

## editorial

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### A Hundred Years of Treasure, or Grime Does Not Pay

I asked Bill Blackburn to collect the articles about children's adventure fiction you find in this issue partly because a special section devoted to that topic seemed like a fine way to celebrate a significant centenary: a hundred years ago, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* first appeared in book form, soon after its original appearance as a serial in *Young Folks* magazine (from October, 1881 through January 1882). As I read through the fine essays Bill gathered, I was glad to see I'd been right. You'll discover that few of the contributors have resisted the temptation to refer to *Treasure Island*. A hundred years later, it's still the classic adventure story.

*Treasure Island* is the sort of playful story that makes people want to play. For an entire week of my childhood, the week after the Walt Disney version of *Treasure Island* had been the Saturday matinee at the local theater, everybody at my school spent recess surreptitiously passing small sheets of paper with black spots drawn on them to everybody else. Stevenson himself said, "Fiction is to the grown man what play is to the child";<sup>1</sup> he might have added that the right sort of fiction is play to the child too.

My own children are still too young to experience the playful delights of *Treasure Island*. But they emerge from the TV room every Friday night, just after *The Dukes of Hazzard* is over, going "Vroom" and joyfully imitating automobiles flying through the air. *The Dukes* is their favorite TV show, just as *Treasure Island* was once my favorite movie. Now at first glance, a classic about pirates doomed to fail in their quest for decidedly ill-gotten gains and a comedy about two ungrammatical bozos who get a charge out of breaking traffic regulations may not seem to have much in common. But they do; and the similarities may at least partly explain why Stevenson's novel, and the various retellings of its story in movies and TV shows and comic books, have given so much pleasure to so many children for the past hundred years.

My children are either too young or too dishonest to admit to being thrilled by the fact that Daisy Duke frequently wears shorts in the public thoroughfares of Hazzard county that might get her arrested at your average orgy. And they don't tell me that Bo and Luke Duke (or their exact clones in times of contractual dispute, Vince and Coy Duke) have cute smiles. No, what the young Nodelmans like about *The Dukes* is two things: the General Lee, and the ramping.

The General Lee is a sleek orange car with a confederate flag painted on it, which those crazy Duke boys always enter through the window, and which frequently goes faster than speeding bullets. And when the General does go faster than speeding bullets, it often zooms up the sides of hills or over the edges of high-pitched roofs or up the slopes of steep embankments. Then it flies through the air for astounding distances, an activity known in my house as ramping. So it comes to this: what my children like about *The Dukes* is lots of fast action involving interesting means of transportation.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island* to please children. In his own discussion of the book, he said, "It was to be a story for boys; no need of psychology or fine writing; and I had a boy at hand to be a touchstone."<sup>2</sup> The boy was his stepson, Lloyd Osborne; but as he suggests in a letter to his friend W. E. Henley, Stevenson expected to please a much wider audience: "if

this don't fetch the kids, why, they have gone rotten since my day."<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, what Stevenson thought would fetch the kids is what attracts my kids to *The Dukes*: lots of fast action involving interesting means of transportation.

The Duke boys have their General; Stevenson's Jim Hawkins has the Hispaniola, a "clever craft." The General ramps; Jim singlehandedly steers the ship into safe harbor. These feats are equally exciting and equally impossible. One boy could no more sail a ship than two boys could fly a car. But that's the whole point; both Jim and the Dukes are wish-fulfilling figures, characters who actually do what those who read about them merely like to imagine. They experience "most disastrous chances" and "moving accidents by flood and field" and "hair-breadth escapes"—the very things that fetched the youthful Desdemona to the larger-than-life Othello, and the very things that Jim Hawkins himself dreams about before he even sets off for *Treasure Island*: "sea-dreams and the most charming anticipations of strange islands and adventures."

