



Classics in Short No. 120: The Little Bookroom

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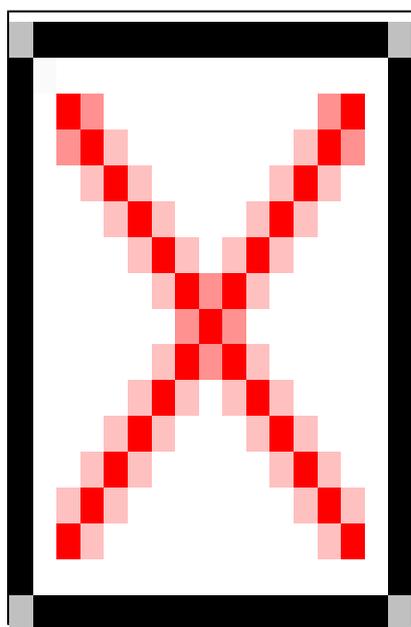
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The Little Bookroom by **Eleanor Farjeon**

What a wonderful storytelling voice is revealed in **The Little Bookroom**.



The **Carnegie Medal**

was first awarded by the Library Association to Arthur Ransome's **Pigeon Post** in 1936 as 'an outstanding book for children' published in the previous year. From then on the award has had an eccentric history, being not so much a measure of literary success as of the critical foibles of children's librarians.

In 1956

the presentation of the Medal to Eleanor Farjeon on the strength of **The Little Bookroom** is a case in point. For this collection of twenty-seven stories may have been first published in 1955 but the stories themselves were hardly new, several dating back to the 1920s and some published then as individual books, mostly in Blackwell's '**Jolly Books**' series. It's true that the line drawings and decorations by Edward Ardizzone turned the assemblage into an outstanding book (he won the first **Kate Greenaway Medal** for **Tim All Alone** in the same year¹ and might have won it for this too) but, as with Walter De La Mare in 1947, who got the Medal for his **Collected Stories for Children**, the award was surely prompted by a wish to honour a much-loved writer for her huge and higgledy-piggeldy oeuvre for both adults and children. (Oddly, in something of a false start, **The Little Bookroom** was singled out in 1957 as the first award made by **IBBY** for its **Hans Christian Andersen Medal**, a harbinger of the subsequent decision to make the award for a total

body of work.)

By happy coincidence

Farjeon's first children's book was published a hundred years ago this year, during her brief but intensive friendship with Edward Thomas: **Nursery Rhymes of London Town**, illustrated with quasi woodcuts by Macdonald Gill, the younger brother of Eric. The contents, some of which stem from Punch, are a gay mixture of wit and doggerel ('Pimlico, pamlico, pumpkins and peas! / Pepper them properly else you will sneeze / Pop in a pipkin and leave them till one, / Pimlico, pamlico, then they'll be done!') and they are drawn from a bottomless well of versifications. Much ephemeral stuff appeared in newspapers and magazines along with a lifetime of volume publications in anything from the fragile **All the Way to Alfriston** (1918) to handsome collections illustrated by such artists as the Moreton-Sales and Gwen Raverat.

Indisputably,

the totality of her achievement ? the mass of verses, songs, stories short and long, plays and pantomimes ? has its origins in 'the little bookroom', the seat of her education, whose 'worlds filled with poetry and prose, and fact and fancy' she describes unforgettably in the Author's Note at the start of the 1955 collection. These twenty-seven stories were chosen by herself from well over a hundred contenders and Eileen Colwell ? storyteller and close friend of Farjeon ? who had probably read the lot with a discerning eye called them 'the cream'. (Perhaps because of length, two spoonsful were omitted: **Tom Cobble** who was stolen by fairies and **Elsie Piddock** who skipped in her sleep.)

That was all long ago

when the world was a different place and when the stories could be seen not only as part of a living author's own career but also as belonging to a more fully recognised genre of creators of essentially Romantic *Kunstmärchen* ? D'Aulnoy, say, or Andersen, or MacDonald ? all of whom would have had a place in that little bookroom. Today though among unRomantic twitterers, when a dozen bookrooms can be accommodated in a single Kindle, they seem decidedly superannuated and it is no wonder that questions are now raised as to why the publishers' editors of the **Children's Book Circle** should in 1966 have named their own award, for 'contributions to children's literature', after a now almost forgotten figure.

A return

to that dusty site, 'crammed with all sorts of reading', deserves to be made however. For if storytelling through the agency of print is a matter of any consequence then Eleanor's book is a model of the craft. One could point to the diversity of its contents, both as to subject and to scale: the weird tale of the barrel-organ grinder in a midnight wood, or the touching incident of **The Lovebirds** are not much more than three pages long, while the historic mystery of **And I Dance Mine Own Child** is twenty-seven; **Westwoods** and **The Clumber Pup** are takes on the theme of the humble person achieving a Royal Marriage, while **Pennyworth** tells of Johnny Moon's comic adventures at a railway station and **The Kind Farmer** of a moral conversion worthy of Maria Edgeworth. What matters most though, is Farjeon's wonderful storytelling voice (she was, after all, involved with theatre as well as stories) and she finds a natural register for what she has to tell. It is almost as though she is releasing pre-existing wonders brought to her by a dusty magician in that cluttered room.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

The **Eleanor Farjeon Award** was made to Brian Alderson in 1968 and to **Books for Keeps** in 1996.

Thanks to Anne Harvey, 'keeper of the flame', for help with the complex Farjeon bibliography

The Little Bookroom by Eleanor Farjeon, illustrated by Edward Ardizzone, Oxford University Press, 978-0-1-9273-249-1, £7.99 pbk.

- At the time of present publication there is a grand Ardizzone exhibition on show at the **House of Illustration** along the road from Kings Cross.

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