

## Reality in Edith Nesbit's fiction

By

*Doaa Mohamed Foad El-Namoury*

Assistant lecturer in the Higher Institute of Languages  
Mansoura

### Abstract

Children's Literature is often identified with forms of fantasy, wish – fulfillment, the dreams and ambitions of the weakest and most dependent seem to be best fulfilled in books that explore possibilities rather than describe actualities. But after the Second World War, the realistic has continued to be the dominant mode in fiction for children. Children's literature started to reflect the social reality of children in the post-war period. Edith Nesbit is one of the modern writers who used magic in writing for children. This paper tackles how Nesbit manages to keep a beautiful balance between both realistic and fantasy worlds in her fiction.

### ملخص البحث

يرتبط أدب الطفل دائما بالقصص الخيالية و الأحلام البسيطة التي دوما ما تتحقق فهو يعبر عن الطموحات التي من الممكن الوصول إليها بعيدا عن ارض الواقع. كان للحرب العالمية الثانية أثرا كبيرا على أدب الطفل حيث ساد الاتجاه الواقعي في أدب الطفل. فبدأ في نقل الواقع الاجتماعي الذي يحيط بالأطفال كنتيجة لتلك الحرب. تعد ايديث نسبت إحدى الروائيات المعاصرات اللاتي استخدمن الخيال في الكتابة للأطفال. و يتناول البحث قدرة نسبت على المزج بين كلا من العالم الخيالي و الواقعي من خلال أعمالها الروائية.

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### Fantasy and Reality

Fantasy simply means imagination or fancy, completely unrelated to reality: product of the imagination as unrealistic notion. And imagination is the knowledge of how and when to trust instincts and impulses rather than calculating by reason. Fantasy was defined as a genre that uses magic and other supernatural phenomena as a primary element of plot, theme, and/or setting. Fantasy is generally distinguished from science fiction in that it does not provide a logical explanation for the scientifically impossible events that occur.

Fantasy is considered as a trans media genre; it essentially bears some special relationship to imagination. It necessarily involves magic; wizard casting spells, witches seeing the future through crystal balls and so on. Works of fantasy require supernatural content; supernatural characters like dragons, elves, trolls, nymphs, wizards and warlocks. Also supernatural events as magical storms and the sky raining frogs.

Pamela Lyndon Travers explains in her *Mary Poppins* (1934) that “everybody’s got a fairyland of their own” (Travers 38). She believes that it is not only children who have a world of imagination and at the same time it is not open to everyone; but one has to be invited in and the fantasy shared. Also Margaret Mallett defined fantasy as “something created out of the imagination and may be a dream, painting, or a story or a poem”(Mallett 126). For her, in Children’s Literature ‘fantasy’ is opposite category to ‘realism’. She believes that if we want to make children’s imagination grow, we should help them by offering ways to exercise imagination through fantasy.

Margaret Clark explained that some writers considered the ideal way of telling a story for children is by creating an imaginary world as it becomes easy for them to move in another time and place you had not seen. But she put some rules that writers should follow even if they use this way; she advised writers to choose a convincing and inviting imagery setting, but the setting should not also take over completely as the story should still remain the prime importance.

Realism is simply defined, in literature, as the portrayal of life. It is not concerned with rendering things as beautiful when they are not, or concerned with idealization. It is concerned with the here and now, with

everyday events, with the needs of the common man, with getting facts right, with environment and with the changes in every time.

Peter Hunt in his *Introduction to Children's Literature*(1994) asks the question about 'can you have realism in children's fiction?' Hunt believed with Raymond Tallis that we can understand life through storytelling. For Hunt, in Children's Literature the adult writer makes all the decisions about the reality that are going to be told to child; what kind of image of the world would be presented to him, what he should know and what not and the proper time to know.

Hunt divided 'Realistic' books for children into three categories; the first are books where the characters are not human but they have the details of the human life as Jill Murphy's *Five Minute's Peace* (1986) and Margaret Gordon's *Wilber Force*(1982). The second are books raise questions of whose reality we are dealing with as in Julie Vivas's *The Nativity* (1986)and Sarah Moon's *Little Red Riding Hood* (1697). The third are books that lie on the border line between realism and fantasy as each one contributes to the life of the other as in Anthony Browne's *A Walk in The Park* (1977), *Gorilla* (2002), *Look What I've Got* (1980),and *Hansel and Gretel* (2008).

Hunt came to the conclusion that realism is a matter of degree; it can be a kind of realism that child can see and understand, but which does not duck the implications of what is seen. And it can be a kind of reality that offers harsh realities such as the Holocaust or the bombing of Hiroshima.

