categories of neurosis and health, nor does he see it as a negative space, an absence of sickness. He elaborates:

People may be leading satisfactory lives and may do work that is even of exceptional value and yet may be schizoid or schizophrenic. They may be ill in a psychiatric sense because of a weak reality sense. To balance this one would have to state that there are others who are so firmly anchored in objectively perceived reality that they are ill in the opposite direction of being out of touch with the subjective world and the creative approach to fact. (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 265)

Instead of a more traditional understanding of health, Winnicott sees well-being as an ability to negotiate effectively between multiple spheres of experience. "Feeling real is more than

existing;” he writes, “it is finding a way to exist as oneself, and to relate to objects as oneself, and to have a self into which to retreat for relaxation” (qtd. in Goldman xx). If Winnicott’s central question is “*what life is about,*” his answer is that it is about achieving a feeling of realness, an objective that can be attained by negotiating the boundaries between oneself and one’s environment, one’s internal and external realities.

Goldman describes Winnicott’s engagement with this task: “The individual is in a constant struggle, he believed, to distinguish fantasy from fact, external from psychic reality, the world from the dream. As Michael Eigen (1991) has noted, Winnicott’s problem was ‘how to develop an account of experience that was not boxed in by inner and outer’” (Goldman xv). Instead Winnicott posits that “paradox accepted can have positive value”, and that “[t]he resolution of paradox leads to a defense organization which in the adult one can encounter as true and false self organization” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 115), suggesting that an insistence on resolving paradox ultimately forces the individual to separate the spheres of the internal and the external in ways that are constricting. Instead, what proves generative is an acceptance of the paradox presented by these dual spheres.

If “feeling real” is about negotiating these boundaries, Winnicott’s concept of transitional phenomena illustrates a way that they can be bridged. Winnicott illustrates the ways that fantasy and reality play out within singular objects and spaces. Rather than trying to untangle this seeming paradox, Winnicott explains that it is this dualism that gives transitional phenomena their power. His most well known example is of the child’s teddy bear, which is neither simply real nor simply constructed in the child’s mind; it is both at once. Winnicott illustrates that the object is greater than the sum of its parts, that fantasy and reality, the inner and outer experience of an object and of the world, take on an entirely new

meaning in their paradoxical coexistence. Out of two supposedly exclusive entities is born a third richer space.

As Winnicott explains: “From birth, therefore, the human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 112), and the transitional object or phenomenon bridges this gap, powerful precisely in that it is both real and unreal at once. In the case of the teddy bear, for instance, the object’s symbolic value is no less important than its physical reality. Phillips explains: “Transitional space breaks down when either inner or outer reality begins to dominate the scene just as a conversation stops if one of the participants takes over” (Phillips 119) and Winnicott writes: “The transitional object is never under magic control like the internal object, nor is it outside control as the real mother is” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 111). Instead, “the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 104).

Crucial to an individual’s ability to engage with these difficult questions of relating inner and outer, subjective and objective, fantasy and realism are Winnicott’s concepts of the holding environment and of play. These boundaries, Winnicott claimed, can only be explored when an individual is granted a safe and non-impinging environment in which to engage for themselves with these dualisms. Goldman explains: “His approach to treatment was such that he aimed to facilitate the creation of an internal space in which the patient could learn to play so that life would begin to feel real” (Goldman xix) and that “[w]here Freud saw

psychoanalysis as a way of freeing people from illusions, Winnicott emphasized the freedom to create and enjoy illusions” (Goldman xxiii). In the editors’ introduction to Winnicott’s essay on play, Lesley and Joyce write that: “A mature capacity for playing is different from the physical activity of play; it depends on an ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, past from present, and to give playful rein to the creative imagination which is neither delusional nor literal” (233). Winnicott himself writes in this essay that “[p]laying is inherently exciting and precious. This characteristic derives *not* from instinctual arousal but from the precariousness that belongs to the interplay in the child’s mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality)” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 247).

Also crucial to Winnicott’s concept of feeling real is the importance of an authentic and creative relationship with the world:

It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living. (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 264)

As the individual learns to relate her inner and outer experiences of the world successfully, that is playfully and joyfully, she must do so spontaneously and authentically, working out a balance between the two for herself rather than accepting an externally imposed arrangement.

As I address the tensions between fantasy and realism, childhood and adulthood, rebellion and obedience, etc. in these novels, I continually draw on Winnicott’s rich concepts of transitional phenomena, the importance of play, and the role of the holding environment to illuminate and frame my discussions, allowing me to discuss these novels in all of their fullness and complexity.

In my first chapter, I explore the contrast between fantasy and realism that I see as so central to this genre, and in doing so I lay out the framework for the rest of the paper. I begin by delineating both fantasy and realism as they appear in the books I study, with a particular focus on the places in which they come together. As I focus on this boundary between the two modes of experiencing the world, I examine the way that their juxtaposition simultaneously exaggerates the differences between the two and also draws them closer together. I explore the ways in which the two are mutually enriching, and I emphasize the importance of continual movement back and forth between the two modes, rather than understanding them as mutually exclusive entities that do not interact.

In my second chapter, I look at the way that space and time are depicted within the genre. I study the children's movements through their physical surroundings as reflections of their movement between the realms of fantasy and realism, emphasizing the flexibility with which the children move back and forth between them.

In my third chapter, I discuss childhood and adulthood as they operate within the genre. I try to capture the way that childhood and adulthood provide different perspectives from which to understand the world as well as the way that individual characters navigate between them. Whereas a purely adult perspective is depicted as one of objective, passive consumption of realism, an entirely childish perspective is represented as one of subjective, active construction of fantasy. I argue that these books present an ability to access both modalities as necessary for a rich and authentic experience of the world.

In my fourth chapter, I discuss the contrast between books and real life as part of the broader discussion of the contrast between fantasy and realism. I explore the way that the

protagonists in the books I discuss use both books and their lived experiences in order to access a liminal space that is more complete than either entity could be alone.

Finally, in my fifth chapter, I examine the contrast these books lay out between obedience and rebellion. This tension not only drives plots forward, but it examines the children's relationship with the world around them. In order to become authentically good, the children must learn to be neither constrained by externally imposed rules nor made selfish and destructive by unchecked whims.

In order to ensure that my analysis stays firmly rooted in the texts of books within this genre, I have selected four novels on which to focus, ones that I think particularly illuminate central elements of the genre. I begin with a novel by Edith Nesbit, arguably the originator of the genre as a whole, who has influenced generations of authors and established the sort of story that I describe as ordinary magic, one with a foot in the worlds of both fantasy and realism and an ability to traverse the distance between them. Of Nesbit's role within the genre, Eager writes: "I am always careful to acknowledge this indebtedness in each of my stories; so that any child who likes my books and doesn't know hers may be led back to the master of us all" ("Daily Magic" 351). Of the four books that I examine, all three reference their debt to the literary tradition from which they come as their protagonists discuss the books that influence their escapades. Two of these four explicitly reference their debt to Edith Nesbit in particular, as their protagonists not only read her books but acknowledge their formative role in their adventures. Eager's narrator comments: "This summer the children had found some books by a writer named E. Nesbit, surely the most wonderful books in the world" (*Half Magic* 7), and McKay's echoes: "In a last minute panic, Naomi

had grabbed *The Treasure Seekers*. Everyone, even Phoebe, knew this book so well that they could recite whole chunks of it” (McKay 45). Out of Nesbit’s works, I have decided to focus on *The Five Children and It*, as it pays particular attention to the boundaries between realism and fantasy and has so many clear connections to the books that it has influenced.

I include a novel by Edward Eager who, as he says himself, writes “second-rate E. Nesbit” (“Daily Magic” 352) though I would argue that his work, while intentionally derivative in many ways, is simultaneously original in its reimaginings of Nesbit’s works. I focus on *Half Magic* not only because it responds so closely to Nesbit’s *The Five Children and It*, locating the boundaries between realism and fantasy and playfully engaging with them, but also because it asks new questions about the ways that these tensions are managed, paying special attention to the tension between children and adults in accessing these transitional spaces.

Finally, I discuss Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* and Hilary McKay’s *The Exiles* as examples of works within this genre that engage with the same questions about fantasy and realism without including literal magic within their stories. Both novels achieve the same sense of enchantment as do the other two, emphasizing that fantasy is not limited to literal magic, and, more broadly, that the boundaries between fantasy and reality are tied to the boundaries between an internal, subjective experience and an external, objective experience of the world. These two novels also draw particular attention to the boundaries between children and adults, books and lived experience, and rebellion and obedience as these dualities relate to the central concept of a transitional space wherein a sense of authentic enlivenment can be accessed and created.

Edith Nesbit's *The Five Children and It*, published in 1902, follows five siblings as they move to the countryside and quickly discover the Psammead, a magical creature that grants their wishes. Robert, Anthea, Cyril, Jane, and the Lamb (their baby brother) soon find that, try as they might to think up a good wish, each attempted adventure eventually goes awry. As they try to introduce magic to their decidedly non-magical environment, the two worlds come together with a great deal of friction. When the children wish, for instance, that they were rich beyond belief, the coins that materialize prove to be out of date and nearly impossible to spend. Other adventures unfold similarly as the children introduce magical elements into their surroundings and experience pushback of the most ordinary and mundane variety in contrast to the magic itself. The story unfolds, chapter after chapter filled with comical misadventures caused by ill-advised wishes, which the children realize that they must somehow find a way to resolve before each chapter's close. The story concludes when the Psammead's magical powers are exhausted and the children promise that they won't make any more wishes, somewhat relieved that their exhilarating but exhausting adventures are coming to an end.

Edward Eager's *Half Magic* (1954) is something of a retelling of Nesbit's *Five Children and It*, and follows the four siblings Katherine, Mark, Jane, and Martha as they discover a magic coin that grants their wishes. Like Nesbit's children, they soon discover that even their most well intentioned wishes turn sour. Unlike Nesbit's children, they discover that their wishes operate according to a rule; the children receive exactly half of each of their spoken wishes. Armed with this information, the children attempt to use their magical power more carefully, sure that this knowledge will allow them to bring magic into the world in a way that is both true to their visions and also harmonious with their surroundings. However,

even once they discover this pattern, they still struggle to negotiate the bounds between fantasy and realism, and spend each chapter finding ways out of the trouble that their wishes have landed them in. As in Nesbit's work, the book ends as the magic coin's magical capabilities are finally expended, at least for them, and the children leave the coin where another child can find it and begin the adventures again.

Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, published in 1930, also follows in Nesbit's tradition, though not as closely as Eager's novel. Like the previous two, this novel begins with four siblings, John, Susan, Titty, and Roger, as they look for adventure in what they see as their otherwise boring lives. Unlike in Nesbit and Eager's works, the children find excitement not through magic, but through more realistic adventures, as the siblings are granted permission to live out their fantasy of being pirates by living independently on their own island for their summer vacation. Even in this more realistic novel, the children's adventures exist in a similar kind of middle space between fantasy and realism as the children enact their fantasy adventures in their real environment. Just like the others, this novel is episodic, and the reader follows as the tension between fantasy and realism, among other dichotomies, lands the children in trouble, which they must then somehow find a way to resolve. The novel concludes at the end of the summer, as the children must leave their fantasy behind and return, at least for a spell, to a purely non-magical reality.

