

“As if She Were a Little Girl”

Young and Old Children in the Works of Lucy M. Boston, Eleanor Farjeon, and Philippa Pearce

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The elderly do not always have a favourable reputation in children’s literature. Wicked old witches pervade popular fairy tales and in more recent books the aged are sometimes portrayed as bad-tempered naggers, plagued by geriatric complaints, and the natural enemies of noisy children (as for instance in Ed Franck’s *Een kanarie in mijn hoofd*). At the same time, these negative images are counterbalanced by a vast number of understanding grandparents and kind seniors, who entertain the young with stories and spoil them with attention and sweet treats. In some children’s books, elderly characters even share a number of characteristics with children, so that they can guide the young through their experiences with more understanding than their parents and peers. Philippa Pearce, Lucy M. Boston and Eleanor Farjeon are three influential British authors that have described the affinities and special relationship between an elderly person

and a child. In this article, I will analyze the construction of old age and childhood in Pearce’s *Tom’s Midnight Garden* (1958/2000) and *A Dog So Small* (1962), Boston’s earlier Green Knowe books, *The Children of Green Knowe* (1954/2000) and *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* (1958/1976a) and on stories taken from Farjeon’s *The Little Bookroom* (1955), *Eleanor Farjeon’s Book* (1960) and *The Old Nurse’s Stocking Basket* (1965).

In the works of Pearce, Boston and Farjeon, the young and the old bear a likeness to each other on different levels: they share a marginal societal position, an affection for nature and animals, an interest in the past, a fondness of stories and a sensitivity towards the unreal. Many of these characteristics are part of the Romantic idealization of the child, an image that also affects the elderly characters in these stories. In the stories of Eleanor Farjeon, Philippa Pearce and Lucy M. Boston therefore, elderly

characters and children are in many ways complementary, so that the wisdom and understanding of the old supplements the enthusiasm and strength of the young.

Affinities Between the Young and the Old

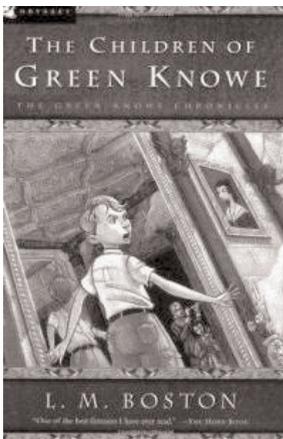
In late twentieth-century Western culture, seniors and children no longer belong to the working population. Their position outside of the professional field has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, children and elderly people are financially dependent on working people, they are not always familiar with current professional proceedings and institutions, and are often denied the responsibility to make important decisions. As a result, both children and aged people are often depicted as weak, vulnerable and lonely. On the other hand, their position in society creates many possibilities. Since children and pensioners are exempt from a daytime job, they have *time*, which enables them to reflect on contemporary society and philosophical issues. The elderly complain about stress and the increasing speed of life in modern society, and to children, many middle-aged adults are “quotidian, unimaginative sorts who [...] cannot take ‘time out’ to consider anything beyond their immediate

circumstances” (Mikkelsen 8). It is not a coincidence that most elderly characters in the stories by Boston, Farjeon and Pearce are no longer married, and that the children visit them during weekends or holidays: the elderly are the only adults who are prepared to devote all their time to the young and shower them with attention.

Most importantly, the abundance of spare time gives the old a chance to tell stories. In the works of Boston and Farjeon one finds many so-called ‘patchwork’ grandparents, a term coined by Pat Pinsent to describe grandmothers “often seen with a piece of needlework which not infrequently gives them inspiration for recalling family memories” (142). Farjeon’s *Old Nurse* narrates tales while she is mending socks (see 1965, 5), and Mrs Oldknow tells her great-grandson Tolly about family history while she is working on a patchwork quilt (see Boston 1976a, 13).

