

E. Nesbit's
Psammead Trilogy

A Children's Classic at 100

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CHAPTER EIGHT



Textual Building Blocks:
Charles Dickens and E. Nesbit's
Literary Borrowings in
Five Children and It

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In the short story "The Town in the Library in the Town in the Library," which appeared in Edith Nesbit's *Nine Unlikely Stories* (1901), two children, Rosamund and Fabian, are left alone in a library on Christmas Eve. They spend the evening constructing a castle using ordinary objects, including books from the shelves. Among the texts in the library are fourteen volumes of Shakespeare, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–80), and fifty-six volumes of *The Beauties of Literature* (263). Nesbit would reuse the idea of physically creating imaginary worlds built from books and other found objects in *The Magic City* (1910), in which two children create a miniature city out of ordinary objects and then are transformed in size so that they can enter it. The construction of what Nesbit called magic cities was an activity that she developed as a game with her own children and subsequently promoted as useful training of the eye and hand, as well a way to stimulate children's imagination and creativity. She was even commissioned to build and display an elaborate magic city in London at the Children's Welfare Exhibition of 1912. This display resulted in so many requests for a book explaining the process of building such magic cities that Nesbit published *Wings and the Child: Or, the Building of Magic Cities* (1913), in which she elaborated on "the science of building magic cities" (vii).

This juxtaposition of magic and an otherwise ordinary, contemporary world is the standard situation of Nesbit's fantasy novels. In *Five Children and It* (1902), the children on summer holiday at a house in the English country discover in a nearby gravel-pit a psammead, or sand-fairy, capable of granting them wishes. In *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904), the children learn that the inexpensive, second-hand carpet purchased at the market at Kentish Town Road is a magic carpet. This weaving of reality and fantasy also suggests one of the key methods Nesbit used in writing her own novels: borrowing from and building upon ideas taken from her own reading. As Julia Briggs has observed, Nesbit "drew on other books extensively and usually very openly" (*Woman* 253) at the same time that she suspected other writers of stealing ideas from her books.¹

In fact, as Briggs has also noted, Nesbit's children's fiction is very much "a book-shaped world" (*Woman* 402). Because, as C. N. Manlove has suggested, "Few writers have had a wider range of literary tastes than E. Nesbit" (50), it is not surprising that her fiction contains numerous references to an eclectic list of authors, including Rudyard Kipling, Charlotte Yonge, Arthur Conan Doyle, William Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens. Like her characters in *The Magic City*, or as she recommends in *Wings and the Child*, Nesbit freely and frequently used other books as the building blocks in the construction of her own imaginative worlds. In the remainder of this chapter, then, I will explore some of the ways in which Nesbit constructed her "book-shaped world," noting, in particular, how she employed Dickens as a foundation stone for the first book of the Psammead trilogy, *Five Children and It*.

According to Doris Langley Moore, Nesbit's first biographer, Charles Dickens, to whom she was devoted in her youth, was the writer who most consistently influenced Nesbit throughout her career ("Nesbit" 698). Indeed, Charles Dickens appears to be Nesbit's chief literary model.² Nesbit's writing process, in which she would simultaneously write multiple books that would first appear in serial form in journals, even follows Dickens's own literary process. As commercial writers, Dickens and Nesbit produced immense amounts of text under demanding deadlines and subsequently penned large amounts of what even their ardent admirers acknowledge to be hackwork. In assessing Nesbit's first twenty years as a professional writer, for instance, most critics agree with

Julia Briggs's declaration that, "Virtually none of her earlier work is worth reviving except for its historical interest" (*Woman* 184).³

The quality of Nesbit's work changed once she discovered her voice and style with the publication of *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), and the text that was pivotal for the transformation of Nesbit's children's writing was the commission of the twelve-part series "My School-Days," which appeared from October 1896 to September 1897 in *Girl's Own Paper*. This memoir has been subsequently reprinted in book form as *Long Ago When I Was Young* (1966) with an introduction by Noel Streatfeild.