Every Friday night, the Dukes's excuse for ramping their car is yet another dispute with Boss Hogg, the fat, ugly man who runs things in Hazzard county. Boss wears a white suit and drives a white car because he represents conventional respectability; he stands for authority and the law and respecting tradition. Meanwhile, the Dukes, whose hair is too long and whose jeans are too tight and whose shirt buttons are just too dangled open, rush around boisterously breaking the speed limit and doing everything their elders tell them they shouldn't do. As wish-fulfillment, this implies an interesting paradox. For it just so happens that "respectable" Boss Hogg is actually a nasty, self-seeking man who assumes he can use other people's respect for the law in order to break it himself. And nobody but the Dukes sees through Boss's schemes; so the theoretically nasty and disrespectful, but actually nice, Dukes have to constantly save the day for *real* goodness.

Since the Dukes are young, conventional wisdom suggests that they are dangerously inexperienced. Wish-fulfillment turns their ignorance into a saving innocence, a matter of being undamaged by the corrupt ways of the world. Since Boss is old and has authority, conventional wisdom suggests he ought to be respected. Wish-fulfillment turns his age into evil cynicism, his authority into hunger for power. In Hazzard county, the law is always criminally repressive, so rebellion against it always both right and very sexy; it's no wonder that even respectful children should find *The Dukes* so satisfying, for even respectful children sometimes feel constrained by parental regulations they know they ought to respect.

*Treasure Island* plays a similar game. In it, the pirates are clearly bad guys. They are mean and nasty. They steal things that don't belong to them. Good Doctor Livesey takes great pleasure in pointing out that they don't even have the sense to come in out of the fever-ridden bog air. Meanwhile, the doctor himself is clearly *not* bad, anything but. His linen is clean. He administers to the sick and the needy. He tells the old pirate Billy Bones that he'll kick him out of the inn if he doesn't start acting like a gentleman and lower his voice. But is it really that simple? While Jim Hawkins tells us how glad he was that Dr. Livesey confronted the old pirate, he also says this about Billy Bones's behavior:

“people were frightened at the time, but on looking back they rather liked it; it was a fine excitement in a quiet country life.” In fact, it’s the pirates who create the excitement all through the book, and it’s the doctor’s business, nay, his very reason for existing, to stop things from getting too exciting. The good doctor represents conventional respectability, just like Boss Hogg does. I’m not suggesting he’s secretly a villain; but he does do his best to dampen the adventure, and if we read *Treasure Island* because we like adventure, our admiration for the conventional values the good Doc espouses has to be qualified, to say the least. Not to put too fine a point on it: the doctor is a boring person, and Jim Hawkins’s constant praise of him is just strident enough to suggest how very boring his particular form of goodness is.

The doctor’s clean linen is something like Boss Hogg’s white suit. Clean linen is respectable; but sometimes, being dirty is fun. The Duke boys aren’t afraid of mussing their jeans, and they just can’t seem to keep the buttons of those shirts done up. Well boys will be boys, won’t they? Stevenson’s pirates act like boys gone crazy; each one he describes is more tantalizingly filthy than the next. Old Billy Bones has a tarry pigtail and hands “ragged and scarred with black broken nails” and a cut on his cheek that is “a dirty, livid white.” This man is not lovely, and he is not engaged, and he does not use Ponds.

Neither does Jim Hawkins, much. Jim claims to respect the virtues of laundry, as represented by the doctor; but he seems to go out of his way to get into dirty-making situations, like climbing into empty apple barrels and hanging around dusty stockades. In *Treasure Island*, dirt represents the foolhardy pleasures of the unconventional, and Jim is foolhardy enough to go through a lot of clothing in a short time. Nevertheless, the three film versions of *Treasure Island* all quite rightly show us a cute little, clean little Jim, a pretty boy who seems to shampoo his shiny hair every night. And as for the Dukes, well, their clothes may be a little unkempt and comfortable, but they sure are pretty, too—and the blinding flashes that emerge from the vicinity of their mouths suggest that they must brush their teeth at least twelve times a day. Maybe one of the reasons they drive so fast is that they have no fear of accidents, knowing that their undies are clean enough to pass the inspection of the most fastidious of ambulance attendants or emergency nurses.