Hilary McKay's *The Exiles*, published in 2007, provides my fourth and final investigation into this genre of ordinary magic. It opens at the beginning of the Conroy sisters' summer vacation as Ruth, Naomi, Rachel and Phoebe are sent to live with their grandmother for the duration of their holiday. Despite their eagerness for adventure, the girls are horrified at the prospect of staying with Big Grandma who, in an attempt to reform their

characters, hides away her extensive collection of literature and attempts to force her grandchildren to engage with the real world instead of, as she sees it, being perennially lost in books. Dedicated to maintaining their autonomy, the Conroy girls do what they can to resist Big Grandma's civilizing influence, and, like the previous examples, find themselves in bouts of trouble, each chapter arising from the tension between their more fantastic perspectives and their grandmother's more realist outlook.

Though the plot-level similarities among these books are certainly important, what these books share at the most fundamental level is the sense of enchantment that inspired this entire project. Of Nesbit, Eager writes that "[e]very page shines with the delight the writer took in fashioning it, and this is a thing that cannot be faked" ("Daily Magic" 351). This delight is evident in each of these four novels, and it profoundly informs the ways in which I approach them in the following chapters.

Chapter One: Fantasy and Realism

In this chapter, I lay out much of the foundation for following chapters, and I discuss the two competing modes of fantasy and realism employed in these stories. These modes are often understood as oppositional, mutually exclusive categories that cannot co-exist within a genre, let alone a single book. I argue that though they are indeed oppositional in many ways, they are *also* complementary, and that their juxtaposition defines not only the four books I discuss, but also the genre in which they exist. Across this genre, the authors, their protagonists, and readers transition fluidly between these two states such that the genre begins, as I have argued, to occupy a third space that is richer than either fantasy or realism alone.

As I have touched upon, in Winnicott's principal example of the transitional object, the child's teddy bear, the bear's realness and its imaginary-ness do not combine such that the bear is partially real and partially imaginary. Instead, it is at once fully real and entirely imaginary, and it is the child's ability to access both of these qualities at once that is meaningful, helping the child to navigate more broadly between herself and her external world. As opposed to a pillow, for instance, which is equally soft, the bear offers comfort that arises from its symbolic value. However the bear's softness is not incidental, and it is no accident that children choose stuffed bears as comfort objects rather than bricks. This is to say that the bear's symbolic value is made accessible through its physicality just as its physicality is made significant by its symbolic value. In much the same way, the coexistence of fantasy and realism within these books helps their protagonists and readers to work through the same broader questions, which relate an internal, individual subjective experience to an external, objective environment.

In the following pages, I explore the way that fantasy and realism are used within these four novels. First, I argue that rather than focusing on the distance between these modes, these novels focus on the boundaries between them and the moments and spaces in which the children (and readers) cross over from one to another. Next, I discuss the way that both realism and fantasy maintain their integrity and separateness despite this attention to the spaces in which they come together. Finally, I claim that this contrast is productive, ultimately allowing for greater access to each.

In contrast to books that separate fantastic and realist domains, these novels continuously intersperse the two as the characters shift between their ordinary lives and the new adventures unfolding before them. As such, these books highlight the places and moments in which a boundary is crossed between the two modes. It only takes moments, for instance, after the children in *The Five Children and It* discover the Psammead until they are fully engrossed in their new, magical mode of understanding. Nesbit's narrator remarks: "It is wonderful how quickly you get used to things, even the most astonishing. Five minutes before, the children had no more idea than you that there was such a thing as a sand-fairy in the world, and now they were talking to it as though they had known it all their lives" (Nesbit 9). In the space of five minutes, the children, and the reader alongside them, are able to accept the logic of a sand-fairy without any physical or emotional transition from a world in which sand-fairies are unthinkable to a world in which they are commonplace. Emphasizing the easy transit between realism and fantasy rather than the distance between them, the novel requires no lengthy process of scenery change or elapsed time to indicate a shift from one state to the next. Instead, the narration stresses an immediacy and continuity to these shifts.

Almost as quickly as fantasy appears in these stories, it disappears again, often leaving the protagonists wondering if their adventures have really occurred. The morning after Nesbit's children discover the sand-fairy, for instance, they wake up to their normal lives and assume that the previous day's events must not have happened. Just as in the case with the sudden onset of fantasy, the quick transition back to realism highlights the way that the two perspectives are experienced in relation to each other rather than separately. In both cases, the sudden change is jarring. Nesbit writes: "If all that dream about the Sand-fairy was real, this real dressing seemed very like a dream, the girls thought" (Nesbit 20). The fact that

the children understand reality in relation to fantasy and vice versa demonstrates the extent to which they experience these dual modes together rather than separately.

The children who discover a magical coin in Edward Eager's *Half Magic* share a similar experience. After requesting in their wish that their adventure will only keep them away from their normal lives for two minutes, they experience the unsettling occurrence of living out an entire magical episode and then finding themselves back at home as though nothing had happened. Eager narrates: "The next thing the four children knew, they were sitting together in Katherine and Martha's room, and it was still that morning, and they had only been away from home a minute. Yet that minute was packed with memories" (*Half Magic* 107). Just as in *The Four Children and It*, the confusion stems from the children's difficulty in understanding how it is possible that such intense fantasy can exist right alongside reality. "Did we dream it?" Katherine asks, to which her brother Mark responds, "I don't think so, or we wouldn't all remember it" (Eager, *Half Magic* 107). The children are presented with seemingly conflicting evidence as to whether their adventure has occurred, and as the boundary between the two experiences is simultaneously sharpened and blurred, and this has a disorienting affect.

The worlds that these novels depict are simultaneously fantastic and realistic, and though they emphasize the spaces where fantasy and realism come together, there is less a blurring of the lines between the two entities than there is a sense of flickering back and forth between them. In this flickering between two modes, they are performing something that Winnicott characterizes as essential to the healthy life. Phillips summarizes Winnicott's conception of development, writing that "development through the use of Transitional Phenomena was not for Winnicott, as it was for Freud, a process of cumulative

disillusionment; it was not a growing capacity for mourning, but a growing capacity to tolerate the continual and increasingly sophisticated illusionment-disillusionment-re-illusionment process throughout the life-cycle” (Phillips 121). Unlike other psychoanalysts who view development as a movement towards a successful separation of fantasy and realism, Winnicott sees development as an ever-improving ability to cycle through these modes as they continually shift.

Nesbit captures this sense of flickering particularly vividly when, near the beginning of *The Five Children and It*, she describes her protagonists’ new home: “the valley looked as if it was filled with golden mist, and the limekilns and oasthouses glimmered and glittered till they were like an enchanted city out of the *Arabian Nights*” (Nesbit 3). Nesbit’s world literally “glimmered and glittered” between the realism of the mundane country buildings and the fantasy of the *Arabian Nights*. Captured within the same physical landscape, this third space draws from the richness of both realms, not as a combination of the two, but as both at once.

Delineating Realism and Fantasy

To some degree, the contrast between fantasy and realism sharpens the sense of each as a separate entity. The stories within this genre almost universally begin with scenes of the children’s boredom as they hope desperately for adventure. Nesbit’s *The Five Children and It* begins as the children’s parents both have to leave suddenly. Nesbit writes: “when [the parents] were gone the house seemed dreadfully quiet and empty, and the children wandered from one room to another... and wished they had something to do” (Nesbit 4). In Hilary Mckay’s *The Exiles*, the girls look forward to their summer vacation with trepidation,

anticipating its dullness: “I’d rather be at school than stuck here all summer” one of them remarks, “I’d rather do anything. Even prison would be better” (Mckay 4). Pages later, the younger two realize that they may have let a can of maggots escape into the garden and, filled with hope, go to check if they have, commenting, “we could do with a bit of excitement” (Mckay 6). The children in *Half Magic* face a similar predicament as “[t]he children never went to the country or a lake in the summer, the way their friends did” (Eager, *Half Magic* 4).

At the beginning of *Half Magic*, the protagonists lament the lack of fantasy in their lives and attempt to compensate for this by pretending, as they imagine various fantastic elements around their suburban neighborhood. However, despite their repeated efforts to see magic in their surroundings, each attempt falls flat. Eager begins: “The adventures of the morning began with promise. Mrs. Hudson’s house looked *quite* like an Enchanted Castle, with its stone wall around and iron dog on the lawn. But when Mark crawled into the peony bed and Jane stood on his shoulders and held Martha up to the kitchen window, all Martha saw was Mrs. Hudson mixing something in a bowl” (Eager, *Half Magic* 10). A superficial appearance of magic is not enough to satisfy the children’s craving for fantasy, and the children are disappointed when closer inspection of the magic they think they see reveals nothing more than visual similarity and wishful thinking. Another similar moment unfolds a page later: “Bees were humming pleasantly round the columbines, and there were Canterbury bells and purple foxgloves looking satisfactorily old-fashioned, and for a moment it seemed as though anything might happen” (Eager, *Half Magic* 11). Again, the spell is broken by the clear lack of true magic. Eager narrates, the disappointment clear in his writing: “But then Miss Mamie King came out and told them that a dear little fairy lived in

the biggest purple foxglove, and this wasn't the kind of talk the children wanted to hear at all" (Eager, *Half Magic* 11). Miss King's entrance only emphasizes the superficial type of fantasy that they have been attempting to force all along; her contrived tale forces the children to abandon their attempts to pretend to see magic where they do not truly. This initial disappointment sets the stage for the realness of the magic that will soon arrive in the children's own lives.

Once fantastic elements begin to appear in earnest, they are just as thrilling and novel as the realistic elements that precede them are dull. Though they unfold within the limiting environments of the children's worlds, the elements themselves are not diminished or compromised. In *The Five Children and It*, the children wish, among other things, that they could fly, that they were limitlessly wealthy, and that one of them might become a giant. The scale of their wishes is that of myths and fables, rather than being reduced to fit their otherwise un-mythic lives. When the children wish that their house would become a castle under siege and they find themselves battling knights, they soon find themselves in some degree of real danger. One of the children, Robert, quickly observes of the knights that, "They've got *real* bows and arrows-an awful length-and swords and pikes and daggers, and all sorts of sharp things. They're all quite, quite real. It's not just a – a picture or anything; they can *hurt us* – or kill us even, I shouldn't wonder" (Nesbit 89). The knights the children have dreamed up as mere images have come to life and taken on such three-dimensionality that they represent a physical danger, and are as fully realized as any fantastical element in a more traditional work of fantasy.

Similarly, Ransome's children alternate between adventuring as pirates and as shipwrecked sailors. Though the novel does not include magic as Nesbit's does, Ransome's

emphasis is similar as he creates fantastic elements that, though placed within the context of a firmly realistic world, are fully realized in their imagining and their execution. The children don't merely pretend to do the things that adventurers do; they actually get to sail to their own island, set up camp, take care of themselves, and even fight with other "pirates." When the children first set up their camp, Ransome describes the scene in great detail: "The camp now began to look really like a camp. There were the two tents slung between the two pairs of trees. ... Then in the open space under the trees the fire was burning merrily. The kettle had boiled, and was standing steaming on the ground. Susan was melting a big pat of butter in the frying-pan" (Ransome 51). The description sounds like it could belong in an adventure book, the kind that inspired the children in the first place. The tents, the fire, the butter in a frying pan all evoke a storybook sense of what an adventure looks like. But there is nothing superficial about the scene despite its seeming almost too good to be true. The description, besides its adherence to conventions of adventure stories, is also remarkably sensory, powerfully evoking the spaces, smells, colors, etc. Their storybook tents really are "slung between the two pairs of trees," their fire is really "burning merrily," and their kettle is "steaming" away. These details remind the reader that Ransome's children really are carrying out the adventure that they once only imagined.