The process of recording episodes from her childhood for this memoir seems to have liberated and energized Nesbit as a writer. This process also led her to believe that memory was the key for successfully writing for children, inspiring her to revise and build upon events from her past in her own fiction. She thus came to believe that memory was the key for successfully writing for children. Later, in *Wings and the Child*, her book on the importance of imaginative play in the educational and emotional development of children, Nesbit would insist that "Observation is no key to the inner mysteries of a child's soul. The only key to those mysteries is knowledge, the knowledge of what you yourself felt when you were good and little and a child" (304). Nesbit also claimed that adults could connect with children only through recollections of their own childhoods:

You cannot hope to understand children by common-sense, by reason, by logic, nor by any science whatsoever. You cannot understand them by imagination—not even by love itself. There is only one way: to remember what you thought and felt and liked and hated when you yourself were a child. Not what you know now—or think you know—you ought to have thought and liked, but what you did then, in stark fact, like and think. There is no other way. (20)

This point was so central to Nesbit's thinking that she repeats it in the second half of *Wings and the Child* and adds, "Only by remembering how you felt and thought when you yourself were a child can you arrive at any understanding of the thoughts and feelings of children" (74).

This absolute belief in the power and importance of memory as the sole method by which an adult author could cross the gulf to child

reader is also found in the introduction to *Long Ago When I Was a Child*, the collected version of her series "My School-Days," where Nesbit rather dramatically declares:

When I was a little child I used to pray fervently, tearfully, that when I should be grown up I might never forget what I thought and felt and suffered.

Let these pages speak for me, and bear witness that I have not forgotten. (27)

Nesbit's belief in the importance of childhood imaginative play fits neatly with Sigmund Freud's comparison, in his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908), of the imaginative play of children and the work of creative writers. Given the bohemian circles that Nesbit frequented, it would not be surprising if she had either read, or were at least familiar with some of Freud's concepts. Certainly Nesbit, with her creation of literal and literary magic cities, seems to be the sort of writer who, Freud says, "does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously" (437). Freud notes that, as the child becomes an adult, play is replaced by fantasies and daydreams, although the motivation is still that of "unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality" (439).

Freud's comments are certainly worth considering in the light of Noel Streatfeild's observations about Nesbit's childhood. After reading "My School-Days," Streatfeild observed that the reader is left with the clear impression that Nesbit was "basically unhappy," but she optimistically added that, "without a doubt an unhappy childhood is the best possible training for those who are going to write for children" (38). Perceptively, Streatfeild notes that Nesbit's childhood, as it was constructed in "My School-Days," could have easily had "a place in a book by Dickens" (37). Stylistically, Nesbit's memories of her childhood, in which Julia Briggs finds "a distinctly literary flavour" (*Woman* 4), are highly reminiscent of Dickens's fiction. Furthermore, the process of writing about her childhood had in many ways the same galvanizing effect on Nesbit's novels as did Dickens's own attempt to write his autobiography between 1845 and 1848. Dickens, however, found the writing of his childhood too difficult and painful, so he chose a

more fictional approach to the same material in *David Copperfield* (1850).⁴ "My School-Days" even has what is equivalent to Dickens's famous Warren's Blacking Factory episode when Nesbit recalls her visit to the mummies of Bordeaux which she considered, "the crowning horror of my childish life, it is to them I think more than to any other thing that I owe nights and nights of anguish and horror, long years of bitterest fear and dread" (*Long Ago* 64). The creation of the Ugly-Wuglies, the creatures that the children construct, but who then come to life of their own in *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), owes its inspiration to this frightening childhood incident. Several of the other adventures that the Bastables undertake in *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) also first appear in "My School-Days."

Just as *David Copperfield* became the fictional voice that allowed Dickens to revisit and revise the memories of his childhood as the basis of his fiction, the process of composing "My School-Days" enabled Nesbit to use her own memories of her childhood as an important source for her children's fiction in creating the voice of Oswald Bastable. Dickens once admitted that *David Copperfield* was the "favourite child" of his fiction (Johnson 2, 690); Nesbit did not make a similar claim about Oswald Bastable, but the humor and richness of his portrayal suggests that Nesbit probably would not deny that he was not only her first major creation for children but also the one dearest to her.