During these story-telling moments the elderly frequently connect the past with the present, a connection which is supported by time theories deviant from linear time. In *The Children of Green Knowe*, *Tom’s Midnight Garden* and *The Old Nurse’s Stocking Basket* time deviates from the concept of time assumed in realistic novels. In realistic fiction, time progresses in a

linear way, and characters may be able to remember the past, but they cannot access it anymore or meet people from the past. In fantastic fiction or magic realist fiction, such boundaries between past, present and future can be crossed, and in the novels mentioned above, the different notions of time contribute to bringing the old and the young together. Farjeon's *Old Nurse* is exempt from normal time, in which people age and die: time does not seem to affect her like it affects other people. She seems to have eternal life, having nursed babies for several centuries. In *Tom's Midnight Garden*, Mrs Bartholomew and Tom play together as children, even though they were born more than two generations apart. In *The Children of Green Knowe* Tolly meets children that lived centuries ago, thanks to what Mary Buckalew calls



Lucy M. Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe*

'Global Time', which "assumes all times as concurrent" (182). The books are pervaded by the idea that everything comes back (see Boston 2000, 8) so that the past can still interact with the present.

The non-linear time concept that most overtly links childhood and old age is to be found in Farjeon's "And I Dance Mine Own Child" (1955, 216–243), which deals with the relationship between a ten-year-old girl and her great-grandmother. Even though their cohabitation seems undesirable to some villagers, the young girl and the old woman have many things in common, as the narrator explains:

[T]here was not as much difference between them as you might suppose. If Griselda's Great-Grandmother had been twice, or thrice, or four times ten years old, there would have been a great deal of difference; for when you are twenty or thirty or forty, you feel very differently from when you are ten. But a hundred is a nice round number, and it brings things home in a circle; so Griselda's ten seemed to touch quite close the ten of Great-Grandmother Curfew, who was a hundred years away, and yet so very near her. (Farjeon 1955, 216)

The circular notion of time described here literally brings the young and the old together. As a result, Great-Grand-

mother Curfew is interested in the same things as a ten-year-old, but fails to give Griselda the financial security that a parent could.

The circular notion of time that Farjeon describes in “And I Dance Mine Own Child” connects the old and young, but leaves out a generation in between. Likewise, in *The Children of Green Knowe*, Tolly’s parents are absent and he is surrounded by elderly people and spirits. Mrs Oldknow often talks about her childhood, but hardly ever mentions her life as a middle-aged, married woman. Her husband, for instance, is one of the great absentees in the *Green Knowe* books. In Farjeon’s best-known story and her own personal favourite, “Elsie Piddock Skips in Her Sleep” (1966, 61–81), the protagonist only skips when she is a child and an elderly lady, and her adult life is merely summarised in a couple of sentences. Anthony’s adulthood in “The Man Who Heard the Trees Grow” is briefly mentioned as “sixty years gone by” (Farjeon 1960, 130). In *Tom’s Midnight Garden*, Tom fades when Hatty grows up (see Pearce 2000, 215), and the next time he sees her she is an old woman. The other middle-aged adults in the story, his uncle and aunt, cannot part with a rational notion of time and are thus unable to understand Tom’s

anxieties. In Pearce’s *A Dog So Small* the protagonist’s mother is so preoccupied with her own concerns that she, unlike Ben’s grandfather, has no idea of her son’s longings and loneliness, and fails to get close to him. Even though the middle-aged may play a more central role in the labour market, in the novels that link the old and the young it is often (working/middle-aged) adults that are confined to marginal roles.

