

No 'nice feminine girls'¹: Representing Alternate Femininity in Enid Blyton's School Fiction

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Abstract: The name Enid Blyton (1897-1968) is synonymous with children's fiction. Celebrated particularly for the school fiction series, Enid Blyton is one author who has remained extremely popular in spite of her strategic location outside the literary canon. The "St. Clare's" and "Malory Towers" series, featuring young girls in a boarding school, have remained in print even in recent times since their first publication in 1941 and 1946 respectively. This paper seeks to interrogate the concept of gender and show how the stereotypical constructions of gender are problematized in Enid Blyton's school fiction. In the process of ridiculing and often rejecting in unequivocal terms the antiquated image of Femininity, Blyton constructs an alternate image of Femininity. In her school stories, Blyton's protagonists, in spite of being situated in a society that perpetrates the submission of women, persistently resist the image of the conventional woman. In the course of this paper, there would be an attempt to analyse the gender stereotypes in early twentieth century British society and how in her school stories Blyton subverts them by constructing an alternate image of Femininity.

Keywords: Gender, school story, Enid Blyton, post-war Britain.

Let the girls take their music and needlework, and the boys the mathematics and so forth. If these important subjects are neglected, we shall have the ladies made strongminded women, instead of good sisters, good wives and in time good mothers (Kamm 70)

*We try to educate girls into becoming imitation men and as a result we are wasting and frustrating their qualities of womanhood at a great expense to the community ... in addition to their needs as individuals our girls should be educated in terms of their main social function - which is to make for themselves, their children and their husbands a secure and suitable home and to be mothers. (John Newsom, *Half Our Future: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, England*, 1963; qtd in Beddoe 61)*

Deirdre Beddoe in *Discovering Women's History* refers to the Hadow Committee (1923) report on the 'Differentiation of the Curriculum for Boys and Girls Respectively in Secondary Schools' in order to illustrate how school education prepared girls for their future roles as the wife and mother: '...girls are allowed to take Botany instead of Physics and Needlework instead of Trigonometry [as] we do not think it desirable to attempt to divorce a girl's education from her home duties and home opportunities'(60). She further calls to attention the Norwood Report of 1943 which makes a clear distinction between the education of boys as future supporters of families and girls as caregivers and nurturers trained for the private world of the home (ibid). It can be deduced from Beddoe's references and the extracts quoted in the beginning of the essay that in post war Britain the conventional construct of femininity while extolling the virtues of passivity and selflessness located the woman in the domestic sphere where she was expected to play the role of the wife and mother to perfection. Girls were not denied education but their education catered to their preordained future roles. This fact was reiterated and perpetrated in popular culture² as well as literature written for children. As Bob Dixon observes, in children's fiction 'girls are placid docile and passive. Girls often just *are*. Boys *do* - they invent, plan and are shown as moving into the world' (*Catching them Young 2*). Dixon's statement is effectively contradicted in Enid Blyton's (1897-1968) school stories which were published during the period 1941-1951. In her school stories, namely in the series *St. Clare's* and *Malory Towers*, Blyton's protagonists though being situated in a society tailored to the submission of women, refuse to be pinned down to the measurements of the conventionally perfect female. In the course of this paper there would be an attempt to analyse the gender stereotypes in post war Britain and how in her school stories Blyton subverts them by constructing an alternate image of femininity.

Before proceeding any further it is essential to interrogate the concept of gender. Gender is a social construct based on society's identification of categories that have been defined as male and female. As Simone de Beauvoir has famously proclaimed

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One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine (*The Second Sex* 267).

