

“Girls Like it Most”: Challenging Gendered Canons and Paracanons in the Case of *The Secret Garden*.

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Introduction: Public Canons and Private Paracanons

The personal practice of going back to remember and reread childhood books has increasingly found a place in canonization processes in the later years of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, enriching and shaping the history of how a specific text becomes a “children’s classic”. Italo Calvino’s premise that “the classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory” (Calvino 1990, 4) suggests that individual recollection must be set alongside cultural histories in order to understand the interweaving impulses involved in canon formation. Private canons are formed within a matrix of literary, historical and socio-cultural contexts, and can run in parallel with public canons or may diverge from and challenge them. The experiences of individual readers provide windows onto everyday use of canons and the negotiations that might be made when encountering a book that has been sanctioned as appropriate in some way for a specific audience: for example children, British children, British girls, and so on. It is important to explain precisely what that book might have *done* to its readership in order to secure its place in a certain canon. While it can be

difficult to identify and isolate the immediate impact a text has on a child through discussion with him or her, paying attention to reading histories and the practice of rereading in adulthood can offer insights into the effects that classic texts have on readers over time, thus helping to explain their significance on a personal level. The concept of the “paracanon”, defined by Catharine R. Stimpson (1990, 957), as a set of texts “beloved” (958) by individuals and communities of readers that may exist beyond traditional parameters of critical taste or opinion, is a helpful tool for articulating the power of such personal narratives and will set the tone for this chapter’s interrogation of the canonization of *The Secret Garden*. I prefer to extend Stimpson’s definition to include texts that exert something of Calvino’s “peculiar influence” and not just those that evoke feelings of passion or nostalgic love, since childhood reading is made up of a gamut of emotional investments and all can help to shape a personal canon. In her study of children’s literature and canonicity, Anne Lundin provides a good account of her lifelong “romance” with Frances Hodgson Burnett’s 1911 novel that helps demonstrate the importance of investigation into paracanons, explaining how it acts for her as a connection to her younger self that is “primal, fierce, protective” (Lundin 2004, 121 & 147), while Beverley Lyon Clark notes that for many of her female friends and colleagues with whom she discusses childhood reading, the work is a “secret love” (Clark 2003, 30); yet there are other remembered relationships with *The Secret Garden*, less passionate but no less telling about its meaning for readers that are worth examining.

As Lundin’s extensive reception history of *The Secret Garden* demonstrates, this text has sustained critical and popular attention for more than a century and its canonical status within the field of children’s literature is shaped by a complex of forces, not all of them official. In public discourse it has appeared in literary histories and ‘top 100’ lists; been regularly reissued by publishers in ‘classics’ series; found a place in schools’ recommended reading and university syllabi; and has metamorphosed into various adapted, intertextual, and cross–

media versions (Lundin 2004, 138). Privately, broad indicators of the actual popularity of the novel can be found in surveys, reported anecdotes, and publishing or library borrowing data as well as in the personal accounts produced by remembering adults that interest me here.¹ If, as Lundin suggests, the canon of children's literature is "a political proving ground" for classics (xvii), then *The Secret Garden* has shown itself to be resilient to ideological pressures as well as commercial ones.

It is not just books that gain licence in this manner: ways of reading and forms of interpretation can also become canonical through official and non-official means. In this chapter, I will use Burnett's novel as a case study, firstly to explore the way that personal memories of reading feed into the discourses of canonization, and then to consider how this process can in turn cover up reading histories that might revise or complicate our understanding of a classic. I am particularly concerned with *The Secret Garden's* emerging status as 'girls' classic' in the collective unconscious, a process that can be traced back to the 1970s in public arenas of publishing, marketing and reviewing, as well as through the expressly personal responses of professional and general readers. I want to test its place in the canon of classic girls' fiction. To do this, I will make use of Lissa Paul's critical approach in *Reading Otherways* (1998), and especially her question "whose story is this?" which aims to take notice of relationships in and around texts (16). One of the strengths of a reading-history approach to canon studies is its commitment to finding new stories of response or reception, as well as its interest in the paracanonical.² By drawing on interviews with men who read *The Secret Garden* when they were boys – who on the whole have not recalled the book being 'for girls' – I attempt to thread alternative reading histories into this story.

