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## Crossing the "Great Gulf": Narration, Nostalgia, and "Contraband Memory" in Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*

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Crossing the “Great Gulf”: Narration, Nostalgia, and  
“Contraband Memory” in Edith Nesbit’s  
*The Story of the Treasure Seekers*

Lauren Poet Brown

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Crossing the “Great Gulf”: Narration, Nostalgia, and  
“Contraband Memory” in Edith Nesbit’s  
*The Story of the Treasure Seekers*

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During the nineteenth-century “Golden Age” of children’s literature, many British writers conceptualized childhood through the lens of restorative nostalgia, writing books that attempted to re-create an idealized version of childhood that never actually existed. This has led critics of children’s literature from this era to characterize many Victorian authors’ depictions of childhood as a fictionalized adult product that serves to colonize child readers, interrelating them into adult narratives and ideologies. Edith Nesbit was well aware of this tendency, and in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), she attempts to subvert it with her child narrator, Oswald Bastable. With Oswald, Nesbit works to create a version of childhood that crosses what she calls the “great gulf” separating adult writers and child readers by activating “contraband memory.” Contraband memory is, for Nesbit, memory lacking the cloying nostalgia that makes other authors’ versions of childhood falsely idealized. Oswald begins the novel seeking to mimic the idealized memories he finds in children’s books, stealing them and reshaping them to fit his everyday life. But he soon discovers that many of these stolen memories do not play out in real life as they do in books, and Oswald ends the novel with an archive of unidealized memories that offer readers a model of resistance to the literary colonization common in children’s literature. By archiving his childhood memories before they have time to be distorted by adult nostalgia, Oswald creates the kind of contraband memory that Nesbit feels will lead to something new: the representation of more realistic versions of childhood.

Keywords: children’s literature, nostalgia, narration, Edith Nesbit, Golden Age of children’s literature, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, memory, colonization, childhood

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my incredible committee members for helping me to shape, write, and polish this thesis. I am especially grateful for Dr. Jamie Horrocks for being an excellent mentor, for giving me countless hours of her time, and for helping me grow as a scholar, writer, and person. This essay is only possible because of her. I am grateful for Dr. Trent Hickman's quick and thorough feedback and for encouragement to stretch my thought process and refine my argument. And I am also grateful for Dr. Jon Ostenson who lent me multiple helpful books, directed my reading, and provided insightful feedback.

I would also like to thank my family members who supported me throughout my thesis. Thank you to my mom for reading my many drafts and teaching me to love learning. Finally, I want to give a special thank you to my husband, Steven, who always made sure I was fed, stayed up with me during the late nights, and listened to all my crazy ideas. Thanks to all!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Children’s Literature in the Victorian Era .....	6
Colonization and Narration in Children’s Literature .....	11
Oswald, Narration, and Contraband Memory.....	17
Conclusion .....	29
Works Cited .....	32

## Introduction

Oswald Bastable, the plucky, twelve-year-old narrator of Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), is sure he knows better than any adult when it comes to writing good children's literature.<sup>1</sup> Early in this popular late-Victorian novel, Oswald states, "I have often thought that if the people who write books for children knew a little more it would be better" (10). Oswald complains that adult authors write too much about "all the days where nothing happened" or about trivial activities such as eating, sleeping and "dull things like that" (10). Instead, he wants to focus his attention, as both protagonist and narrator, on "the best part of books" which is "when things are happening" (10). Oswald's commentary on adult authors' writing reflects Edith Nesbit's own views on the failure of children's literature. For Nesbit, as well as for her character Oswald, there was something lacking in the children's literature written by her contemporaries.

Nesbit conceptualized this missing something in terms of a physical division between children and adults. Nesbit, a prolific writer herself—she wrote over a dozen novels and numerous short stories for children, the most famous being her novels *The Railway Children* (1906) and *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*—was especially sensitive to the way in which adult writers and child readers seemed unable to communicate naturally and directly. In her 1913 manual on writing children's literature, Nesbit states,

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<sup>1</sup> Though *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* might be categorized as a middle-grade book by today's definitions, this category did not exist for Victorians, who would have considered the novel as simply a piece of children's literature. In fact, there was little categorization of children's literature beyond it being for "juvenile" readers until the late nineteenth century, when authors began to separate children's literature based on gender. Lundin writes, "while books for the youngest readers tended to be more gender inclusive, those for older children divided largely into adventure fiction for boys and domestic chronicles for girls" (42-43). These books for older children "often dealt with themes of the 'test of manhood' or 'true womanhood'" (42). *Treasure Seekers* includes both domestic and adventurous elements.

There is a freemasonry between children, a spontaneous confidence and give-and-take which is and must be forever impossible between children and grown-ups, no matter how sympathetic the grown-up, how confiding the child. Between the child and the grown-up there is a great gulf fixed, and this gulf, the gulf between one generation and the next, can never really be bridged. (*Wings* 4)

Nesbit's "great gulf" suggests an uncrossable divide that creates an "us" and "them" dichotomy between children and adults. Grown-ups, Nesbit explains "are people who once were children and who have forgotten what it felt like to be a child" (*Wings* 5). The "gulf," then, seems to be a function of the passage of time, a physical manifestation of the growth from child to adult that ends with an irreconcilable change of perspective. Once the gulf is crossed and this new perspective is set in place, adults cannot go back to childhood; instead, they rely on memories of childhood, memories that are often colored by nostalgia when they are re-created for children in the guise of fiction.

The tension that exists between the child reader and the adult writer of children's literature, expressed by Nesbit as a "great gulf," has been explored by numerous critics almost from the time that children's literature began to be a subject of academic study. One popular theory, posited by critics such as Jacqueline Rose, Perry Nodelman, and Jack Zipes, suggests that children's literature is a form of colonization. In *The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Rose argues that adult authors use children's literature to coerce children into adopting expectations, conventions, and ideals set up by adults. This coercion not only further separates children from adults, Rose contends, but it also bids children to conform to adult desires. Rose explains, "Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in

between” (1-2). Other critics agree with Rose, believing that children’s literature is rife with adult influence, even if that influence is created unintentionally. Ulrich Knoepflmacher contends that since adult authors were once children, “all children’s books involve, in varied combinations and to varied degrees, an adult reactivation of childhood selves all of us harbor” (xiv). This makes children’s book adult territory rather than child territory, wherein small versions of adults who act out adult fantasies of childhood take the place of actual children.

Not all critics feel that children’s literature is colonizing in nature, however. Marah Gubar directly challenges Rose in her *Artful Dodgers*, arguing that adult authors purposely put material in their books that teach children to resist and revise adult ideals. Gubar feels that adult authors should “carefully acknowledge the tremendous power that adults and their texts have over young people, while still allowing for the possibility that children—immersed from birth in a sea of discourse—can nevertheless navigate though [sic] this arena of competing currents in diverse and unexpected ways” (32-33). Children’s literature, according to Gubar, can help children navigate the adult world and learn to question adult beliefs.