Despite the intensity of these fantastic elements, they are placed within realistic environments and are met with strikingly mundane pushback. As the children's wishes for magic and adventure come to pass, it is not ogres or dragons that cause problems for them so much as curfews and minor logistical complications. When the children in *The Five Children and It* wish for a gravel-pit full of gold notes, they are met with only the most ordinary resistance to their newfound wealth. They quickly realize that, in order to spend it, they must

walk the long, hot distance to town, and that even once they are there, it is not easy to exchange their wealth as they have imagined. Nesbit describes their walk into town, emphasizing the tedious nature of the obstacles they begin to face: “It was more than a mile, and the road was very dusty indeed, and the sun seemed to get hotter and hotter, and the gold in their pockets got heavier and heavier” (26). The mundane logistical implications of their wish occupy the majority of the narrative as Nesbit steers the reader’s attention towards the heat, dust, and monotony of their wish as it exists within their world. Though they have wished for and received nearly limitless wealth, they can only use what they can personally carry into town, and even this amount represents a physical burden. Whereas in a more traditional fantasy story the presence of magic might occupy nearly all of the narrative, here the realistic consequences of the fantasy constitute the source of narrative events.

One of the most consistent commonalities among these books is their preoccupation with hunger, and specifically with meals. One might presume that such everyday details as mealtimes would be forgotten in the face of extraordinary events. Instead, the unusual attention paid to meals in these novels highlights the way that the fantastic elements are rooted quite firmly in the real world, and that the children must fit in these adventure around their most quotidian schedules and routines. At one of the most dramatic moments in *Swallows and Amazons*, when the Swallows have finally defeated their rivals, the Amazons, instead of drawing out the scene, the Amazons have to race home in order that they might be back in time for breakfast and not have their absence missed. When one of the Nesbit children becomes a giant, he is horrified to realize that his normal portions at lunch will not satisfy his increased appetite.

In fact, in nearly every chapter of *The Five Children and It*, Nesbit includes a scene in which the children's wish somehow keeps them from, or threatens to keep them from, their meals. Nesbit's persistent focus on the children's hunger is particularly noteworthy in the chapter in which the children wish for flight. She writes: "It was the most wonderful and more like real magic than any wish the children had had yet. They flapped and flew and sailed on their great rainbow wings, between green earth and blue sky; and they flew right over Rochester and then swerved round towards Maidstone, and presently they all began to feel extremely hungry" (Nesbit 63). Despite this wish feeling "more like real magic than any wish the children had had yet," the narration almost immediately turns from a description of their flight to a focus on their hunger. In fact, the rest of the chapter's plot hinges not on the children's sudden fantastic ability, but on their most conventional as well as physical need for a meal. Despite the presence of magic and adventure, all of these authors repeatedly portray their protagonists' problems within the sphere of realism rather than fantasy, repeatedly placing the reader's attention on the margin between fantasy and reality and the effects of their juxtaposition.

An Increased Access to Each Pole

Throughout the genre, the ordinary gives the extraordinary its sense of enchantment and energy, while the extraordinary also lends the ordinary a sense of comfort and relief. It might seem that because these novels include both realism and fantasy, they would offer watered-down versions of each, failing to fully capture either. Indeed, it might seem that purely fantastical novels or purely realistic novels would allow for a more immediate and

undistracted attention to one mode or the other. Instead, the presence of both fantasy and realism in such close proximity to each other allows for increased access to each.

These books illustrate the way that fantasy can function not just as a tool of escapism, but also as a powerful tool with which to engage with the world, providing a perspective through which to understand reality. Winnicott rejects the idea that fantasy is mainly a tool to escape from unpleasant aspects of real life; rather, he turns this notion directly on its head, suggesting instead that it is reality that enriches fantasy. He writes: “It will be seen that fantasy is not something the individual creates to deal with external reality’s frustrations ... Fantasy is more primary than reality, and the enrichment of fantasy with the world’s riches depends on the experience of illusion” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 65). That is to say, fantasy can be a way into reality, a bridge between one’s own internal, subjective experience and one’s external, objective environment. Rather than being an artificial addition to supplement realism’s insufficiencies, Winnicott suggests that fantasy provides within which the individual can experience reality relevantly and meaningfully.

Ransome illustrates the grounding power of fantasy; as the children in *Swallows and Amazons* explore their new surroundings, they use their fantastic adventure narrative in order to understand the events in their lives, establishing their narrative first, and then using it as a tool to understand their surroundings. When they first encounter the houseboat moored near their campsite, they know very little about it or its owner, but as they occupy a world of pirates and adventure they assume that the houseboat must fit into this context. ““He’s probably a retired pirate,”” Titty assumes, and when they see a green bird on the boat’s railing, they take this as further evidence, as Roger confidently asserts: ““He is a pirate...There’s his parrot”” (Ransome 38). The children name the man who owns the

houseboat Captain Flint, and have a series of battles and interactions with him, though he himself is unaware of the role he plays within their schema. When they finally explain his role to him, he is willing to play along such that their initial framework not only shapes the way that they understand their reality, but it ultimately shapes their reality as well.

These fantastic elements bring a sense of enchantment and an enhanced depth to the children's perceptions of reality. When Anthea in *The Five Children and It* decides to sneak out of the house to make a wish, she leaves by the window. Nesbit narrates this choice: "It would have been just as easy to go out by the door, but the window was more romantic, and less likely to be noticed by Martha" (Nesbit 59). Nesbit emphasizes the importance that a sense of fantasy and magic gives the children as they act out the more banal moments of their lives. Even before Anthea makes a wish, she acts out the non-magical pieces of her life in anticipation of the adventure and style that the magic will soon bring. Similarly, in *Swallows and Amazons* the children rename many of their food items with a similar effect. When the Amazons bring along some lemonade to share with the Swallows, they explain, "Let's broach a puncheon of Jamaica rum. We've got a beauty in the Amazon. Let's go to the harbor and get it. It's really good stuff. Sometimes our cook is quite friendly, for a native. She calls it lemonade" (Ransome 112). Not only does this allow the lemonade to fit into their pirate narrative; by applying their fantastical framework to their reality, the children are also able to interact with that reality in a richer and more joyful way.

This fantastical schema also helps the children decide what to do in difficult or ambiguous situations. One of the children in *Swallows and Amazons* captures the Amazons' ship and cannot decide whether or not to eat the chocolate she finds there. Eventually she reasons that pirates "always eat everything they find in a captured ship" (Ransome 211),

using her understanding of pirate convention in order to help her navigate the choice. Later, when the children are caught in a thunderstorm, they use fantasy to help resolve a confusing and difficult situation again. Ransome narrates: “Nobody could go to sleep. They became shipwrecked sailors” (Ransome 333), illustrating the way that their fantastic narratives allow the children to turn what could have been a terrifying situation into one that is exciting instead. Their use of fantasy in these situations, though remaining fantastic throughout, is always aligned in relation to their realities and allows for increased access to them.

Realism also provides a way into fantasy, as the children are able to engage most deeply with these fantastic elements when they are experienced within the context of their everyday, realistic world. Both the authors within this genre and Winnicott emphasize the way that a grounding in reality allows for the children to live out fantasy on a scale that is manageable. Winnicott writes:

One thing that follows the acceptance of external reality is the advantage to be gained from it. We often hear of the very real frustrations imposed by external reality, but less often hear of the relief and satisfaction it affords. Real milk is satisfying as compared with imaginary milk, but this is not the point. The point is that in fantasy things work by magic: there are no brakes on fantasy, and love and hate cause alarming effects. External reality has brakes on it, and can be studied and known, and, in fact, fantasy is only tolerable at full blast when objective reality is appreciated well. The subjective has tremendous value but is so alarming and magical that it cannot be enjoyed except as a parallel to the objective. (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 65)

Ransome evocatively illustrates this point. The children in Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* get to live out their fantasy fully, in that they truly feel like pirates and get to independently carry out the tasks that pirates do, but they do so within a context of safety and support that is the result of their fantastic adventures occurring within the context of their ordinary lives. They rely on parents and neighbors for regular provisions of food, including such comforts as baked goods and celebratory birthday meals. In fact, as the children first

settle into their new lives on the island, their mother visits them that very night to check in and deliver supplies. She brings them pillows, explaining that: ““You can sleep without them, I know, but a pillow makes such a lot of difference that I’m sure Christopher Columbus himself always took his own pillow with him”” (Ransome 58). She reassures the children that Christopher Columbus himself had similar objects of comfort and security, though the truth is that the children’s adventure is a child-sized version of Columbus’, his voyage shrunk down and placed within a summer spent on a lake. However, it is the very degree of comfort and safety the children’s reality affords them that allows them such powerful access to Columbus’ fantastic narrative of adventure.

Ordinary life is also positioned as a comfort and relief after the sometimes overwhelming fantastic adventures of this genre, further emphasizing the way that reality provides a sense of brakes and grounding from which to access manageable windows of fantasy. As happens in many of these books, the children in Eager’s *Half Magic* return home from an adventure and find themselves reluctant to seek out more excitement for a period. Eager narrates: “that one morning had been so crowded with adventure that somehow they didn’t feel as though they wanted any more excitement for some time. They put the charm away in its safe place under the flooring, and spent the morning and afternoon playing the most ordinary games they knew” (Eager, *Half Magic* 109). The children’s reaction stands in direct contrast to the beginning of the book when these very same games are described as impossibly dull, and the children yearn for the exact type of adventure they later receive. Too concentrated a dose of either fantasy or realism leaves the children desperate for the other, but it is their ability to navigate freely between the two poles that allows them an ability to fully engage with both worlds.

Chapter Two: Liminal Space and Time

In this chapter, I explore the way that these four authors depict space and time in order to evoke places where the ordinary and the enchanted meet. The children in these novels inhabit environments that juxtapose home and away, the familiar and the novel, the comforting and the thrilling. As is the case with these authors' exploration of the central tension between fantasy and realism, their use of juxtaposition serves not only to sharpen both sides of each contrast, but also to illuminate the way that bringing these sets of opposites together allows for greater access to each.

In particular, I address the various ways that location is used to make some of the tensions between fantasy and realism and many other accompanying contrasts visible in a particularly literal way, and I explore the way that a treatment of physical spaces and times highlights the children's abilities to move back and forth between contrasting poles as they travel back and forth between settings and within timeframes.

In each of these books, the sense of boredom and dissatisfaction that define the opening pages is expressed through attention to the physical spaces depicted. The children describe their current locations with frustration: “I’d rather be at school than stuck here all summer ... I’d rather do anything. Even prison would be better” (McKay 4). Even in light of the new freedom that comes along with summer, the children feel stuck at home, so imprisoned by their location that Naomi, the second eldest sibling, imagines that a real prison would be better. McKay goes on to describe the eldest’s dream, that “One day, she would spend summer in the countryside, somewhere hilly, not like the Lincolnshire flatness she was accustomed to” (McKay 8). This contrast between country hills and suburban flatness reinforces the contrast between the monotony and sameness of the children’s home and the variation and sense of adventure that the hills evoke.

