Nesbit’s Psammead Trilogy

Eitan Bar-Yosef

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 51, Number 1, 2008, pp. 84-87 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/233284
The full exchange is worthy of Housman and is one of the benefits of completeness in coverage. It also leaves the reader with a powerful remembrance of Housman as a man of letters. Few further messages follow that exchange. He died little more than a year later.

It should be noted that in the two bulky volumes are several typographical errors in dates, at least five misspellings of the publisher Trübner, and even a “Housmomnan.” No editor is perfect (nor his proofreaders), but Burnett comes close.

STANLEY WEINTRAUB
University of Delaware

Nesbit’s Psammead Trilogy

“THAT BEAUTIFUL Baalbec temple in the desert! Plenty of good sand there, and no politics! I wish I were there, safe in the Past—that I do,” whines the Psammead, that magical Sand-Fairy, at the very end of The Story of the Amulet (1906), the third book in E. Nesbit’s magical trilogy that began with Five Children and It (1902) and continued with The Phoenix and the Carpet (1904). Like so many other moments in the trilogy, this final scene is tinted by Nesbit’s soft, warm sense of irony: after all, even though the Sand-fairy’s wish is swiftly fulfilled, readers of The Amulet would be the first to know that the past is rarely free from politics—and never really safe.

This truism is certainly reflected in this new collection of essays commemorating the trilogy’s centenary. Although they approach the texts from very different theoretical and methodological perspectives, all the contributors dwell on the intriguing relationship among fantasy, ideology, and the trilogy’s constructions of the past—Nesbit’s fascination with earlier historical epochs (from ancient Egypt to the Roman conquest of Britain), but also her Edwardian “present” as viewed from the twenty-first century. The trilogy encourages this reading, but, even more significantly, it performs it: that Nesbit herself was able to depict Edwardian society in historical, even historiographical, terms (in one of the most celebrated episodes in The Amulet, the children travel to the London of the future) is merely another demonstration of her genius.

Interestingly, although Nesbit’s position as “one of England’s preeminent writers for children” seems irrefutable, several of the contributors to the volume still feel obliged to defend Nesbit’s eminence and justify the importance of her work. This slight sense of anxiety—which
BOOK REVIEWS

is probably missing from the other Centennial Studies published by the Children’s Literature Association (dedicated to the work of Potter, Baum, and Barrie)—surfaces from time to time in this collection, for example, in the many allusions to Humphrey Carpenter’s assertion (in *Secret Gardens*) that Nesbit was merely “an energetic hack,” and that as soon as one examines her novels closely, “doubts begin to emerge as to the real nature of her talent.” While Carpenter’s authority certainly added force to his claim, it is nevertheless indicative of the current state of scholarship about Nesbit that critics are still obliged today to confront misgivings that were first voiced a century ago.

Following Raymond E. Jones’s comprehensive introduction, the collection includes thirteen chapters, all of them written especially for this volume, with the exception of Suzanne Rahn’s “News From E. Nesbit: *The Story of the Amulet* and the Socialist Utopia,” which first appeared in 1985 in *ELT* and is republished here in a newly edited version (chapter ten). Offering a remarkably astute reading that traces the fantasy back to Nesbit’s Fabian credentials, Rahn’s essay—published, incidentally, the same year Carpenter issued his damning account—marked a new, more sophisticated era in Nesbit scholarship. Its inclusion in the collection is therefore well earned and most welcome.

The volume is not divided into any distinct chronological or thematic sections; nevertheless, chapters one–seven all focus on the trilogy itself by approaching Nesbit’s texts through various critical and cultural strategies. Among other issues, the essays explore Nesbit’s ambiguous treatment of gender (chapter one); offer a postcolonial critique of her views of empire (chapter three); discuss her “comic spirituality” (chapter five) and her comic techniques (chapter six). Though not groundbreaking, these are all solid, extremely useful contributions. Particularly helpful is Monica Flegel’s essay on Fabianism and didacticism (chapter two), which complements Rahn’s work on *The Amulet* by turning to Nebsit’s other novels and examining the tension between her socialist convictions and her middle-class bias. Another original essay is Teya Rosenberg’s reading of the Psammead series as an early manifestation of magic realism (chapter four), a term usually associated with South American novelists. The most stimulating essay, however, is probably David Rudd’s delightful Lacanian reading of *Five Children and It* (chapter seven). Arguing that “Nesbit has presented the child’s move from the Imaginary into the Symbolic,” Rudd claims that rather than fulfilling the children’s desire, the book stages this desire through
fantasy, with the dry, grumpy Psammead cast as an inversion of the mother figure.