Gubar is not alone in believing that children’s literature can be a locus of resistance. In *The Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction*, Barbara Wall acknowledges that “all writers for children must, in a sense, be writing down [that is, writing in a less complex or less nuanced way than they would for adults]. If they write with an educated adult audience in mind—their own peers—their stories will surely be, at best not always interesting and probably often unintelligible, and at worst positively harmful, to children” (15). While many authors do have a tendency to “write down” to their audience in a condescending way, widening the gap between children and adults, some “write down” in a way that helps children navigate the world around them without losing their own desires and expectations. Nesbit, according to Wall, is one

of these authors because although she was aware that adults were reading her stories as well as children, “her interest in her child audience soon took precedence. Content to play with and entertain child readers, she began to concentrate on a single, rather than double, audience” (149). Nesbit, by writing just for children, was attempting to cross the uncrossable gulf between child reader and adult writer and approach the shores of childhood.

Yet to approach is tricky business, even for the most self-conscious author. Nesbit believed that some adults “may learn to see across it [the gulf], a little, or sometimes in rare cases lean very far across it so that you can just touch the tips of the little fingers held out from the other side” (*Wings* 4). To create children’s literature that could reach those fingertips, however, an author required a special tool, something that Nesbit refers to as “contraband memory.” “Contraband memory” according to Nesbit, is the key to writing children’s literature that can successfully engage children without coercion or colonization and that can offer what seemed to her like an authentic version of childhood, one unadulterated by adult interests. Nesbit explains in *Wings and the Child* that most adult writers have lost their sense of what their childhood was really like and thus end up writing stale and artificial stories about children that are saturated with nostalgia and idealism. However, some adults, Nesbit claims, manage to carry across the gulf of time memories that are preserved in their initial form, as though trapped in amber at the time of their childhood making. Because the adults who maintain these memories “have managed to slip past the Customs-house with their bundle of memories intact” (*Wings* 5), contraband memories are precious commodities. Smuggled through the “Customs-house” of time, illicitly existing in the world of adulthood but maintaining their foreign origin, these memories must be kept secret and guarded by the adults who possess them—adults, writes Nesbit, who “can never fully display them [these memories]” (*Wings* 5). Nesbit believed that she

was one of these special adults who had managed to smuggle her memories of childhood across the gulf and into adulthood, and this, she argued, gave her the ability to write children's literature based not upon the idealized memories of an adult but the "authentic"<sup>2</sup> memories of a child.

From the outset of *Treasure Seekers*, it is clear that Oswald considers himself to be Nesbit's assistant in this process of recording and archiving "authentic" childhood memories. But his efforts are complicated by the fact that Oswald deals in his own kind of contraband—or stolen—memories. Oswald is well aware that adults invest idealized memories of childhood in the books they write and the stories they tell, and throughout the novel, he steals these memories with reckless abandon. Sometimes he gets these idealized memories from oral retellings, but most often he takes them from the books he reads, books that are (of course) written by adults. These stolen memories become the basis for Oswald's adventures, the fodder for his own childhood experiences, as he tries to "restore the fallen fortunes" of the "House of Bastable" (2).

Idealized as they are, these stolen memories carry with them adult expectations and a great deal of nostalgia for a time and a place that could not possibly exist in reality. But Oswald mostly overlooks this fact as he selects appropriated memories from the archive he maintains in his head and sets about trying to reenact them as actual adventures in his own life. In the context of Rose or Nodelman, this would suggest that Oswald is heavily invested in his own colonization, his own interpellation into adult ideology via the idealized memories he steals. In fact, it seems that Oswald is following a pattern that would enable him to become a colonizer of

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, there is no such thing as a truly "authentic" memory. Memories are often unstable and fluid and can change over time. Le Goff points out that "psychologists and psychoanalysts have insisted, in the case of memory as well as in that of forgetting . . . on the conscious or unconscious manipulations that interest, affectivity, desire, inhibition, and censorship exercise on individual memory" (54). By "authentic" memory, I refer to memory presented by Nesbit as having limited adult mediation. Nesbit, like all adults, is also writing nostalgically and cannot have "authentic" childhood memories. However, her attempt to remove nostalgia from memory by the use of her narrator Oswald and his creation of contraband memories enables her to work with memory differently than her contemporaries.

later child readers of his own text when he states that he “shall just tell [us] the nice, interesting parts” of his childhood (10). It appears that Oswald is idealizing his memories here, but this is not the case. Many of the memories that Oswald creates by re-creating the memories he has purloined highlight his failures and the inability of his stolen, idealized memories to measure up to reality. As narrator, Oswald could choose to record memories similar to the ones he finds in books, memories of children finding happiness, success, and pleasure when they conform to adult ideals. Yet for the most part, he does not. By refusing to fill his novel with childhood memories polished by nostalgia and idealism, Oswald replaces the idealized version of childhood found in many children’s books with a more realistic version of childhood that works to resist the colonization of young readers. In his deliberate and self-conscious selection process, Oswald steals idealized memories and turns them into memories that—archived in his novel before they have time to change—have the potential of crossing the gulf in their un-idealized state through the actual text and becoming the kind of contraband memories that Nesbit feels will be able to teach children to craft their own personal childhood memories rather than mimic the idealized childhood archetypes outlined in children’s literature.

### **Children’s Literature in the Victorian Era**

Though many classify Nesbit as an Edwardian writer, and some even consider her stories to be the first modern children’s books, Nesbit’s *Treasure Seekers* crosses another type of gulf, the gulf separating two different literary moments. Nesbit wrote during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, which places her near the end of what critics call the “Golden Age” of children’s literature, a term describing the “unprecedented explosion of children’s literature that took place from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century” (Gubar vii). Though Seth Lerer points out that “there is no single golden age, no moment when the literature for children is

better, more precise, or more effective than at any other moment” (7), most critics agree that the production and quality of children’s literature truly changed in the nineteenth century.

One of the changes that occurred was the recognition of children’s literature as a genre of its own. Children’s literature existed before the nineteenth century, but early examples usually centered on instruction or came from adult books, such as *Gulliver’s Travels*, that were adapted for children (Basney 148). Elizabeth Harden states,

Until the latter half of the eighteenth century, very few books other than textbooks and books on courtesy had been written especially for the young. For entertainment, they shared in much of the literature designed for their elders—translations from Latin classics, tales of King Arthur, legends, ballads, lives of the saints, Aesop’s *Fables*, and stories of history and travel. Many of these stories appeared in the shape of broadsides and chapbooks, and aside from being badly written, their content was often coarse, and the pictures that accompanied them were little more than crude woodcuts. (28)

During the Golden Age, authors began to focus on writing for children not only for educational purposes but for entertainment as well (Lerer 10). By doing so, children’s literature emerged as its own genre, one that is not classified by content as many genres are, but by its intended reader, the children (Cadden xxvii).

