

Graham Greene's Books for Children

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"No one can recover from their childhood."
 "Nul ne guérit de son enfance."

—French singer, Jean Ferrat :

The British actress, Emma Thomson, once declared: "There is in Britain a great respect for children's literature: We take it very seriously."

Undoubtedly, the relationship between what adults read and books for children has always been quite different in France and in English-speaking countries. Thus, when T.H. White's agents decided to translate into French *The Sword in the Stone* (1938),¹ the first volume of his modern British adaptation of the Arthurian legends and to publish it in a children's collection (La Bibliothèque Verte) without changing a single word in the text, no French adult wanted to be seen reading it. Curiously, this was one of the books found on President Kennedy's bedside table after his assassination.

It is in fact very revealing that, as for detective or sentimental fiction, many authors feel the need to use a penname when they decide to include a book for children in their catalog of works. This was the case with Greene—who did not authentify

his first children's book, *The Little Train*. When it was published in 1946 by Eyre and Spottiswoode, it carried only the name of the illustrator, Dorothy Craigie.²

For many generations, English-writing authors have aimed at a double readership, like Charles Dickens, Robert-Louis Stevenson (who was one of Greene's remote cousins), Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, in children-adapted illustrated editions. More recently, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books were published in most countries in two editions, one for children, one for adults. Bloomsbury produced editions with a different cover picture in Britain and in the United States of America; in France "Gallimard" and "Folio Junior" carried the same text, but with different illustrations and at a cheaper price. The most prominent case was Philip Pullman, who surprised critics when he won the Whitbread prize for adults in 2001 for *The Amber Spyglass*,³ the third volume of his trilogy intended for children, *His Dark Materials*.

Greene has always been known as an author who aimed at different kinds of readers, writing both what he called *entertainments*, often thrillers, spy or detective stories, and proper "novels" for readers looking for what Roland Barthes called *writerly* texts—narratives implying the reader's participation, and those Virginia Woolf termed, without any negative connotation, as *common readers*. As Neil Sinyard quite rightly put it, "Greene is what, in classical music terms would be called a 'crossover artist' . . . who has the gift of appealing both to the intelligentsia and the masses."⁴

1 White, T.H. *The Sword in the Stone*. London: Collins, 1938.

2 *The Little Train*, by Dorothy Craigie, with illustrations by the author. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1946, as by Graham Greene. London: Max Parrish, 1957. Illustrated by Edward Ardizzone. London: The Bodley Head, 1973.

3 Pullman, Philip. *The Amber Spyglass*. London: Scholastic School, 2000.

4 Sinyard, 112.

In her introduction to *The Quiet American*, Zadie Smith ironically considered Greene “a literary double-agent,” capable of having himself been influenced by such canonic writers as Conrad and James and by authors of spy novels such as John Buchan, John Le Carré, or of adventure stories like those of Sir Henry Rider Haggard. One could add the Reverend Wilbert Awdry for *Thomas, the Tank Engine*, published the same year as Greene’s *The Little Train*, or even Diana Ross with *The Little Red Engine Gets a Name* (1942). These texts have a common theme: a lonely train wrongly deciding to escape to the peaceful daily world so as to obtain the respect of others.

Few authors have so continuously and enthusiastically described the influence that the books they read in their childhood had on their whole lives and on their own writing. Greene even went as far as to claim that the books he read as a child had more influence on his life than the discovery of religion and his conversion to Catholicism. Indeed, he thought that one’s personality was definitively determined in the first fifteen years. What Greene wrote in his essay on Charles Dickens in *The Lost Childhood* (1951) might justify his statement: “the creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood and adolescence, and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share.”

Greene was a very precocious reader and secretly learned how to read, hidden in his uncle’s attic near Cambridge, which surprised his mother. He never forgot that first

book: “It was paper-covered with the picture of a boy bound and gagged, dangling at the end of a rope inside a well with the water rising above his waist.”⁵

It was in fact one of Dixon Brett’s adventures—a popular detective story published in the *Aldine Magazine* in the twenties. Greene later read Conan Doyle when he was ten, and in 1974 wrote an introduction to *The Sign of Four*. He also passionately immersed himself in Sir Rider Haggard’s adventurous world of *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885)⁶ and *She* (1887)⁷, which not only influenced his own way of writing, but also turned him into a “globe-trotter,” a reporter, and an agent of the secret services:

If it had not been for that romantic tale of Quartermain, Sir Henry Curtis, Captain Good and, above all the ancient witch Gagool, would I at nineteen have studied the appointments list at the Colonial Office and very nearly picked on the Nigerian Navy for a career.⁸

And yet, reading those adventure novels was not enough and he very often mentioned the importance of his discovery, at the age of fourteen, of a historical, sentimental novel by Marjorie Bowen that is today quite forgotten, *The Viper of Milan* (1906). There he found the phrase he often quoted and commented on: “Human nature is not black and white, but black and grey. I read all that in *The Viper of Milan* and I looked around and I saw it was so.”⁹ In his 1960 introduction to her book, he paid her an exceptional homage by suggesting

5 Greene, Graham. *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays*. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1951. Penguin Books, 1962, 11.