Oswald Bastable, the narrator of Nesbit's groundbreaking *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, as well as of its sequels, *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904), realizes that, with the fortunate appearance of the wealthy Indian Uncle who announces that he will become the benefactor to the needy Bastable household, the conclusion of *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* sounds remarkably like the ending of a Dickens novel. Nevertheless Oswald insists—I would suggest at this point in the narration that Oswald also functions as the voice of Nesbit—"Besides, I can't help it if it is like Dickens, because it happens this way. Real life is often something like books" (238). In *The Wouldbegoods*, when Oswald finds himself acting like Betsy Trotwood from *David Copperfield*, it confirms for him, "what a true author Dickens is" (157).

Briggs has astutely noted that "*The Treasure Seekers* is above all a book about books" (187). Clearly, the Bastables and, by extension, many of Nesbit's other child characters are an extremely bookish group.

They frequently pattern their adventures after the books they have read. Alice, after one of their many misadventures in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, explains, “we wanted to be like the children in the books—only we never have the chances they have” (136). Elsewhere in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, Noel, the poet in the family, announces, “Let’s read all the books again. We shall get lots of ideas out of them” (15). The adventures of the Bastables always, however, lend support to Nesbit’s reassurance to parents in *Wings and the Child* that “It is astonishing how little harm comes to children through books” (91).

Like the Bastables, Nesbit drew many of her ideas and literary techniques from her own reading. Nesbit’s debt to the narrative technique of Kenneth Grahame’s *The Golden Age* (1895) and the use of F. Anstey’s comic fantasy *The Brass Bottle* (1900) in the composition of *Five Children and It* has, for example, been noted by critics such as Gillian Avery, Roger Lancelyn Green, Julia Briggs, and Anthea Bell. For Nesbit, books were both literal as well as figurative building blocks for creation of novels. In other words, her fantasy novels are simply another version of her magic cities. In *Wings and the Child*, she explains, “books are not only things to read, but that they will make marble slabs for the building of temples” (147–48). Books become objects to build on, a revealing metaphor that points to her own process of composition. In her discussion of the construction of the Elephant Temple, a structure that she often included in her magic cities, she explains that “The walls are of big red books—*Sheridan’s Plays*, *Tom Jones*, and *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*” (170). The importance of books to the creation of magic cities and her novels is underscored by her recommendation:

The library is the best place for building: there is almost certainly a large and steady table: also there are books. I need not urge you to spare the elegantly bound volumes, the prized first editions, and the priceless folios and duodecimos in their original calf and vellum. You will find plenty of books that nobody will mind your using—the old *Whitakers*, bound volumes of the *Cornhill* and *Temple Bar*—good solid blocks for the foundations of your city. (120)

In her own novels, then, Nesbit often used other texts as the foundation or inspiration for her own work. Doris Langley Moore has argued forcefully that “It was occasionally said by those careless critics whose pleasure lies in tracing every literary work to its supposed sources” (Nes-

bit 147) that although Nesbit studied children’s literature extensively, “she owed no direct debt to any precursor” (Nesbit 148). As Julia Briggs has shown, however, Nesbit often used other books to provide initial ideas for her own novels so that episodes from Charlotte Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain* (1856), Kenneth Grahame’s *The Golden Age* (1895), and Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* (1894, 1895) “all became grist for the mill, though their material was always hailed in an essentially re-creative way; her sources could always be openly acknowledged because her use of them was never merely derivative” (Moore 218).

While trying not to become one of those careless critics that Moore condemns, I will now explore in more detail the significant influence on Nesbit of Dickens’s work, particularly his collection of four children’s stories that were initially serially published as *Holiday Romance* in the American children’s magazine *Our Young Folks* (1868) and simultaneously in the English periodical *All the Year Round*, the journal that Dickens edited. At the heart of Nesbit’s Bastable series is the complex narrative voice of Oswald, with its curious shifting from first person to third person and the comic distancing of the children as they critique the adults around them, and this voice seems to owe a great deal to the narrative frame of Dickens’s *Holiday Romance*. Julia Briggs has argued, in fact, that Nesbit’s technique of using “the child’s viewpoint to pierce the disguising forms of adult conventions and pretensions” was acquired from Dickens (“Women Writers” 247). The juxtaposition of the contemporary world and the magical—which Nesbit so successfully uses in *Five Children and It* and its sequels, *The Phoenix and the Carpet* and *The Story of the Amulet* (1906)—can also be traced to Dickens’s “The Magic Fish-bone,” which appeared as the second section of *Holiday Romance*.