This was only made possible by the fact that more children’s literature was being produced in the nineteenth century, and the stories that were produced were of higher quality than those that came before. In fact, many children’s books written during the Golden Age are ones that many people still recognize today as beloved classics: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island*, *The Jungle Book*, *Peter Pan*, *The Secret Garden*, and more. As Golden Age authors wrote higher-quality children’s literature, wrote more of it, and wrote with

the intent of entertaining children specifically, the genre of children's literature emerged as distinct from other types of literature.

At the same time that children's literature was formalizing its generic conventions, a new conception of childhood was also emerging. That is, the type of literature aimed at children was not the only thing reshaped during this era. Gubar explains,

Particularly during the Golden Age of children's literature, a host of critics agree, political, social, and religious crises led Victorian and Edwardian authors to construct childhood itself as a golden age, a refuge from the painful complexities of modern life. According to this line of thinking, when children's authors whisk child characters away to Wonderlands, secret gardens, or uninhabited islands, it attests to their 'regressive desire for a preindustrial, rural world,' as well as their longing to believe in the existence of a natural, autonomous self, free from the imprint of culture.<sup>3</sup> (4)

This notion of childhood was heavily influenced by Romantic ideology. James Hold McGarven claims that Romantics such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were torn between "the simultaneous idealization of the child" and a "lament over the loss of their own childlike innocence" (2). McGarven believes that "this tension, expressed repeatedly in Romantic texts, . . . both lovingly engendered and relentlessly shadowed the efflorescence of imaginative children's literature in the Victorian period" (2). This Romantic "idealization of the child" and "lament" over the loss of innocence was refined by Victorians writers, creating an idealized concept of childhood. These memories are idealized because they reflect childhood as

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<sup>3</sup> Though authors in the Golden Age began to see children as "autonomous" and free from the culture of influence, they still saw them as separate from adults. So separate, in fact, that they felt children needed to be communicated with differently from adults, and so authors would often "write down" to children on a level that adults felt children could understand.

a separate, Edenic, innocent state through an adult lens that is much more sterilized than actual sticky childhood. It is no surprise, then, that the texts created during this Golden Age suggest that childhood is a happy place, a place apart, special. Childhood, in this Romantic sense, is a secret garden that seems a sort of Garden of Eden which, as with Adam and Eve, cannot be returned to completely as an adult. Nesbit's own ideas about the "great gulf fixed" reflect this idea of childhood as a separate and special place.

Conceiving of childhood as a place apart required authors of children's literature during this time to construct childhood nostalgically. Before all else, childhood was a paradise their child selves possessed but now have lost. Robert Hemmings calls the "imaginative destination" of children's literature "an impossibly sanitized and Edenic time and space" (55) and suggests that such literature "is rich in retrospective longing for a past not as it was, but as it might only have been" (57). Children in these books become "functionaries serving the needs of the adult writer and reader" (Hemmings 56). Consequently, many Victorian authors, Knoepflmacher claims, "turned to their inner child" in order to write their stories (9). Knoepflmacher posits that some authors have a tendency to depict these lost inner selves as "dream-children" that reflect the Romantic ideal established by Wordsworth and John Ruskin,<sup>4</sup> children who are full of innocence and wonder and become tainted by society and adulthood (13). Alice at the beginning of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Diamond from George McDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* are examples of these idealized, Romantic dream-children. They reflect the Romantic ideal of the child as an other, a creature set apart and marked by its innocence and inexperience.

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<sup>4</sup> Knoepflmacher credits Ruskin as an inspiration to the six authors that he focuses on in his text (5). Ruskin creates a romantic child in his children's book *The King of the Golden River* through Gluck, a blue-eyed, blond-haired twelve-year-old boy whose kindness and innocence allows him to save his valley from destitution (47, 64-65).

Golden Age authors who didn't opt for dream-children followed a more realistic model, creating children who lived in the real world but who were nevertheless extremely ethical and moldable. Though these authors sometimes used elements of fantasy and fairytale in their own writing, they focused on creating novels that centered around education (23). The children in these stories are tiny ethical repositories into which the rules of society can be poured. They follow an "Edgeworthian"<sup>5</sup> model, using more or less realist conventions to depict how good children behave and grow into good adults. Neil Postman describes this depiction of childhood in contrast to the Romantic child:

[A]s childhood moved into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . there were two intellectual strains of which the idea was composed. We might call them the Lockean<sup>6</sup>, or Protestant, conception of childhood, and the Rousseauian, or the Romantic, conception. In the Protestant view the child is an unformed person who through literacy, education, reason, self-control, and shame may be made into a civilized adult. In the Romantic view it is not the unformed child . . . who is the problem. The child possesses as his or her birthright capacities for candor, understanding, curiosity, and spontaneity that are deadened by literacy, education, reason, self-control, and shame. (59)

Plenty of Edgeworthian/Lockean children exist in Golden Age children's literature, especially in Sunday School tracts and gift books that were used as schoolroom rewards. This version of

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Edgeworth wrote stories for adults and children, though her tales for children (like her most famous, "The Purple Jar") tended to be highly moral and instructive. Fiona McCulloch explains that before the Golden Age, authors of children's literature focused more on moral tales in which children were instructed how to be good. Edgeworth's 1796 book *The Parent's Assistant* featured Rosamond, a young girl who "is instructed or socialised by her mother" to become a good, moral child (1-2), while her 1801 *Early Lessons* introduced Edgeworth's popular Harry and Lucy characters.

<sup>6</sup> Postman explains that Locke and Rousseau had very different views on childhood. Locke saw the child as a potential citizen and consumer, whereas Rousseau saw the child as a creature of nature (56-59). Rousseau believed that children should not read books except *Robinson Crusoe*, as literature would corrupt them.

childhood is, however, just as much a reflection of an adult's perception of how a child should think and behave as the Romantic dream-child.

This notion—that children's books should overtly influence the way children think and behave—is quite different from the intent of books aimed towards adults. Adult literature often prefigures an objective reader who maintains a certain critical distance from the characters. But as Maria Nikolajeva explains, children are encouraged to do the opposite, to identify with the characters about whom they are reading and mold themselves after the characters (188-89). Perhaps this is why children's literature can have such an impact. Many adults can remember living and breathing alongside their favorite characters when they were reading as children. This identification can emotionally bind readers to certain books for life, but it also poses a problem that turns up in nearly every academic study of children's literature: the imposition of adult agency on the child subject.