Hunt explained that fantasy comes along with reality, they are close to each other in a child's world; writers use the method of getting their characters into a journey to show children real places in their country through real landscape and maps and at the same time explore themselves and educate as in Kipling's *Puck* (1906), *The Wind in The Willows*(1908) and Jerome K.'s *Three Men in A Boat* (1956). For Hunt, there are different types of fantasy introduced to children; The 'Domestic' fantasy, the common type for the child, like *Winnie-the-Pooh*(1926) and 'High' fantasy, the wider scope of imaginary world, like *The Hobbit* (1937). Hunt believed that fantasy is suitable for children, as it embodies and reflects the human psyche and it is the perfect way to portray adult-child relationship in literature.

Fairytales are one of the oldest known forms of literature and the most popular. It presents experience in vivid symbolic form. Traditional fairytales passed on orally from one generation to the next. At first, it was not only for children but also for adults as its heroes and heroines are young people finding out their fortune then there was fairytales specified for children.

Realism started in the nineteenth century with the French who were responsible for this movement. The French believed that realism is a copy of nature and reveals to us the literature of truth. It rejects Classicism, Romanticism and the belief of art for art's sake. During the latter part of the century realism used widely in European literature. Jacques Derrida defined reality as "a series of fictions people create – a set of artificial constructs – the process of 'deconstructing' a text becomes an act of consciousness – raising an insight into the relationships of imagination and logic, fiction and reality" (Nodelman 236-237). Realism was the dominant form of writing in the 1870s and 80s. Children's literature handled real subjects like child labor, education and the lack of provision of clean water for the working class.

Realism deals with attitudes and behavior based on the acceptance of facts and the rejection of sentiment and illusion. It tends to portray familiar things as they really are without idealizing them, or presents them in any guise as they are not. It is a quest for truth and accuracy. It shows the life and attitudes of the common man and his needs like the life of the peasant and the worker. However, A.A. Mendilow explained that "literature first tries to reflect reality as faithfully and as fully as it can, and then, despairing of the attempt, tries to evoke the feeling of a new reality of its own" (Mendilow 69).

Fantasy started with the First Golden Age of Children's Literature in the middle of the nineteenth century with the appearance of many childhood classics that children today continue to enjoy like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and George MacDonald's *The Princess and The Goblin* (1858) as they started to deal with children's imagination at this time and for the first time, a child came to see magical characters and talking animals instead of stories filled with moral values and religious lessons. Fantasy literature was considered a nineteenth- and twentieth century concept and creation. They portrayed the Victorian image of child; sweet, pretty, charmingly dressed, dreamily innocent little girls.

The First Golden Age ended with A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh Books (1924-1928) and it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that audiences Dunsany, H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Rice Burroughs. The appearance of magazines devoted to fantasy novel helped in the development of fantasy. The first fantasy magazine *Weird Tales* was created in 1923 followed by *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1949). The popularity of fantasy genre has continued to increase in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with works like J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Books which are a fully imagined world and give children what they like and choose to read. Fantasy has become no more this 'Secondary' world or

less significant than realism. It comes to discuss philosophical questions about self and otherness. It comes to be considered as an important genre as it helps the authors and the readers to engage with 'disturbing material'. It also encourages the growth of man's creative capacity as it allows him to cross the boundaries of space and time.

Books for children in wartime involves kinds of realism whose features are helplessness and seriousness; family lost its role and every individual feels lonely and lost. People suffered from the loss and separation caused by the war. The policy of evacuating children from urban centers, food shortage, the removals caused by bomb damage are problems faced families at that time. The main feelings dominated this period were guilt, fear and discontinuity. The time of war was a time of destruction of the natural world, innocent people and kidnapping of children. The war had an immediate impact on the 'Comics'. John Rowe Townsend wrote "since The Second World War the realistic has continued to be the dominant mode in America and Australia fiction for children" (Townsend 261).

During the post-war period, there was a mood of uncertainty derived from the aftermath of The Second World War. Writers face the questions about if reality is a subject to introduce to children, how they can deal with these issues to convey their meaning. There were difficulties of offering stories about the world in this age; how to identify the 'real' world with fantastic elements, the changing structure of the family as there was a growing of individuality, and how to explain the realities of life and death as the ideal can never be achieved because there is movement between change and loss.