***The Secret Garden* and the 'Girls' Classic'**

Lundin remarks upon *The Secret Garden's* surprisingly modest entry into the growing canon of twentieth-century Anglo-American children's literature, pointing out that after an enthusiastic reception on publication it was absent or mentioned only in passing and with a mixed response by librarians and reviewers in America and the UK well into the 1970s. As with many books claimed for a child audience, the process of canonization of *The Secret Garden* has been slow and has fed upon the novel's effect on its primary readership over time as much as it has been bolstered by notions of literary quality or ideological fitness, and so the importance of popular canonization is key. By the early 1980s, *The Secret Garden* had increasingly found its way into the professional field – notably being chosen as one of the Children's Literature Association Canon Committee's "touchstones"³ – and its classic status was thus secured. Clark also notices that the novel was for a long time "a well-kept secret" (Clark 1993, 30) and argues that much of its growing popularity and significance in the later part of the twentieth century can be attributed to increasing possibilities for celebration of the feminine. Certainly, *The Secret Garden's* classic status has most recently been celebrated via the book's 2011 centenary in ways that might be considered primarily feminine. As well as conferences and edited collections of academic essays brought out to mark the occasion, this period saw an increase in publication of new editions and reissues, many of which are packaged in ways that might be considered both nostalgic and gendered. For instance, the Penguin "Threads" and Puffin Classic hardback covers focus on florals, reflecting climatic moments in the text where the garden comes to life: "the green things began to show buds and the buds began to unfurl and show colour, every shade of blue, every shade of purple, every tint and hue of crimson" (*The Secret Garden* 232).⁴ While not a surprising choice for enticing readers to a story about a garden, the delicate pastels and intricate flower patterns on these book jackets reflect trends in packaging for a female market and match the visual semantics of women's fiction. The 2008 Puffin Classics paperback and centenary Puffin paperback edition

illustrated by Child (2011) speak more obviously to a younger audience, identifying Mary as the major protagonist of the story by featuring her on their covers; but these jackets are also highly stylized, featuring pastels and floral images. Their imagery and design draw upon branding of the ‘chicklit’ genre, an association strengthened in the case of the Puffin Classic by its back–cover boast of a “heartwarming introduction by Sophie Dahl” (who is well known for a particular style of nostalgic femininity which she brings to her cookery shows and books). One of my male readers, who used this edition for our memory work, writes in his first–impression notes, “feminine cover”; another notes that he felt rather overwhelmed by the colour and flowers on the copy he sourced for the project because they contrasted with the edition he remembers reading as a child, for which the cover was “quite bland”. Analyzing the shorthand of marketing imagery, the materiality of contemporary reissues implies an ideal audience of girls and women.

Although earlier cover art has not always provided such a clear steer on audience, this implied female readership can be found in other forms of paratextual content from the 1970s onwards. In 1986, Faith McNulty, *The New Yorker*’s children’s book editor, argued that “[t]here is hardly a literate female alive who hasn’t read and loved it” (cited in Lundin 2004, 137). A similar stance had been taken by UK Puffin a decade before. Kaye Webb’s editor’s note to the 1974 Puffin edition of Burnett’s novel speaks of the magic of the novel for generations of readers. It urges its readers to keep their copy of the book carefully, “for you will want to go back and read it over and over again” claiming that “[g]irls like it most between the ages of nine and fourteen.” The same discourse of female readership and affectionate memory has also been forged in the more official sphere of literary criticism. When Laura Hoffeld published a paper in the scholarly journal *The Lion and the Unicorn* in 1979, exploring the cultural importance of romance and transformation in children’s literature, she opened with a highly personal memory of *The Secret Garden*. She explained that there was a year in her

childhood when she “fell forever under the spell” of *The Secret Garden* (Hoffeld 1979, 4) and went on to employ other recollections of her girlish and adolescent responses to Burnett’s novel to build her argument. Hoffeld’s article marks the beginning of a series of critical discussions of the text that were grounded in paracanonical terms. It was followed by Madelon S. Gohlke’s 1980 essay for *College English* which examines her adult response to Burnett’s novel in light of aspects of her own life story, including details of a childhood illness and the traumatic loss of her father in a swimming accident. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser then published what was to become an influential feminist critique of *The Secret Garden* in the American journal *Children’s Literature* in 1983, also making use of memory to enter into a rereading of Burnett’s text.

Keyser argues that the novel’s ending – in which Mary’s story of growth is seemingly eclipsed by a celebration of Colin’s recovery to health – celebrates male experience over female, and therefore essentially fails the reader. While Keyser suggests that we “ask an adult what he or she remembers from a childhood reading” of the novel to begin a reassessment of the work, this call to include a male or female mature perspective remains rhetorical as Keyser relies only on her own memories of *The Secret Garden* and her subsequent feminist disappointment: for her, the denouement is problematic because Colin is never as attractive as Mary “to the reader” (Keyser 1983, 2). Keyser’s slippage in conflating the implied reader with her own memories of encountering the book as a child, and therefore her assumption that *The Secret Garden* is, as Puffin might have it, liked most by girls who then may find themselves rejecting its patriarchal closure, has been replicated in later critical responses to the text and, I would argue, has subsequently fed into contemporary popular canonization.