### **Colonization and Narration in Children's Literature**

Children's literature as a form of colonization has been discussed by many critics, including Rose, especially, and Nodelman.<sup>7</sup> Notably, Nodelman spends considerable time thinking about the concept of memory and how adult memory enables the colonization<sup>8</sup> of the child through children's literature. Nodelman states that all adults carry in their minds “personal versions of [their] own childhoods” (“The Other” 33) based on memories typically idealized by nostalgia, versions that “emerge . . . from adult authors' need to speak from their adult experience” (*Hidden* 210). These embellished memories are then written into books for children

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<sup>7</sup> Nodelman compares elements of children's literature to Edward Said's famous theories on Orientalism in his article “The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature” (29).

<sup>8</sup> Though Nodelman's equation of child colonization with Said's scholarship could be problematic, as it simplifies and sanitizes the idea of colonization, it is an attempt to try to explain the power dynamic between child and adult found in children's literature and provides an interesting lens of study for that dynamic.

to read in order to “restore” what adults think is in the model childhood, “childhood as it ought to be” (33). But inevitably, childhood and children in books are different from childhood and children in real life. When authors “perceiv[e] a gulf between this ideal childhood [remembered by adults and represented in their books for children] and the real behavior of children we know, we work in literature and life to make children more like the ideal” (33). Children reading such literature learn that childhood should be the way adults are imagining it to be. They, in turn, remember their childhoods in the way taught to them by the books they read as children.

Children begin to use the nostalgic memories written by adults as their own rather than their own personal memories. When these children become adults and begin to write children’s literature, their books perpetuate an adult idealized version of childhood for new child readers to adopt, and the cycle continues. In other words, adult writers for children learn to remember childhood in an idealized way through children’s literature and to reproduce this Romantic ideal of childhood, the idea of the child being a separate, innocent, Edenic creature, in their own books. The cycle perpetuates itself indefinitely as new adult writers teach new child readers how to remember their childhoods when they are grown.

Often, authors in Golden Age literature created their narratives by looking back and remembering childhood with the nostalgia they felt for their own childhood. Svetlana Boym claims that nostalgia “is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has ever existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy,” and this romance powers a number of adult-narrated children’s books (xiii). Sometimes an author feels that he or she has lost his or her childhood to time and seeks to reclaim it through storytelling. By trying to restore the lost “home” of childhood, these authors reminisce with a specific type of nostalgia that Boym calls “restorative nostalgia.” Restorative nostalgia, Boym explains, is

created when a person or a group of people take selective parts of the past and use them to create a modified notion of tradition in the present, claiming that they are following practices from the past. In reality, their notions of the past have been reformed to fit modern desires and are given new meaning (41-42). Additionally, restorative nostalgia is often used in attempts to remedy or repair something broken in the present. That is, people believe that past traditions or beliefs can solve modern problems if applied correctly. Restorative nostalgia can be dangerous, however, as it often creates a distorted, idealized view of the past, as with the case of childhood. Adults find themselves longing for the lost Eden of childhood and tend to use restorative nostalgia while writing children's literature in an attempt to restore and fix the childhood that they lost.

Adult authors who use restorative nostalgia unwittingly create a conspiratorial community, as communities that are based on restorative nostalgia often have a conspiratorial element to them. Boym explains that these "imagined communities" are made up of people with the same distorted view of a past "home" who feel that this home is "forever under siege" and needs constant defending (43). These people cling to a restored vision of "home" rather than seeing it for what it really is, and they may defend it with a "nearly apocalyptic vengeance" (43). In these conspiratorial groups, "home is not made of individual memories but of collective projections and 'rational delusions'" (43). Similarly, though perhaps not at the level of a conspiracy, Golden Age authors created a type of "imagined community" where the concept of childhood is shaped through restorative nostalgia as childhood memories are recycled and perpetuated through children's books. Children's authors attempt to restore the Edenic childhood "home" that never existed but seems to have existed because of its constant representation in children's literature.

To help restore this lost Edenic home, authors often use narrators to act as agents of restorative nostalgia desire, agents who often take the form of adult narrators who take on specific narrative roles to tell their stories. Victorian narrators may be parents, teachers, or preachers, roles in which the adult functions as an instructor for the child (Wall 39-42), or they may appear as older, wiser versions of their child selves engaged in reflecting on their mistakes as they narrate. Such adult narrators know “how to entertain children while at the same time keeping them in their place” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 211). Old Jim Hawkins, who begins *Treasure Island* by explaining that he is “go[ing] back to the time when my father kept the ‘Admiral Benbow’ inn,” is one such narrator, an adult figure who will offer child readers his high-seas adventure with much moralizing and reflection (Stevenson 1). A grown Ralph Rover similarly opens *The Coral Island* from a position of adulthood, “with the memory of my boyish feelings strong upon me” and with the intention of providing boy readers with “valuable information” that will be of “great profit” to them (1). Whether intentional or not, a power dynamic is put into play when an adult narrator tells the child reader a story. Sometimes these instructional adult narrators were based off of the authors themselves. Maria Jacobson suggests that in some fiction, particularly fiction written for boys in the nineteenth century, authors frequently use autobiographical elements, relying on what they know in order to write their stories (17). These autobiographical memories, however, have the potential to be laced with restorative nostalgic memories. Because children are socialized to respond submissively and obediently to adults in instructional roles, both fictional and autobiographical, such narrators exert a powerful force on child readers, encouraging them to accept a notion of childhood created by restorative nostalgia.

As a consequence of this influence, child readers begin to believe that their childhood is similar to all other childhoods. They believe that they share this experience and thus become part

of the conspiratorial community of nostalgic adults as they age and claim these memories as their own. For example, Jacobson explains that “boy books” from the nineteenth century often “portra[y] widely shared boyhood experiences” that “allo[w] each male reader to flesh out the page before him with his own memories” (24). Readers often join in with these idealized memories, taking them as part of their own memoirs, merging them into something that looks like a shared experience, the staples of childhood. Child readers begin to use these shared experiences rather than their own personal experiences, the nostalgic memories of adults supplant personal childhood memories, and readers begin their initiation into the conspiratorial group of adult authors who use restorative nostalgia to write about childhood. This initiation results in a layering of nostalgia, first that of the author who recalls childhood memories and inserts them into the narrative, and then that of the reader whose own memories combine with those of the author such that a sense of “shared experience” of childhood emerges (24).