All four stories of Dickens’s *Holiday Romance* are presented in the language of children, ranging in age from six to nine years old. Dickens thought that the chief humor of the stories was that “The writing seemed to me so like children’s” (Johnson 2, 1071). The informal and self-congratulatory tone of the child narrators will sound surprisingly familiar to *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* and its sequels. Dickens begins *Holiday Romance* in the following manner:

This beginning part is not made out of anybody’s head you know. It’s real. You must believe this beginning-part more than what comes after, else you won’t understand how what comes after came to be written. You

must believe it all, but you must believe this most, please. I am the Editor of it. Bob Redforth (he's my cousin and shaking the table on purpose) wanted to be the editor of it, but I said he shouldn't because he couldn't. He has no idea of being an editor. (339)

The character, William Tinkling, has many of the speech patterns of Oswald Bastable. Tinkling, Redforth, and their female companions, Nettie Ashford and Alice Rainbird, decide that they must "educate the grown-up people" and that they need to "throw our thoughts into something educational for the grown-up people hinting to them how things ought to be. Let us veil our meaning under a mask of romance" (406). Each of the children tells a story using an established children's genre, such as a fairy tale, pirate story, or moral tale. For her contribution, Nettie Ashford describes the role-reversing country where "the grown-up people are obligated to obey the children, and are never allowed to sit up for supper" (428). Throughout, Dickens's children sit in cool judgment of distant adults and engage in constant rebellion of adult authority, so that *Holiday Romance* becomes an important precursor to Kenneth Grahame's better known *The Golden Age* and its sequel, *Dream Days* (1898). Although the essays in Grahame's *The Golden Age* provide an insightful analysis of childhood, they were not intended for children. Nevertheless, Grahame's narrative techniques were subsequently incorporated by Nesbit into her Bastables series. *The Golden Age* is acknowledged by Nesbit via Oswald Bastable, who in *The Wouldbegoods* considers it, "A1 except where it gets mixed up with grown-up nonsense" (85). However, it Dickens's short fairy tale, "The Magic Fish-bone," narrated by Alice Rainbird, rather than Grahame's *The Golden Age*, that is the text that has the most in common with Nesbit's *Five Children and It*.

"The Magic Fish-bone" is the only literary fairy tale that Dickens wrote, although fairy tales would play a significant role in his novels and short stories, as has been shown by Harry Stone in *Dickens and the Invisible World* (1979) and Michael Kotzin in *Dickens and the Fairy Tale* (1972). Dickens's impassioned defense of fairy tales, "Fraud on the Fairies" (1853), was written in direct response to George Cruikshank's rewriting of traditional fairy tales first published in 1853 and eventually collected as *The George Cruikshank Fairy Library* (1870). In "Fraud on

the Fairies," Dickens argues the importance of fairy tales as children's literature and insists, "In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected. . . . a nation without fancy, without some romance never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun" (111).

Dickens put this theory into practice in *Hard Times* (1854), where the reading of fairy tales and *The Arabian Nights* nurtures Sissy Jupe, in contrast to the strict diet of facts that emotionally stunts and dooms Tom and Louisa Gradgrind. In her chapter on "Imagination" in *Wings and the Child*, Nesbit, like Dickens, stresses the value of providing fairy tales to children in order to stimulate their imagination, and she indirectly refers to Dickens when she warns, "These Gradgrinds give to the children the stone which they call facts and deny to the little ones the daily bread of dreams" (26).

