



childhood & philosophy

núcleo de estudos de filosofias e infâncias [nefi/uerj]
international council of philosophical inquiry with children [icpic]

e-issn: 1984-5987 | p-issn: 2525-5061

book review

Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books, by Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor. English Media Centre, 2025.
ISBN: 9781906101749

author

adam m. ferner

independent researcher

e-mail: adam@adamferner.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4900-8065>

doi: [10.12957/childphilo.2025.89713](https://doi.org/10.12957/childphilo.2025.89713)



Spatial metaphors are at the centre of Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor's (2025) recent book *Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books*, which was published in January this year by the English Media Centre. Their argument, as compelling as it is unnerving, is that the landscape of the imagination – that “happy place”, that “refuge,” which in a psychoanalytic mode we might call “a psychic retreat” – is just as easily colonised as the physical one. Frances Hodgson Burnett's (1911) *The Secret Garden*, a “classic” of British literature, is a cipher for the fictional realm, which admits some people as citizens, but excludes, dehumanises and denigrates others.

The book is a curated collection of Sands-O'Connor and Chetty's column of the same name, published in the online magazine *Books for Keeps* (2018–). Their short, wonderfully pithy pieces explore the history of children's literature, the British publishing industry, and the all too often horrendous ways that canonical texts represent racially minoritized people. They cover books past and present, delivering fine-grained but never alienating analysis of the texts, interwoven with social critique. There are a handful of singly authored contributions – pieces from Sands-O'Connor's blog *The Race to Read* and Chetty's influential essay "You Can't Say That! Stories Have to Be About White People" – but mostly they are co-authored (there is also an excellent introduction by Patrice Lawrence). Thirty-eight in total, the chapters are organised into three sections: "'Classic' Children's Literature & Britain's Children's Book Industry," "Books and Belongings," and "Making Change" (this latter section being a more upbeat selection, describing ways that the industry may change for the better). The chapters are too interesting, too rich and too varied to be summarised individually. There is more worth in exploring the argument that runs through them, which investigates the deep and troubling connections between publishing, colonialism, liberalism and race.

"Robinsonades" are a helpful springboard here. The term, we are told, refers to a sub-genre of island adventure, of which the canonical case is Daniel Defoe's (1719) *Robinson Crusoe*, literary ancestor of *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), *Coral Island* (1857), and *Peter Pan* (1904) (among many others). In Defoe's original, the eponymous hero finds himself ship-wrecked on an island, which through hard-work, courage and natural intelligence (in Defoe's telling), he makes his home. Chetty and Sands-O'Connor's deconstruction of this much-loved text is instructive, and disturbing.

"Defoe," they write, "offers in narrative form the same justification as was used for England's appropriation of American soil provided in philosopher John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (published thirty years earlier)" (Chetty & Sands-O'Connor's, 2025, p. 32). In their framing, the hero of this classic, widely emulated tale, is a settler-coloniser; he lays claim to the land through agrarian labour, and significantly his doing so involves the dispossession of others, personified in the man, racialised as Black, whom Crusoe names "Friday."

“‘Friday’ ... is instructed to address Crusoe as ‘Master.’ Crusoe frequently refers to his co-habitant as a ‘creature’ and a ‘savage’...” (Chetty & Sands-O’Connor’s, 2025, p. 32).

Like many of the texts discussed here, the unalloyed racism and bigotry in the original has been “cleaned up” in subsequent editions. In Usborne’s 2007 version of *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, servitude is replaced with “friendship.” Hugh Lofting’s (1920) *Doctor Doolittle* follows a similar trajectory; the original involves the Doctor “bleaching the skin of the African prince who wants to be white” (Chetty & Sands-O’Connor’s, 2025, p. 38), but Macmillan’s 2018 reprint is rewritten to excise this material. In 2023, Roald Dahl’s back catalogue was re-released with edits, while recent years have seen filmic adaptations of each of these authors’ works carefully, if not perfectly, sanitised for modern audiences.

Sands-O’Connor and Chetty describe how textual remnants of the originals remain (Macmillan’s 2018 *Doolittle*, for instance, still contains a reference to “these Darkies”). Even assiduous attempts at whitewashing perpetuate the dominance of white authors over authors of colour. The “classics table” in your local bookshop is typically monocultural and monochromatic. Relevantly, this is in part a result of financial concerns: “As many so-called classic books are out of copyright, there is... an economic imperative at play. Publishers can produce and market versions of old classics relatively cheaply. Film-makers are spared the costs of purchasing rights” (Chetty & Sands-O’Connor’s, 2025, p. 40) Chetty and Sands-O’Connor draw our attention to the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, connections between racist histories and the neo-liberal project of building capital.

