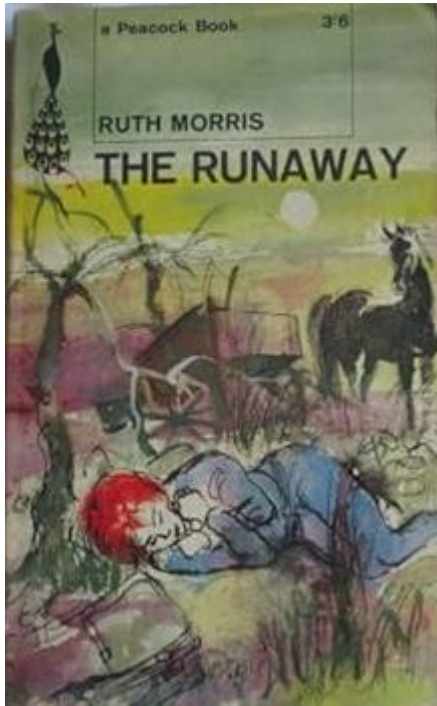


Childhood adventure and adult irresponsibility: children's literature through adult eyes

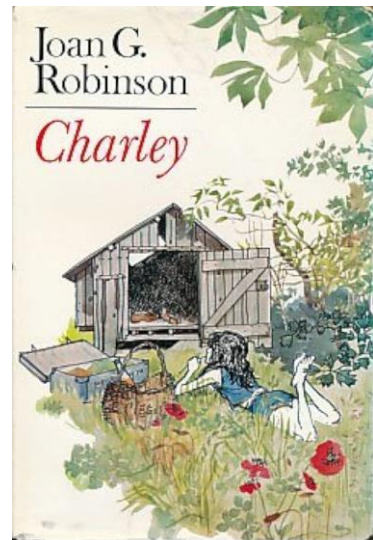
I was struck recently by how my perception of children's literature has changed since I myself was a child. This can be illustrated by two books that I read as a child, and recently re-read as an adult. They are *The Runaway* by Ruth Morris, and *Charley* by Joan G Robinson.

Both *The Runaway* and *Charley* have similar themes, though they are set in different countries (*The Runaway* in Australia, and *Charley* in the UK). Both deal with young girls who find themselves either abandoned or gloriously independent of adults (depending on how you view their situations!). The



Australian protagonist is a 12-year-old orphan, Joanne, though she has had a happy life living with her uncle and aunt since her parents' death. Their departure on a world cruise, leaving her behind, is a surprise, but she is undaunted by the possibility of a new adventure – staying with relatives she has never met, on a sheep farm. However, she is not made welcome by the taciturn couple, and is put to work by the woman, who is bitter and unfeeling, and who has a manic cleaning obsession. Potential release comes when the couple ask her to go and live with the woman's sister. Being before the age of the telephone, Joanne is despatched with a note for the new relatives, but decides, on arrival at the property and before meeting the relatives, that her life there would be no less unhappy, so sets off alone, with a pony and trap, with no plans for the future. Because there is no communication between the farming couple and the woman's sister, no-one realizes that Joanne has not turned up at her destination, and no-one, especially not her aunt and uncle in comfortable cruising bliss, is aware of her plight, or seems to care.

"I don't want Charley. You know that. It's the work. If it could –" So begins the story, from a fragment of a letter, taken out of context. The missing words actually read: "**It's not that** I don't want Charley. You know that. It's the work..." However, Charley, on the way to stay with friends of the family, only reads the torn fragment, and decides that, if they don't want her, she doesn't want to stay with them, either! She decides to sleep rough in their garden, believing, with a child's logic, that they are probably watching TV in the front room, not realizing that the couple have actually gone away. She finds out that she is truly alone when she comes across a note for the milkman – "No more milk, thank you." She is then truly alone, but relishes her independence, creating different personas for herself as she moves about the village.

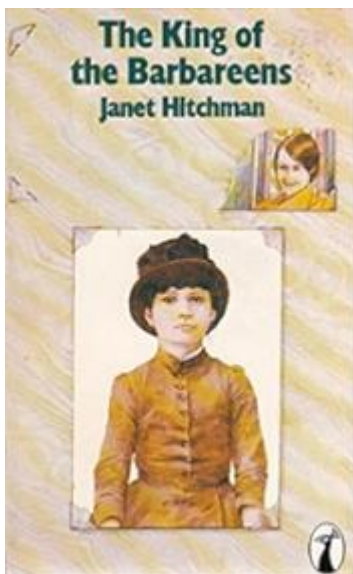


I found myself thinking about both of these stories, and even re-bought *Charley* on eBay, as I became aware of my incredulity at the irresponsibility of the adults involved in both stories. In the Australian story, the true negligence belongs to Joanne's guardians, her aunt and uncle on the cruise, who didn't take her with them and who seemed to think that placing her on a sheep farm with relatives she had never met and who didn't want her, would be fine. Quite what they thought when they eventually returned from their cruise is never explained. I secretly hoped that they got an unpleasant shock when they went to retrieve Joanne, to find that not only was she not on

the sheep farm, but that she had never arrived at her second destination either. The story has a happy ending, but I sincerely hope that the adults involved had a rude awakening.

The story of *Charley* also features adult irresponsibility, as illustrated via the fragment of the letter that Charley has. Charley's aunt has asked a family friend if Charley can come to stay, but asked in such a way as to make it almost a given 'You will have her to stay, won't you?' and didn't seem to pick up on the fairly clear wording of the letter they sent her in response, 'I don't want Charley.... It's the work.' Despite this, she packs off Charley on a journey on her own to stay with those same friends – who turn out to have gone away.

As a child, the attraction of both novels was the sense of adventure that both girls had. As an adult, I am astonished at the level of irresponsibility exhibited by all of the adults, who should have known better, and who exposed both children to serious risks. But a child reading both these novels doesn't focus on that, but more on the day-to-day adventures that each protagonist has.



This brings me on to another childhood favourite, *The King of the Barbareens*, by Janet Hitchman. An unusual title for the autobiography of an illegitimate orphan, Elsie (later known as Janet) born in East Anglia in 1916. This book was marketed as a children's book, and indeed was in the children's section of the bookshop that I often frequented, but I have come to realize that it is less a children's book and more a memoir of childhood. This makes sense to me now, as a few inferences in the book went over my head as a child. The book tells the story of the child's placement through a succession of foster placements and institutions, with only one constant person in her life, whom she saw about once a year – the 'lady from the Pensions' (referring to the Ministry of Pensions, who funded some children orphaned in the Great War; Elsie's father had been a soldier). Elsie was a difficult child, whose behaviour did not necessarily endear her to those with whom she lived. The sadness is that she realizes that if only she had had a family, people who would have been there for her come what may and would have fought her corner, she might have had a better life. Janet Hitchman became an author.

Janet Hitchman's story is less about adult irresponsibility, though it certainly contains elements of cruelty, ignorance and indifference, but more about how disruptive it was to have no home, no family, and no-one whose aim was to protect and cherish you. 'The Pensions' made many changes to her placements, some of them totally unsuitable (eg she was once placed at a home for mentally handicapped women), and it is implied early in the book that if The Pensions had not forcibly removed Elsie, at age 5, from the care of the people she called Gran and Granfer, the first family she had ever known, she might have had a better life.

The Runaway and *Charley* are novels, so we can bask in the comfort of the fact that neither story really happened (and both stories do have happy endings). But Janet Hitchman's autobiography is a stark reminder of how very harsh and unloving the world was for a sickly, contrary, unattractive orphan in the first half of the twentieth century.

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