Eleanor Reeds describes this layering of nostalgic memory as “elegiac,” a narrative lament for the child the narrator once was but is no longer. “Elegies for lost boyhood,” according to Reeds, comprise a huge portion of the Victorian boy books that remain popular even today (61). The nostalgia in these books creates what Reeds terms a “temporal gap” between “the ‘I’ that experiences and the ‘I’ that narrates in retrospective accounts of boyhood” (61). Borrowing a phrase from Dorrit Cohn, Reeds posits that this separation between the experiencing ‘I’ and the recalling ‘I’ gives “cognitive privilege” to the adult over the child; that is, the adult narrator is able to construct the memories of childhood as he or she likes, having both more knowledge than the experiencing child within the text and more temporal space to reflect. This temporal space is also present between adult author and child reader. Reeds suggests that while many critics believe that this temporal space creates characters that child readers are taught to imitate, most

child readers are actually able to identify that these characters are “the fictitious product of dangerous nostalgia” (70), dangerous in that they have the potential to influence children. But since Reeds argues that child readers see through this nostalgia, it seems that the nostalgia is only dangerous to the adults perpetuating an idealized childhood that they can never return to. What Reeds does not consider, however, is the potential power of the imagined community created by inviting child readers to absorb the ideals presented by nostalgic adults. Children, when they become adults, are invited to join the community of writers who see childhood with a restorative lens, and though they perhaps have the ability to identify these child characters as fictitious when they are children, they lose that ability when they become adults and join the imagined community built around an idealized childhood. This widens the temporal gap between adult author and child reader.

Adults may attempt to use nostalgia to fill that gap in order to restore their lost childhoods. This restorative nostalgia turns children’s literature into a playing field in which children become subject to the ideologies of adulthood. For an author like Edith Nesbit, however, creating and deploying “contraband memory” can minimize nostalgia and the colonizing potential that it has. Key to the creation of “contraband memory” in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, is Nesbit’s use of Oswald Bastable. Because Oswald is a child, the temporal gap between his experiencing “I” and his narrating “I” is much smaller than that of his adult counterparts. Narrating Oswald still has some “cognitive privilege” over the Oswald whose adventures he describes, but because these adventures take place in a past that is so close to the literary present, the power differential is negligible. So is the nostalgia that colors Oswald’s memories, which is minimized by the fact that Oswald is still a child when he records his memories. He ends the book, for example, writing in the present tense: “And now we are to go on living in the big house on the Heath, and it is

very jolly. Mrs. Leslie often comes to see us, and our own Robber and Albert-next-door's uncle" (196).<sup>9</sup> This suggests a continuation or consequence of the events he has recalled rather than a temporal separation. Not all nostalgia is removed, as Oswald is Nesbit's own fictional creation and carries her nostalgia within himself. And yet through Oswald and his creation of contraband memory, Nesbit identifies and critiques the restorative nostalgia so commonly found in children's literature and thus introduces a type of child character who leaves the romanticized model of nineteenth-century literature behind and moves toward the kind of child common in twenty- and twenty-first century children's literature.

### **Oswald, Narration, and Contraband Memory**

Though there are numerous child narrators before Oswald Bastable,<sup>10</sup> Nesbit brings something new to children's literature with his creation. Wall claims that Oswald is the predecessor of a new kind of children's book narrator, one created solely for children rather than for the adults reading over their shoulders (152). Gubar describes Oswald as both "appealing as well as appalling" (43)—appalling in his arrogance and his condescension but appealing in his clumsy pre-adolescent charm. Both Anita Moss and Anne Lundin suggest that Oswald is an intervention in convention, though they disagree on how he functions. Moss notes that Oswald "permits Nesbit . . . to create a more convincing rendering of childhood experience" (191).

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<sup>9</sup> The novel does take a surprising, nostalgic turn at the end, when Oswald's rich uncle comes to visit the family and is so charmed by the children that he saves their father's failing business and has them all come live with him. This is the kind of idealized conclusion that Oswald has learned to be patently false, and seems to be a reflection of restorative nostalgia. Oswald acknowledges that "This ending is like what happens in Dickens's books; but I think it was much jollier to happen like a book" (194). However, Oswald also demonstrates in this quote that it is "like" a book and that books do not always reflect reality, as he thought they did at the beginning of the novel. He also notes that his own happy ending is surprising, an inversion of reality, when he observes, "It is like as if our fortunes had been in an earthquake, and after those, you know, everything comes out wrong-way up" (185).

<sup>10</sup> Gubar explains while Nesbit is often credited as one of the first authors to use a child narrator, she had many predecessors. Some of these include the narrators in Dickens's *Holiday Romance*, Craik's *The Little Lychetts* (1855) and *Our Year: A Children's Book* (1860), Stretton's *Max Krömer* (1871), Ewing's *Mary's Meadow* (1883-4), and Molesworth's *The Boys and I* (1883) and *The Girls and I* (1892) (40).

Lundin claims that “Nesbit harmonizes the prior dissonance between the child-audience and adult-writer of children’s literature through the ‘voice’ of Oswald” (*Constructing* 95). While Lundin thus regards Oswald as a stabilizer, Moss suggests—and I agree—that Oswald agitates the power equilibrium created by adults and children. The “more convincing rendering of childhood experience” that Moss mentions results from Nesbit’s attempt to remove restorative nostalgia and idealization from Oswald’s narration. While it initially seems that Nesbit will offer the same kind of idealized version of childhood common in so many stories of the time, she surprises readers by representing Oswald’s childhood as happening presently, instead of in years past, and by offering an alternative to the idealized, nostalgic, memories readers expect.

Unlike adult narrators such as Jim Hawkins or Ralph Rover from *The Coral Island*, Nesbit chooses to have Oswald narrate with special proximity to his childhood, for he himself is a child and remains so for the entirety of the novel. This allows him to remember what other adult narrators of children’s literature have forgotten: that his ideas about how to live and behave as a child are largely constructed from sources outside of himself. Oswald steals these ideas from his neighbors, from strangers, but most importantly, Oswald steals the adventures that will become his own childhood memories from books. While many children build their own worlds, to some extent, from the things they encounter in books, and reenact literary scenes or impersonate literary characters in play, Oswald’s reenactments are not play—they are a kind of reality. When he steals memories lodged in books, he re-creates them in his everyday life, sees how well they work, and then—crucially—turns to examine them with a critical eye. By having Oswald examine these memories, Nesbit demonstrates how to break from restorative nostalgia.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Again, I feel it necessary to stress that Nesbit’s attempt to remove all nostalgia is impossible. However, the fact that Nesbit identifies the problematic nature of restorative nostalgia and attempts to rectify it helps her to remove some of this nostalgia and present readers with a different type of child character.

Nesbit uses Oswald's examination of these memories to find fault with the idealization that inevitably characterizes authors' depictions of childhood and to begin replacing these nostalgic memories with more realistic memories of his own. Oswald archives these latter memories in his novel with the hope that they will one day become contraband: memories smuggled into the adult world without being adulterated. As an adult creation, Oswald inevitably has some nostalgia attached to his character, but Nesbit uses him as a model. He demonstrates for child readers how to create their own potential contraband memory and thus to break from the colonizing cycle propelled by restorative nostalgia.