"The Magic Fish-bone" is the story of seven-year-old Princess Alicia, daughter of King Watkins, who must decide on an appropriate time to use her wish. Dickens's fairy tale is set in a Victorian lower-middle-class environment that mixes the magical with the mundane. On his way home from the office at Pickles, Alicia's father purchases "a pound and a half of salmon not too near the tail" (408) at the fishmonger's shop, where he is confronted by his Fairy Grandmother, who directs him to share the fish with his daughter. The Fairy Godmother explains that, by doing so, he will enable his daughter to discover the magic fish-bone that will provide her with a wish for anything she desires. The Fairy Godmother also issues a warning, saying that the fish-bone can be used only once, "PROVIDED SHE WISHES FOR IT AT THE RIGHT TIME" (409). Alicia must choose the proper wish, a dilemma that is also central in Nesbit's *Five Children and It*. In Nesbit's novel, for example, after several mishaps with wishes granted by the sand-fairy, Jane writes to her mother, "P.S.—If you could have a wish come true, what would you have?" (80). Alicia is confronted with several possible occasions to use the fish-bone, including when her mother faints, when a brother puts his hand through a glass window, and when the baby falls into the grate and receives a black eye. Each time, she resists using the magic fish-bone, although her father encourages her to do so. Alicia finally uses the fish-bone when her father announces that he has no money for the family, although he has tried very hard to earn it. After

Alicia rubs the magic fish-bone, her father's salary immediately arrives, and Alicia discovers "the very secret connected with the magic fish-bone" (415) and makes the moral to Dickens's tale apparent: "When we have done our very, very best, Papa, and that is not enough, then I think the right time must have come for asking help of others" (415).

"The Magic Fish-bone," with its concern with appropriate and inappropriate wishing, is the story that has most in common with Nesbit's *Five Children and It*. Anita Moss has suggested that the children in *Holiday Romance* are more "silly, affected, and self-consciously cute" than those who appear in Nesbit's fiction, whom she finds to be "much closer to the authentic voice of childhood" (190). I would argue, however, that the child's voice in both "The Magic Fish-bone" and William Tinkling's introduction are fairly free of these faults, although the other two stories are frequently marred by such clever overwriting. F. J. Harvey Darton would agree with Moss's evaluation in that he places most of the limitations of *Holiday Romance* on the "jocular artifice" that results in the child narrators sounding "too often with a voice and mind like that of Charles Dickens being playful" (293).

Much of the humor of *Five Children and It* is the result of the children's discovery of the psammead, or sand-fairy, who has the ability to grant them a wish a day, and their inability to enjoy satisfactorily this gift. Although it is a comic fantasy, Nesbit provides the story with a moral in that it is very much a meditation of the vanity of human wishes. In *Wings and the Child*, Nesbit shows that she is clearly in favor of combining entertainment with education in books for children. She warns, "Clever young people find it amusing to sneer at the old-fashioned ideal of combining instruction with amusement—a stupid Victorian ideal we are told which a progressive generation has cast aside" (42). She warns "to divorce amusement and instruction—may not this tend to make the one dull and the other silly?" (42). The children's desire to become "as beautiful as the day" (24), or Robert's wish "to be bigger than the Baker's boy" (143) have unexpected and ironic consequences in *Five Children and It*. Like "The Magic Fish-bone," Nesbit's novel humorously examines what is worth wishing for.⁵

Nesbit's children have multiple opportunities to request wishes, whereas Alicia has only one, but they must also learn to be selective in their wishes. Their wishes are also temporary, in that they last only un-

til sunset, and are formulated so that they go unnoticed by the servants. More problematically, the sand-fairy grants the wishes in a very literal manner, and on several occasions the children inadvertently make wishes that result in comic or unintended consequences. As the sand-fairy subsequently explains to the children in *The Story of the Amulet*, "Look here, I *had* to give you the wishes, and, of course they turned out badly, in a sort of way, because you hadn't the sense to wish for what was good for you" (32). Nevertheless, as in Dickens's story, the children learn that the most useful wish is not one of those that satisfies immediate impulses, but rather, it is the final one that helps others and not themselves.

At one point, Nesbit observes that the wishes granted to the children don't resemble the wishes or gifts granted by the fairies in "Sleeping Beauty" (60). Actually, they are similar to wishes found in traditional fairy tales. Iona and Peter Opie note in *The Classic Fairy Tales* that "Fairy tales are unlike popular romances in that they are seldom the enactments of dream-wishes" (11). The Opies explain that "in fairy tales wishes are rarely granted; and when they are the wisher may be made to look as foolish as King Midas" (11). One is reminded of King Midas's dilemma after the children have their wish of being made "rich beyond the dreams of something or other" (37) in the chapter "Golden Guineas." Although they are provided a gravel pit full of gold coins, they quickly discover that, since the money is not in contemporary currency, they are unable to spend it.