So the period following The Second World War witnessed the flourishing of fantasy in Children's Literature; writers do not want to provide a sense of the real world for children, they try to introduce children's fantasy texts. Writers cannot introduce the unpleasant truth about humanity. They do not know how to show the hard side of the world. However, there was a struggle between the imagined and the real; it was difficult for them to imagine a better world after what they suffered from The Second World War and the threat of nuclear annihilation as the sense of annihilation was a main feature in the novels of this period. Writers believe that children cannot understand this hard world, "the sun has to travel from East to West in a day; the starling has matters to attend to; whilst the babies will mature, learn to speak, and their teeth will come through. Gaining their teeth will take them into the food chain as predatory consumers in the real world" (Thacker 120), they want to give children a way of looking with hope toward the future, to offer something comforting and entertain them. Writers are themselves longing for



childhood and a world of fantasy. It was due to many of the greatest and most joyful children's fantasies the shadows of real and often unhappy events in their authors' lives.

Nesbit started with the comic adventures story of *The Story of The Treasure seekers* in 1899. She entered the world of magic and fantasy with her early stories for *The Strand*(1901) as she was publishing her stories in magazines. She also published *The Wouldbegoods*(1901) in the *Illustrated London News*, *The New Treasure Seekers*(1904) in *London Magazine* and followed it by *The Railway Children* (1906). Her books were full of wit, energy and invention. She began her first series of fantasies, *Five Children and It* in 1902, *The Phoenix and The Carpet* in 1904, *The Story of The Amulet* in 1906. She turned to a story of a real life in *The Railway Children* in 1906 then returned back to fantasy in *The Enchanted Castle* in 1907. Nesbit was convinced that entertainment should come first in any book for children, and then writer can pass any moral value for them. But at the same time, Nesbit was aware that children hate anything which pretends it is going to amuse them then turns to be another thing. Anna Blanch called Nesbit 'fantasy God-Mother'. For her, Nesbit was the first author who creates realistic child character in real world settings with magical objects "for many readers-H.G. Wells and Laurence Houseman, G.K. Chesterton and Noel Coward-for these and thousands more, the most magical stories of modern times are those by that Edwardian Wizard E. Nesbit"(Blanch 2).

Nesbit's children characters are modern and believable; they are both boys and girls who have equal shares of magic and adventures. They do talk, quarrel and play; as Nesbit did herself with her brothers. They are not completely right or completely wrong, they do both good and bad things, and they are usually middle-class children. Her children are the central figures whom the child reader will identify himself. "They are not particularly handsome, nor were they extra clever, nor extraordinarily good. But they were not bad sorts on the whole; in fact, they were rather like you."(Nesbit, *The Phoenix* 16) any children can do read her stories. Nesbit can do this because she in some sense had never quite 'grown up'. Doris Moore assured this meaning as she explained Nesbit's nature "she had all the caprices, the little petulancies, the sulks, the jealousies, the intolerances, the selfishness of a child; and with them went a child's freshness of vision, hunger for adventure, remorse for unkindness, quick sensibility, and reckless generosity" (Moore 208-209).

However, Nesbit manages to keep a beautiful balance between both realistic and fantasy worlds. Reality and fantasy were both included in her writing for children. She mixes magic into everyday life. And her mixture of the realistic and fantastic objects marks her out as one of the leading

lights of Victorian fantasy. She presented the economic realities of her society; how families tend to be in financial trouble. She showed the disadvantages of capitalism; the middle-class family suffered from the demands and stresses of capitalism and deprived them from enjoyment and wonder of childhood, how capitalism creates selfish individuals with a mechanistic and loveless society, and her view about modern suburbs and cities in general and especially of London, and the bad conditions of the inhabitants who were sick or starving as she explained through Jimmy in *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) her view about the modern world "I think magic went out when people began to have steam engines,..... and newspapers, and telephones and wireless telegraphing" (Nesbit, *Enchanted* 187). Also in *The Railway Children*, Nesbit dealt with poverty but she did not deal with it just from the outside, but she deals with her children characters from the inside. Anthea Bella, Nesbit's biography, explains that Nesbit had two great steady influences;

"Realism and humour. They leaven the most fantastic adventures in her books – and the conversation and homely adventures of the children who do *not* have the luck to meet with magic rings or carpets, sand-fairies or phoenixes, are just as entertaining as the travels of those who do" (Bell 74-75).

Nesbit started *Five Children and It* with showing the reality of the conditions of living in London especially for children as houses are small and children cannot find nice things to play with in a wide place without hurting the things or themselves. She explained how children need trees, waters, woods and sands to have fun not buildings "London is like prison for children, especially if their relations are not rich. And nearly everything in London is the wrong sort of shape—all straight lines and flat streets" (Nesbit, *Five* 3) this was the only part in this novel Nesbit dealt with real conditions of the society, after that she entered with the children the magic world and their adventures with their wishes.