By the mid-1990s, theoretically informed work in children’s literature had brought the gendered nature of children’s books to the fore. In one of the most nuanced of these approaches, Paul’s *Reading Otherways* argues for the value of feminist criticism as part of a

range of discursive practices that help to demonstrate the complexity of children's literature and the importance of recognizing multiple ways of reading a text. She argues that readership is crucial and should be paid attention to: a group of female teachers will read differently to a group of four-year-old boys and "[o]ne group of readers focuses on one aspect, which another group elides, or slides past, in coming to a possible interpretation of a text" (Paul 1998, 10). However, as Frances E. Dolan points out, many other feminist critics have ignored the issue of actual readership and assumed that a novel like *The Secret Garden*, "brimming" with positive female agency, simply has to be feminist and, moreover, that it is only read by girls (Dolan 2013, 219).⁵ This feminist perspective was most firmly established in 1995 with the publication of Shirley Foster and Judy Simons' *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of Classic Stories for Girls*. Foster and Simons see *The Secret Garden* as a "benchmark" for their study, as its appeal has "always been primarily to a female readership" (Foster and Simons 1995, 9). They are disappointed by the retreat into conservatism that they read into the novel's closing scenes, but are perhaps even more disappointed with themselves as young readers for not noticing this: "We had completely failed to register Mary Lennox's exclusion from the inheritance of Misselthwaite Manor" (ibid., ix). Similar experiences of "failure" predicated on *The Secret Garden's* ending are reported by Faye Cheatley (1994) and Dolan, and by U. C. Knoepfelmacher who, in an article on female aggression in children's literature, points out that the book "is usually remembered" as the story of Mary Lennox, despite Colin's ascendancy, and that girl readers have to find ways of disregarding Mary's displacement in the final chapters (Knoepfelmacher 1983, 22).

In all these accounts, the young female reader is considered to be the norm in a first reading, and the older feminist reader the standard for subsequent rereading. Such a stance is bound to lead to the canonization of particular kinds of encounters: readings that see Mary at the centre of the narrative as the object of identification, but also responses that create resistant readers –

to use Judith Fetterley's term – who must consider the ending (and Colin's central position in it) as a problem to be ignored or solved because it does not conform to ideas of the development of the heroine.⁶

Professional rereadings of *The Secret Garden* drawing on personal reading histories and reading memories thus provide a systematic grounding for treating it specifically as a story for girls; and yet this was not always the case. Burnett's novel was originally considered by publishers and reviewers to be general family reading. When it was first released (in serial form in *The American Magazine* in 1910, then in book form a year later) it was recommended to readers of "all ages" from "seven to seventy-seven" (*Bookman* 1911, cited in Lundin 2004, 134). Initial reviewers also stressed the book's appeal to boys and girls through its range of central characters. In the *American Bookman* R. A. Why stated that it is difficult to know who the leading character of the book actually was, since "[o]f heroes and heroines there is an abundance" (1911, in Gerzina 2006, 269), a stance mirrored by the reviewer in *The Nation* who recognised Mary, Colin, Dickon and Mrs Sowerby as important figures. Others focused on Dickon or Colin as main protagonists (see Gerzina 2006, 269-275).

These early public commentaries on *The Secret Garden* demonstrate ways in which attitudes towards the content and audience of a text can change over time, and how canonization might take place at the level of interpretation. Critics can implicitly contribute to the erasure of other reading histories where Mary's story is less important – where it is "slid past," to use Paul's terms - and where other responses might come to light. The risks of this kind of canonization have been identified by scholar Jan Susina who seeks ways to enter the intellectual discussion of *Little Women* – another "classic for girls" – which he sees as being "for too long a limited conversation among feminist critics" (Susina 1999, 167). These risks spread beyond academic discourse to generalized inference. In *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film*, Tim Morris notes that he did not read *The Secret Garden* as a boy and thus is excluded

from the proper audience for the novel: “Even today, I’m not sure many boys read this book. I am therefore an outsider to reading *The Secret Garden* especially in the sense that so many women now report to me: that the book was a crucial reading experience for them when they were growing up” (Morris 2000, 87). Assumptions like Morris’s about the actual readership of Burnett’s work may be grounded in anecdotal and statistical truths,⁷ but they risk covering over male perspectives, concealing the remembered responses of male readers who may offer up alternative interpretations of the text. These male voices are particularly important to an ongoing reading history of *The Secret Garden*, in light of the original views of publishers and reviewers that it was general family reading, suitable for a male and female audience.

Male Reading Histories and *The Secret Garden*

In an attempt to recover a more inclusive reading history in terms of gender, I asked five men between the ages of 20 and 65 (Charlie, Alex, Martin, Harry and Geoffrey) to remember their childhood reading of *The Secret Garden*, then reread the novel and reflect on this experience. At each stage they reported their private responses and discussed memories and rereadings with me in interviews.⁸ Throughout this process I tried to remain aware of the dangers of conflating male experience, acknowledging that my participants shared additional key markers of identity, such as ethnicity (white British), and differed in others (such as age and level of formal education). Nevertheless, their accounts offer windows onto experiences of reading as a boy.