Beauvoir distinguishes between sex as a biological fact and gender as a socio-historical one. Gender is a construct and one *becomes* masculine or feminine through an appropriation of values that conform to the social, cultural and historical idea of the man or woman. So, in order to become a woman one must condition and compel the body to comply with the accepted notions of femininity. Gender therefore, is socially scripted, a performance, or a 'stylized repetition of acts' (Lerner 140), and is the 'costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance' (ibid 238). This brings us to Judith Butler's idea of the performative nature of gender: 'That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (*Gender Trouble* 136). Later she advises her readers to think of gender "as a corporeal style, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (139). Gender roles are rendered intelligible by the repetition of recognisable performances within specific contexts and this repetition is a 'reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings *already socially established...*' (emphasis mine) (Butler 140).³ The notion of femininity as well as masculinity is therefore nothing but a social construct; society maps out distinct roles for both men and women into which they must fit in. That gender is performative is attested by the fact that one's actions, appearance and attitudes constitute one's gender; it has been pointed out by Gwendoline that girls are expected to 'talk and read quietly' and they are not supposed to 'go pounding about the lacrosse field or splash in ...[the] pool' (*Upper Fourth at Malory Towers* 32). Individual subjects thus posit themselves as 'male' or 'female' following their performances; the performances therefore construct subjects as 'male' or 'female'. It would be seen that in Blyton's school stories, the protagonists do not conform to an already established social order and in not doing so they appear to be gender transgressors. They fall in the category of the deviant 'Other' as those people who resist the role script that is prescribed for that particular gender – females seen not to behave in a 'feminine' fashion. These girls exist in a realm where all ideals of traditional femininity are interrogated, subverted and ultimately repudiated only to be replaced by an alternate image of femininity.

The social conditioning of masculinity and femininity has altered very little through the centuries and it is indeed not very difficult to locate a fairly standard image of the stereotype of 'conventional femininity' in literature. Susan Lehr, in her work on children's literature, suggests that 'girls are described in popular culture as passive, quiet, sweet, nice, emotional, more mature than boys, dependent, hardworking, smart, shy, accommodating, beautiful, pretty, or cute' (16). So girls perform their predetermined roles in society and thereby construct their gendered identities. Simone de Beauvoir in describing the formative years of a child focuses her attention on the girl child who

...learns that to be happy she must be loved; to be loved she must await love's coming. Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow-White, she who receives and submits. In song and story the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, she is chained to a rock, a captive, sound asleep; she waits (*The Second Sex* 291).

The physical attractiveness of a girl and her passivity were always accentuated in representations of conventional femininity as seen in Charles Kingsley's description of Ellie as 'an angel out of heaven' (Hunt 170) in *The Water Babies* :

Under the snow-white coverlet, upon the snow-white pillow, lay the most beautiful little girl that Tom had ever seen. Her cheeks were almost as white as the pillow, and her hair was like threads of gold spread all about over the bed (ibid).

Thus the image of conventional femininity, both in children's literature and in popular culture as a whole, has been linked to physical attractiveness, emotion and passivity for the greater part of the twentieth century, despite changes in attitude towards women. What one encounters in Blyton's school stories however, is a subversion of this image of traditional femininity and through her memorable characters like Darrell, Sally, Carlotta, Bill and Bobby, Blyton espouses an alternate image of femininity.

To begin with, in Blyton's school stories clothes and appearance are of little value and to be beautiful is certainly no virtue. Popular culture during the time when Blyton was writing emphasised on the female being beautiful and attractive to the male gaze. Magazines carried advertisements showing that cosmetics can work wonders for a woman and make her more desirable to the masculine gaze. It is interesting to note the advertisements that appeared in Women's Magazines like "Women's Illustrated", "Everywoman" and "Britannia and Eve" in the 1940s and 1950s focused on the woman's need to look good. An advertisement for the "Icilma Vanishing Cream" begins by reiterating

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the need to please the male gaze: “A lovely skin fascinates men more than anything else”. The advertisement deals with a distraught woman who, neglected by the man she is in love with, is convinced that “it must be ... [her] skin” that makes her man remain oblivious to her. She tries the cream and notices triumphantly the change in his behaviour. The person who avoided her earlier on, now showers all his attention and affection on her. The advertisement ends with a determined decision on the woman’s part “to stick to Icilma”. However, in Blyton’s stories girls are discouraged from paying a lot of attention to their appearance. Rosemary Auchmuty notes that in Blyton ‘the most feminine characters...are constantly criticised and exhorted to change, while the least feminine are deemed perfectly acceptable as they are’ (*A World of Girls* 85). Girls like Alison, Angela, Zerelda and Gwendoline who fuss a lot about their appearance are the objects of derision. Alison is sent out of class by the form mistress Miss Roberts for having done her hair in a different and fashionable manner:

“Alison,”...[Miss Roberts] said, “there is something very strange about you this morning. It seems to me that you have forgotten to do your hair.”