Eager’s children similarly imagine their chances for novelty and adventure as being essentially tied to their location. Eager writes: “The children never went to the country or a lake in the summer, the way their friends did” and that their summertime caretaker, Miss Bick, “wouldn’t take them to the country or a lake; she said it was too much to expect and the sound of waves affected her heart” (Eager, *Half Magic* 4). Again, summer as a time of excitement and exploration seems inherently tied to the particular location of the sea or the country. Nesbit’s *The Five Children and It* provides yet another example of this contrast between the boredom associated with the suburban home and the excitement that is tied to the countryside. The book opens as the children’s family moves to a new house in the country, and while their parents find the new house to be “quite ordinary” and even “inconvenient...there being no shelves, to speak of, and hardly a cupboard in the place”, the children feel differently as, “the house was deep in the country, with no other house in sight,

and the children had been in London for two years without so much as once going to the seaside even for a day by an excursion train” (Nesbit 2). As in the other examples, Nesbit positions the children’s home as stifling and depicts the sea and the country as exciting “excursions”. Ransome echoes this sentiment when he writes: “With an island like that within sight, who could be content to live on the mainland and sleep in a bed at night?” (17), emphasizing the way that the contrast between home and away can make home seem especially dull and uninteresting.

Home is also figured as a restrictive environment as the children are often required to cut their adventures short in order to return home at particular times for meals or for bedtimes. In addition to shortening adventures, the atmosphere at home is one of boredom and adult control. Nesbit describes that “nearly everything in London is the wrong sort of shape—all straight lines and flat streets, instead of being all sorts of odd shapes, like things are in the country” (2). Nesbit’s London is devoid of the organic playfulness that the countryside evokes, and these “straight lines and flat streets” correspond with a setting in which the children are constantly confined: “In London almost everything is labeled “You mustn’t touch,” and though the label is invisible, it’s just as bad, because you know it’s there, or if you don’t you jolly soon get told” (Nesbit 3). Home is boring and constricting, not only because it keeps the children away from the more interesting environment of the countryside, but also because it is an environment in which they cannot fully engage with their surroundings, being restrained by the adult supervision that, though sometimes invisible, is seemingly ubiquitous.

By the same token, these authors also use depictions of physical spaces in order to convey a sense of enchantment, novelty, and excitement, as the children of the novels go on

adventures that take them to new spaces, both literally and metaphorically. Nesbit begins *The Five Children and It* by describing the children's introduction to their new house in the country: "The children had explored the gardens and the outhouses thoroughly before they were caught and cleaned for tea, and they saw quite well that they were certain to be happy at the White House" (3). There is a sense in this description that the children are like animals let free, able to explore freely before they are caught once again and brought back into the domestic sphere. The reader sees that the children's freedom to explore has been successful because they must be "cleaned for tea" by the time their parents reclaim authority. In contrast to London which "has none of those nice things that children may play with without hurting the things or themselves-such as trees and sand and woods and waters" (Nesbit 2), the children's hunches that they will enjoy the countryside are confirmed when "Robert had found the broken swing and tumbled out of it and got a lump on his head the size of an egg, and Cyril had nipped his finger in the door of a hutch that seemed made to keep rabbits in, if you ever had any, they had no longer any doubts whatever" (Nesbit 3). These injuries signal to the children that this new environment is one in which they can truly engage with their surroundings, learning on their own rather than from the uninvited safety restrictions put in place by adults.

Traveling Between Home and Away

However much the contrast between these two types of environments highlights their difference, these books primarily focus on the places where the two meet. When the children in Nesbit's *The Five Children and It* first arrive at their new house, Nesbit describes that it "seemed to them a sort of fairy Palace set down in an Earthly Paradise" (Nesbit 2), emphasizing the coming together of such different poles of experience. While Nesbit

certainly juxtaposes home and away, monotony and change, boredom and excitement, she also emphasizes here the links connecting the two experiences. While Nesbit's children are given free range in the out-of-doors during the day, they are still expected to return home and go inside throughout the day for meals and to come home in time to eat dinner and go to bed. Even as Ransome's children are given permission to sleep overnight on an island by themselves, they must row the distance back the mainland each morning to pick up milk. Their literal movement across water as they traverse the metaphorical distance between home and away highlights the fluidity, both literal and figurative that defines these crossings.

The distance between the ordinary home and the enchanted away is also shortened by time, as these authors make clear that the enchanted experiences that unfold will be limited in time. The magic in Nesbit's *The Five Children and It* only lasts until sundown of the day on which it begins, insuring that each episode must resolve itself before the children return home for bed. McKay's *The Exiles*, Eager's *Half Magic*, and Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* all take place during summer vacation from school, with the implicit understandings that they occupy a space defined both by its departure from the everyday routine of the school year and by its inevitable return. Ransome writes: "[The children] were to be allowed to land on the island, and to live there until it was time to pack up again and go home to town and school and lessons" (Ransome 18-19). Here, as Ransome first lays out the children's adventurous summer, he emphasizes the adventure's eventual end, rather than focusing on the way it appears initially to extend infinitely into the future.

This meeting of the two environments and the modes of experience that they represent allows for the children to navigate back and forth between both, ultimately allowing them to engage with each environment more completely than they would be able to

separately. The Swallows' trips back to the mainland each day to pick up milk are precisely what allow them to otherwise live so independently on their island. More broadly, a sense of security and manageability of scale allow the children in all books to enjoy their adventures fully rather than with fear. Likewise, the children's adventures to new spaces ultimately allow them to return home and appreciate these familiar spaces as comforting and safe rather than as restricting and boring, as they seem initially.

Winnicott's concept of the holding environment that a mother provides her children seems particularly useful here. He writes, "Only on a basis of monotony can a mother profitably add richness" (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 65), stressing the interrelatedness of the contrasting modes of the familiar and the novel, the safe and the exciting, and Goldman emphasizes that "The holding environment provides a sense of safety and trust that depends on the reliability of the caretaker and the effective communication between caretaker and child" (xix). Ultimately this holding environment allows the child to experiment in safety without feeling constrained, and gives the child the important ability to learn independently, supported by adults without being stifled by their presence. Phillips writes: "For Winnicott, and those who were influenced by his work, psychoanalytic treatment was not exclusively interpretive, but first and foremost the provision of a congenial milieu, a 'holding environment' analogous to maternal care" (Phillips 11). These books, in their attention to the way that physical landscapes operate as metaphors for this sort of holding environment, stress, just as Winnicott does, that these spaces allow the children the balance of freedom and support they need in order to engage most richly with their worlds.

Chapter Three: Childhood and Adulthood

In exploring the margins between fantasy and realism, another contrast that emerges is that of childhood and adulthood. Across the genre, a division exists between children and adults in the way that they envision the world around them. Defined by their creativity and flexibility, children are able to inhabit a world of fantasy, whereas adults are constrained to a purely realist world by their rigidity and insistence on logic and reason.

In this chapter, I begin by exploring the boundaries between childhood and adulthood through the theme of miscommunication between children and adults. The importance of miscommunication between children and adults throughout this genre, I argue, emphasizes the places where children's and adult's perceptions of the world meet and suggests that these two poles exist in relation to each other rather than as completely separate categories. Next, I describe the way that adults in these novels are constrained by their reliance on realism in their understanding of the world and the way that they often impose this constricting perspective on the children with whom they interact. By contrast, I explore the way that the children use a fantastic framework in order to access their worlds more fully. Finally, despite the differences between adults and children, I discuss the variety of places in which there is crossover between the two modes, and suggest that it is this borrowing from both spheres that allows for the richest and most rooted experience for these novels' protagonists.

Both the children and narrators of these stories address the division between children and adults quite frankly, and they make it clear that the division is not only between individual children and individual adults, but is between these two classes of people. Children and adults do not simply have different experiences; they have entirely different perspectives through which they understand the world around them. This often manifests itself in miscommunication as the children and adults in these stories literally cannot understand each other on a literal as well as symbolic level.

McKay approaches these miscommunications with particular humor, and though they are exaggerated for comic effect, they nonetheless remain believable, perhaps because the Conroy girls see themselves so much in opposition to all of the adults in their lives. The event that sets the plot of the story in motion, the inheritance of a sum of money from a great-uncle, leads to a funny scene at the dinner table as the girls assume that the money will be split evenly among the members of the family, while their parents don't realize the need to explain that they will be spending the entire sum on behalf of the group. For a few minutes after the announcement, there is peace and quiet before the miscommunication becomes apparent. The Conroy parents assume that their daughters will be pleased with their plan to renovate the house, and the girls happily calculate what they will be able to buy with their newfound wealth. Eventually though, the disconnect becomes clear as Naomi asks her mother, "You're not going to have much left ... or are you and Dad clubbing together to get all that done?" (McKay 29). As chaos erupts, and the Conroy girls voice their unhappiness, Mrs. Conroy expresses her exasperation: "Whatever are you thinking of? Speaking like that! We thought you'd be pleased" (29). Their back and forth further emphasizes the distance between the two groups, neither having anticipated the others' response. Moreover, not only

are the Conroy girls outraged at the thought that they will not control how any of the money is spent, they are distraught to hear of their parents' very practical uses for the new family fortune as opposed to their own fantastic and utterly impractical ideas. Though the entire issue seems ridiculous to Mrs. Conroy, the children are entirely earnest in their response. "Oh, my money," responds Rachel, "as tears began to pour down her cheeks," (McKay 29-30) and the reader sees just how differently each party experiences this same conversation, a theme that continues to play out throughout the rest of the novel.

The theme of miscommunication becomes even clearer in the books that incorporate magic. At the beginning of these books, the children usually assume that as magic springs up in their lives, they will be able to share the experience with the adults around them. When, for instance, the children in Edith Nesbit's *The Five Children and It* make their first wish and become unrecognizably beautiful, they attempt to go home and simply explain the situation to the servants. However, they quickly discover that this is not possible: "Three times they tried in vain to get the servants in the White House to let them in and listen to their tale" (Nesbit 16). The children immediately discover that it is only in the most literal sense of the word that the children can still communicate with the adults in their lives. They exchange words with the servant at home, but are entirely unable to get their point across; the presence of magic in the children's lives has made their reality unrecognizable to the adults and has therefore made any meaningful or productive communication impossible. The children realize this quickly and decide to act accordingly in the future as they vow: "If we *do* come out of this all right, we'll ask the Sammyadd to make it so that the servants don't notice anything different, no matter what wishes we have" (Nesbit 17). Ultimately, the children realize that exposing adults to their new dimension of reality will not bring them greater

understanding, but will only hinder communication. When they request this of the Psammead, it responds quite frankly: “‘I’ve done *that* for you-it was quite easy. People don’t notice things much, anyway. What’s the next wish?’” (Nesbit 23). The phrasing of the children’s request is notable, as they do not ask that their wishes will be impossible to detect, but simply that the servants will not notice them. Since the children’s and adult’s perceptions of the world are already so far removed from each other, the adults’ attention needs only to be subtly redirected. Even this seems barely necessary as the Psammead remarks, “People don’t notice things much, anyway.”

When the children do occasionally attempt to speak directly with adults about their magical experiences, they nearly always find their experiences impossible to communicate. When Jane is completely candid, for instance, explaining “‘There’s a fairy there -- all over brown fur -- with ears like a bat’s and eyes like a snail’s, and he gives you a wish a day, and they all come true’” (Nesbit 32) it is perhaps no surprise that she receives an incredulous response: “‘Touched in the head, eh?’ said the man in a low voice...” (Nesbit 32). Once again, the problem is not the children’s literal ability to convey their experiences to the adults in their lives, but the adults’ ability to believe that which the children describe. Eventually, the children learn to anticipate these types of responses. Nesbit notes: “They did not tell Uncle Richard anything about the Psammead. I do not know why. And they do not know why. But I daresay you can guess” (Nesbit 58). Without necessarily consciously doing so, the children have learned to be selective about who they share their magical experiences with, understanding that attempts to communicate will most likely be unproductive. Though the children may be doing this unconsciously as Nesbit here suggests, the reader can see the pattern emerging of adult inability to understand or believe in fantasy.