When I asked my participants to answer Paul’s central question, “whose story is this?” four of these adult male readers produced accounts of remembering that reflect early reviews in recognising a range of protagonists in the text. Martin found himself identifying with Mary, demonstrating the basic fact that young readers can relate to characters across a gender divide and that “cross-gendered fantasy in general must be viewed as a crucial part of imaginative

life” as David Glover and Cora Kaplan put it (Glover and Kaplan 2000, 46). Martin points out “she’s the sort of character that’s central to [...] as a child you can’t help but think, oh, what would it be like if I was in this...situation.” However, his discussion of Mary as protagonist then broadens out to include Colin and Dickon as major characters: “you’ve got a good set-up, you’ve got the three – you’ve got Colin, Dickon and Mary – and so you’ve got three quite different personality types.” Another survey respondent (whom I did not interview) similarly writes that Mary is the protagonist but stresses that the relationship between all three characters is very appealing. Harry and Geoffrey share with Martin a sense that the story belongs to more than one character. Geoffrey recalls the three child characters by name, while Harry remembers two principal characters, one girl and one boy (although he could not remember their names and mistakes the relationship between them as master and daughter of a servant). These sets of responses indicate that answering Paul’s question, “whose story is it?” is by no means straightforward, and that individual, private experiences of the novel do not always reflect official and paratextual prompts to read the narrative as Mary’s tale. Sometimes the answer is not Mary at all: Alex remembers very little about the plot or detail of *The Secret Garden*, and only really speaks about Colin (although he does not remember the name): “one of the main characters [...] was in a wheelchair [...] and he was visited by...somebody who he didn’t get on with, and they ended up getting along well because they found the secret garden.” Alex’s memories cast the novel as Colin’s story, with his dilemma and rescue the central theme, rather than Mary’s arrival and discovery of the garden. In an even more obviously counter-canonical turn, two male survey respondents both considered Dickon to be the novel’s main character, specifically naming him as the “hero” in one case. The range of responses speaks to the fact that identification in reading fiction is not a simple process but one that might involve trying on identities and questioning or judging, as well as

finding aspects of oneself in a particular character. These practices might be guided by gender, but are not restricted by it.

As mentioned earlier, the cohort of readers I worked with had mostly not considered the novel to be specifically aimed at girls. Only Charlie, who first read the novel in the 1990s, commented in our remembering interview that it is “viewed more of a book for girls to read than boys,” an assessment which might be guided by editions from this period, such as Albion Press’s (1991) or Hodder’s (1994) which only feature Mary on the front cover, or by the fact that he had bought a copy of the Vintage edition to reread which contains gendered visual codes. He also admits to having “sort of read in the grey area” as a child, enjoying other books that might be termed “girls’” stories. Geoffrey too explains that there was perhaps “more crossover” in his choice of reading matter than there might have been in other households of boys, since he spent time living with his aunt during a period when his mother was ill and found himself reading some of his step-cousin’s “girls’ stuff”; thus, when his mother gave him *The Secret Garden* to read (it was “gently put into my hands”), “it wasn’t the foreign matter that might have been expected” for “a boy growing up in the mid-to-late 1950s.” The other men I spoke to did not focus on the novel’s implied readership and the question of whether or not *The Secret Garden* is a “girls’ classic” did not explicitly arise in their remembering accounts.

There is of course plenty of evidence to suggest that boys and girls have always read across and between the canonical boundaries of gendered reading, and that labels such as “boys’ books” and “girls’ books” do not always dictate or define personal paracanon building. The bulk of evidence gathered by other researchers demonstrates how girls have read and responded to books for boys. Kate Flint’s work shows how Edwardian middle-class girls preferred the *Boy’s Own Paper* to the *Girl’s Own Paper* for instance, and Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the Working Classes* points to surveys of working- and middle-class

girls from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which revealed that those girls often admitted to enjoying magazines and books marketed at boys. Accounts by children's authors offer further support for reading across gendered markers, indicating a diet of books in childhood that was not dictated to by implied or intended audience. K. M. Peyton loved reading pony books but was also a passionate devotee of W. E. Johns' "Biggles" books (Peyton and Fisher 1974, 273) and Jamila Gavin read about "school, horses, ballet dancers" but also "the so-called boys' books, too: Tarzan, Biggles and Jennings" (Gavin 2007, 65).