One of the first examples of Oswald's theft and reconstruction of memory occurs in an episode in which Oswald recounts his attempt to earn a reward by solving a crime. Oswald and his siblings one day decide—on the basis of memories Oswald has stolen from Sherlock Holmes and other detective stories in cheap “yellow-covered books”—to try detection as a money-making venture (*Treasure* 17, 19).<sup>12</sup> Oswald and his siblings set about doing what many authors hoped child readers would do: modeling their behavior on exemplary characters, appropriating, in the process, the values and ideologies of the author (Nikolajeva 188). Oswald takes his memory of literary detectives from his mental archive and attempts to re-create it in his own life so that his memories match those in the books he has read. Oswald explains to his siblings that “you can't choose what crimes you'll be detective about. You just have to get a suspicious circumstance and then you look for a clue and follow it up” (20). The children attempt to find a

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<sup>12</sup> While the Sherlock Holmes stories were not specifically geared towards children, children definitely read them. Writes Lundin, “older children read books whose subject matter attracted a broad popular audience” such as “Charles Dickens's novels” and “G.A. Henty's imperialistic adventures” (“Victorian” 41). Sherlock first appeared in the 1887 edition of *Beeton's Christmas Annual*. This periodical, which the *Antique Trader Vintage Magazines Price Guide* calls “the most expensive magazine in the world,” today sells for as much as \$150,000 but would have been easily accessible by Oswald (Stock). While not specifically a children's periodical, the color printing, lavish illustrations, and adventurous stories in *Beeton's* were particularly appealing to young readers like Oswald.

mystery through the newspaper, but nothing comes of their attempt (20). While protagonists in detective fiction can always spot a suspicious advertisement, the Bastables cannot. But the children are able to find a “suspicious circumstance”—their neighbors’ lights turn off and on at night when they are supposed to be out of town—and they decide to investigate.

Oswald quickly discovers, however, that the memories he has stolen from fiction in no way correspond to real life. Instead of replicating the success that always plays out in detective novels, Oswald’s investigation is bungled. He and his siblings soon discover that their neighbors are *not* out of town, and in their attempt to find out why, they end up spying on their neighbors in a very impolite and un-neighborly manner. During this attempt, Oswald falls, hits his head in the neighbors’ yard, passes out, is thus found to be trespassing, and must be carried away by Albert’s Uncle (another neighbor and friend of the children), who scolds Oswald and his siblings.

Oswald, narrating this misadventure in the third person, writes,

Albert’s uncle came in next day and talked to each of us separately. To Oswald he said many unpleasant things about how ungentlemanly it was to spy on ladies, and about minding your own business; and when I began to tell him what I had heard he told me to shut up, and altogether he made me more uncomfortable than the bump [he had received from his fall] did. Oswald did not say anything to any one. (28)

In disgrace, Oswald, on his own volition, goes to his neighbors to apologize for his blunder. He states (rather pathetically), “I am very sorry, I beg your pardon. We wanted to be detectives, and we thought a gang of coiners infested your house, so we looked through your window last night . . . and I know it is very dishonorable to pry into other people’s secrets, especially ladies’, and I never will again if you will forgive me this once” (28). Though he is trying to find the success always found in fiction by appropriating and reenacting the memories of the narrators in the

detective stories he has read, Oswald realizes that what he was doing was not only improper but patently unreal, and he records this realization in all of its inglorious humiliation.

At first it may seem that Oswald's detective adventure is a colonizing one. Albert's Uncle, an adult, seems to direct Oswald into acting in a certain way, a way that constitutes a behavioral ideal, and Oswald complies. Oswald is a little sadder, but a little wiser, and begins to conform to societal expectations, much in the same way that children read children's literature and then are colonized to accept an ideal childhood. However, there are two reasons why this does not constitute the kind of colonization described by Nodelman and other critics. First, there is a difference of intent that makes one process distinctively colonizing and the other educational. Albert's Uncle, unlike the adult authors in their highly-nostalgic imaginative community, is not attempting to restore an ideal. Rather Albert's Uncle is attempting to provide Oswald with tools to become a successful human being, tools (i.e. don't spy on ladies, be a good neighbor) that he can choose to use and implement in the future.

Second, in addition to showing the difference between a colonizing ideal and an educational moment, Nesbit also seems to be critiquing colonization by having Oswald engage with two contradicting narratives. The first is the idealized childhood depicted through the detective story, which Oswald attempts to follow, and the second is the scolding he receives for attempting to follow this ideal. Nesbit's introducing the second narrative (the scolding from Albert's Uncle) gives Oswald the opportunity to resist the first narrative, the nostalgic childhood presented to him in children's literature. Robyn McCallum and John Stephen explain that two conflicting ideologies are often important for resistance in children's literature, as "transgression defines a conflict between co-existing formations or ideologies, and privileges one over the other" (367). Oswald, in following the first narrative, did his best to mimic the idealized ideology

established for him by adult narratives as depicted in children's literature. This ideal, however, fails, and Oswald is told that the model he was determined to follow is wrong. Oswald is left to process these two conflicting narratives and quickly realizes that the ideal narrative, the one found in the yellow-covered detective novels, is a false narrative, and he privileges the more realistic narrative (it is rude to spy on your neighbors). By privileging the second, more realistic narrative, Oswald realizes on his own that he needs to seek the forgiveness of his neighbors and goes, unprompted by any adult, to apologize to them, thereby resisting the idealized narrative. Nesbit, through these counter-narratives and Oswald's response and critique to them, seems to suggest that authors need to re-examine the nostalgic ideals presented to children in children's literature, demonstrating how to circumvent the cycle of restorative nostalgia.

Similar to the two different narratives, Oswald is also left with two simultaneous sets of memories: the detective memories he stole from his books, and the detective memories he gained from his enactment of his stolen memories. The first memories are idealized, written by an adult author and recounted in a narrative that turns out successfully. Oswald's reenactment, however, is a failure. These failed memories which Nesbit illustrates are very real, and therefore, very un-ideal, full of failure, misunderstanding, and embarrassment. Though Oswald apologizes and is forgiven, he reflects with a critical eye that is immediate and registers no nostalgia on how painful it felt to be scolded ("more uncomfortable than the bump") and how ashamed he was ("Oswald did not say anything to any one") for spying on women. These emotions become part of the memory, preventing it from sliding into rosiness no matter how much time passes afterward.