Obviously neither Jim or the Dukes are really bad guys. They don’t look like bad guys, and they probably don’t smell like bad guys, and they are, to say the least, ambivalent about their own flirtations with lawlessness. They may not feel totally comfortable with cleanliness and conventionality, but they all have good hearts—and their innate virtue is shown by the fact that they don’t let their nails get ragged like the pirates do or their bodies turn to fat like Boss Hogg does. These are mere boys, sweet innocents who only flirt with danger.

On *The Dukes of Hazzard*, it’s brutally obvious that the Dukes’s supposed badness is actually goodness, and that Boss Hogg’s white suit hides a heart of pure grime. I think *Treasure Island* has continued to delight readers for a century because it’s a lot more subtle than *The Dukes*. In his essay in this issue, Bill Blackburn suggests that moral ambiguity is central to *Treasure Island*; I suspect the morality is so ambiguous because Stevenson demands from readers two directly opposed but perfectly balanced responses to each of his characters at the same time. Consider Jim: he has the exciting adventures we all dream about, and as he says himself, he saves the day by being foolhardy and thoughtless at all the right times: “if you want to know who did it—it was I!” We ought to adore him and everything he stands for. But by the time he tells us this story, he’s older, presumably wiser, and an insufferable prig—just like the good Doctor. He insists that he hated “that accursed island” from the first time he set foot on it; he constantly makes santimonious comments about how silly pirates are; he conveniently forgets that the treasure which made him rich never belonged to him in the first place.

The constant tension between the thrilling actions of young Jim and the condemning attitudes of the older Jim who tells about them makes *Treasure Island* a richly satisfying book to read; our pleasure in young Jim’s foolhardiness makes it hard for us to accept the older’s Jim’s condemnation, but then our inevitable acknowledgment that the older Jim is right to condemn foolhardiness makes it hard for us to accept the foolhardiness. Caught by this unresolved conflict, we enjoy the essentially paradoxical pleasure of the adventure genre; for we usually read such books for the escape they offer us out of the boredom of our normal lives and into the excitement of the extraordinary, but we usually don’t find them satisfying unless they finally tell us that excitement is always dangerous and that ordinary boredom is pleasingly safe.

Stevenson’s pirates are scary, awful men, and we *ought* to despise them, just as we *ought* to admire the good Doc and the older Jim. But Stevenson maintains the balance; he cleverly gives every bad man who plays a significant part in the action of the novel a physical handicap, a handicap of the sort that creates sympathy. And he invents episodes in which those handicaps create serious problems for those who have them, so that we have no choice but to feel sorry for those we also despise. Billy Bones dying of drunkenness, Blind Pew run down by horses he cannot see as he stands in the road deserted by his friends, and above all, the one-legged John Silver deprived of any way to leave the stockade but crawling, because the so-called good guys refuse him assistance in a fit of moral outrage—these are the central dramatic moments of the novel, and they all involve the sufferings of physically disabled yet undeniably despicable men.

But of course, the greatest ambiguity of the novel surrounds its richly ambiguous villain, Long John Silver. Long John is so evil that, says the marooned Ben Gunn, even the vicious Flint was afraid of no one but him: “Silver was that genteel.” This perverse use of the word “genteel” sums up the ambiguity; for Silver, the most vicious of pirates, has that most humdrum and “genteel” of jobs aboard a treasure ship: food preparation. Furthermore, he is friendly and sympathetic, ironically the only one of the pirates that all the good guys trust. And he is not merely deceptively good, but actually so, at least sometimes. He seems to genuinely like Jim, and he does save him from the other pirates. Furthermore, he *is* handicapped, and deserves our sympathy. Furthermore, and perhaps most important, Jim tells us that when he first saw Silver, “I thought I knew what a buccaneer was like—a very different creature, according to me, from this clean and pleasant-tempered landlord.” In the terms of *Treasure Island*, Silver is the ultimate paradox: a respectable villain with self-respect, a *clean* pirate.