6 Haggard, H. *King Solomon’s Mines*. London: Cassell, 1885.

7 Haggard, H. *She*. London: Longmans, 1887.

8 Bowen, Marjorie. *The Viper of Milan* (1906), with an Introduction by Graham Greene. London: The Bodley Head, 1960, 13.

9 *Ibid.*, 10.

her book initiated his own literary career: "I think it was Miss Bowen's apparent zest that made me want to write. One could not read her without believing that to write was to live and to enjoy."¹⁰

He immediately invented new episodes in his copy books, which have unfortunately disappeared and even wrote a pastiche of the novel filled with breath-taking intrigues. There he had also discovered the very Conradian theme which was to influence most of his own fiction, and which he could have also found in Greek tragedies, or in Shakespeare's plays—the moment when fate would inexorably oscillate: "the sense of doom that lies over success—the feeling that the pendulum is about to swing."¹¹ Similarly, Greene often said that the epigraph from Browning's poem "Apology" (1885) could have summed up most of his own novels :

Our interest's on the dangerous edge
of things.
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, demi-rep
That loves and saves her soul in new
French books—We watch while there
in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway.

A Few Children's Characters in Greene's Fiction

Children always play an important part in the writer's fiction. Thus, in *The Power and the Glory*, it is Luis, the young boy who revealingly opens the door at the very

end of the novel to let in the new priest who will assure the continuity of the church after the execution of the whisky priest in Mexico: "My name is Father . . .' But the boy had already swung the door open and put his lips to his hand before the other could give himself a name."¹²

Philip, in the short story, "The Basement Room" (1935), adapted for the screen by Carol Reed as *The Fallen Idol*, impersonates the very Greeneian figure of the innocent child unable to understand the adult world that surrounds him. The young boy involuntarily betrays the man he admires, Baines, the butler.

In the four-page short story, "I Spy," one of Greene's favorites, included in *The Spy Bedside's Book* (1957) and edited with his brother Hugh, Charlie Stowe, aged twelve, hides in his father's tobacco shop to smoke his first cigarette and is then the unwilling witness of his father's leaving the house, framed between two mysterious men wearing raincoats and bowler hats.

"The Destructors" is a premonitory short story taking place in 1950s London about gratuitous vandalism and the extreme violence among certain groups of young people. First published in magazine form in 1954, it was adapted for British television in 1975. By focusing exclusively on a violent group of youngsters, the story somewhat mirrors William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. In Greene's short story, the youngsters, led by Trevor (T), decide without any reason to destroy completely a 200-year-old house that had survived the Blitz during the absence of its owner, Mr. Thomas, "Old Misery."¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.,10.

¹¹ Ibid.,15.

¹² *The Power and the Glory*, 220.

¹³ Greene, Graham. "The Destructors", in *Twenty-One Stories*. The Viking Press, 1949.

Four Illustrated Books for Children

One may wonder what brought Greene to write four illustrated books for children, also classified as “transport novels”: *The Little Train* (1946), *The Little Fire Engine* (1950)¹⁴, *The Little Horse Bus* (1952)¹⁵; and *The Little Steam Roller* (1953)¹⁶. In the Spring of 1939, Greene started his long-lasting love affair with Dorothy Glover, a theatre costume designer who, under the penname of Dorothy Craigie, illustrated children’s books.

Greene was then at the head of a publishing house, Eyre and Spottiswoode. If he agreed when Dorothy suggested that he write books for children that she would illustrate, it was most probably to avoid what he feared all his life: boredom. The Little Train runs away because he is bored to remain on a country branch line; Toby, the pony in *The Little Fire Engine*, suffers too from this affliction.

The four books were written in London during the German bombings of the Blitz, when Greene and Dorothy Glover were active voluntary members of the Civil Defence. In the books, a vehicle invariably performs a courageous act which inevitably fails. The vehicle is always on the side of law and order, and it often becomes a hunter. The Little Train dreams of a visit to “the world outside, where the great expresses go.” In fact, the outer world turns out to be ugly, noisy, and frightening.

The underlying theme in the four books, which are connected as a series, is

a nostalgic commemoration of a pre-war rural Britain and the end of an era: motor cars replacing horses, small corner shops giving way to impersonal anonymous stores financed by banks and stern businessmen. Revealingly, in *The Little Train*, the big city, called “Smokeoverall” is presented as Dante’s Inferno, a terrible cave of demons where loudspeakers announce connections to ‘High Yelling’, ‘Tombe Junction’ and ‘Grimborough’—a seedy world reminiscent of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

The circumstances surrounding the composition of *The Little Train* were recounted by Greene in a signed copy he sent to Catherine Walston with the mention of his collaboration with Dorothy Glover, formerly a stage designer and then a successful writer of boys’ books. It was written mainly in a pub called “The Chester Arms” on Sunday mornings during the flying-bomb period of World War II, probably in June 1944. Greene describes how they made a small dummy copy out of a notebook and he made wild pencil suggestions as to how the illustrations should go and of what they should consist; so the book was written and designed simultaneously.