Although Nesbit's children have their various wishes granted, their adventures nevertheless resemble those of the husband and wife in "The Three Wishes" in that the couple impulsively squander away their initial wishes and must use the final wish to have things return to how they were. Nesbit summarizes the children's dilemma with the wishes at the beginning of *The Story of the Amulet*, explaining that the children's "wishes come true, but somehow, they never could think of just the right things to wish for, and their wishes sometimes turned out very oddly indeed" (9). Nesbit even mentions "The Three Wishes" in *Five Children and It*, just before the children request their initial wish from the sand-fairy:

I daresay you have often thought what you would do if you had three wishes given you, and have despised the old man and his wife in the

black-pudding story, and felt certain that if you had the chance you could think of three really useful wishes without a moment's hesitation. (24)

Most of the wishes granted in *Five Children and It* are what Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* has categorized as "rash wishes," which are prevalent in fairy tales and which reflect the impulsive nature of young children (70). Bettelheim suggests that, "While the fairy tale realistically warns that being carried away by anger or impatience leads to trouble, it reassures that the consequences are only temporary" (71), a point that also applies to wishes of *Five Children and It* which last only until sunset.

As in "The Magic Fish-bone," the trick is, as Cyril realizes, "to find a really useful wish, and wish it" (58). He recognizes that the true power lies not in the ability to grant wishes, but in having the wisdom to select the appropriate object for a wish. When the children consider what their mother might wish for, Jane suggests, "She'd like us all to be good," but Cyril points out, "Yes—but that's so dull for us" and adds, "besides, I should hope we could be that without sand-fairies" (195). For children such as these, in spite of what their parents may occasionally think, good behavior is not a particularly magical event but a routine part of the mundane world. Although the sand-fairy is reluctant to give out advice about effective wishing, other than the standard maxim, "think before you speak—" (84), he does observe that in earlier times, people tended to wish for "good solid everyday gifts" (85). One suspects, however, that the sand-fairy's recommendations of a wish for a megatherium or a pterodactyl would turn out just as badly as Cyril's wish for "Red Indians in England" (180). In this instance, then, the psammead is not so much a wise tutor instructing the children, as a device for further testing their forethought, their ability to see the practical limitations of wishes.

This occasion is not the only time, however, that the psammead is instrumental in having readers consider the nature of wishes in the mundane world. Just before the final wish, the sand-fairy makes the children promise not to tell anyone about his existence and warns that if grown-ups got hold of him: "they wouldn't wish silly things like you do, but real earnest things; . . . and they'd ask for a graduated income tax, and old-age pensions and manhood suffrage, and free secondary ed-

ucation, and dull things like that" (205). Here Nesbit seemingly promotes Fabian policies as "real earnest things." Humphrey Carpenter has argued, however, that despite her membership in the Fabian Society, her socialist beliefs were "only skin deep" and that Nesbit seemed to be more attracted to the intellectual stimulation and notoriety of the organization than to its politics and social agenda (129). Not surprisingly, then, the psammead's speech ironically undercuts the Fabian agenda by suggesting that it was no more realistic than the children's rash wishes.

In fact, *Five Children and It* ironically undercuts the utility of any wishing. Cyril, for instance, observes at one point that "ordinary life is full of occasions on which a wish would be most useful" (160), but the children are hard pressed to discover such an appropriate occasion. In fact, the novel's final wish is an instance of Nesbit's use of borrowing textual building blocks because it repeats the conclusion of "The Three Wishes" in that Jane's wish that mother would discover Lady Chittenden's diamonds and jewels (196) is replaced with Anthea's wish that "mother could forget all about the diamonds" (205). Wishing comes full circle to negate wishing.