Young and Old Alike

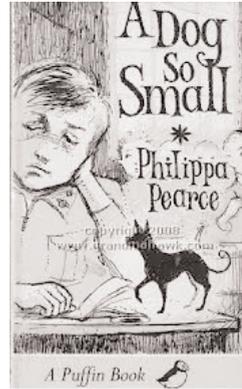
As a result of the affinities between young and old, children and aged characters are often pictured as being alike, both physically and mentally. Physically, their small size and vulnerability are stressed. Shrunk to the size of a seven-year-old, the old Elsie Piddock is “a tiny, tiny woman [...] so very bent and fragile, that she seemed to be no bigger than a little child” (Farjeon 1966, 76). In *Tom’s Midnight Garden*, Mrs Bartholomew appears as a young child and as an elderly woman, apparently without fundamental changes: when Tom meets the old lady for the first time, she “reminded him of the little girl in the garden” (Pearce 2000, 209), not of the young woman he saw the last time when they went skating. Even Aunt

Gwen makes the connection at the end of the story:

Of course, Mrs Bartholomew's such a shrunken little old woman, she's hardly bigger than Tom, anyway: but, you know, he put his arms right round her and he hugged her good-bye as if she were a little girl. (Pearce 2000, 218)

More than just the elderly's vulnerability, the stories also stress the playfulness of both. Mrs Oldknow's room is filled with children's toys (see Boston 1976a, 21), and sometimes she looks "so mischievously [Tolly] could almost imagine she was a boy to play with" (Boston 2000, 14). Moreover, "her wrinkly smile [...] still had something boyish about it, rather like his own, as if she could read his thoughts" (Boston 1976a, 45), and when they discover a treasure in *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, Mrs Oldknow first wants to dress up in the recovered jewels, just a like a little girl (see *ibid.* 170).

At times, elderly people are portrayed in literature (as in society) as psychologically equal to children, usually with negative implications concerning their mental capacities. One's 'second childhood' is an English euphemism to denote senility, and in Dutch the word 'kinds' (which means both childlike and senile) links early childhood to senile dementia. A good



Philippa Pearce: *A Dog So Small*

example of the similar psychological representation of elderly people and children is to be found in Philippa Pearce's *A Dog So Small* (1964). The protagonist's grandfather, Mr Fitch, is pictured as a good, honest man who lives a simple life in the countryside with his somewhat dominant wife. The relationship between Mr and Mrs Fitch very much resembles that of a parent and a child, as becomes clear when the old man promises his grandson, Ben, a dog, something which Mrs Fitch opposes. Ben's grandfather is impulsive and eager to please the boy but has to obey his wife, who is more cautious and thinks ahead. Mrs Fitch is in control of the finances and other important decisions, and she is frequently portrayed as reprimanding her husband. Like a parent, Ben's grandmother checks her husband's spelling and the content of

his letters to Ben (see Pearce 1964, 4). In his writing, Mr Fitch resembles a young child, composing the words “slowly and crabbedly” (ibid. 98), and with many mistakes, as if he were just learning to spell. Moreover, the narrator takes on a superior tone and invites ironic distance when describing both Ben and his grandfather:

As Mr Fitch wrote with such difficulty, he always supposed that others would be as easily confused as himself by the spelling of words. (Pearce 1964, 98)

The remark was senseless to Ben, and he forgot it at once. [...] But the remark had been of importance, and helped towards important decisions of which Ben knew nothing until later. (ibid. 113)

In the first quotation, Ben’s grandfather wants to pass on a secret, but wrongly assumes that his own difficulties with spelling apply to other people as well. Everybody immediately knows what he is talking about and as a result, the old man looks rather silly. In the second quotation, the narrator shows that s/he knows more than Ben, who is excluded from important decisions. As a result, the reader may feel intellectually superior towards these characters, but also sympathetic. In the stories by Farjeon, Pearce and Boston, old people are sometimes described as having limited

mental capacities, but usually this is done in a friendly way, and respect is shown for other values possessed by the elderly characters. Children and aged characters are then pictured as having less factual knowledge, but as being morally superior to middle-aged adults. This portrayal corresponds to a Romantic view of childhood.