“Oh no, Miss Roberts,” began Alison eagerly. “Sadie showed me a new way. She said that I have the kind of face that...”

“Alison, you don’t really mean to tell me that your hair is done like that on *purpose!*” said Miss Roberts, in pretended horror. Alison subsided at once and the girls giggled. Alison did look a little silly with her hair all piled in floppy curls on top of her head. Miss Roberts never could stand what she called “frillery” in dress or hair style (*Summer Term at St. Clare’s* 23).

Alison is not only ridiculed publicly but is also not given any chance to explain herself. She is always teased for paying more attention to her looks than studies or games. Angela Favorleigh who joins St. Clare’s in the Fourth Form is the conventionally beautiful girl with “bobbed golden hair falling to her shoulders, the ends curling underneath most beautifully” (*Claudine at St. Clare’s* 8). However, Angela is labelled as a ‘snob’ by the girls and in *Fifth Formers at St. Clare’s*, she is gulled by a mere second former who uses Angela’s expensive face cream on her shoes and spreads shoe polish on bread slices instead of anchovy paste(44-7). It is thus plain to see that good looks do not guarantee success in Blyton’s world of the boarding schools. Time and again vanity associated with traditional beauty is ridiculed. Gwendoline imagines herself as a fairy princess and is similarly jeered at:

“I shall feel like a fairy princess, going up those steps!” She[Gwendoline] tossed her loose golden hair back over her shoulders.

“You would!” said Alicia, scornfully. “But you’ll soon get ideas like that out of your head when Potty gets going on you” (*First Term at Malory Towers* 10).

Alicia’s retort and her deliberate reminder about their form mistress Miss Potts suggests that the fairy tale image of femininity, of ornamental beauty, of being gazed at and admired is not appropriate. The conventional image of femininity is thus first deflated and then deprecated though in a derisory manner. The alternate image of femininity appropriated by Blyton exhibits little or no concern with appearance. In *Claudine At St. Clare’s*, Miss Ellis reprimands both Claudine and Angela for “think[ing] too much”(41) of their looks. Both the girls refuse to sit in the sun as they are scared of getting freckled like Bobby. Angela is persistent in her demand to let her use protection against sunlight which might damage her ‘rosy brown’ skin:

“Oh please, Miss Ellis, couldn’t Claudine and I share the sunshade?” said Angela, who also had a fear of freckles...She gave Bobby’s face a scornful glance. It was absolutely covered with little brown freckles... “I couldn’t bear to get freckled like poor Bobby,” went on Angela.... “This sun is so hot...just see how it has treated Bobby”(40).

Bobby, however is the one who espouses the alternate image of femininity as she is quite content with the freckles:

“Don’t you believe it,” said Bobby, not standing any nonsense of that sort. “My face is freckled winter and summer alike. Nothing to do with the summer sun. I was born with freckles!”(ibid).

J. Obelkevich has an intriguing observation to make about the social conditioning of females in 1940s and 1950s:

The late 1940s and 1950s were characterised by attempts to impart the ideal of ‘home-making as a career’ to women of all social classes. It was urged particularly strongly in educational literature. The Norwood Report (1943), the blue-print for the secondary educational arrangements provided under the 1944 Education Act, recommended that girls should be taught domestic science because they were all ‘potential makers of homes’ (61).

In Blyton’s school stories girls are physically active, daring and ambitious and so the traditionally passive girl gives way to one who is dauntless, articulate and is an achiever. In these stories we have brave girls like Margery Fenworthy whose tale of courage is narrated by her friends:

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Margery climbed up an iron pipe to the window-sill of a burning room, and rescued a girl called Erica. She tore sheets into strips and tied them to the bed. She climbed down them with Erica over her shoulder. She fell from the ladder and broke her leg and hurt her head. She saved Erica's life, and is a real heroine (*The O' Sullivan Twins* 138).