Perhaps Robert is correct about the psammead, then, when he argues against asking for additional wishes from this "spiteful brute": "I feel almost sure it wished every time that our wishes shan't do us any good" (57). Jane, however, clings to the idea that wishes can have value, maintaining that it would be "too silly to have a chance like this and not use it," adding, with perhaps an oblique reference to the textual building blocks upon which Nesbit has built her novel, "I never heard of anyone else outside of a book who had such a chance; there must simply be heaps of things we could wish for that wouldn't turn out Dead Sea fish, like these two things have" (58).

Still seeking ways to make wishing effective, Anthea observes that, while the sand-fairy has provided them with "a splendid, glorious chance," it "seems such a pity it should be wasted just because we are too silly to know what to wish for" (84). Repeatedly, however, ill-conceived wishes turn out to be worse than no wishes at all. Perhaps because they are children or because Nesbit is also building upon another text, the children's great expectations turn out to be as mixed in their results as that of Dickens's Pip. Even Nesbit's lesson is built atop that of the earlier story: better to have a magic fish-bone that is held in

reserve for a useful wish than unlimited impulsive wishes that turn out to be no better than Dead Sea fish.

Marcus Crouch has argued that "No writer for children today is free of debt" to Nesbit and suggested that British children's novels produced between 1945 and 1970 should be considered "The Nesbit Tradition" (16). Children's writers as varied as C. S. Lewis, Noel Streatfeild, Edward Eager, and J. K. Rowling have all acknowledged their literary debt to Nesbit. Jane's comment near the beginning of *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, "I wish they taught magic at school" (22) seems, for example, a natural stepping stone to Rowling's Harry Potter series.

Nesbit is an important children's author whose novels reveal many significant changes as children's literature bridged the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. However, Doris Langely Moore's suggestion that Nesbit has no nineteenth-century precursors and Marcus Crouch's assertion that all twentieth-century British children's fiction owes a literary debt to Nesbit's books are both overstated. A more accurate evaluation of her work lies midway between these claims.

Nesbit delighted in creating, as a form of children's entertainment, magic cities built by recombining in a surprising and innovative manner pre-existing material. As she suggested in *Wings and the Child*, the best place to build a magic city was in a library, and in a similar fashion, she freely used other books as the building blocks in the creation of her own imaginative worlds. As Julia Briggs has observed, Nesbit was "Never one to be embarrassed by her borrowing" (*Woman* 225). Nesbit often relied on Laurence Housman to provide her with the ideas for plots of her stories. He provided her the initial concept for *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, and she gratefully acknowledged his help in the note that she sent him that accompanied a copy of the novel (Briggs *Woman*, 153). Housman also felt that he provided Nesbit with the concept for *The Wouldbegoods*. Indeed, the issue of borrowing or lifting ideas from other writers seems to be a bit ambiguous for Nesbit. The "Wings" episode of *Five Children and It*, with its discussion of what constitutes stealing, is perhaps indirectly an attempt by Nesbit to address her ambivalent feelings about this issue. The hungry children debate whether taking plums from the orchard is actually stealing. While Cyril argues "stealing is stealing," Jane observes that since they have wings,

they are more like birds and thus not constrained by the ten commandments (88). Therefore, having decided that they must select only the necessities of life when they take food from the clergyman's window, they leave behind the custard pudding. But they also feel troubled enough by their actions to leave behind a note and funds to pay for the food that they take. Nesbit comments on the children's behavior, "I cannot pretend that stealing is right. I can only say on this occasion it did not look like stealing," and she adds that it "appeared in the light of a fair and reasonable business transaction" (94).

As a commercial writer, Nesbit seems to have felt that it was fair and reasonable to borrow from other writers. Bits and pieces of Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age*, F. Anstey's *The Brass Bottle*, and Charles Dickens's "The Magic Fish-bone" all enter the composition of *Five Children and It*. Grahame's collection of essays provided a useful narrative technique. Anstey's comic fantasy was the inspiration for the plot device of an ancient fairy being discovered in a contemporary setting. Nesbit even has the children acknowledge her use of Anstey when Jane observes that the conclusion of *Five Children and It* seems "like the 'Brass Bottle'" and adds, "Yes, I'm glad we read that or I should never have thought of it" (206). Anstey's novel appeared serially in *The Strand* a year before *Five Children and It* did, and it was even illustrated by H. R. Millar, Nesbit's long-time illustrator. Jane's acknowledgment of Anstey's novel, like Nesbit's note of appreciation to Housman, both seem akin to the children leaving a note for the clergyman. Finally, Dickens's "The Magic Fish-bone" from *Holiday Romance*, with its humorous examination of social implication of wishes, provided a bare-boned structure that Nesbit subsequently fleshed out in *Five Children and It*.