Published examples about boys choosing to read girls' books are fewer. Melvin Bragg's fond recollections of reading *Little Women* as a boy were published in *Children's Literature in Education* in 1978, situating it within the growing tradition of autobiographical accounts of childhood reading. Bragg disagrees with Louisa May Alcott's designation of the novel as a "story for Girls," suggesting that he was not the only boy to hurdle the "terrible barrier" of its title to read it. He also notes that rather than being a badge of honour in the way reading boys' adventures stories might be for young female readers, for most men, enjoying a book like *Little Women* required a kind of apologetic stance toward the younger self: "most of them would qualify the admission by muttering on about sisters or cousins leaving it lying around or found books in the house or teachers 'forcing' them to read it at school" (Bragg 1978, 95). Certainly there are fewer academic discussions of *The Secret Garden* by male scholars that reflect on personal reading histories from childhood than there are by female critics. Tellingly, Knoepflmacher has to turn to his female students for confirmation of resistance towards the end of the narrative, and explicitly points out that it is especially girls who resist in this way: of his own personal relationship with *The Secret Garden* much less is said.⁹

Being a self-selecting group of remembering readers keen to share their memories and impressions of *The Secret Garden* with a researcher, it is perhaps not surprising that my group of male participants were not on the whole embarrassed or apologetic about reading the novel

as boys. All were enthusiastic child readers, and four of the five defined themselves as the bookish or “indoorish” reader in their family (often compared to brothers or sisters who preferred outdoor activities or watching film and TV). It is true that like Bragg most of them did not choose the novel voluntarily when they were young; but perhaps it is also the case that not very many books apart from those in a series or by an already well-loved author come to children other than by accident or recommendation.¹⁰ Harry was introduced to the novel by a teacher, Charlie by a library assistant, and Martin and Geoffrey by their mothers; Alex found it at the bottom of a box of library-sale books that had been brought home by a parent. None of them felt compelled to read the book and none would class it as particularly beloved: their paracanons, in the sense that Stimpson gives the term, were more obviously shaped by the conventions of typical ‘boys’ reading’ across the late twentieth century, including Brian Jacques’ Redwall books, works by Paul Jennings and Anthony Buckeridge, Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* collection, as well as comics, annuals, and more adult fiction such as ghost stories and crime novels. Nevertheless, Burnett’s novel had entered for each of them the broader type of paracanon, being significant enough to remain in “the folds of memory”.

Although *The Secret Garden* was not a favourite, nearly all the men had recognised its footing as a classic of children’s literature, either at the time of reading it or in subsequent adult reflection. For example, Alex mentions that he did not read many classics as a child, which is why *The Secret Garden* stood out as unusual in his personal canon; Martin remembers Burnett’s novel forming part of a cheap mini-library of classics introduced to the household when he was young, of which he most enjoyed Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*; and Harry recalls wondering why his teacher thought *The Secret Garden* was so much better than Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five* series, concluding that it must have been because it was a classic. There is clear emotional value placed by some readers upon the

“thickness” and corresponding challenge or difficulty of certain texts encountered in youth, but this sense of achievement in reading a ‘proper’ book can be easily overlooked when considering paracanonization.¹¹ *The Secret Garden*’s classic status and perceived ‘worth’ seems to have played a part in consolidating it as an important text in individual reading histories, and in some cases this reading experience may have contributed more to its inclusion in their personal canons than aspects more usually considered to be crucial to its classic status, such as the characterisation of Mary and reader-identification with her.

Susina argues that *Little Women* has failed to reach more male readers since its publication because there are few male characters for these boys to identify with, but the same cannot be said for *The Secret Garden*. Accounts by early reviewers and remembering men indicate that Burnett’s novel can be read in multiple ways, and it is clear that these interactions allow for different interpretations of who might be the central protagonist and why. Colin features as a significant hero for the men I spoke to: his frailty – represented by his wheelchair, his hunchback, his bedridden status and his hysteria – is a common theme in memories of the book which implies a fascination with his character that sometimes overrides the obvious focus on Mary in the first part of the narrative. Chapter Seventeen, in which Colin has his major tantrum and Mary checks his spine for lumps, is one that several readers recall distinctly:

He had been lying on his face beating his pillow with his hands [...] His face looked dreadful, white and red and swollen, and he was gasping and choking [...]

“I can’t stop!” he gasped and sobbed. “I can’t — I can’t!”