Margery's valiant effort can be seen as an image of the alternate Femininity that Blyton constructs. She single-handedly rescues Erica and though we have a gardener present there at that moment but he seems redundant. Thus the masculine figure that is conventionally held to be the saviour and the protector recedes into the background. Another subversion occurs when it is seen that the girls desire for much more than the security of a marriage. Marriage and motherhood is not prioritised as future options. The girls are ambitious and do not think of 'home-making' as a viable career option. Most of them are shown to have chosen careers for themselves before leaving the school. Mavis goes to train as a singer, Irene to study music, Mary-Lou to train as a hospital nurse, Bill and Clarissa plan to run a riding school together and Darrell goes to college, hoping to be a writer after completing her education. Thus the image of the docile and demure housewife is replaced by the articulate and ambitious woman who knows her mind. In fact, these stories are about students and teachers who stay in a school to learn and teach both of which are intellectual activities. In presenting professional women who find intellectual work stimulating, Blyton questions society's prescription of a restrictive education for girls in anticipation of their future domestic roles.

Blyton adopts a disparaging tone towards stereotypically feminine characters and promotes the transgressors who deviate from the norm. In the school stories Blyton emphasises the need for physical exercise. The image of the diseased and debilitated woman perpetrated by late nineteenth century medical discourse is countered in these stories.⁴ The girls enjoy swimming, gymnastics, playing lacrosse and tennis. Sports is directly antithetical to all forms of accepted feminine behaviour as very aptly pointed out by Mariah Burton Nelson: ' [While playing games, the girls] shove, sweat, strain, flex, groan, take large strides across open spaces, prioritise their own pleasure and even, occasionally, receive applause for their accomplishments, regardless of their physical beauty' (64). Such unconventional portrayals of feminine behaviour are scattered throughout the texts in Blyton. The girls are always eager to excel in sports and being chosen in the school team is an honour each girl strives for. Darrell 'glow[s] with pride' when she is considered for the match team. Oh! If only she *could* be in the match-team. How pleased her mother and father would be- and how she would boast to Felicity. 'I was in the match-team when we went to play Barchester. I was on the wing because I'm so fast. And I shot a goal!' (*Third Year At Malory Towers* 50).

Girls are seen shouting about in the fields, glowing with perspiration at all the running around that they do and not for once is such unfeminine behaviour criticised. The girls are also encouraged to go on long country walks and those who try to avoid these walks are the stereotypically feminine characters who are objects of derision and contempt. Girls like Daphne who are only too bothered about their appearance and who attempt to evade such walks invite the wrath of the teachers too:

Miss Parker was surprised and annoyed when she heard that Daphne was not to go with the class on their long walk...she said 'She's just the type of girl that needs a jolly good long walk- yes, and a muddy one too. Shake some of her airs and graces off her!' (*Second Form At Malory Towers* 53).

Gwendoline is in fact prescribed more physical exercise by the doctor and later on by her father. In the doctor's opinion, she "need[s] much more exercise. 'Games, and more games, gym, walk...plenty of hard work, and no thinking about herself at all!'" (*Upper Fourth At Malory Towers* 114). The traditional construct of femininity that glorifies frailty and physical weakness as emblematic of the ideal woman is discarded in favour of the alternate image of the active, physically fit and strong woman.

In constructing an alternate femininity Blyton shows her protagonists reveling in midnight feasts, enjoying themselves fully, eating to their heart's desire. The elaborate descriptions of food recur in each book undermining the conventional image of femininity that demands that the woman be on a strict regimen or a diet to keep in shape. Again it is interesting to notice that in popular culture females were exhorted to "relieve [them]selves of [their] burden of fat and regain a slim healthy figure" (Advertisement for SILF Brand Obesity Tablets). In Blyton's world, however, eating is valorised with midnight feasts occurring in almost every book. In *Upper Fourth At Malory Towers*, we have a poolside midnight feast, the food for which is supplied by Clarissa's nurse. The exhaustive detailing of the edible items facilitates Blyton's aim of subverting the traditional image of femininity:

There were tongue sandwiches with lettuce, hard-boiled eggs with bread-and-butter, great chunks of new-made cream cheese, potted meat, ripe tomatoes...gingerbread cake fresh from the oven, shortbread, a great fruit cake with almonds crowding the top, biscuits of all kinds and six jam sandwiches(64)!