Both sets of memories, the ideal and the actual, are archived in Oswald's mind, but only the latter find their way into the written archive Oswald is also keeping, the novel itself. Oswald

is keenly aware of which memories he is choosing to recreate, which to document, and which to abandon. He states early on, “I shall not tell you anything about us except what I should like to know about if I was reading the story and you were writing it” (10). Admittedly, what Oswald is doing here is very un-childlike. This kind of deliberation requires an adult perspective that many children do not have. Nesbit is clearly entering the text and doing what she wants her readers to do. However, by making Oswald the deliberator and selector of these memories, Nesbit is attempting to give children power that they do not usually have in other texts that are full of restorative nostalgia. By having Oswald participate in this deliberate assessment of which memories are suitable to keep and which should be discarded, Nesbit appoints Oswald a type of archivist, or, as Jacques Derrida would call it, an “archon” (10). Archons oversee archives, places where items, texts, stories, or memories are collected and stored. The “documents,” or items in the archive, are cared for and interpreted by archons. Archons, according to Derrida are “the document’s guardians” and “have the power to interpret the archives” (10). Through this interpretation of the documents, archons create laws and determine how to execute those laws. In this way laws both originate from and are enforced by an archon’s interpretation of the materials in the archive. By making Oswald an archon, Nesbit gives Oswald the power to archive contraband memory. True, Oswald is a fictional creation and an extension of Nesbit, and the real archontic power lies with her. However, Nesbit’s attempt to circumvent some of the nostalgic problems associated with children’s literature by giving Oswald the power to create potential contraband memories shows her attempting to remove much of the restorative nostalgia found in the imaginative communities of adult authors, who are archons in their own right presiding over the archives of children’s literature. Archives are often physical places, such as museums, books, or libraries, but Oswald’s archives are both mental and physical.

One archive that Oswald maintains and manages consists of the memories he takes from outside sources, books and people, which delineate how childhood should be enacted and remembered. Though this archive is comprised of materials focused almost entirely on children, the archons typically in charge of this archive are adults who interpret childhood and write it down in children's literature. It is in this archive that one finds the idealized memories that adults create for children to consume. Oswald constantly removes memories (like those found in the yellow-bound detective stories written for children) from this idealized childhood archive and deploys them in his own life. If he reads a particularly nice tale, Oswald saves it in this archive for his own future use. The idealized memories stored in this archive inevitably depict childhood as a separate, happy, Edenic paradise. Thus, they can never be the "contraband memories" that Nesbit describes because they are full of nostalgia and tainted by adult knowledge and desire. They paint for the children who peruse or appropriate them an "impossible" childhood (Rose 1), as Oswald quickly learns.

Oswald's theft and reenactment of the detective adventure drives home to readers the realization that the memories he documents and comments upon in the *Treasure Seekers* are fundamentally different from the memories of other narrators of children's literature which always, inexplicably, end well. As Oswald re-creates his stolen scenes and plots, and then reflects back on and analyzes his real-life results, he creates memories that are anything but ideal. Rather than being shiny and marked by success, his actual memories are bruised and ragged. They closely resemble the stolen memories of idealized childhood in terms of content, but they are un-idealized, and free from much of the restorative nostalgia found in other children's books. Nevertheless, they are what Oswald goes out of his way to preserve and record, even when this costs his considerable embarrassment. Having had no time to be polished with

the nostalgia that would surely color them if they are allowed to sit until an adult Oswald is ready to recall them on his own, these memories are placed by Oswald in a separate archive. This second archive consists of Oswald's own lived memories. Unlike the archive of idealized childhood memories, this mental repository of actual childhood memories stores memories that are messy, ugly, sometimes shameful, and always imperfect. And yet they are key to breaking away from the colonizing effects of children's literature, as they are void of much the restorative nostalgia that influences children to accept an adult-idealized childhood. Oswald, by having these potential contraband memories, has the potential to resist joining the imaginative community of adult writers who create fiction and the memory of child based on a restorative nostalgia.

In the detective episode, readers can see Oswald moving reflectively between the promises contained in the archive of idealized childhood memories and the sad realities in the archive of actual childhood memories, but this becomes even more apparent in the Lord Tottenham episode. This time, Oswald begins by stealing the idealized memories of childhood common in the *Little Lord Fauntleroy*-type books popular in the 1880s, books that feature plucky boys righting wrongs with their good-natured charm and quick thinking<sup>13</sup>. Oswald suggests that, since all their other efforts have failed, the children might be able to “restore the fallen fortunes” of the Bastable family by rescuing a wealthy old man from danger (98). Oswald states that he “felt quite certain that the books were right, and that the best way to restore fallen fortunes was

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<sup>13</sup> *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, written by Burnett in 1886, achieved huge popularity in both the United States and Britain. Wall states that the *Fauntleroy* books appealed to children because they contain “a noble child hero, a satisfying rags-to-riches story, and language and syntax which was simple enough not to exclude them” (168). *Fauntleroy* was popular among adults, too, who delighted “in watching Fauntleroy’s encounters with people who were unable, at least at first, to comprehend his goodness and his innocence” (168). In fact, Wall argues that though *Fauntleroy* may have been written for children, it was directed more towards adults (169).

to rescue an old gentleman in distress. Then he brings you up as his own son” (98). Oswald points out that “in the books the least thing does it—you put up the railway carriage window—or you pick up his purse when he drops it—or you say a hymn when he suddenly asks you to, and then your fortune is made” (98). He and his siblings thus concoct a plan to set their dog Pincher on Lord Tottenham, an aristocrat who often walks in the local park, so that they can rescue him from his artificially-constructed peril and claim the inevitable reward.

At first, Oswald’s plan works just as it would in a memory from the archive of idealized childhood. Pincher attacks Lord Tottenham, who behaves, Oswald observes, “exactly as if someone had explained to him beforehand what he was to do” (102). Oswald and his siblings then proceed to “rescue” Lord Tottenham from the dog, just like the children in their books. They even use a bookish type of dialogue, making observations such as, “Dicky, we must rescue this good old man,” “It is a dangerous task—but who would hesitate to do an act of true bravery?,” “Haste, ere yet it be too late,” and “Stand still, aged sir, and I will endeavor to alleviate your distress” (103-04). This is not how the children normally talk; however, they do their best to mimic the memories that they find in the books they read in order to make this scenario as close to the “reality” of fiction as possible. Of course, Fauntleroy fiction characteristically depicts a childhood that no one has really had, being recounted by a narrator who never really existed. But no matter; Oswald and his siblings are confident in his plan, sure that “the books were right.”

Their confidence quickly fades. It doesn’t take long for things to go awry—that is, for the episode to take a much more realistic turn than it does in Oswald’s stolen and idealized memory version of the adventure. In every book Oswald has read, the adult narrator describes his child self gaining success after performing such a rescue, and true to literary form, Lord Tottenham

offers Oswald half a sovereign for saving him from the dog. But Oswald finds that he feels too guilty about the situation to accept the man's money. In his narration of this moment, Oswald reflects, "It was very silly; but now we'd done it I felt it would be beastly mean to take the old boy's chink after putting him in such a funk. He didn't say anything about bringing us up as his own sons—so I didn't know what to do" (105). Through this reflection, Oswald is yet again confronting the two conflicting narratives presented to him: that of the ideal childhood, and reality. By recognizing that the ideal narrative is a flawed narrative, one doomed to failure, he is resisting the narrative given to him in idealized children's literature. He recognizes, before he is scolded, that what he is doing is wrong, that the narrative he has been given to follow is faulty. Oswald decides to break away from the narrative, and to tell Lord Tottenham that "he was very welcome, and we'd rather not have his money, which seemed the best way out of it" when Pincher begins to lick the children, causing Lord Tottenham to realize that the dog was really theirs (105).