Nesbit used the animating power of imagination, often figured as magic, as the central theme of *Five Children and It*. Nesbit started the magic world for the children by making the four children discover unknown talking animal, they went to play by digging in the gravel and they heard a voice speaking to them asking them to let him alone but children insisted on knowing who he is. It told them that he is a sand-fairy and that there were once many Psammeads but the others died because they got cold and wet. It also offered to give them wishes but their wishes will be turned into stone at the sunset.

The first wish made by the children was that 'they were all beautiful as the day'. Turning to beautiful children changed their look and their youngest brother, the Lamb, did not recognize anyone of them and

refused to stay with them. Also all the servants in their house, the cook, the nursemaid, did not know them and they refused to open the door for them and did not allow them to enter the house. The four children waited outside till the sunset to know if they are going to look themselves again or not. They were afraid to be turned into stones as the Psammead told them but at the same time they were preparing for their next wish that their servants did not notice anything happened to them in their next wishes. The wish ended at the sunset and children turned back to their natural selves. Next day children could not believe what really happened to them. All of them thought it was a dream except Cyril who confirmed that it was true and not a dream.

Their next adventure with the wishes was 'to be rich beyond the dreams of something or other'. They found that there was a lot of gold and they could not spend all of it before the sunset as the gold will be turned to be stones. However, the children could not spend any of it as it turned out to be 'not current coin', and it ended with trouble as they are accused of stealing his gold and taken by the police but they are rescued by the sunset as the gold turned to stones. The wish ended without buying anything useful or enjoyable with it except two pairs of cotton gloves, twelve penny buns, an imitation crocodile-skin purse and a ride in a pony-cart. They did not even feel any happiness in this wish.

For investigating different worlds with different people, children wished 'there were Red Indians in England' not big ones, but little ones for children to fight. Children thought to dress up like Indians in order to look like the powerful leaders of a large tribe to make Indians afraid from them but they had been surrounded by the Indians who are going to scalp them first then roast them but as usual everything is ended and the Indians disappeared at the sunset.

Nesbit enters the world of adventures for children in *The Phoenix and The Carpet*. She tells the story of four children; Robert, Cyril, Jane and Anthea with The Phoenix and the wishing carpet. The mother of the four children buys a new carpet instead of the one that was destroyed in an accidental fire. The children find an egg in the carpet which turns into a talking phoenix. The phoenix explains that the carpet is a magical one that will grant them three wishes per day. The four children go on many adventures wearing out their magical carpet.

At the beginning of the novel, Nesbit explains the nature of children as they cannot stay quiet, they must have something to do. She introduced children who are believable middle-class, experience a series of adventures, are generally good-natured and well-meaning but also quarrel amongst each other and get into trouble. Children play with fire and as a result their carpet had been destroyed and with bringing a new



one, their adventures and their magic world started to begin; they found a mysterious egg within the new carpet and they put it into the fire and the result was a phoenix, a talking bird with a story about the wishing carpet which can move them to anyplace they wish to go.

The phoenix told the children about the wishing carpet which would take them anywhere they choose, but with every wish and every place they go, the adventure faces troubles and ends with a specific wish; to go home. They went to the topless tower where they discover a treasure but the carpet sank to the bottom of the tower, leaving Robert clinging to the wall "Righto! Said everyone, for the adventure had shaken the nerves of all. So they all got on to the carpet again and said – I wish we were at home"(Nesbit, *Phoenix* 13).

Another adventure with the phoenix and the wishing carpet was taking the cook by accident to the sunny seaside, but again there were savages on the island who thought that the cook is their queen according to an old prophecy and the cook was happy to be left behind. Every adventure had consequences on the children but the hardest one was when children wished to go somewhere they can see the Lamb, their fifth baby brother, and their mother but no one can see them. It was hard for them to see their mother looking at them without seeing them. An adventure for children means fun and enjoyment but this was not happening in every time.

Through adventures and magical world, Nesbit reflects the reality of the London Society during the reign of Edward VII; the children and the phoenix visit The Phoenix Fire Insurance Company which the phoenix considered it as his temple. "I am', said the bird, simply, 'the Head of your House, and I have come to my temple to receive your homage. I am no parrot'- its beak curved scornfully- 'I am the one and only Phoenix, and I demand the homage of my High Priest"(Nesbit, *Phoenix* 38).