Silver is one of those rarities of literature: a character who has stepped out of the pages of his book. People who’ve never read *Treasure Island* or even seen movies of it think of somebody like Long John when they think of pirates—a one-legged man with a three-cornered hat and a parrot on his shoulder. He’s Everyman’s version of Everypirate. Much of the reason for that is Stevenson’s subtly ambiguous writing; still, it can’t be denied that Robert Newton’s brilliantly accurate performance in the Disney version of *Treasure Island* helped turn Silver into an archetype. With one eye tucked up under his eyebrow, Newton says, “Arrrrrr, me ‘earties,” with such rich bravura that it’s hard not to be sucked in; who could help but love such exuberant nastiness?

The nasty playfulness and sympathetic villainy of Long John Silver represent what makes *Treasure Island* special—different from *The Dukes of Hazzard*, different from the hundreds of other adventures involving hundreds of other interesting means of transportation—different enough to have endured its hundred years with grace, and to deserve at least a hundred more. Fast

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device for the Christmas season of 1939. By 1949, Johnnie Marks had written and Gene Autry and Bing Crosby had recorded the song, and the Horatio Alger reindeer became a permanent part of the American celebration of Christmas.

Though the Christmas holiday has been much commercialized, and has lost so much of its religious significance that many children now think that December 25th is Rudolph's birthday rather than the birthday of Christ, some of the old religious roots of the season still exist. St. Nick and "old Nick," the devil, and Father Christmas, the English legendary character of misrule, were early on confused and amalgamated, so that even now excess and chaos and overindulgence have become the dominant qualities of American Christmases, derived from this unlikely trio. And Santa himself still retains some of the qualities that he had as a Dutch saint and Christian bishop. As he sometimes brought punishments to Dutch children, so American children are told,

You better watch out,  
You better not cry,  
You better not shout,  
I'm telling you why,  
Santa Claus is coming to town.  
He's making a list,  
And checking it twice,  
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice . . .

(Coots and Gillespie, "Santa Claus is Coming to Town")

Santa is a kind of boogey man, like the goblins who will get you if you don't watch out. Though he is still a jolly, ho-hoing fellow, he retains that threatening aspect of his personality as an agent of social control, keeping children in line. The American celebration of Christmas retains very little of the original religious flavor of the holiday, with its soul-searching and fasting; the wrathful God of the Hebrews and the Puritan founding fathers has lost His significance as a punitive figure in America, but for little children, Santa has taken His place. Though the song is rollicking and upbeat, and the ominous message thereby somewhat undercut in its impact, the vengeful quality is still there.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Actually, there is some evidence that the poem may not be Moore's at all, since he did not own it until 1844 when a volume of his poems, including this one, was published; it is clear that some of the other poems in the book have been "borrowed," and there is a popular tradition in the Livingston family that Henry Livingston, Jr. actually wrote the poem and Moore simply read it to his children that day. The houseguest

consequently assumed that it was his own, and passed it on to the Troy newspaper. Moore may merely have neglected to correct her mistaken impression. See Tristram Potter Coffin, *The Book of Christmas Folklore* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Coffin, p. 91

<sup>3</sup> Cited from John Buxton, ed., *Poems of Michael Drayton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), vol. 1, p. 184.

Ruth K. MacDonald, a former president of the Children's Literature Association, teaches at Northwestern University.

## A Hundred Years of Treasure

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orange cars and sleek silver spaceships may have replaced pirate ships in the mythology of youth; but nothing has replaced *Treasure Island's* clever ambiguities, and nothing could replace Stevenson's graceful, controlled, limpidly clear prose. Try reading *Treasure Island* aloud to some children, and see if it doesn't hold them, despite its lack of spaceships and girls in short shorts.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "A Gossip on Romance," *Memories and Portraits* (New York: Scribner's, 1898), p. 268.

<sup>2</sup> "My First Book: *Treasure Island*," *The Art of Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1908), p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in David Daiches, *Robert Louis Stevenson and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 55.

Perry Nodelman