The Little Train was originally dedicated to “the guard of the twelve o’clock to Brighton.” The manuscript kept at Austin (Texas) consists of 24 tiny pages written in black ink and pencil. The editing and montage by Greene are apparent, for instance, “Double spread of village,” pp.5 and 6, “farewell scene.” The positioning of the illustrations was clearly indicated by Greene in pencil on the right-hand side of the pages.

14 *The Little Fire Engine*, illustrated by Dorothy Craigie. London: Max Parrish, 1950. Illustrated by Edward Ardizzone. London : The Bodley Head, 1973.

15 *The Little Horse Bus—A Tale of Startling Adventure*, illustrated by Dorothy Craigie. London : Max Parrish, 1952. Illustrated by Edward Ardizzone. London : The Bodley Head, 1974.

16 *The Little Steam Roller—A Story of Adventure, Mystery and Detection*, illustrated by Dorothy Craigie. London : Max Parrish, 1953. Illustrated by Edward Ardizzone London : Doubleday, 1974.

The first edition numbered 20,000 copies of which 12,000 sold quickly. Although that book simply credited "Story and Pictures by Dorothy Craigie," the 1952 blurb on the inside dust-jacket of *The Little Fire Engine* (1950) announced: "IT CAN NOW BE REVEALED that Graham Greene was not only the author of the book which you now have in your hand, but, also its predecessor, *The Little Train*."

In a letter to Max Reinhardt, dated 14th August 1959, Greene had refused an alternative illustrator for a second edition of his third children's book, *The Little Horse Bus* (1952) to be published by Max Parrish: "that would be insult to an old friend who collaborated in the whole affair." However, following Dorothy Glover's death in 1971, the book was re-published and illustrated by Edward Ardizzone. The manuscript of *The Little Horse Bus*, subtitled *A Tale of Startling Adventure*, illustrated by Dorothy Craigie and published in 1952 is contained in a beautiful little "Century notebook." Written in pencil, it specifies the space where the drawings should be included, e.g.: "whole page (31) in color entitled 'Hansom and horsebus'." It was awarded the Boys' Clubs of America *Junior Book Award for 1955*.

The Little Steamroller, subtitled *A Story of Adventure, Mystery and Detection*, was first published in 1953. The manuscript is included in the same Century notebook as *The Little Horse Bus*. Both editions of these books were successfully illustrated by two excellent artists using contrasting styles and techniques: in the 1950s by Dorothy Craigie with her typographical effects and her graphic games; and in the 1970s by Edward Ardizzone, already a famous book illustrator

whose work was collected by many fans.

The books were translated into several languages, including German, Swedish, Dutch, Italian and French, except for *The Little Steamroller*. The French edition is a thorough adaptation which features a "Frenchification" of the text. This method was quite common at the time, the object being not to disorientate the young reader. Unfortunately, this prevented the young reader from learning about another culture. Thus, in *Le Petit Omnibus*, the original route for the bus, London Bridge to Waterloo Station becomes the very Parisian Madeleine to Bastille. Whitehall and Oxford Circus are changed to Maubert and Place de la Concorde. Scotland Yard is la PJ, Police Judiciaire, situated on the well-known Quai des Orfèvres. In *The Little Train*, the great Jock of Edinburgh, the famous Scottish Express, "*Why ye poor wee train...*," becomes "le grand Mistral" marseillais and has a very amusing Mediterranean accent. Strangely enough, "Guinness is good for you," which appears on a poster, becomes "Buvez du vin!"

Now out of print and valuable collectors' items, there is a strong argument for the four beautifully written books to be reprinted. Ironically, the theme has now become very fashionable, with the emphasis on the ecological value of a more natural world, away from the noisy, polluted, impersonal industrial cities.

Finally, *The Monster of Capri*¹⁷ and *The Monster's Treasure* are a unique curiosity in the publishing world and a real treasure for the bibliophile. *The Monster of Capri* was originally handwritten by Greene for his two grandchildren on the back of eleven colored postcards, each one featuring a

¹⁷ *The Monster of Capri*, including *The Monster's Treasure*, ed. by Rolando Pieraccini. Pesaro, Italy : Eurographica, 1985.

different view of Capri. *The Monster's Treasure* is a continuation, this time written on eight postcards.

Reproductions of the postcards were published by Eurographica in 1985 in a signed, limited edition. Included is a handwritten dedication: "*The Monster of Capri*: a story written specially for Andrew and Jonathan by their Grand pic, Graham Greene." This is followed by an Author's note which reads: "These stories, written on postcards, were addressed to my two grandchildren Andrew and Jonathan Bourget many years ago when they were small. Now I am afraid they are too old to much enjoy the book, which all the same is dedicated to them."

In his essay on young Charles Dickens,¹⁸ Greene wrote

The creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood and adolescence, and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share.¹⁹

Greene also used a thought-provoking image, insisting on the considerable importance of the books found on the family's shelves and read by children. Those books, he concluded, are "a crystal, in which the child dreamed that he saw life moving."²⁰

18 "The Lost Childhood", 1951.

19 Ibid., 59.

20 Ibid., 12.

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