Consider again *Robinson Crusoe*. As Sands-O’Connor and Chetty (2025) frame it, the novel figures as an iteration of what the political philosopher Charles Mills calls “racial liberalism.” Liberalism is the political ideology that emphasises autonomy and an individual’s freedom from state interference. Within neo-liberalism (the economic manifestation of liberalism, realised within the capitalist marketplace), such liberties include the freedom to own private property and to make profit. Liberalism may not be *inextricably* tied to ideologies of race but for Charles Mills, it is a matter of historical fact that the “natural rights to property” described by Locke, Immanuel Kant and other liberal forefathers, are bound up with imperialist projects of white supremacy (hence “racial liberalism”).

Crusoe's agrarian existence – his home-building, animal husbandry and farming – is both the result of and justification for a land-grab and the deracination and enslavement of indigenous people. Thus: "When children's writers draw on the features of the Robinsonade sub-genre, they almost inevitably find themselves in conversation with colonial fantasies" (Chetty & Sands-O'Connor's, 2025, p. 35).

It is worth dwelling, for a moment, on this theory of property, since in many ways it seems to be at the heart of Sands-O'Connor and Chetty's critique. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, mentioned above, was written as a defence of colonial settlements in America (specifically those of his patron, the Earl of Shaftesbury). For the political scientist Barbara Arneil, the Lockean appropriation of land requires two specific elements of labour: "cultivation" and "enclosure". This is what Crusoe is seen to be doing in Defoe's novel; he cultivates the island, then encloses it, demarcating it on his own. This is no longer "common" land, but "private property."

Beyond the Secret Garden describes how the same appropriative process occurs in the landscape of the imagination. At times, Chetty and Sands-O'Connor seem almost to see this as one of the central functions of the publishing industry. The British imaginary – the conceptual realm inhabited by the Mad Hatter, the Pevensie children and Harry Potter – is the result of an industry that "cultivates" and "encloses" conceptual space (creating what Chetty has elsewhere called a "gated community of enquiry"). In some sense, of course, our imaginations are unlimited ("world-building," as N.K. Jemisin has amply demonstrated, is an open-source platform). In another important sense, however, and especially in relation to the printed page, the imagination is restricted, privatised and "policed" (Chetty & Sands-O'Connor's, 2025, p. 70). The publishing industry could not exist without the mechanisms of "intellectual property," "copyright," "permissions," "advances," and "royalties." Authors would not earn money and publishers would not make profit without the enclosure and cultivation of their literary "estates," their shareholdings of the imaginative landscape. (Contrast this with the relative openness of oral traditions, where a story might be a communal resource to be retold and reworked without fear of legal reprisals.)

Is the neo-liberal publishing industry necessarily racist? In line with Mills's rendering of "racial liberalism," Sands-O'Connor and Chetty (2025) appear open

to the possibility that anti-racist publishing is at least theoretically possible. Indeed, one of the aims of the book is to identify positive shifts in publishing, to signpost advances by activist-publishers like Verna Wilkins (p. 118), and to map potential avenues for progressive story-telling. Deploying some of the quantitative data provided by the *Reflecting Realities* reports (pp. 11, 119), they describe an increase in books by racially minoritized people and the consequent rise in nuanced and complex portraits of characters of colour. Like Mills, however, they also hold that it is a matter of historical fact that British publishing is inextricably tied to ideologies of race and the imperial project.

Throughout *Beyond the Secret Garden*, we are shown the different ways that “classic” children’s books function as colonial propaganda. In some texts, the narrative explicitly endorses British imperialism; in the work of Bessie Marchant and G.A. Henty, for instance, young white protagonists find “wealth, success, and even fame by dominating and exploiting the land people of the colonies” (Chetty & Sands-O’Connor’s, 2025, p. 45). White characters are framed as determinately superior to other colonial subjects (the same is true in *Crusoe* and *Doolittle*). More insidious, perhaps, are the silences and omissions. H.E. Marshall’s *Our Island Story*, beloved by former Prime Minister David Cameron, “glorifies white Britain’s past without engaging with the realities of colonial oppression” (p. 109). Stories are told about British heroism that pointedly ignore imperial expansion, involvement with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and white supremacy. “There is,” as Jacqueline Rose has it, “resistance to memory inside memory itself.”

At the start of this review, I mentioned the notion of the “psychic retreat,” a term coined by the psychoanalyst John Steiner. This concept, of a mental refuge, a spa-like resort where someone can marshal their spirits, is conceptually tied to the notions of escape and escapism, which we use when we talk about reading. When life seems overwhelming, we can run away, hide, relax – in books. The considerations above encourage us to explore this engagement with literature more closely. While psychic retreats can provide respite from challenging situations they can also be used pathologically, as a way to avoid the exigencies of reality; “a patient who is evidently not psychotic,” Steiner writes, “and fully capable of observing reality, can nevertheless misrepresent it to himself and to others and consequently live in an unreal world of phantasy and illusion.” This is

the Secret Garden, a psychic retreat, wherein the British Empire (and by implication, its public) is not, in fact, responsible for oppression and on-going violence.