“You can” shouted Mary. “Half that ails you is hysterics and temper — just hysterics — hysterics — hysterics!” and she stamped each time she said it. (177-78)

Harry remembers Colin’s “panic attack” and the girl “sort of pulling up his nightshirt and saying there’s nothing wrong with your back,” and admits that this scene is the most “vivid

memory” of the book he has. Alex experienced a similar sense of familiarity with this chapter when he reread the novel, stating that this moment in particular constitutes the only “real” memory of his first encounter with the book. The lively textual descriptions of Colin’s hysterical rage are certainly striking enough to be fixed as a graphic mental image in the memory. Although Harry says that it is one of the televised versions of *The Secret Garden* that first comes to mind, other remembering readers seem to create mental vignettes directly from their reading of the text (and since illustrations of this episode in most editions are not especially interesting, they are unlikely to have influenced the memories). This scene has also received attention from critics for its importance to Mary’s theme, some noting that Colin is like a screaming baby who needs her mothering; however, something more seems to be going on amongst my male readers, who focus on Colin’s experience and not Mary’s. Geoffrey remembers being particularly struck by Colin’s body language and the emotional effect this had on him as a boy reading: “Well, err...it had my hair standing on end. It really did. [...] this was the climax.” He admits that part of the thrill of reading this episode might be traced to his own embryonic sense of boyish rebellion and desire to scream and shout “to hell with approval”, fostered by his time attending a strict boys’ boarding school. Mary’s repetition of the rather exotic word “hysterics” is also key: Burnett’s narrator explains that Mary “felt as if it had an effect on [Colin]. He was probably like herself and had never heard it before” (179) and the same effect might be at work on readers who feel that tantrums are beyond the usual scope of their worlds. Colin’s hysterical fit and Mary’s subsequent response to it indicate the novel’s adeptness at giving textual space to tensions perhaps commonly felt by young male readers, as well as offering up fantasies of how they might be soothed. This aspect of the text might be elided by some audiences, but my participants represent a small sample of male readers who found common pertinence in it.

Some of this interpretative work obviously deals with elements of the individual reader's identity. As Norman Holland posits in his transactive model of reader response (1975), the reader's "identity theme" plays a part in any reading and certain characters and episodes act as mirrors for readers, reflecting back the most recognizable aspects of self. This process is perhaps easiest to observe when readers misremember elements of a text. For instance, Alex puts forward a convincing reason for why "as far as [he] was aware, the protagonist was a boy", explaining that his boyhood reading preferences tended to involve books featuring boy heroes and thus it never crossed his mind to think of a female protagonist when remembering *The Secret Garden*. Harry mistakes the tensions in Mary and Colin's relationship as primarily born of class differences between servant and master, an error that might be attributed to his own background and the powerful feelings he has for the housemaid Martha (whom he identifies as his favourite character, rereading as an adult). Martha appeals because she is a strong, no-nonsense person, "[w]hich I liked. I don't do nonsense myself, I'm from Yorkshire and I'm a soldier and we're quite straight-lined." Although his social class and military training may have affected his adult appreciation of this minor character, it is possible that his early response was also shaped by an innate and keen interest in the division between strong and weak which inflected his recollection of all aspects of the text.

Alex and Harry both find these instances of misremembering highly embarrassing, describing their memories as "stupid" and "wrong," but false memories also demonstrate how varied the reasons for a text's entry into personal paracanons might be and how responses to a text might shift and develop at different points in each reader's life. This process has implications for more official canon formation as well. While those critics reading the text as a girls' classic reveal their anxieties about misremembering the ending of *The Secret Garden* in order to rework its patriarchal message – Dolan notes that the adult Keyser forgot the ending and exclaims "I certainly did, too" (Dolan 2013, 205) – other readers respond differently. Only

Charlie, who, as we have seen, has a tendency to read “in the feminine”, makes a comment about Mary’s apparent retreat from the narrative in its closing chapter in terms that are similar to feminist scholarship: “I wanted to know more about Mary, because I thought it was Mary’s novel and they switched to sort of Colin’s novel.” For most of my male readers, Colin’s character and fate are more important and act as the starting point for their engagement with the text, and so the redirection of attention from Mary to Colin in the latter chapters of the novel is not particularly noteworthy: it is something they “slide past”. Indeed, it is the violent opening of the novel rather than the ending that provokes most commentary amongst this cohort. Harry, Martin, Geoffrey, and Charlie all reflect on their surprise or disconcertion at Mary’s initial situation in India, the neglect she suffers from her parents, and the shocking cholera outbreak that kills the colonial community. It is a poignant set-up for a children’s book, and although the famous first line focuses on Mary’s move to Misselthwaite and her disagreeable nature, the rereading men focused more on her initial abandonment: “During the confusion and bewilderment of the second day Mary hid herself in the nursery and was forgotten by everyone. Nobody thought of her, nobody wanted her, and strange things happened of which she knew nothing” (4). Harry found “the whole concept of a book for eight-year-olds starting with a young girl [...] becoming an orphan and her family dying of cholera” distinctly at odds with his expectations for a children’s classic, and both Charlie and Geoffrey are clearly moved as adult rereaders by the pathos of the framing narrative in which a child is left vulnerable and helpless. These responses indicate that while the novel’s closure is of great interest if Mary functions as the central figure, it may not always be the most important interpretative moment for all readers.

