A biographer's life

Ann Thwaite

Résumé: *Dans son travail de biographe, Ann Thwaite a appris à suspendre pour quelque temps sa propre existence au profit d'une autre qui lui est étrangère. Ce qu'elle aime, autant dans ses oeuvres pour enfant que pour adultes, c'est la recherche mystérieuse de la vérité, toujours cachée dans la plus normale réalité. C'est ce mystère qu'elle revoit ensuite dans des classiques comme* Winnie the Pooh *et les fables de Grimm.*

My own life has become that of a biographer. When I am actually writing a book I have, it would seem, no life of my own. I abandon nearly all my domestic responsibilities, and social pleasures and work for eleven or twelve, even thirteen, hours a day, turning the mass of papers and notes, gathered over many years, into a consecutive readable story, a narrative, a book. "A well-written life is much rarer than a well-spent one", André Maurois apparently said. If I'm not going to have any life of my own (well-spent or not) at that period, I might as well make as good a job of my subject's life as I possibly can.

It's easier now but even so it requires real determination to go into a retreat, to cut oneself off from the world, to write at home. I often think of Harriet Beecher Stowe writing to friend in 1850 just after she'd begun *Uncle Tom's cabin*: "Since I began this note, I have been called off at least a dozen times: once for the fish-man, to buy a codfish; once to see a man who had brought me some barrels of apples; once to see a book agent; then to Mrs. Upham's to see about a drawing I promised to make for her; then to nurse the baby; then into the kitchen to make a chowder for dinner; and now I am at it again, for nothing but deadly determination enables me ever to write; it is rowing against wind and tide." Twenty-five years later Frances Hodgson Burnett was having similar difficulties in a small flat in Paris where she was trying to support her husband's medical studies and the family by writing. My children are grown up now but they still come and go, bringing their own dancing children and there are still the men with fish, which I don't want because I am a vegetarian, and the barrels of apples and the dinner to make.

When I'm writing a biography, I cannot imagine I shall ever be prepared to work so hard, to give up so much, to suspend my own life--ever again. But as soon as I've finished I forget my resolution to concentrate on my own life in future, for my life as I've said has become the life of a biographer. The varied

routines of researching into someone else's life have become a necessary part of my own life. I feel I need to know someone beyond myself, and I have this daunting suspicion that any characters I might invent in my own fiction would be less interesting than real people. The trouble with real people in everyday life is that we don't know them. I certainly don't know even my closest friends as well as I know Tom Jones or Elizabeth Bennet or Michael Henchard--or indeed Lytton Strachey, Henry James and Thomas Hardy, the subjects of biographies I admire and return to. We cannot read the diaries of our friends or their letters, except the few they write to us, which often tell us far less than we want to know; and they often draw back when we ask them the really important questions. Our knowledge of the people around us is at best sketchy and partial. We have only our own view. In a sense everyone is ultimately unknowable. It is the attempt to know that I find addictive. And being a biographer one is licensed to be inquisitive.

I seem to need the treasure-hunt element, the feeling of always being on the lookout for something. I can't imagine life without long silent hours in the British Library or the pleasure of taking out random books from the stacks in the London Library on the off chance that the right name--Burnett, Gosse, Milne--will be there in the index. I am even addicted to humping about the heavy decaying bound volumes of the *Times*--though not to microfilm readers. Yet I also have moments of longing for the freedom of fiction, to be allowed to use my imagination more, not to be so strictly in the thrall of actual truth. I should say I have no patience at all with a mixture of the two--with any form of fictionalised biography, with putting invented conversations into the mouths of real people, with any twisting of the facts. R.L. Stevenson put it like this: "It must always be foul to tell what is false and it can never be safe to suppress what is true."

But how can we know what *is* true? There is no certain way really of knowing the truth about anyone's past, not even one's own. We all rewrite history the whole time. "Everyone has the right," the biographer Victoria Glendinning has said, "to restructure his own past. The contemplation of the past might otherwise be unbearable." We lie to make things more bearable or just more interesting. How often have we checked a memory with a friend and found that we remembered things entirely differently. And who is to say who is right? I had a telling example of the frailty of memory when working on my biography of Edmund Gosse. I found four different accounts of the moment of Gosse's first sight of Swinburne. The poet had fainted in the reading room of the British Museum and had fallen and cut his head--his red hair was dabbled with blood. He looked like one who was dead. Edmund's account written that evening (July 10, 1868) ties in quite well with Swinburne's own account in a letter to a friend--but writing years later, in 1912 and again 1917, Edmund, without his journal beside him, as I had, got all the trivial details wrong--the date, the time of day, everything. It is often not only trivial details that we re-

member wrongly.