It is no accident that the discussion of Robinsonades resonated particularly with me. In addition to the stories of island kingdoms that I read and watched as a child, my taste for homesteading fantasies was cultivated by the innumerable management simulations I played, computer games like *Settlers* (1993), *Warcraft* (1994) and *Command & Conquer* (1995). Even today, most management sims on offer present players with what Locke called “*vacuum domicillium*,” and others refer to as “*virgin territory*” or “*terra nullis*” – an empty unowned land, which can be claimed and sandboxed. This is the neoliberal myth, captured so precisely in Defoe’s novel, which carefully obscures the fact that cultivation and enclosure are acts of domination.

Complementing the notion of a “psychic retreat,” we find in the work of philosophers Charles Mills, Kristie Dotson and Linda Martín Alcoff, the concept of “white ignorance.” Ignorance is not simply the passive absence of knowledge; it can be an active, wilful avoidance, a “turning away” from the truth. For Chetty and Sands-O’Connor, the classics of British children’s literature perpetuate specific forms of unknowing by telling partial, biased stories. In so doing, they provide both a justification for imperial (white) dominance, and a nostalgised “happy place” in which white readers can escape from the discomfort and challenge of the realities of structural racism, patriarchy and white supremacy.

I suspect that the authors of *Beyond the Secret Garden* would say that publishing is not an intrinsically supremacist endeavour – there are important moments of hope and joy in the book (e.g. 93ff). They would, however, doubtlessly acknowledge the potentially insurmountable obstacles to creating a more egalitarian industry (Chetty & Sands-O’Connor’s, 2025, p. 71). There are moments, too, where they seem to want to steer away entirely from neoliberal models of production. If anything, there could have been much more of this; I would have liked to read their thoughts on fan-fiction, on open-access, on the adaptation of books into computer games (such as Frank Herbert’s *Dune* franchise, with its references to “jihad,” becoming *Command & Conquer*) and on forms of author-ship that trouble publishing contracts (including, notably in this case, co-authorship).

That said, the collection remains a triumph – of accessible analysis, of historical scholarship, of literary deconstruction and imaginative creation. I don't know if the publishing industry will take heed of a book that offers such a coruscating critique (and the English Media Centre must be commended for publishing it), but they should. Indeed, all of us who grew up on Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, Arthur Ransome, J.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman and their various successors in the canon of classics, would benefit from buying and reading a copy of *Beyond the Secret Garden*, and then rereading it.

references

- Arneil, B. (1994). 'Trade, Plantations, and Property: John Locke and the Economic Defense of Colonialism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 55(4), 591–609.
- Chetty, D., & Sands-O'Connor, K. (2025). *Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books*. English Media Centre. ISBN: 9781906101749.
- Jemisin, N.K. (2018) *How Long 'til Black Future Month?*. Orbit Books. ISBN: 9780316491341.
- Mills, C.W. (1997). *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press. ISBN: 9780801484636.
- Steiner, J. (1985). 'Turning a blind eye: the cover-up for Oedipus'. *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 12(2), 161–172.

adam ferner:

Freelance writer and child support worker. Has a PhD in philosophy and is author of several books, the most recent of which is *Unhappy Families: Childcare in a Hopeless World* (Agenda, 2024).

How to quote this article:

APA: Ferner, A. M. (2025). [Review of the book *Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books*, by D. Chetty & K. Sands-O'Connor]. *Childhood & Philosophy*, 21, 1-8. 10.12957/childphilo.2025.89713

ABNT: FERNER, Adam M. *Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books*, by Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor. *childhood & philosophy*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 21, p. 1-8, 2025. ISSN 1984-5987. Acesso em: _____. doi: 10.12957/childphilo.2025.89713.

credits

-
- **Acknowledgements:** Not applicable.
 - **Financing:** Not applicable.
 - **Conflicts of interest:** The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.
 - **Ethical approval:** Not applicable.
 - **Availability of data and material:**
 - **Authors' contribution:** Conceptualisation; Writing, revising and editing the text; Formal analysis; Obtaining funding; Research; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Supervision; Validation: FERNER, A.
 - **Image:** Not applicable.
 - **Preprint:** Not published in preprint repository.
-

artigo submetido ao sistema de similaridade 

submitted: 13.02.2025

approved: 14.02.2025

published: 24.02.2025

editor: walter omar kohan