Lord Tottenham collars the children, forcing Oswald to come face to face with the unrealistic nature of the memories upon which he had patterned his actions. The elderly man sits on a bench so that his eyes are level with Oswald's and makes Oswald "stand in front of him." "You would have taken my half-sovereign," Lord Tottenham says with considerable anger. "Such conduct is most—No—you shall tell me what it is, sir, and speak the truth" (107). Oswald is forced to answer, but he does so to readers and not to Lord Tottenham directly, admitting in narration to us, "I had to say it was most ungentlemanly" (107). Oswald continues, making sure readers see the disparity between the plan as it functions as an idealized memory of a narrator in a borrowed text and the plan as it functions in the real life of Nesbit's character: "I see now it was very silly, . . . but it didn't seem so till we did it . . . in the books if you rescue an old

gentleman from deadly peril, he brings you up as his own son—or if you prefer to be your father’s son, he starts you in business, so that you end in wealthy affluence” (107). The boy’s explanation is cut short, for as he says to readers, “I was so ashamed I couldn’t go on, for it did seem an awfully mean thing” (108). Oswald’s sister Alice steps in and offers a key observation: “we are really very, very sorry. But we wanted to be like the children in the books—only we never have the chances they have. Everything they do turns out all right” (108). It never seems to do so in the memories that Oswald records in his novel. They never work, of course, because these memories are actual memories rather than the nostalgia-driven idealized memories found in children’s fiction.

Once again, at the end of this episode, Oswald ends up with two separate memories of daring rescue, one from the idealized childhood archive (in which “everything . . . turns out all right”), and one from his actual childhood experience. By constantly using the memories from the archive of idealized childhood found in children’s literature, it seems that Oswald is thoroughly colonized: he has taken from books the nostalgically twisted memories of adults, used these as a model for his own childhood, and will replicate these memories in his own writing as the way childhood should be, thus perpetuating the nostalgic cycle described by Nodelman.

Oswald, however, breaks away from this cycle through his self-conscious critique of the viability of these memories.<sup>14</sup> As he realizes that his adventures as a detective and a rescuer of Lord Tottenham do not unfold as they are supposed to, Oswald creates new memories that profess the impossibility of the childhood represented in children’s literature. His memories of

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<sup>14</sup> Reeds and Gubar both discuss Oswald’s use of irony as a resistance to colonization (Reeds 63; Gubar 133). I agree but note that Oswald’s ironic narration is only part of his complicated use of memory.

failure (specifically getting the bump on his head for spying), scoldings (being chastised by Albert's Uncle and Lord Tottenham), embarrassment (feeling bad for spying on the ladies, having to admit his mistake to Tottenham), and misunderstanding (he was not actually going to take Lord Tottenham's money) come to comprise an alternative archive of actual childhood memory. This second archive is the novel, which becomes a record of Oswald's failed attempts to achieve the idealistic childhood described in children's literature. What Oswald doesn't recognize, however, is that his novel also bears witness to his refusal to comply with the conventions set out for narrators of children's literature, his refusal to fill the minds of other children with notions of childhood that are entirely unrealistic. He has saved his readers from the disappointment of finding themselves subject to the desires of that most powerful sovereign: the adult.

### **Conclusion**

There can be no mistaking that at the outset of *The Treasure Seekers*, Oswald wants to be colonized; that is, he wants to find himself having the kind of childhood described in children's literature, with his own idealized memories filling a book modeled after those he has read. But the workings of reality prevent him at every turn, and his own archive of actual childhood memories is filled with his failures that are recorded in the moment rather than retrospectively and therefore remain largely un-idealized. Nesbit has Oswald preserve the memories in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, giving a model of how memories may be smuggled across the great gulf of time, becoming true contraband memories. And they have; millions of young and old readers have enjoyed the markedly different childhood adventures narrated by Oswald for over a century now. As Nesbit knew, contraband memory is scarce, and those who find it discover a treasure.

Of course, by writing his adventures and misadventures down, Nesbit gives children the opportunity to read, imagine childhood to be just like it is in *The Treasure Seekers*, begin remembering their own childhood in similar terms, and thereby fall back into Nodelman's cycle of colonization. However, the fact that not all of Oswald's adventures are successful, or even happy, gives children the opportunity to resist. Rather than reading, consuming, and replaying idealized memories, children who read contraband memories like those in *The Treasure Seekers* are led to do as Oswald does: question the memories, analyze them, and archive them separately from their own actual childhood memories. Oswald's experience demonstrates to young readers the possibility of resisting the colonizing tug of idealization.

By using contraband memory to resist the idealization of restorative nostalgia, children are able to create new and different kinds of childhoods. Rather than the ideal, Edenic childhood so commonly found in Victorian children's literature, more realistic childhoods begin to emerge. By having Oswald examine, redefine, and record his memories to reflect childhood in a more realistic way, Nesbit is in many ways ahead of her time. She demonstrates a desire to give more respect and agency to her readers by trusting them to navigate their own childhoods and by acknowledging the childhood is not always like the books and can also include bumped heads, reprimands, shame, and sometimes tears. In this way, Nesbit's novel foreshadows many of the concerns that come decades after her time. During the mid-twentieth century, authors began to be concerned with representing more realistic childhoods that are filled with imperfect realities. In 1968, author Maia Wojciechowska complained that authors of children's books

keep going back to their own turn-of-the century childhoods, or write tepid little stories of high school proms, broken and amended friendships, phony-sounding conflicts between parents and children, and boring accounts of what they consider "problems." The gulf

between the real child of today and his fictional counterpart must be bridged. (qtd. in Cart 26)

As though responding to this concern, children's and young adult literature after the mid-twentieth century more and more often turned away from nostalgically-tinted experiences and began to offer greater realism. Nesbit, through her use of Oswald Bastable, is a forerunner of these new childhoods.

Through Oswald, Nesbit seems to be encouraging children to create their own memories, with all of the highlights and lowlights of childhood, and to archive these memories as children so that they might one day become the contraband that escapes the idealization wrought by nostalgia. Gubar points out that "both Nesbit and Oswald excel at revising other people's plots" (133), and it seems that Nesbit is encouraging children to do the same. If Oswald, and children like him, are successful in archiving actual childhood memories, rather than memories that have been polished by time or by an adult's desire to represent a childhood that conforms to their own ideologies, these future adults have the potential to stretch their fingers and reach across the gulf separating child readers and adult writers. Although adults cannot ever fully participate in childhood again, such contraband memories might allow them to see childhood for what it really is, in all of its inglorious, scabby light. In a sense, Nesbit offers her readers the forbidden fruit, allowing child readers to exit the romantic Eden of childhood by creating potential contraband memories.

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