In another midnight feast celebrating Carlotta's birthday, we find the girls eating without any inhibition or apprehension and in the course of doing so they deconstruct the anorexic model of the conventional female:

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They ate everything. Carlotta even ate sardines and pineapple together. Alison tried prawns dipped in ginger-beer..”Nobody would dream that sardines pressed into gingerbread cake would taste so nice,” said Janet (*Second Form At St. Clare’s* 123).

In these school stories girls are encouraged to eat and enjoy their food; eating is never problematised. In their resistance to the conventional image of the slim woman, the girls refuse to be what Foucault calls ‘docile bodies’.⁵ Their bodies thus do not subscribe to society’s norms for the ideal woman. They celebrate their individual desires and for them femininity is not equated to self-starvation and a complete obliteration of their individual identities.

Enid Blyton constructs a world where the male gaze is conspicuous by its absence and the girls are ‘out of the bounds of patriarchy’ (Rudd 123). It is a world that has not been defined by patriarchy, ‘a stage where women could act freely according to their own rules, unrestricted by the demands of the male-dominated world outside’ (Auchmuty 28). Consequently, traditional images of femininity fail to find favour here. The world of Blyton’s *St. Clare’s* and *Malory Towers* can be best summed up in Gill Frith’s words

In a world of girls, to be female is *normal*, and not a *problem*. To be assertive, physically active, daring, ambitious, is not a source of tension...There is no taboo on public speech: in innumerable school stories, girls hold and address a tense, packed meeting. The ruptures and rewards of romance are replaced with the ructions and rewards of friendship, and pop stars by idealised Head Girls. “Pretence” and “pretension” are questionable; mysteries are unravelled, codes broken, secret passages explored, disguises penetrated. “Tricks” played on teachers replace “tricks” of make-up; in place of diets, there are midnight feasts... Clothes and appearance are of little significance in the unchanging world of the school, and to be beautiful is not an advantage. . . (121).

In such a world, the conventional female is a misfit. However it is not enough to repudiate the traditional image of femininity. Blyton constructs an image of alternate femininity; the Head’s speech repeated thrice in the *Malory Towers* series emphasises that the espoused purpose of the school is to create strong women, ‘women the world can lean on’:

One day you will leave school and go out into the world as young women. You should take with you eager minds, kind hearts, and a will to help. You should take with you a good understanding of many things, and a willingness to accept responsibility and show yourselves as women to be loved and trusted...I count as our successes those who learn to be good-hearted and kind, sensible and trustable, good, sound women the world can lean on... (*First Term At Malory Towers* 20).

In constructing an alternate image of femininity Blyton lays more emphasis on character building. The schools strive to bring out the best in their pupils and therefore each student is tested in their crucibles. Even girls who reject the traditional image of femininity have to be tested in order to be the model of the alternate femininity that Blyton espouses. Girls like Bobby, Alicia, Darrell, Carlotta who are not stereotypically feminine to begin with are also on probation till they attain Blyton’s ideal of the alternate feminine- one who is responsible, willing to help and is loved and trusted unanimously. So Bobby who begins the series as a ‘don’t carish’ (*Summer Term at St. Clare’s* 106) girl goes on to become a responsible girl later in the series. Darrell, who initially loses her temper at the smallest instigation goes on to conquer it and is finally acknowledged as ‘one of our biggest successes’ (*Last Term at Malory Towers* 23) by the Headmistress Miss Grayling. Alicia learns to be more considerate and Carlotta too like Darrell learns to control her temper. Blyton rejects the conventional images of femininity that are already socially established and accepted thereby constructing an alternate image of femininity where character building is accorded prominence. Moral character is much more important than birth, class or wealth. So in spite of belonging to a wealthy aristocratic family, Angela can never match Carlotta in her popularity although she was once a circus girl.