Nesbit illustrates this tension in an interaction between Jane and the children's mother as they try to communicate about the sudden influx of fantasy that is having an effect on both of their lives. The children's mother demands of Jane: "Now think before you speak, and tell me the truth" (Nesbit 150). This order is more difficult to follow than initially meets the eye; Jane can either think before she speaks, or tell the truth, but cannot do both. As the children have already illustrated, Jane's decision to tell the truth is a rash one, whereas a more thoughtful decision would require more forethought and also more deceit. Nesbit presents the remainder of their reaction: "'We found a Fairy,' said Jane obediently. 'No nonsense, please,' said her mother sharply" (Nesbit 150). Nesbit reminds the reader that Jane truly is following her mother's instructions "obediently" but that adults cannot recognize the truth of their children's experiences, even when they are confronted directly with straightforward accounts.

The theme of miscommunication comes to a head in one particular chapter of the book in which the children wish that their house will become a castle. Their wish is granted, but they soon realize that there are some unexpected complications as to the wish's execution. The adults around them, who have been expressly prevented from seeing the effects of the children's wishes, cannot see that anything has changed. While the children see a castle with all of its medieval details, the servants see the same old country house that they have always seen. The children reflect on this surprising development, musing that "'you can't have a castle mixed up with our house-and so we can't see the house, because we see the castle and they can't see the castle, because they go on seeing the house'" (Nesbit 91). This captures something about the way that the adult-children miscommunications function throughout the entire book. The problem is not that the children and adults cannot

communicate with each other at all. The servants in the chapter can still see the children themselves despite not seeing the castle, and the children can see the servants despite not seeing the house. However, it is each group's rootedness in their own perspective that renders any true understanding or communication impossible. Through the exaggerated illustration of these magical transformations, Nesbit illustrates that the children's fantastic perspective prevents their ability to understand what the adults see, and also that the adults' realist perspective prevents their ability to understand what the children see.

Adulthood and Realism

Among other things, these miscommunications expose the way that the adults in these books are constrained by realism. In the very beginning of *The Five Children and It*, one of the children remarks that “servants never dream anything but the things in the *Dream-book*, like snakes and oysters and going to a wedding -that means a funeral, and snakes are a false female friend, and oysters are babies” (Nesbit 20). Even within adult dreams, a space in which fantastic elements present themselves, adults can only use these elements as direct, concrete symbols for completely non-fantastic life events. The set of symbols is limited and, in fact, the symbolism is so rigid that individual interpretation of these symbols is not possible. Instead, one must rely on a “*Dream-book*” to translate them from the realm of fantasy to the realm of realism.

The adults' realist perspective does not ultimately provide them a helpful framework through which to understand the world, at least not within these novels. Particularly when these authors introduce fantasy into their otherwise realist worlds, these adults are left with inadequate tools with which to process and react to these events. When, for instance, in *Half*

Magic, one of the children wishes to become invisible, and therefore becomes half invisible, she causes a scene on the streets as people begin to see her. One of the most striking elements of the chapter is the variety of responses that her invisibility evokes from the various people that she encounters. When one man claims, in a moment of hysteria, that he has seen a ghost, another man quickly responds. Eager narrates the scene: “‘Don’t be silly. There’s no such thing,’ said the first man, who happened to be a learned professor. He glanced at the misty Martha. ‘Marsh gas,’ he said. ‘Very interesting’” (*Half Magic* 122). The first man, acting unusually for an adult, actually comes quite close to the truth in his assessment of the situation. By contrast, the second man, whom Eager sarcastically notes is a “learned professor,” relies on his rigid and realist academic framework in order to draw a conclusion about what he sees, but ends up missing the mark entirely. His subdued remark, “Very interesting” only serves to reinforce this disconnect. The fantastic occurrence of Martha’s half-invisibility *is* truly “very interesting” but the professor’s understanding of the situation could not be any duller.

However, just as the adults largely fail to engage meaningfully with the fantastic elements and occurrences in their lives, they fail even to listen when someone else gets it right. In contrast to this supposed expert’s inability to assess the situation competently, a child is able to understand what is happening: “‘It’s a little girl, only she’s only half there,’ said a child, but of course nobody paid any attention to *her!*” (Eager, *Half Magic* 122). The adults’ realist understandings of the world around them are so strong that they cannot think flexibly outside of them even when the evidence that this framework is inadequate is both immediate and obvious. Nesbit captures this very inadequacy of the adult realist framework

powerfully in *The Five Children and It* when one of the children explains: “Of course it is [true], but it’s not true enough for grown-up people to believe it” (Nesbit 148).

In fact, many of the representations of adults in these books depict them as forces of unwanted control and rigidity in the children’s lives. Nesbit provides an example when the children’s youngest sibling in *The Five Children and It* suddenly grows up as the result of a wish, and he turns out to embody the very worst type of adult. Nesbit describes an interaction between him and the rest: “‘Look here, Jane,’ said the grown-up Lamb, putting his hands in his pockets and looking down at her, ‘little girls should be seen and not heard. You kids must learn not to make yourselves a nuisance. Run along home now-and perhaps, if you’re good, I’ll give you each a penny tomorrow’” (Nesbit 125). Nesbit notes that he both puts his hands in his pockets and looks down at his siblings, signaling both disengagement and condescension. This adult Lamb has become a caricature of what it means to be an adult, condescending to his sibling both literally and figuratively.

The characters in the other books encounter similar adults. At best, adult involvement in their fantastic adventures signals unwanted control over their wishes, and at worst, it threatens to signal the end of their fantastic experiences entirely. The children in *Half Magic* express fear at the thought of adult involvement in their adventures: “‘And now I suppose we’ll have grown-ups butting in and telling us what to wish all the time, and like as not wanting to borrow the charm and wasting its substance on their own devices and desires, and it’s just all utterly and completely ruined!’” (Eager, *Half Magic* 145). The children in *Swallows and Amazons* face a similar set of challenges. Ransome describes their situation: “‘Natives were like that, useful in a way, but sometimes a bother. They all held together, a huge network of gossip and scouting, through all the meshes of which it was difficult for

explorers and pirates to slip” (Ransome 242). Just as is the case in the other novels, this constant monitoring presence of adults threatens to destroy the possibility of adventure for the children.

Children and Fantasy

In contrast to the way that the adults of these novels are constrained by their reliance on realism, fantasy helps to open up the children’s worlds in productive and profound ways. In fact, Nesbit addresses this at the beginning of *The Five Children and It*. She writes:

Now that I have begun to tell you about the place, I feel that I could go on and make this into a most interesting story about all the ordinary things that the children did—just the kind of things you do yourself, you know—and you would believe every word of it; and when I told about the children’s being tiresome, as you are sometimes, your aunts would perhaps write in the margin of the story with a pencil, “How true!” or “How like life!” and you would see it and very likely be annoyed. So I will only tell you the really astonishing things that happened, and you may leave the book about quite safely, for no aunts and uncles either are likely to write “How true!” on the edge of the story. Grown-up people find it very difficult to believe really wonderful things, unless they have what they call proof. But children will believe almost anything... (Nesbit 3-4)

Nesbit emphasizes that the “really wonderful things”, the fantastic elements that define the book are only available to her young readers. While adults suffer as the result of their rigidity and strict adherence to realism, children are given access to a wonderful and enchanted world that is entirely their own.

Eager echoes this sentiment at the end of *Half Magic* as the children decide who to pass on their magical coin to: “‘And I think it has to be a child,’ said Mark. ‘Most grown-ups wouldn’t understand, unless they’re wonderful ones like Mr. Smith, and you don’t find types

like him on every street corner” (*Half Magic* 212). Once again, children are granted entrance to these fantastic worlds and adventures that adults cannot access.

Navigating Between Modes

However, just as is the case in previous chapters, the distinction between children and adults is, in many ways, less interesting than the negotiable boundaries these books explore between childhood and adulthood. For all the adults who are hopelessly rigid and out of touch, there are many adults who are sensible allies to these young protagonists. In contrast to the category of adults who limit the children’s options for exploration, for instance, there are also some who are mindful of keeping some distance and allowing children the room they need to explore on their own. Eager touches on this when he describes the children’s mother in the beginning of *Half Magic*: “When their mother came home she knew something was wrong. But being an understanding parent she didn’t ask questions” (*Half Magic* 17).

Ransome provides a very similar description of the children’s mother in *Swallows and Amazons*. “I’m not going to keep on coming to bother you.’ / ‘You don’t bother us, mother,’ said John. / ‘I’m not going to anyhow, but I’m going to ask you to let me know every two or three days – or oftener if you like –that everything is all right” (Ransome 59). In both cases, the narrators emphasize the way that this distance is the result of thoughtfulness and caring on the part of these mothers rather than of inattention or lack of investment in their children. It is precisely because they pay attention to the needs of their children that these mothers are able to grant their children this degree of independence.

In light of their healthy distance, these adults can provide much needed support for the children with whom they interact without being overbearing. The mother in *Swallows and Amazons* reminds her children that “‘You’ll be wanting provisions, you know, and we

natives can always supply them. So you'll be calling now and then at Holly Howe, won't you?" (Ransome 59). She establishes herself as a resource and allows her children to come to her as they need help, granting them a great deal of agency but also a great deal of support. One of Eager's positive depictions of an adult, Mr. Smith, follows a similar pattern: "He [Mr. Smith] allowed, and even urged, the four children to choose anything they wanted from the menu at dinner, at the same time frankly advising Mark that he thought he would enjoy rare steak and fried onions more than he would codfish tongues" (*Half Magic* 140-141). While giving the children the opportunity to make decisions on their own, he provides help along the way and allows them to use his help as they see fit.

The division between the adult sphere and the children's sphere is further complicated by the fact that the children are already in the process of growing up, becoming adults themselves. At times, the children seem like miniature adults already. Just as the adults in Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* can occasionally transition between "natives" and friends of the children, flexibly navigating between child and adult spheres, the children also sometimes make similar shifts. Ransome illustrates this writing that "Susan was in a very native mood that day, as Able-seaman Titty observed" (Ransome 243), emphasizing the flexibility with which Susan can occupy this more adult perspective on a given day.

Just as is the case elsewhere, these books explore the categories of childhood and adulthood through an examination of the places where these worlds collide. They emphasize that an adherence to either sphere alone is isolating and restrictive, and that instead, a dialogue between children and adults and an ability to navigate fluidly back and forth across this border is crucial.

Chapter Four: Books and Real Life

Of all the commonalities between the books in this genre, these four novels are connected by one particularly visible thread. Not only does their common exploration of the same liminal spaces unite them, all four foreground this engagement through their attention to books and reading, and two of them also acknowledge their shared engagement in this project by explicitly referencing E. Nesbit and her books in particular.

In this chapter, I illustrate that for the protagonists of these stories, the way into these liminal worlds is through the act of reading. However, the act of reading alone is not sufficient to produce these transformative and liminal spaces. I discuss the ways that books operate as transitional objects within these texts, and I conclude that it is the children's engagement with these works through play in a world outside of the texts that produces a joyful experience, in which the children are able to engage most fully.