Whereas the essays in the first half of the collection concentrate on Nesbit alone, the six chapters that follow contextualize her work in innovative ways. Jan Susina offers an interesting comparison between Nesbit’s and Dickens’s literary borrowings (chapter eight); Ann Dowker traces the affinity between *Five Children* and nineteenth-century morality tales; and Julia Briggs presents a fascinating account of the relationship between *The Amulet* and other *fin-de-siècle* stories of time travel (including the intriguing observation that Nesbit’s book was written in 1905—just like another celebrated text that ponders the consequences of traveling through time and space: Einstein’s paper on the Special Theory of Relativity). The final two essays contextualize Nesbit’s achievement by considering how her work was expanded and occasionally subverted by two other artists: H. R. Millar, who provided the unforgettable illustrations for the trilogy (chapter twelve); and the children’s writer Edward Eager whose tribute to Nesbit, Esther Gilman suggests in chapter thirteen, turns “the radical socialist vision into small change.”

As a whole, this collection includes a remarkable wealth of insights and information which make it vital reading not only for Nesbit scholars, but for anyone interested in Edwardian culture or children’s literature. It is precisely this claim for comprehensiveness, however, that reveals some of the weaknesses in the volume. For example, while some of the essays situate Nesbit’s work within a broader literary and cultural context, the collection could have benefited from a more systematic attempt to assess her influence on twentieth-century writers, from C. S. Lewis to J. K. Rowling.

The volume certainly amends the critical tendency to concentrate on *The Amulet* and thus overlook the richness of the first two books of the trilogy. Nevertheless, despite some occasional references, there is no methodical effort to situate the trilogy as a whole in the context of Nesbit’s other writings for children—to examine, for instance, the relationship between the Psammead trilogy and Nesbit’s other celebrated (perhaps even equally celebrated) trilogy, namely, the Bastables books: *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), *The Wouldbegoods* (1901), and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904). Since, as Teya Rosenberg notes, the “two trilogies share many of the same references,” it appears that what makes the later a “classic” is precisely Nesbit’s ability to turn from a straightforward realism into the realm of fantasy. The fact that Nes-
bit returned to realism almost immediately with *The Railway Children* (1906) raises questions about the affinity between her generic preferences and her position in the canon. One wishes these questions were addressed more explicitly in the collection.

Finally, the relative obscurity of the Psammead trilogy (compared, for example, with *The Wizard of Oz* or *Peter Pan*) may explain why many of the contributors cannot simply rely on the reader's familiarity with the texts and are thus forced to describe, sometimes in great detail, various incidents from the books. Unfortunately, what could have been advantageous in one chapter becomes rather repetitive in a collection. But this, to be sure, is a minor flaw in what is otherwise a most admirable and timely volume. There is no need, in other words, to summon up the magical Psammead from his pleasant sandy retreat; thanks to studies like this one, future critics will surely be exempt of the need to explicate Nesbit’s plots.

EITAN BAR-YOSEF
Ben-Gurion University

---

**R. L. Stevenson & Science**


“HE IS AN ARTIST, and he knows nothing about science; not even so much as I do, and Heaven knows I am very ignorant,” Fanny Stevenson commented about her husband in January 1891. In *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science and the Fin de Siècle*, Julia Reid provides a timely corrective to this view by offering the first detailed assessment of the implications of science for Scotland’s most celebrated late-nineteenth-century author. Reid’s conspicuously tripartite and interdisciplinary title implies a remarkably broad sweep. The generic word “science” suggests this book will map Stevenson’s engagement with a number of evolving and newly differentiated fields of study emerging from the physical, natural and social sciences, while the temporal referent hints that the discussion will take place in the context of the cultural anxieties of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Neither is entirely true. Reid’s book focuses almost entirely upon three interconnected (and at that time marginal) fields—evolutionary psychology, degeneration theory, and cultural anthropology. She moves chronologically, the majority of the fiction analysed in the study (chapters one–five) written before Stevenson’s departure for Samoa in 1888.