Notes

1. Briggs observes that the very concept of building imaginary cities may have been an idea that Nesbit discovered in Evelyn Sharp's "The Palace on the Floor," which appeared in *The Other Side of the Sun* (1900) a year before the publication of *Nine Unlikely Tales* (328). Briggs also suggests a second, more intimate source for the process of building magic cities in H. G. Wells's *Floor Games* (1911), which is a similar instructional manual for children showing

the creation of imaginary cities and wonderful islands out of blocks. Wells was asked to write *Floor Games* after a publisher became intrigued by the games of constructing towns and villages out of blocks that the protagonist plays as a young boy in Wells's *The New Machiavelli* (1910). There is a remarkable overlap between Nesbit's *Wings and the Child* and Wells's *Floor Games*, although Nesbit uses the process of building miniature cities as a springboard to discuss childhood education, whereas Wells is much more narrowly concerned with the process of building cities. While *Floor Games* is an illustrated seventy-one page game manual intended for children, Nesbit's *Wings and the Child* is a two-hundred page book intended for adults in which Nesbit outlines her theories of education. Wells is much more interested in creating the cities as a backdrop for the actions of soldiers and trains, whereas Nesbit is more concerned with the process of creating elaborate and detailed structures out of found objects. Near the conclusion of *Floor Games*, Wells mentions that "Some day, perhaps, I will write a great book about the war games and tell of battles and campaigns and strategy and tactics" (71), which he did in the companion volume, *Little Wars* (1913). The friendship between Nesbit and Wells had become so strained by this point that neither writer mentions the other in their books on construction of miniature cities as a form of children's games. In *Wings and the Child*, Nesbit credits herself as the sole inventor of the magic cities game (124) and recalls having developed the concept as an adult while playing with her son during his recuperation from the measles (146). Wells doesn't mention Nesbit in either *Floor Games* or *Little War*, and claims to be "the chief inventor and practiser (so far) of Little Wars" (151).

2. Nesbit was not alone, of course, in her fondness for Dickens. The favorite author of both boys and girls, according to a poll conducted by Edward Salmon among two thousand child readers of the journal *Nineteenth Century*, was Charles Dickens. Salmon subsequently included the results in *Juvenile Literature as It Is* (1888), his study of children's literature. Dickens was the clear favorite among boys, collecting 223 nominations out of the 790 cast; and while Dickens was not as popular among girls as he was with boys, he remained the girls' top choice, drawing more votes than either Charlotte Yonge or Louisa May Alcott (14–23). This poll is just one of many examples that confirms Dickens's popularity as an author among late Victorian and Edwardian children, even though he is generally not considered to be a children's writer. While Dickens was beginning to fall out of fashion among adult readers, he remained an author whose books bridged the dual audience of children and adults, and his influence also extended to numerous children's authors, including Nesbit. Whereas Dickens was primarily an adult author who also appealed to children, however, Nesbit is a children's author who also appeals to adults.

3. Nesbit herself, however, tended to undervalue her children's writing and considered her poetry for adults her primary vocation and superior work.

4. Although the name is common enough, it is curious that the nickname that Nesbit used as a child was Daisy, the same name that Streeforth assigns to David Copperfield as a nickname in the most autobiographical of Dickens's novels.

5. With its examination of the power and implications of receiving one's wishes, *Five Children and It* also anticipates Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's popular musical *Into the Woods* (1987). The musical begins and ends with Cinderella's desire "I wish" (3, 138). But like the children in *Five Children and It*, the fairy tale characters of *Into the Woods* are granted their desired wishes by the end of Act I and assume that they will live "happy ever after!" (75). But by the opening of the Act II, all the characters are dissatisfied and come to realize that "Wishes may bring problems / Such that you regret them" (86). In a similar fashion, Cyril observes, "We haven't really got anything worth having for our wishes" (138).

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