Books and Fantasy

When real life is too dull for the children within this genre and they look to fantasy, they do so by reading. When, for instance, the children of *Half Magic* find themselves facing an endless summer with little promise of excitement, they turn to books. Eager writes:

Still, even without the country or a lake, the summer was a fine thing, particularly when you were at the beginning of it, looking ahead into it. There would be months of beautifully long, empty days, and each other to play with, and the books from the library. In the summer you could take out ten books at a time, instead of three, and keep them a month, instead of two weeks. Of course you could take only four of the fiction books, which were the best, but Jane liked plays and they were nonfiction, and Katherine liked poetry and that was nonfiction, and Martha was still the age for picture books, and they didn't count as fiction but were often nearly as good. (*Half Magic* 5-6)

These books and the children's play, it seems, take the place of the country or a lake, at least to some degree. Unlike the more rigid school year, the summer contains "beautifully long, empty days" that the children can fill as they wish. That the children can take out more books and keep them for a longer period reflects this sense of freedom and flexibility that they suddenly possess. Their focus on fiction, rather than non-fiction further emphasizes the way that the children are using the books, as a way into fantasy and out of the boring and restrictive realism of their actual lives.

The Conroy siblings of *The Exiles* also begin their summer vacation with a stack of new library books. They too read them in a boring environment of non-adventure. McKay's first description of the girls at home captures the contrast between the girls' environment and the escape that their books offer. She writes: "Naomi Conrad crouched uncomfortably at the end of the garden reading a book. As usual, she had spent her Saturday morning at the town library, searching the too familiar shelves for something new. On her left was the stack of books she had read, and on her right was the pile she hadn't opened yet. She kept her elbow

leaning on that pile to guard them from her permanently book-hungry sisters” (McKay 3). Naomi’s current, stifling reality lies in contrast to the novelty and expansiveness that books represent, and though she reads, Naomi is physically constrained in her present environment as she is “crouched uncomfortably at the end of the garden.” She looks for “something new” at the library, referencing not only a search for a literal book that is new to her, but also the way the contents of the book have the ability to expand her world. But even though the library offers her some hope, it is still “all too familiar.” Once home, the books in their piles, read and unread, seem to mimic the days of summer vacation, precious and containing some hope of novelty but still quite limited and contained by the girls’ surroundings and by their inability to do more than passively consume the novels.

As *The Exiles* progresses, McKay’s focus on books only becomes more pronounced. In preparation for her granddaughters’ arrival, Big Grandma has hidden all of her books in an effort to cure her grandchildren of what she sees as their escapist reading habits. To the girls, this is just a continuation of what they experience at home, as they face a shortage of books wherever they go. When it rains several days in a row, the role of books as antidote to a stifling reality becomes particularly clear: “To Big Grandma the days of wet weather seemed like a time of constant searching, as the girls wandered preoccupied through the house, questing for ghosts, books, relics of the mysterious disappearing Uncle Robert, secret passages, something to do, books, books, books, anything to read” (McKay 64). Feeling bored and trapped in the house, the girls look for fantasy from any source they can, looking for literal manifestations of the fantastic (ghosts), hints of the fantastic (family myths, secret passages) and most importantly, perhaps the most obvious source of fantasy for them, books. “How poor Noah,” Big Grandma remarks, “survived forty days cooped up with his

relations in that ark is past my understanding” (McKay 72). Naomi responds ““He probably had plenty of books with him”” (McKay 72).

Big Grandma’s project to cure her granddaughters of their reading habit is itself a further validation of the role that books play within these narratives and the way that they are used. It is precisely because books function as alternatives to a purely realist worldview that Big Grandma wants to keep them away from her grandchildren. Explaining her project to the girls’ mother, she says quite explicitly, ““I told you they read far too much. Pure escapism. Just as bad as smoking or alcohol; they were addicted. I’m curing them”” (McKay 163-164). Big Grandma’s mission is clearly hypocritical, as McKay emphasizes that she describes Big Grandma as ““conveniently forgetting the large doses of literature she indulged in herself” (McKay 163-164). Nonetheless, Big Grandma strengthens the associations between fantasy and literature and reality and realism, as she imagines the two poles separately and fears that too much reading will prevent her grandchildren from engaging with the external world. Graham, a local boy who helps Big Grandma out around the house communicates Big Grandma’s general idea to his mother, saying ““Too many books, [Graham] had been told, were one of the chief causes of the girls’ inability to behave like rational human beings.” (McKay 101).

Graham himself provides a contrast to the book-addicted yet incompetent Conroy sisters, and is defined by his practicality in conjunction with his booklessness. In a letter home, Naomi describes him to her mother, emphasizing the contrast: ““We have met a boy called Graham. He says he’s never read a book except at school. He’s going to teach me to drive a tractor” (McKay 104). Naomi’s contrasting points of description emphasize the way

that his lack of interest in books and reading seems to be connected to his practical interests and skills.

It is important to note that not all books inspire the children equally. Eager notes that, even in the summer, the children can only take out four fiction books, and this launches him into a discussion of the other types of novels with which the children interact. Plays, poetry, and picture books are close enough to fiction for the children's enjoyment, but "Mark hadn't found out yet what kind of nonfiction he liked but he was still trying. ... The nonfiction books he tried were mostly called things like "When I Was a Boy in Greece," or "Happy Days on the Prairie" - things that made them sound like stories, only they weren't. They made Mark furious" (Eager, *Half Magic* 6).

The same is true for McKay's protagonists. When the Conroy sisters have to select the two books they will each bring to their grandmother's in a hurry, they end up selecting books that are almost all poor choices. On one end of the spectrum are the books that are uninteresting because they are too deeply entrenched in the children's recognizable world. These include a book about natural history, a picture book about a rabbit and the seasons, and a book about the eating habits of man-eating tigers. On the other end of the spectrum are the books that are too unrecognizable, bearing little to no relation to the girls' reality. These include a book of Russian folktales and a Bible, books selected, ironically, because they have never been read. When the girls are desperate for reading materials, Big Grandma gives them cooking books and Shakespeare, reading materials intended to be impenetrable to the girls. These are similarly uninteresting in that they fall too far on either end of the spectrum. The cookbooks are covered in grease, emphasizing their place in the real world, and the

Shakespeare is quickly deemed an impossible read for the opposite reason, because its connection to the real world is too tenuous.

Limitations of Books

Despite the desire that books have the capacity to instill, they do not necessarily satisfy the longings that they arouse. One of McKay's initial descriptions of the Conroy sisters' garden captures this limitation: "Naomi finished the chapter and closed the book. For a few seconds she could not see, and then her eyes refocused on the small, sunshiny garden. It was overcrowded, she thought. Too many plants, too many scattered belongings, too many book-starved sisters waiting to pounce" (McKay 4). Naomi's need to refocus her eyes as she finishes the book in order to take in her surroundings once more reinforces the extent to which she is mentally transported away from the confines of the garden while she reads. However, as she closes the physical cover of the book, Naomi is once again stuck where she always was, surrounded by her present reality on all sides. At this moment, it seems that Big Grandma is at least partially correct in her diagnosis of reading as escapist; reading these books makes Naomi wish that she is in the countryside herself, having an adventure like the ones she reads about, but simply reading these books does not allow her to fully engage with this world of fantasy.

McKay makes a point of illustrating the extent to which many of these books are not useful in their application, emphasizing the importance of being able to relate the books and the children's experiences. She writes: "Ruth had gone hunting for badger sets alone, unguided by anything except her book, which she had decided was not as useful as she had thought it would be in Lincolnshire" (McKay 109). Later, Naomi remarks to her sister that

“Natural history always sounds nice and clean in books; I don’t know why yours always is so disgusting” (McKay 170). In these and several other instances throughout the novel, the children expect the many instructional books to be more helpful than they prove to be. Neither the highly realistic or highly fantastic books can be applied to their lives.

The one book that is useful to the children is E. Nesbit’s *The Treasure Seekers*. The fact that it is written by E. Nesbit serves as an important link to the genre of “ordinary magic” in which the *The Exiles* is situated. It is precisely this book’s positioning in this transitional space between realism and fantasy that makes it so useful to the Conroy girls. Of the choice to bring this book along, McKay writes: “In a last minute panic, Naomi had grabbed *The Treasure Seekers*. Everyone, even Phoebe, knew this book so well that they could recite whole chunks of it, but still, at least the book was rereadable. But not indefinitely” (McKay 45). In contrast to many of the books the girls bring, this one is not only readable but “rereadable.” It succeeds where the other books have failed, including enough of the real world to be legible to the girls while also including enough fantasy to capture their attention for not just one read but many. However, even this beloved book is not infinitely rereadable; there is a limit to the passive consumption of any book; a book must be engaged with in the real world through play in order to be really satisfying.

Eager also situates E. Nesbit’s work as occupying a unique space between fantasy and realism that makes it particularly compelling to his protagonists. Initially, the children encounter irritation as they put down their copy of Nesbit’s *The Enchanted Castle*. Katherine asks, ““Why don’t things like that ever happen to *us*?”” to which Mark responds that ““Magic never happens, not really. . . . Only in fairy stories”” (Eager, *Half Magic* 7). Quickly though, Katherine responds that ““It *wasn’t* a fairy story. There weren’t any dragons or witches or

poor woodcutters, just real children like us!” (Eager, *Half Magic* 8). Ironically, the others chime in that the children in these books are not just like them, that they never experience any of the fantastic things that Nesbit’s children do. Of course, they are about to discover just the sort of magic that Nesbit depicts, and Eager’s attention to Nesbit’s books in this way is self-referential, drawing attention to the genre of ordinary magic that Nesbit pioneers and in which he writes. However, the children’s frustration that they have not yet experienced magic of their own reinforces the limitations of even the most compelling story of “ordinary magic.” Just like the children in *The Exiles*, they are not satisfied until they have engaged with these novels in their own lives.

Books as Transitional Objects

As McKay illustrates, the books that are most successful are the ones that engage in the project of relating fantasy and reality. McKay and others also explore the way that books themselves, in their physicality, function as transitional objects for the children who engage with them. They are at once real and created, just like Winnicott’s classic teddy bear, existing as literal, found objects but also as subjective, created ones. McKay captures this dichotomy in the way that the children and adults understand books within her narrative. Whereas the children assume that books will be able to be freely and easily sent to them across wide distances, thinking only of their urgent need for reading material, their parents focus on the practical aspects of the situation, noting the weight of the books and the prohibitive cost of mailing them.

Eager also captures the sentiment that books are at once real and fantastic. He writes of the children in *Half Magic* and their trip to collect the summer’s books at the library: “The

library was two miles away, and walking there with a lot of heavy, already-read books was dull, but coming home was splendid-walking slowly, stopping from time to time on different strange front steps, dipping into the different books” (*Half Magic* 6-7). Eager creates a clear distinction between these two ways that books exist in the world. Just like McKay, Eager points out their literal weight, on the one hand, illustrating their physicality and the burden they can impose. However, he also presents their ability to open up new figurative worlds to the children as they “dip” into different books in “different strange” locations, in this case, front steps.

Just like Winnicott’s teddy bear, these books as transitional objects serve to help the children in these stories make connections between their internal, subjective, and fantastic visions of the world, and the external, objective, and realist schemes that govern their surroundings. Moreover, as much as these particular novels are about reading, they are equally about the ways in which their protagonists engage with their reading in meaningful ways. In contrast to the way that reading can be frustrating in its inability to actually facilitate the adventures it depicts, the children in these books are able to bridge this gap with the help of particularly transitional novels, taking their experiences of novels and bringing them to life through play. In one particularly evocative scene in *The Exiles*, the Conroy girls use a map to make their way:

Despite the fact that from the time they left the house, Ruth, Rachel, and Phoebe could see the whole of the village, and even distinguish the particular white house that was the village shop, Ruth was determined to make full use of her map. Every time the clearly defined footpath crossed a stile or turned a corner Ruth fished out the map, laboriously located their position, and after much twisting and turning made the path marked on the map line up with the one they were following. Then she would point triumphantly in the direction in which they were to proceed. By this means they reached their destination without once getting lost. (McKay 55)

They do not stop at simply reading the map, but painstakingly connect it to their external environment. McKay's tone is playful throughout the passage, noting that they "reached their destination without once getting lost." She pokes fun at the idea that the map's role is purely functional here. Instead it represents a somewhat fantastic, enchanted depiction of their world, which, through playful acting out, the girls are able to engage with. It is precisely this marriage of reality and fantasy that makes the trip so meaningful. The fact that the children create this space through play highlights both their fluidity and active engagement rather than passive, rigid consumption. This rich transitional space allows for access both to fantasy and reality at once.