Conclusion: (Para)Canonical Authority

Any attempt to retrieve real reading histories will demonstrate the dangers of canonization. A text can become fixed through cultural narratives that assume common response, especially in terms of gendered reading; but these assumptions cannot always be justified historically, nor when placed alongside reported experiences by actual readers. Susina's lament about the fate of *Little Women* as the object of a "limited conversation among feminist critics" (Susina 1999, 167) may seem slightly peevish – after all, he demonstrates that it is possible for a man to be a feminist critic, too – but it highlights the sometimes uneasy relationship between different critical movements in children's literature studies in the late twentieth century, where radical feminist approaches can be at odds with reader-response philosophies, even when both aim for a nuanced consideration of how the text speaks to its audience. As Susina notes on the matter of reading Alcott's novel, it is "a less universal experience and a much more diverse one than [...] feminist critics have suggested" (Susina 1999, 162). Recent critical readings of *The Secret Garden* point to this diversity, stressing the varied use that individuals might make use of the text as paracanonical in a range of ways. In particular, some have challenged the construction of an ideal girl reader and indicate that amongst girls and women, too, response cannot be presumed as uniform. Christine A. Jenkins inserts herself into the history of the novel's audience as a reader unwilling to "comply with conventional gender roles" and provides a personal account of her love for *The Secret Garden* which is based on her recognition of Mary Lennox as a childhood ally who "celebrates her forthright noncompliance" and is "utterly undaunted by obstacles" (Jenkins 2009, 139 & 136). Zetta Elliott cites the novel as one of her childhood favourites which she has (like the Puffin girls) "returned to again and again" (Elliott 2009, 111). She realizes that as a black African American who grew to political awareness in her teens she might "stumble over [her] own invisibility" in a narrative like Burnett's, marked as it is by colonialism; but as a child and again in adulthood she has found in Mary's pursuit of the garden "a model of mystery and

discovery” that has helped her find her own creative voice as an urban environmentalist (ibid., 112). These voices of female diversity are a reminder that canonization is a process constantly to be revised as the seat of authority and consensus is reviewed and expanded: personal accounts from remembering adults that do not obviously fit the audience for a “classic girls’ novel” will continue to shape the history of *The Secret Garden*’s reception and status in the canon.

In speaking with male rereaders who were generally unaware of traditions of feminist criticism and who freely reflected on their own responses and rereadings, certain aspects of the novel’s appeal that do not focus directly on Mary’s girlhood are brought to the fore. These readers did sometimes identify with Mary and her initial suffering as part of their “cross-gendered fantasy”, but in reading and rereading accounts there is also a marked identification or interest in Colin – not always both – despite evaluations of his character as being “a bit of a wimp” (Harry). This suggests a curiosity about complex male experience, something that may also be compounded over time: Geoffrey recognized that as a child he would have identified with Dickon, but that as an older man he recognizes himself in Colin. I also noticed a concern with trauma and violence in memory work with my participants, both in the way that Colin’s hysterics were most vividly recalled, and in the striking recognition amongst several men that they had forgotten the opening scenes set in India, which are to them violent and upsetting. This concern can be understood alongside a related interest in the ability to control or calm. This affective engagement may provide some answers to the issue of why the episode in which Mary soothes Colin is so important, but perhaps also indicates some of the general acceptance (rather than resistance) towards the novel’s rather gentle closure in which Misselthwaite’s servants watch Colin and his father walk confidently across the lawn together towards the manor – an ending that is sometimes read as anticlimactic. Significantly, some participants also moved beyond the question of “whose story is this?” to consider themes of

nature and discovery, which have proven central to many professional readers of *The Secret Garden* and play a huge part in explaining the reach and importance of the novel to all kinds of child readers and adult rereaders.¹² Responses are not uniform of course. Geoffrey hardly mentions the garden, and when prompted to think about its significance, admits that he is not “a child of nature” and that the images of gardening have never “made much sense” to him, either as a boy or a man reading the novel. On the other hand, Charlie’s appreciation of the novel is very much shaped by his sense of what he describes as the “magical” qualities of the garden and the importance of “natural beauty”, (although he admits that as a child he “hated gardens, summer holidays just were trips to garden centres, it was completely boring.”). Importantly, the garden represents one of the “secret places” that are core in Charlie’s reading of the text and which shift focus away from character towards pastoral setting, a common theme for much canonical British children’s literature. The secret place also represents a kind of readerly feeling for Alex who initially notes that his memories of *The Secret Garden* are “green memories”. When we return to this intriguing comment after he has reread the novel he talks about feeling a “strange sort of green nostalgia.” This sensation is tied to a section from Chapter Fifteen, in which Mary is led by Dickon to notice the changing aesthetics of the secret garden: “‘Why!’ she cried, ‘the grey wall is changing. It is as if a green mist were creeping over it. It’s almost like a green gauze veil.’” (163). For Alex, that creeping green mist ties the pleasures of reading to memories of his own childhood spent in Yorkshire, and the gauze veil represents something of the opaqueness of those memories, revisited in his current home in the altogether less verdant environs of Australia. Harry’s version of the green gauze veil reveals memory as it works in the opposite direction, as adult experience reminds him of his childhood reading. As a young army officer he was a jungle warfare instructor patrolling the jungle in Belize, and he recounts coming across some Mayan ruins:

