



Classics in Short No.19: Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain

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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on Edward Ardizzone's **Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain**.

Ship's boy among the publishers <!--break-->

Origins (1) anthropological:

Edward Ardizzone's Little Tim, <!--break-->who stows away on a steamboat and meets with storms and shipwreck, is prototype (however diminutive) of the Hero venturing to unknown shores. And he properly meets with the encatastrophe/eucatastrophe??? of the Happy Return.

Origins (2) biographical:

Ardizzone was born a hundred years ago in French Indo-China (his father was French, of Italian descent, his mother English). Coming to England early on, he spent some dismal boyhood years in Ipswich, later enlivened by the arrival of a cousin with whom he explored the docks and some of the vessels that called there. Much later he stayed with a brother in Deal, and his recollections of that and of his maritime ramblings at Ipswich led him to the creation of **Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain**. First published in 1936, this was the foundation of his great career as a children's book illustrator.

Origins (3) commercial:

Little Tim was written out and illustrated by the artist in a large drawing book (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum). By a devious route it came to the notice of Geoffrey Cumberlege in the London office of OUP, who showed it to a young assistant, Grace Allen, visiting from the New York office (and later becoming the great and much-loved editor Grace Allen Hogarth). She took the ms. back to New York, replaced Ardizzone's cursive script with her own neat lettering, and had the book printed as a grand folio by the new process of offset litho. Summer in the city was not good for drying ink though and the paper was printed on one side only so that blank page-openings alternated with those having text and pictures.

The Immediate successors:

?Little Tim? began life as a bedtime story and was dedicated to its first auditor, Ardizzone's son Philip. Such was its success, that a companion volume followed in 1937 for his sister Christianna: **Lucy Brown and Mr Grimes**. It then was only natural that the two protagonists should meet, and a year later they set sail together (along with Mr Grimes and his redoubtable housekeeper, Mrs Smawley) in **Tim and Lucy Go to Sea**. At this point though more pressing events turned up and in 1939 Ardizzone found himself en route to becoming an Official War Artist.

Transformations:

There were to be no more appearances of Little Tim in folio (although in 1947, through the benign influence of Graham Greene, Eyre & Spottiswoode published in large format the adventures of another intrepid youth, **Nicholas and the Fast-Moving Diesel**). The first two Tim books were reissued as modest paperbacks in 1944, and in 1949 the lad featured in a new escapade in **Tim to the Rescue** . The format was here reduced to that of a 48-page quarto, and that became the standard dress for eight more books about Little Tim, who was often accompanied by Charlotte (saved from drowning in 1951) and a luckless epigone called Ginger. In 1955 and 1958 the two pre-war Tim books were re-edited to fit the changed format, although poor Lucy Brown fell foul of modern prohibitions (Mr Grimes had originally picked her up inconsequentially in a local park) and she had to be considerably revised before being allowed out again in 1970. The seventh volume in the series, **Tim All Alone** (1956) was the first book to win the Kate Greenaway Medal.

Heroic Continuities:

Like William Brown, a near-contemporary, Little Tim is unaffected by the storms of life and survives multiple shipwrecks, mutinies, stowings-away, and ferocious bosuns while remaining a resourceful 8-year-old (or thereabouts). The formula seems crude, but criticism is entirely disarmed by Ardizzone's unaffected storytelling and fluent drawing. What good news therefore that all eleven of Tim's adventures are being re-originated from the original artwork and will appear from Scholastic between now and the autumn. And when that's done, perhaps Scholastic will turn their attention to two of Tim's near relatives whose stories are equally ? if not more ? rewarding: **Peter the Wanderer** (1963) and **Johnny the Clockmaker** (1960).

The illustrations are taken from the Scholastic edition of **Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain**. reissued in 1999 (0 590 11417 4, £9.99)

Brian Alderson is Chair of the Children's Books History Society and the chief children's book consultant for **The Times** .

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