Nesbit also invokes maps in order to emphasize the sense of books truly coming to life. As she describes the children's flying adventure in *The Five Children and It*, she writes:

All the words in the English Dictionary, and in the Greek lexicon as well, are, I find, of no use at all to tell you exactly what it feels like to be flying, so I will not try. But I will say that to look *down* on the fields and woods, instead of *along* at them, is something like looking at a beautiful live map, where, instead of silly colors on paper, you have real moving sunny woods and green fields laid out one after the other.
(Nesbit 63)

Nesbit captures the way that the children's perspective is rooted both in books, as represented by maps with colored illustrations, and also in the real world, as "real moving sunny woods and green fields" rush along underneath the children's flight. It is in this liminal, transitional space that the world becomes a "beautiful live map" and takes on such tremendous enchantment that "all the words in the English Dictionary, and in the Greek lexicon" are no use to describe it.

These enchanted moments arise when the children in these novels are able to bring the stories from their own books to life through an active and playful engagement with the texts, and all four authors emphasize the way that stories influence their protagonists'

adventures. Goldman writes that, “For Winnicott, originality was possible only on the basis of tradition” (Goldman xxvi). Just as the children use pre-existing narratives from books to shape their adventures, Winnicott stresses the way that all new ideas are built out of older materials. Nesbit highlights the idea that life is somehow built by books, jokingly suggesting that the weather reports that are written down in the newspapers have the ability to shape the way the weather actually plays out the next day:

The people who decide what the weather is to be, and put its orders down for it in the newspapers every morning, said afterwards that it was the hottest day there had been for years. They had ordered it to be ‘warmer-some showers,’ and warmer it certainly was. In fact it was so busy being warmer that it had no time to attend to the order about showers, so there weren’t any. (Nesbit 58)

Later in the text, when the children in *The Five Children and It* come up with a solution to a problem posed by their final wish, Jane remarks “‘It’s like the ‘Brass Bottle,’” to which Martha responds, “‘Yes, I’m glad we read that or I should never have thought of it’” (Nesbit 155).

Ransome and Eager also emphasize the important role that reading has in inspiring and shaping the lives and adventures of their protagonists. Ransome begins his story with a detailed description of his protagonists’ provisions and he writes:

They also put in the ship’s library. Titty had found on the shelves in the parlour a German Dictionary left by some former visitor. ‘It’s full of foreign language,’ she said, ‘and we shall want it for talking with the natives.’ In the end it was left behind, because it was large and heavy, and also it might be the wrong language. Instead, Titty took *Robinson Crusoe*. ‘It tells you just what to do on an island,’ she said. (Ransome 31)

The children understand the important role that books will play in shaping their expedition, and it is notable that instead of taking the book that is both non-fiction and heavy, placing it more within the realm of realism, they choose to bring a novel to guide them and provide

them with a sense of instruction with which to proceed. Eager's children also reference *Robinson Crusoe* as it inspires one of Mark's wishes. Mark thinks to himself: "The thought of desert islands reminded him that he hadn't reread *Robinson Crusoe* yet this year", and it is this chain of thought that quickly prompts him to remark "I was just wishing we were all on a desert island" (Eager, *Half Magic* 49), setting the children's entire adventure in motion.

While the protagonists of this genre are heavily influenced in their adventures by the books that they read, they do not simply use these books as scripts, acting them out word for word. In fact, the narrators of these four books tend to poke fun at some of the stories upon which their protagonists base their escapades. Near the beginning of *The Five Children and It*, Nesbit writes, rather tongue-in-cheek: "...a sudden thought came to them, and would have turned their ruddy cheeks pale if they had been children in a book. Being real live children, it only made them stop and look at each other with rather blank and silly expressions" (Nesbit 41). Later, when Robert finds himself in a fistfight, Nesbit describes the aftermath: "Robert was sobbing -- mostly with rage. Though of course I know that a really heroic boy is always dry-eyed after a fight. But then he always wins, which had not been the case with Robert" (Nesbit 107). Though it seems that Robert imagines himself in the image of a "really heroic boy," the sort that can be found in the most traditional narratives, Nesbit makes it clear that this model is unrealistic and is forthright about the moments in which Robert's narrative departs from the model upon which it is based.

Rather than passively engaging with books as scripts for their adventures, the children in these books engage with them quite actively. In fact, their reading process seems to feature the children as authors as much as they are readers. In many ways, the children's authorial reworking of these texts evokes Winnicott's discussions of play. He writes: "In playing, the

child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 246). Similarly, he writes: “Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality.” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 246). Winnicott’s child takes the stuff of dreams and “lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality,” just as the children in these books take the stuff of novels and bring this into their lives through their own manipulation of the “fragments” or objects and experiences of their external realities. They infuse these external environments “with dream meaning and feeling” but do so “without hallucinating,” bringing a sense of magic to their everyday lives without seeming out of touch with reality.

While the children initially approach books more traditionally as readers, they are, as I have discussed, inspired but also frustrated by this experience. It seems to them almost a tease, reminding them of the adventures they would like but cannot have. The children soon manage to move beyond this disappointment, however, by acting as authors, playing out their own version of the stories they have read within the spaces of their own lives, just as Winnicott’s children use play. In the cases of the two stories that involve literal magic, the children’s roles as authors is emphasized by the oral nature of the wishes that they make; just as the author of a book creates plots out of mere intentions, throughout both novels, the children themselves bring real plots into being simply by speaking their intentions out loud.

The theme of children as authors is highlighted especially clearly by Arthur Ransome in *Swallows and Amazons*. As the children plan their adventure, they meticulously pack

supplies for their trip and discuss the shape that their voyage will take, creating their trip with great enjoyment and intentionality. As one of their final preparations, they commit their positions aboard the sailboat to writing: “At last John took a sheet of paper and a pencil from his pocket. ‘Let’s make the Ship’s Articles,’ he said.... He wrote, ‘Owners, Walkers Limited.’ Underneath that he wrote: ‘Master: John Walker. Mate: Susan Walker. Able-seaman: Titty Walker. Ship’s –Boy: Roger’”(Ransome 19). Not only do they literally write roles for themselves as though they are writing characters in a book, the way that John writes down each of their roles, follows it with their names, and separates it by a colon suggests a playbill in which the cast is described at the beginning, each actor matched up with her role.

As I discuss earlier in the paper, Winnicott writes: “From birth, therefore, the human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of...” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 112). The central problem, this is to say, lies neither in fantasy or reality, but in their separation, and the same is true within this genre, as the children find both books and real life on their own to be exasperatingly insufficient. It is in a playful, engaged, and intentional meeting of the two that the children can finally be satisfied.

Chapter Five: Obedience and Rebellion

One of the most striking commonalities among the books in this genre is an exploration of what it means to be “good.” The children in all of these books resist compliance with externally imposed rules, and as a result inevitably find themselves in trouble in nearly all of their adventures. These conflicts play a large role in driving the plots of these episodic novels forward. Once the children find themselves in trouble, they must learn to resolve each situation, and it is this pattern of trouble emerging followed by a creative solution that structures most chapters within these novels. As such, a structural analysis of these novels reveals their thematic focus on navigating between the internal and the external, relating inner worlds of autonomous desires and external worlds of limit and restraint. The children learn to be authentically good, neither letting the external overly constrain their inner agency, nor letting their subjectivity loose on the external world in a way that is destructive.

Resisting Obedience

The children in these stories are quite direct about how unpleasant they find the idea of obedience. When, for example, the children in *The Five Children and It* discuss potential wishes that they might make, Jane suggests using one of their wishes to help become better behaved. Nesbit writes: “‘She’d [mother] like us all to get good,’ said Jane primly” (146) to which the others promptly reply, “‘Yes-but that’s so dull for us ... and, besides, I should hope we could be that without sand-fairies to help us. No, it must be something splendid, that we couldn’t possibly get without wishing for’” (Nesbit 146). Not only is Jane’s proposal unpleasant and “prim” as Nesbit indicates, it also emphasizes the extent to which expectations of good behavior are constructed externally rather than by the children themselves. Being good in this particularly tiresome way belongs to the realistic adult world, not the fantastic child’s world of magic and wishes.

Eager echoes this sentiment and speaks directly to the reader: “The trouble was that the adventure with Sir Lancelot had seemed to point to a moral. And if you have ever had a moral pointed at you, you will know that it is not a completely pleasant feeling. You are grateful for being improved, and you hope you will remember and do better next time, but you do not want to think about it very much just now” (*Half Magic* 110-111). Eager’s language is evocative here as he conjures an image of a moralistic arrow pointed at the children, underscoring the extent to which they feel powerless and attacked by these morals.

McKay also explores this adult-imposed order as her protagonists experience it. When the children get an unusual chance to go off on their own, away from adult supervision, they feel a sense of relief and McKay writes, “Home, school, the monotonous struggle to retain their flawed, familiar, and uncompromising characters in a blandly

civilizing world ... all seemed very far away” (McKay 80). It becomes clear that the children’s resistance to obedience is not an arbitrary or thoughtless one, but rather an attempt to maintain an authentic sense of self. Winnicott echoes this sentiment, and Phillips describes his view, writing that “The individual’s Self was endangered, above all, Winnicott believed, by precocious adaptation to the environment” (Phillips 3). In opposition to a feeling of suppression of their particular and authentic selves, the Conroy sisters fight earnestly to preserve a sense of control over the “flawed, familiar, and uncompromising” elements of their personalities.

Eager provides a clear example of the necessity of rebelliousness in the face of what is in his depiction a literal stripping of personality and any and all agency. When one of the children in *Half Magic*, Jane, rashly wishes that she was no longer a member of her family, she suddenly transforms into the very type of obedient child that she has always resisted being. Suddenly her life becomes defined by grey colors and dull activities, but even though she has been magically transformed, some part of Jane is still drawn toward a more active engagement with her world. When her new mother informs her that it is her nap time, a remnant of old-Jane asks, ““Couldn’t I dig some worms and go fishing instead?”” and shortly follows this up with a second request that she might ““Build a block fort and have a war with toy soldiers?”” (Eager, *Half Magic* 161). These choices of activities are telling. The obedient Jane is expected to engage in the most passive activity possible, to nap, whereas the old, rebellious Jane is interested in activities that are not only messy and chaotic, but require her very active, even aggressive, involvement. What is more, these activities that the familiar piece of Jane has suggested will necessarily impact her environment, as she will dig up the

land or construct a fort within her home, using and changing her surroundings in the process of her play.