Romantic Features of Children and the Elderly

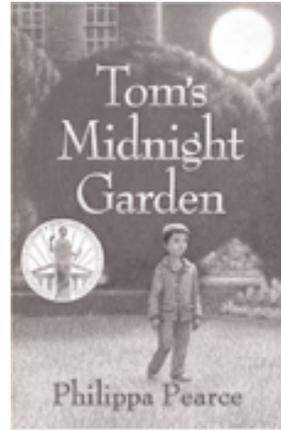
The concept of the elevated child in Romanticist discourse greatly influenced Victorian and twentieth-century thinking about childhood (see Reynolds 3) and certainly pervades the books discussed in this article. Central to this Romantic concept of the child is the idea that the very young are innocent and pure. For the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the child could only be perverted by instruction and experience:

Childhood in Romantic literature is frequently portrayed as Edenic, natural and asocial. The Romantic child is, like Adam, unfallen as long as it remains solitary. (Richardson 122)

The idea of the prelapsarian world formulated by Alan Richardson is most obviously present in *Tom’s Midnight Garden*. Critics have often compared Tom’s garden to the Garden of

Eden, and according to Raymond E. Jones, "Tom's journeys to the garden do represent an entry into the ideal of childhood of innocence and happiness" (214). It is no coincidence that, apart from the animals and the gardener, only Hatty can see Tom: she is the youngest child in the garden and therefore the least set in adult ways. As Hatty grows up and experiences a literal fall (from the wall), the children physically and psychologically move away from this prelapsarian natural environment. But why is old Mrs Bartholomew granted access to this Edenic world? As an adult she is supposed to be far removed from that innocent state. However, Mrs Bartholomew does not enter the garden as an adult, but as a young girl. Moreover, like a child, the old lady is at the margins of life, and about to return to a mystical state, possibly a state of divine innocence. Moreover, it is thanks to her longing for the garden of childhood that Tom is able to enter it. This corresponds to the idea that childhood innocence is very much a construct of adult desire.

Tom's garden points to another characteristic that is centrally important to the Romantic image of the child as it has lived on in the twentieth century: the child's closeness to nature. According to William Wordsworth, nature is "a rich



Tom's Midnight Garden
(Philippa Pearce)

mine of associations and experiences that contribute to the growth of a 'chosen spirit'" (as quoted by Richardson 123). In the stories by Farjeon, Pearce and Boston, nature is not only central to the child's development: elderly people also share this closeness to nature. In Philippa Pearce's work, it is in the garden that Tom has his experiences with Hatty, and it is the garden that old Mrs Bartholomew enters in her dreams. It is no coincidence that, apart from Hatty, Tom is only seen by the gardener and the animals: they are all creatures that are part of or connected to nature. Both Tolly and Mrs Oldknow in Boston's *Green Knowe* books enjoy spending time in the garden and have a close relationship to animals, especially birds. According to Linda Hall, this connection to nature contributes to the Romantic atmosphere of the book:

Contributing to the picture of 'the innocence' of their lives is their richly fulfilling respect for the animal and bird life at Green Knowe, an environmentally loving attitude not confined to social position. (232)

But the comparison stretches even further than that. Not only is Mrs Oldknow named after a bird (Linnet or Granny Partridge) and is occasionally compared to one (see Boston 1976a, 125), she also knows how to attract and communicate with them, speaking, "in clucks and tschks which are common to old ladies and birds" (ibid. 137).

In Farjeon's stories, the link of the old and the young with nature is even more explicit. Not only are a lot of her stories set in pastoral surroundings, which are usually described in great detail, nature often plays a very central part in the tales. Children and elderly people have an almost pagan connection to nature, especially to trees. Kissing a tree is seen as a blessing in "The Girl Who Kissed the Peach-Tree" (Farjeon 1955, 83–90), where it is a girl's love for a tree that saves the town. In "Every Man Loves the Tree that Gives Him Shelter" (Farjeon 1960, 95–96), an acorn was planted for the grandfather's birth and the man spends his old age under the tree that has grown from that seed, feeding the birds. Nature is portrayed

as something that is more reliable than people: when a grandchild says that he loves his mother most, the old man gives him an acorn to plant because an oak outlasts many humans. Another old man who is close to nature is "The Man Who Heard the Trees Grow" (Farjeon 1960, 125–130). Once again, his love for nature is passed on to a child, who shares with him the time and patience to listen to the trees.