The alternate image of femininity that Blyton constructs is rooted in the ‘feminine Utopia’ or the ‘World of Girls’ that Lofgren and Auchmuty speak of. The traditional feminine roles are forsaken and the girls adopt and legitimise an alternate femininity in a community that exists only for them and because of them. Auchmuty sees the texts as sites of empowerment and either refuge or identification, ‘an alternative to the real world of patriarchal relations,’ a celebration of female autonomy in a number of different areas (*A World of Girls* 4). In doing so Enid Blyton has challenged what Janice Raymond has termed ‘heteroreality,’ that is, a life-view which defines women only in relation to men and sees them as alone or even invisible without men (*A Passion for Friends* 3). The stories present a community of female sisterhood as an alternative to the restricting confines of domesticity offered by patriarchal paradigms. The enduring appeal of the books⁶ lies in the fact that they present liberating images for women by providing alternative modes of being from those offered by society. They present women as active, strong both physically and mentally, loving, caring and thus question and ultimately dismantle society’s presumptions about women.

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Notes

¹ The title of the paper refers to Gwendoline Lacey's exasperated epiphany in Blyton's *Upper Fourth at Malory Towers*:

Anyway I don't like the look of them much... They'll probably go all out for games and gym and walks. Why aren't there any nice feminine girls here- one who like to talk and read quietly, and not always go pounding about the lacrosse field or splash in that horrible pool! (32)

Gwendoline's disapproval with her schoolmates who according to her are not 'feminine' enough reiterates the conventional construct of femininity that equates femininity with passivity. The traditional feminine attributes which Gwendoline endorses are seen to be the exception and not the norm in these school stories; in the process of ridiculing and often rejecting in unequivocal terms the antiquated image of femininity, Blyton not only fulminates against the stereotypical representations of feminine behaviour but also constructs an alternate image of femininity.

² Popular magazines of the era reinforced women's subordinate domestic role. Jenni Calder mentions that 'Two 1943 covers for *Everywoman* show a mother and daughter rolling pastry and a young woman holding a bowl of fruit looking coyly over her shoulder'. Then she further observes that 'in December 1945, the first postwar Christmas, a girl in feminine yellow frock with a large bow decorating a Christmas tree' is found on the cover of *Girl's Own* magazine (*War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain* 179)

³ As Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, performativity is not the conscious action of a subject but the reiterative power of discourse. Specifically, she describes performativity in terms of gender, asserting that "genders can be neither true or false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (136). That is, gender is constituted through various behaviors and acts that we see *as* gender, rather than the other way around. The scripts of the dominant culture are impressed upon the body, through fashion, through medical practices, through education. Iterations of such scripts constitute what Butler describes as performativity—the way in which scripts come to be understood by subjects as natural, innate.

⁴ As the male body is held to be the norm, feminine functions of menstruation, pregnancy and menopause were held both to be the Other and to be physically and psychologically threatening. These normal bodily functions were perceived as disorders and so women were held to be physically weaker. In England in 1869, J.M.Allan was observed that every woman is always more or **less** an invalid, and cannot therefore pursue uninterrupted physical or mental activity: 'Nature disables the whole **sex**, single as well as married, from competing on equal terms with men' (*The Eternally Wounded Woman* 46).

⁵ In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Michel Foucault expresses concern with the way in which modern societies produce and promote 'docile bodies', and the voluntary self-policing and constant surveillance which subjectively inscribe on the body the societal construct; an example of this is the way in which women embrace the construct 'femininity' through slimming, dieting, taking resort to excruciating ways of unwanted hair removal and painful clothing. Discourses define the norm and anything that does not agree to the norm has to conform or face punitive consequences. For more see *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*.

⁶ In total Enid Blyton published well over 600 books. Her work has been translated into 70 languages and has sold over 60 million volumes. *The Yorkshire Post* reported in 2008 that 'Children's authors Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl have been named the nation's best-loved writers - over Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens.' (August 19, 2008).

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