My soldiers, of course, were just not interested at all [...] But I remember looking at things, specifically because it's difficult to navigate in the jungle, you can't see much, the trees all grow to the same height, so the maps are plotted from the air, but actually they don't really represent the terrain underneath because you can't see it. [...] I remember coming across a big lump in the ground and not being sure whether it was the ground or a Mayan ruin. [...] And so I remember peeling it back and seeing actually these were ... these were very carefully crafted limestone blocks covered in ivy. And I do remember pulling that ivy back and thinking ... being reminded of *The Secret Garden*.

These are not necessarily gendered readings,¹³ but ones that move beyond character and identification.

This set of responses demonstrates the attraction of themes of mystery and discovery in Burnett's novel, and along with accounts that locate Colin in a central role, they offer an alternative history of readerly engagement in *The Secret Garden* that is worth recovering. As windows onto boyhood reading they provide glimpses of non-canonical forms of interaction with a canonical text and point to the intriguing parallel workings of personal paracanons which need not have official status or necessarily even be rendered into romances in order to tell important stories about the living history of children's literature.

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¹ For instance, *The Secret Garden* appears as one of the most mentioned titles in Christine Hall and Martin Coles’ report on a national survey of children’s reading undertaken in 1994/5, but further data on how the novel was read or the reasons for this popularity are not provided..

² A key critical text in this tradition is Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984).

³ The final list was published in three volumes, featuring fiction, fairy tales, and picturebooks, and edited by Perry Nodelman (1985-89)

⁴ All quotations are taken from Frances Hodgson Burnett. *The Secret Garden*. William Heinemann, 1957. First published 1911.

⁵ Even Stephanie Krüger, who is concerned that the male characters in the novel are overshadowed by Mary and is determined to analyse masculinity in the text in more detail, agrees that *The Secret Garden* is “a novel for girls rather than boys” (Krüger 2012, 69).

⁶ A number of critics have come up with solutions to Mary's lost agency by seeing it as displaced onto other symbols of femininity such as the garden, Mrs Sowerby, the ghost of Lilies, or Mother Nature – rather than handed over to Colin. Paul avoids collapsing the reader of *The Secret Garden* into an idealized young female one and thus seems to be able to more easily accept the contradictions in Burnett's ending. Paul notes, '[t]here is something so compelling about the story that I am prepared to suspend my annoyance with the ending...Like it or not, Burnett got the plot right' (1987, 196).

⁷ For example, a review of the social networking site for general readers <http://www.goodreads.com> reveals a large proportion of reviewers of *The Secret Garden* to be adults reflecting on the process of rereading the text, the majority of whom identify as women.

⁸ This research mostly took place in spring and summer of 2014. I spoke to men who had read *The Secret Garden* when they were boys and who were willing to remember and reread the novel for the purposes of my research. Each participant was interviewed twice: once for an account of remembering and once for an account of rereading. One further set of remembering and rereading accounts from a man taking part in a previous study in 2010 was also included in the corpus of responses. Names have been changed. Although only a small sample of actual readers can be investigated using this methodology, the common experience of reading a book recognized as a girls' classic provides enough points of connection for some essence of a shared phenomenon to be described (see Moustakas 1994).

⁹ Knoepfelmacher is not always so adverse to reflecting on the bonds he had with books as a child. See "The Critic as Former Child" (2002), in which he examines his childly identification with Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*

¹⁰ On the other hand, one respondent to my survey who did not participate in interview wrote that he originally picked the book up because of the cover and synopsis on the back cover: "I was drawn to mystery and atmosphere in my favourite fiction, even then, and I suspect *The Secret Garden* would have implied both."

¹¹ See Fiona Maine and Alison Waller's "'Swallows and Amazons Forever!'" (2011) for evidence of this phenomenon. In the research underpinning this article, adult Nicki remembered Ransome's novel being worth ten points in a library scheme she was part of, which meant it was "quite thick, quite a lot of text, maybe a more complicated plot", while adult Lynne explains "if it was a nice meaty sort of thick book I'd go for that."

¹² See for example, Christine Wilkie, "Digging Up *The Secret Garden* (1997).

¹³ Like my participants, Clark also candidly explains that the image that stayed with her from her childhood reading of the novel "was not of Mary or Colin but of the garden" (Clark 2003, 31),