In fact, far from offering up sickly sweet protagonists who only exist as markers of proper behavior, the protagonists of these stories are often decidedly and joyfully rebellious. The children in *Swallows and Amazons*, for instance, delight in their rebellion. Tasked with warning Captain Flint that his houseboat is at risk to be robbed, the children cheerfully carry out this task, despite their very own plans to rob it later themselves. ““Let him put a padlock on it”” they decide, ““Let him put ten padlocks. We’ll smash them with crowbars. I’ll tell him now, on the way home”” (Ransome 238). Rather than expressing any unhappiness that it will suddenly be more difficult to break into Captain Flint’s boat, they are excited for the additional challenge, as each new obstacle represents an opportunity for resistance.

Winnicott himself is a figure of gleeful noncompliance. Rodman, a biographer, writes that “People often remembered him for the tricks he performed in driving his cars, such as standing up in the driver’s seat, head out the roof, while steering with a stick. One thinks of him as a sort of psychoanalytic Mr. Toad, inveterately fun-loving and irrepressible” (Rodman 19). Rodman references the classic children’s book *The Wind in the Willows* in his picture of the “fun-loving and irrepressible” psychoanalyst, not only for the spirit the comparison evokes, but also to emphasize the child-like nature of Winnicott’s behavior as he refused to accept adult standards of behavior, or “civilization,” as McKay’s Conroy sisters put it.

In fact, the Conroy sisters of McKay’s *The Exiles* provide perhaps the best illustration of the fervent rebelliousness that features so prominently in these novels. When, at the very beginning of the book, one of the younger two gets in trouble, the older two express their exasperation with her timidity and lack of resistance. In anticipation of being sent to bed as

punishment, Rachel has put on her pajamas before the punishment has been meted out. McKay describes the reaction this causes: “Her sisters looked at her in despair. They believed in behaving as though they were innocent at least until they were proven guilty, and quite often even after that” (26). One of them reflects that ““It was a very weak-spirited thing to do... No moral strength ... she’s got to be trained,”” to which the other agrees, ““She’s lucky to have us, really”” (McKay 26). Their sense of autonomy and opposition to everything adult and ordered is crucial to their senses of self, and the older siblings of the family take great care in passing the tradition down to their younger sister.

They do not have much work to do with their youngest sibling, however. If anything, she sometimes takes this rebellious spirit too far. When one of the sisters complains, ““But Phoebe’s awful on purpose!”” she is quick to defend herself: ““Why shouldn’t I be?” asked Phoebe cheerfully” (McKay 87). In fact, it is Phoebe who provides one of the most amusing illustrations of the sisters’ insubordinate attitude one morning at the breakfast table. When Big Grandma teasingly asks, ““what will my poor little grandchildren do without their Big Grandma all day, especially as I intend locking them out of the house?”” Phoebe is quick to respond quite matter of fact, ““Well, we’ll smash a window and come back in”” (McKay 72). Big Grandma eggs the girls on, sure that they will not follow through. Sure enough, Rachel, the least rebellious Conroy sister, tries and fails to execute the plan, unable to act in such clear defiance of all established rules. Smugly assuming that she has won the round, Big Grandma announces: ““Mind over matter,”” at which point McKay narrates: “Phoebe, who had been carefully selecting a likely looking missile, turned and chucked it through the kitchen window where it smashed a neat, but rather large hole in the dead center” (McKay

73). “‘Matter over mind,’” comments Naomi, pleased to have disproven Big Grandma’s assumption: “‘Quite a good shot, too!’” (McKay 72-73).

Good Intentions

Ultimately, despite their aversion to following the rules, the children in all of these stories care a great deal about being good in a deeper sense. Concerned that their wishes have been having negative impacts on those around them, the children in *Half Magic* discuss their next wish anxiously. “‘Put in a good deed, too,’” urges Martha, “Just to be on the safe side” (Eager, *Half Magic* 71). Though the children enjoy their wishes as a way to break out of the monotony of their lives, they don’t want their adventures to be particularly disruptive.

Nesbit’s children in *The Five Children and It*, are also upset by the negative consequences of their actions; they are initially thrilled to encounter magic and experience some excitement in their otherwise boring lives, but are soon horrified when their wishes go awry. Chapter after chapter, earnest and simple wishes go wrong, causing complications for the children themselves as well as nearly everyone else they encounter. The pattern culminates in the last chapter when the children’s particularly unthinking wish threatens to hurt an uninvolved man. Nesbit writes: “It was truly awful. Here was an innocent man accused of robbery through that silly wish of Jane’s” (Nesbit 151). Ironically, though the children value their adventures for their authenticity, spontaneity and relevance to their lives, these very same features are often what create their most negative effects as the children fail to anticipate the effects their actions may have on others.

The same unfolds in Eager’s *Half Magic*, as the children find themselves repeatedly unable to anticipate negative effects of their wishes. They become disillusioned with their

magic, unable to control it effectively, and it seems that each of their wishes must be fated to turn sour. They discuss what to do about this situation, reflecting that "... it was a moot question what to do with the charm next. Even wishing to do good deeds with it did not seem to be proof against the occurrence of that hot water in which the four children so often found themselves" (Eager, *Half Magic* 111). In *Half Magic* as well as in *The Five Children and It*, it seems as though the children's wishes are fated to be twisted to terrible effect, no matter how earnest the children's intent, and the children are horrified at these turns of event. After a particularly disastrous wish, one of the children remarks, "It's terrible—we were going to be so careful, and look what happened! You'd think that charm would have better sense!" (Eager, *Half Magic* 130).

Even McKay's Conroy sisters, who are so intent on rebellion, also want to behave well at some level. When, near the end of the book, they are invited to dinner at their friend Graham's house, they surprise everyone with their sincere attempts at good behavior. McKay writes: "It was the first time in their lives that they had ever tried to be pleasant, on purpose. Graham was proud of them" (157). However, despite the fact that they have attempted to "be pleasant," they have not become cooperative or orderly. In fact, despite Big Grandma's attempts to get them cleaned up and presentable for the meal, and in clear defiance of her instructions, they go swimming on their way over to Graham's, arriving wet and dirty, completely inappropriate for the occasion. Despite their inability to adhere to external notions of good behavior, they manage nonetheless to make an excellent impression over the course of the meal such that "... Mrs. Brocklebank, in the pleasure of watching them enjoy her cooking, forgot that she had ever thought of sitting them on newspapers to save her

chairs” (McKay 157). Rather than a more superficial show of manners, it is their genuine and authentic charm that wins them over in Mrs. Brocklebank’s heart.

Authentic Goodness

Across the genre, these authors emphasize the way in which these children must work through the tension between obedience and rebellion in order to arrive at behavior that is authentically good. As such, the books emphasize the children’s engagement with both modes as they work out the question for themselves. The Conroy sisters’ father remarks of his daughters that ““It’s not as if they were bad kids. On the whole”” to which his wife responds, ““It’s not as if they were good ones either!”” (McKay 20). The children themselves debate these questions as they try to strike a balance between stifling obedience and trouble. ““Is there anything that’s serious and fun at the same time?”” (Eager , *Half Magic* 111) questions one of the children in *Half Magic* as the group attempts to craft a wish that is neither dull nor destructive. Initially it seems unclear, both to the children and to the reader, if there is. Each chapter follows the same pattern as the children attempt to break out of the restrictive environment imposed on them by adults only to find themselves too far in the other direction, causing more damage than they either anticipated or intended. The real focus of each chapter, however, is not concerned with the trouble, so much as it is concerned with the way that the children manage to resolve the situations in which they find themselves. Over and over, they work through the conflicts that they have created, as each chapter resolves neatly. The focus is as much on the resolution of these conflicts as the conflicts themselves, on the eventual compromise between trouble and obedience that the children achieve rather than on either pole itself.

Just as rebellion is necessary for these children, these narratives also suggest that some degree of obedience and good behavior is also necessary, and though the children set out on their adventures in resistance to an excessively restrictive environment, they often realize that they still need some safeguards and boundaries. Phillips describes Winnicott's conceptions of an ideal environment, one that features "the mother's holding of her child in a way that made him feel safe without his having to submit to her constraint" (Phillips 66), suggesting that a combination of boundaries and freedom are both integral components of a healthy environment. When the children ask for increased restrictions on their wishes in both *The Five Children and It* and *Half Magic*, these decisions make sense within just such a framework that sees rebellion and obedience as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, asking that their adventures will not take them away from home for more than a short period of time, the children realize that their rebellion becomes more accessible to them, not less, when balanced with some degree of constraint. When, in *Half Magic*, the children travel back in time and unintentionally cause a great deal of trouble, they are not particularly upset when it is decreed that "for the future protection of the world from the terrible good intentions of these children, and for their protection against their own folly, that this charm may, for twice the length of time that it shall be in their hands, grant no further wishes carrying said children out of their own century and country, but that they may find whatsoever boon the magic may have in store for them in their own time and place" (Eager 106). In fact, when they get home, Eager writes that, "the four children were all so glad to be home that they stayed around the house all the rest of that day" (*Half Magic* 109). Too much rebellion leaves the children overwhelmed and unable to engage further. It seems

that some balance between the two poles is required in order for the children to feel both happy and safe in their explorations.

Winnicott stresses the importance of locating oneself in one's environment as part of feeling authentically alive and engaged with the world. Phillips summarizes:

In Winnicott's writing culture can facilitate growth, like the mother; for Freud it prohibits and frustrates like the father. In Freud's view man is divided and driven, by the contradictions of his desire, into frustrating involvement with others. In Winnicott man can only find himself in relation with others, and in the independence gained through acknowledgement of dependence. (Phillips 7)

Just as rebellion is necessary to avoid a smothering of one's own individuality, an attention to one's environment and one's connections to others is equally necessary in order to locate and ground oneself in time and space.

A healthy balance between rebellion and obedience allows the children in these books to explore the boundaries between their adventures and the external world against which they push up, providing an invaluable opportunity for growth. Nesbit writes that "the almost daily adventures resulting from the Psammead wishes were making the children wise beyond their years" (Nesbit 124) and Eager echoes the sentiment in *Half Magic* as Katherine reflects: "That charm certainly does improve people, once they've been through the mill of it" (*Half Magic* 175). It seems that this balance between breaking and following the rules, tangling with reality and feeling the pushback, is necessary in order for the children to learn how to relate to the world around them in a way that is authentic without being too submissive or too selfish and destructive, reassured by their agency as well as the limits of their power.

“It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never complete, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience (cf. Riviere, 1936) which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is ‘lost’ in play” (qtd. in Caldwell and Joyce 114).

Children’s books and Winnicott share the same interest: in capturing what it is that sometimes, or often if we’re lucky, makes us feel alive most authentically and richly, grounded in the exterior world while holding on to the enchantment of our inner lives. I would venture that all of art wrestles with this question of relating one’s inner experiences of the world with the external pushback that the world extends. But if all of literature engages with this question, children’s literature does so in a way that no other art form exactly does. For children who are just learning to navigate the tension that exists between their own personal experiences of the world and the expectations they discover from adults and the world in general, this topic is of particular importance. And unlike in adult literature when this subject is often a secondary one, since adults have long since struck a balance somewhere between the two poles of the internal subjective and the external objective, in children’s literature this question often takes center stage.

Both Winnicott and these authors reject the idea of asking what defines the real and what defines fantasy, refusing to delineate them as important and separate categories. Instead, they ask how one can use both fantasy and reality to feel alive in the world, not despite it, and to navigate the bridge between one’s internal and external realities.

It is also no coincidence that both Winnicott and these books are so playful in their treatment of what it means to live fully in the world. Rather than trying to pin anything down conclusively, the texts seem to meander contentedly, permeated by the sense that there is a great deal of joy in this exploration. In doing so, these projects take on a feeling of authenticity and spontaneity, a sense of richness and even magic.

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