The children came to the conclusion that they should get rid of the phoenix and the wishing carpet "Nobody blamed the bird. It had acted in a perfectly natural manner. But everyone saw that it must not be asked to prolong its visit. Indeed, in plain English it must be asked to go!"(Nesbit, *Phoenix* 80) the phoenix and the carpet go away but the phoenix sends children all the toys they have ever wanted as a thank you.

Nesbit combined realistic, contemporary children in real – world setting with magical objects and adventures and sometimes travel to fantastic worlds. *The Railway Children* tells the story of three children; Roberta, Peter and Phyllis, and their middle – aged mother who found themselves lose their warm security of a comfortable life and have to live in the country. The children have their adventures to the railway station everyday watching the trains, exploring the station, making friends with

the porters and station master, waving to the passengers and waiting for the return of their father.

ChamutalNoimann considered Nesbit's *The Railway Children* a realistic fantasy novel. Noimann showed how Nesbit combined between the reality of the society which neglects its own needs and falls back into destructive practices out of sheer habits. Nesbit used the railway as a part of modernism in that age and The Station Manager as a representative of the industrial development in society, who is following the rules with a typical stern manner. Noimann explained how Nesbit dealt with different social classes to show that the reform of the society should start from people themselves. Nesbit showed the lower working class, represented in the porter, Mr. Perks who thought that any help from the community is considered charity and hurt his dignity; children wanted to celebrate his birthday and invited everyone to share but Perks considered the presents as charity and imply that he is unable to provide for his own family, but children can make him cross the lines between classes and convince him with the society where everyone is useful to the other.

Nesbit offered the children an adventure with the magic world in nature; the children heard a soft noise "but quite plainly to be heard through the sound of the wind in tree branches, and the hum and whir of the telegraph wires. It was a sort of rustling, whispering sound; it grew louder and more rustling and rumbling."(Nesbit, *Railway* 39). The children lived the adventure of hearing this strange sound and tried to find what is it or what it is going on in the forest. It turned to be 'a moving tree', it were walking down the side of the cutting "it is magic, said Phyllis, breathlessly. ' I always knew this railway was enchanted."(Nesbit, *Railway* 40) Children were surprised but happy at the same time; it was a new adventure for them. They run to the station to warn people from the 'moving tree' before any accident could happen.

Nesbit also used the talking animal in her novel as the dog was speaking with the children; Bobbie had a conversation with the dog as they were trying to help her (the dog) and her baby and the dog understands this "I'm bound to bark and bite if strangers came into my master's cabin, but I know you mean well, so I won't REALLY bite."(Nesbit, *Railway* 54) the children speak with her in a natural way as it is their own world.

Nesbit turned the children from the secondary world, the imaginative world, to the tough truths of the real world. she introduced information about their real world to children and offered the themes of unjust imprisonment and political repression; their mother started to give her threechildren some information about the Russian Society at that time and how there was a discrimination among rich and poor people as no one

can dare to say anything about rich people doing wrong or how to make poor people better and happier. She told them this information through the story of the Russian gentleman whom they offered to take to their house from the station as he was so ill, the mother came to tell them that he is a writer who was sent to prison for writing a beautiful book about poor people and how to help them. She explained how prisoners sent to Siberia by walking for days and weeks in a chain, each convict chained to other, and guards beat those who fell down and could not get up to go on until they reach the mines where they stay for life. The children were shocked from this kind of reality; it was hard for them to imagine injustice and being sent to prison for nothing wrong. Nesbit started the situation for the children as an adventure ; taking a stranger from the station to their house and waiting their mother to tell them his story, then she came to real life, to the reality of the world they are living in and do not know anything about the other bad side of it.

Their mother continued the story with telling them that when the war came, he volunteered as a soldier as Russian prisoners were allowed to and with the first chance, he escaped and came to England to search for his wife and children whom he knew escaped to England after he had caught. Again Nesbit shows the confusion of the children about what is right and what is wrong in the real world to be done.

Towards the end of the novel, Nesbit came to reveal the secret behind the moving of the family to the country and the reason for the disappearance of children's father; it was another reality in their life which they do know nothing about it. It is the reality of the prison again; their father was shut up in prison charging with selling State Secrets to the Russians, he was considered a spy and a traitor. Nesbit showed how sad and shocked Bobbie was when she knew this truth, but at the same time she wanted to understand what and why did it happen. Her mother explained to her but she still could not imagine how this awful thing can happen to her father.

Nesbit offered the magic world through her three novels; *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix* and *The Carpet and The Railway Children* but sooner or later the magic itself brings trouble and problems and the children at certain time are happy to escape from it and back into the old familiar world. She mixed the magic and real worlds in the children's world.

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