With Eleanor Farjeon, Philippa Pearce and Lucy M. Boston, the respect and love for nature that the old and the young share is closely linked to an environmentalist message. In the present, Tom's once beautiful garden is nothing but a small yard, and the river is polluted; in "Elsie Piddock Skips in Her Sleep" the village is threatened by factories, and in Lucy M. Boston's last Green Knowe novel, *The Stones of Green Knowe*, the house and the garden are endangered. This respect for nature is often linked to a nostalgic feeling for the pre-industrialised past, which is also a Romantic feature. Indeed the elderly and the children share an interest in the past, both personal and national. Mrs Bartholomew, Mrs Oldknow and the Old Nurse reconstruct the past of their own youth and thus pass it on to the young. This corresponds to the Romantic poets' nostalgia for the past, both on a personal and historical level:

for them, childhood was the remains of a past state of the world, which was still close to a divine origin, so that "to adopt the child's standpoint meant, for the Romantic, to transport oneself into the past" (Ewers 737).

Finally, and most importantly, the Romantic child's closeness to a divine origin evokes in the young a special sense for the unreal, a gift they have in common with the elderly. This telepathic talent enables children and aged people to communicate with trees, animals or even spirits. Moreover, the stories that the aged tell to children enhance this talent for the supernatural to a great extent. This is most obvious in *The Children of Green Knowe*, where both Tolly and Mrs Oldknow communicate with the spirits of dead children. The old lady very much encourages Tolly's interest in the supernatural and confirms more than once that she believes in the ghosts herself. In contrast, the middle-aged adults in these books lack the imagination needed to participate in magical experience, and are once again excluded from the special bond between the old and the young.

A like, But Not the Same

Although Boston, Farjeon and Pearce suggest various similarities between the children and elderly characters in

their stories, only rarely are both groups described to be as alike as in the quotation above (in the section on non-linear time) from Eleanor Farjeon's "And I Dance Mine Own Child", where a 110-year-old great-grandmother is portrayed as similar to a ten-year-old little girl. In the story, this also causes problems: since the great-grandmother is psychologically on the same level as the child, it is impossible for them to live together for a long period. Somebody has to assume responsibility, and since the old lady is unable to, it is the child who takes on the role of an adult and starts earning money – a phenomenon known as the child's 'parentification' (see a.o. Hooper, 2011). In most children's books in which the aged and the young share some characteristics, it is the balance between likeness and difference that makes the interaction between the old and the young so successful and interesting. This corresponds to Peter Hollindale's view on 'childness', a feature that, paradoxically, is not only present in children. In *Signs of Childness in Children's Books*, Hollindale describes the childness of Polixenes, a character from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, who is playing with his son Florizel:

In playing with Florizel, Polixenes is not ceasing to be an adult; he is

not playing as a child plays any more than adults read as a child reads. But there is a transaction between them, a shared set of pleasuring beliefs about childhood and child behaviour, in which the adult can engage – in our contemporary phrase – as a participant observer. [...] For the boy it is the presentness of his condition; for Polixenes it is participant reconstruction, made up from observation, play, and memory, and values and hopes which he invests in childhood and the future represented by this son. Childness, the quality of being a child, is shared ground, though differently experienced and understood, between child and adult. (47)

In this quotation, the adult does not completely converge with the child. The adult cannot shut out years of experience, even if s/he might like to. Roni Natov stresses that a complete return to childhood entails serious risks: “to be lost in childhood moments also signifies frozenness, so that as adults we need to seek a balance” (7). The same is true for grandparents and other elderly characters in children’s books: even though they feel closely connected to child characters, there are usually some differences as well, which allow the aged person to guide the young character, often with more understanding than a parent could.

