



Classics in Short No.10: A Child's Garden of Verses

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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Helen Levene on Robert Louis Stevenson's **A Child's Garden of Verses**.

A Child's Garden of Verses

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First published:

1885

Genre:

Poetry collection

Who for?

Imaginative young children and nostalgic adults

Claim to fame:

The Western world's best known collection of poems about childhood

Influenced by:

Author's own childhood, despite it being, in his words: "... a very mixed experience, full of fever, nightmare, insomnia, painful days and interminable nights ??The collection reflects the benign side of Robert Louis Stevenson's earlier years rather than the pain of his many illnesses; it includes the longings and imaginings of young children, their likes and their fears, their surroundings, dreams of travel and adventure, out and about, the seasons and the weather, nature, being alone, and being ill. Some of the poems pay tribute to the special people in his childhood ? his beloved nurse, his mother and his auntie.

Classic qualities:

A Child's Garden of Verses is the earliest poetry book for children to remain consistently in print since its publication. It was written specially for children to read and enjoy for themselves. A seminal work, it changed how children could be written for and written about in poetry as it presented children for the first time as the makers of their own imaginative worlds. Robert Louis Stevenson's ability to recall precisely the feelings and the experiences of his own infancy brings the poems to life, ringing true with little children and evoking fond reminiscences in adults. Seen through the eyes of a child, and told in the first person, the world of play depicted in these poems does not condescend or patronize a young audience. This is why generations of children have taken them into their hearts, especially the well-known ones such as ?My Shadow?, ?The Land of Counterpane?, and ?Where Go the Boats??. They are simple to read yet skilfully written

with an economy of words; they are highly evocative of the time yet most are as relevant and poignant today as they were then.

Who was Cummy?

Stevenson's much-loved and deeply religious nurse, Alison Cunningham, 'Cummy' as he called her, who watched over him during his many bouts of illness, diverting his attention and firing his imagination by repeating psalms and hymns from the Bible and tales of the Covenanters, eg. Robert Woodrow's **Suffering of the Church of Scotland**. 'Cummy' became the formative influence of Stevenson's early childhood with her intoxicating mixture of comfort, religious terror and guilt. He dedicated **A Child's Garden of Verses** to her.

When and where did RLS write the poems?

The first few poems came to him in Braemar in Scotland, in between writing **Treasure Island**. The rest were composed during 1881-84, in Hyères in France, during a long period of illness, where he lay in bed unable to do anything but reflect.

About the author:

Born in Edinburgh on 13th November 1850, Robert Louis Stevenson was the much-loved only child of civil engineer Thomas Stevenson and Margaret Balfour. From as young as six years of age he knew he was going to be a writer and his first known literary creation was a biography of Moses, which he dictated to his mother.

He attended various schools but was often away due to ill health, and long periods of recuperation in Europe. Despite his literary ambition, RLS entered Edinburgh University to study Engineering to please his father, but he dropped out after three years. His father insisted that he take up Law instead which he agreed to do, particularly so that he could continue his Bohemian lifestyle. Although he qualified, he did not practise and was still determined to become a professional author. He worked hard at his writing and gradually succeeded in gaining the interest of editors, contributing essays to various periodicals. In 1876 he met Fanny Osborne, an American whom he later married. His stepson, Lloyd Osborne, was the inspiration behind **Treasure Island** which was first published in 1883. Stevenson's other books include **Prince Otto; The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde; Kidnapped; The Merry Men; The Black Arrow**, and other novels and essays. After his father's death in 1887 he published a book of poems called **Underwoods** and then left Scotland with his wife, mother and stepson for America. In the late 1880s he settled on the island of Samoa, where he died in 1894 of a brain haemorrhage.

Is the collection PC?

Stevenson has been accused of presenting too sweet and innocent a view of childhood. Interestingly, his own childhood was often wracked with pain and illness, yet there is no hint of this suffering in the poems. The poems are a personal reflection of RLS's upbringing and therefore contain the highly Christian moral values that were instilled in him as a child by Cummy. Yet the poems do not preach, or moralize and if they do, it is with an element of humour:

A child should always say what's true

And speak when he is spoken to,

And behave mannerly at table;

At least as far as he is able.

One poem, 'Foreign Children', in which the child is so happy that he or she cannot believe that anyone living anywhere else could be so fulfilled now appears condescending.

Editions?

The first illustrator of **A Child's Garden of Verses** was Charles Robinson. There have been many editions since with different styles of illustration. The collection is so popular that a Robert Louis Stevenson poem can be found in most contemporary anthologies for young children.

The illustrations are taken from the Hamish Hamilton edition, illustrated by Michael Foreman (0 241 13918 X, £6.99 pbk).

Helen Levene works in publishing.

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