In Boston’s *Green Knowe* books, for instance, Mrs Oldknow likes to play with Tolly and communicate with the spirits of past generations, but she is rarely as emotionally involved as Tolly is. She has the wisdom to guide Tolly through his experiences, providing safety and good advice. On the other hand, young Tolly has skills that Mrs Oldknow lacks, for instance his sense of adventure and the physical strength to go exploring. In *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, the stories that the great-grandmother tells are supplemented with discoveries that Tolly makes on his journeys through the garden, and the two combined lead to a great treasure.

Conclusion

In more recent novels, the elderly are still very much present, but their roles have further diversified (see Pinsent 2001). Several types of grandparents populate contemporary children’s books, and the emphasis has shifted from the weak and vulnerable senior to the happy, healthy and active grandparent and even the geriatric superhero, as in Carl Norac and Ingrid Godon’s *My Grandpa Is a Champion* (2007) and *My Grandma Is a Star* (2008). Many of the issues discussed in this essay still apply to contemporary children’s books, for instance the interest

in stories, the past and the imaginary that helps Kit bond with his grandfather in David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), or the playful and imaginative attitude that a young girl shares with her grandfather in Marjolijn Hof's *Mijn opa en ik en het varken oma* (2011, "My Grandpa and I and the Pig Grandma"). Together the anonymous protagonist (a young girl) and her grandfather indulge in absurd games. This grandpa behaves in a more childish way than his granddaughter at times. He likes baking pancakes so much that he cannot stop and makes enormous piles, which results in grandfather and granddaughter having to buy a pig to eat them. They call their pig "grandma" and decorate her stable with a neon sign flashing its name. Both seem to play on equal terms and come up with suggestions for new games. A magic realist dimension also seeps into the story when it is suggested that their encounters do not only take place in reality, but also in their dreams.

Like the young girl from Hof's book, many protagonists in recent children's books find an escape from the hassle of daily life with their grandparents in books that often build a contrast between the city and the countryside. Even when that countryside is not as widely available as it was

in the mid-twentieth century and many elderly people live in the city, the contrast between city and country remains a powerful trope to date in the construction of old age in children's literature. Guus Kuijer's *Polleke* series, which started in 1999 with *Voor altijd samen, amen* ("Always together, Amen", translated into German as *Wir alle für immer zusammen*), provides an additional example. In the city, the young girl Polleke is plagued by worries about her father, a drug addict, and about her mother, who has fallen in love with her teacher and does not want to give up that relationship even though it greatly embarrasses her daughter. Polleke visits her grandparents in the countryside regularly, where she helps them tend the farm and milk the cows. Her grandparents' home is the place where she most easily finds peace and quiet. They make time for her, take her thoughts and worries seriously, and let her share their lifestyle. In contrast to the other books discussed in this chapter, the grandparents' life also includes religion. From them, Polleke learns to pray, although she prefers to do so with her own words rather than using Christian or other religious models. Her grandparents are patient and understanding guides in her process of

acceptance and maturation. *Voor altijd samen, amen* is representative of a larger group of contemporary children's books, in which children find comfort in the clarity, regularity and safety of their grandparents' lives.

Children's books, with their frequent inclusion of positive portrayals of seniors, can contribute to correct a frequent omission that Anne M. Wyatt-Brown observes, of

the possibility that every stage of the life course has its own topics, crises, and turning points, processes or moments, any one which can also cause a flowering of creativity, a revitalization, or a new beginning. (9)

Even though the social position and activities of the grandparents' generation have substantially changed since the works of Boston, Pearce and Farjeon were written, the good relationship between the young and the elderly has been mainly preserved, and especially in children's literature still draws on Romantic ideals and tropes. These books show children and adult readers that childhood and old age are time periods in life to be cherished and enjoyed, and that when children and the elderly start bonding, amazing things can happen that not only transgress the boundaries of age, but also of time and reality.

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