I had a vivid example from my own story this summer. I returned to my old school for its centenary celebrations--thirty seven years after I left. Someone I didn't remember came up to speak to me. She said she'd been a few years my junior and had always remembered me. "Oh, why?" I asked in some trepidation. For the previous hour people had been remembering my swimming prowess but this at first seemed to be an even more dreary way to be remembered, "There was this poetry speaking competition and you forgot your words". Oh yes, I *did* remember that--one of my worst memories of my school days--the agony of standing up in front of five hundred girls, saying, "Happy are men who yet before they are killed/can let their veins run cold . . .", and then forgetting what came next. I had never talked about it; it was a memory I'd spent 37 years trying to suppress. How *could* she remind me? But she was going on. "I was only about 12 at the time but I remember being so impressed. I've often thought of it since when things have gone wrong." What could she mean? "Don't you remember? You stopped and turned and walked round the stage and came back and started again and got it right. It was marvellous." So all those years I had been agonising unnecessarily. It had been all right--not something to be ashamed of.

And what, you may say, has all this to do with children's books? Well, that poetry competition may now have been released into my imagination--just as other incidents from my schooldays have been. It may well be the subject of my next short story. Everything I write has its roots in reality and in my own story--sometimes transformed out of all recognition, more often, nowadays, into fact not fiction.

As a writer, I have always been more interested in realism than fantasy. Only three of my stories *The travelling tooth* (many years ago), *The chatterbox* and *Gilbert's birthday cake* have any element of fantasy in them and they are all firmly rooted in reality. I'll come back to this later. As a reader of children's literature I realize that the worst and the best is normally some form of fantasy. At the extreme there is feeble "Science" fiction about children who find themselves on Mars ("What on Mars do you think you are doing?" asked the green lady) or anthropomorphic nonsense, with sub-sub-Beatrix Potter dressed-up animals. At its best, fantasy accounts for most of the classics of children's literature from *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* to *The mouse and his child* (which someone--perhaps it was me--once described as the *Wind in the willows* of the post-Buchenwald generation).

Make your own list of the classics of children's literature and you will find the great majority, if not all, are fantasy. Alan Garner has suggested that this is because "teachers, librarians and child manipulators" (his phrase) believe myth, with its sub-divisions of folklore, fairytale and fantasy, is safe for children to read because it is not "true". And one has to admit that it is adults ("child manipulators") who make the classics, not really the children themselves.

"Classics", though they must be *enjoyed* by children to survive, are the works read and reviewed by adults, recommended by adults, put on reading lists by adults and handed on to the next generation by adults. If *all* adults had reacted to *The house at Pooh Corner* as Dorothy Parker did in *The New Yorker*, it would not still be in print. A.A. Milne was so nettled by her criticism that in his autobiography he felt he needed to remind her it was a *children's* book--"No Alderney at the approach of the milkmaid thinks 'I hope this lot will turn out to be gin'. And no writer of children's books says; 'Don't bother about the children, Mrs Parker will love it.'" He had a point, of course, but, in fact, one of the strengths of the Pooh books, one of the things that has made them sell in their millions, is that they appeal to adults as much as to children. And this brings me back to my own story as my own *very* battered copy of *Winnie-the-Pooh* was given by my father to my mother soon after they were married in 1926 and five years before they had any children.

So that in a sense was the beginning of my current biography. I was brought up on Milne and indeed I find it quite difficult to be objective about Milne's verse. I came from a slightly down-market version of Christopher Robin's nursery. I remember (or think I do) a particular confusion over E.H. Shepard's picture of Percy, illustrating "Corner of the street", the first poem in the first book. Wasn't that child in gaiters and double-breasted coat, dancing along a London pavement, actually me, myself, and not the boy Percy at all? There are photographs to prove the resemblance, and photographs of my older brother aged six (circa 1937), with his own toy Kanga tucked under his arm. The confusion extended beyond the purely visual. I *think* our doctor (in a top hat) was inclined to say "tut, tut"--but perhaps he wasn't. The long vanished London, in which I grew up, was recognisably the same world as Christopher Robin's. And nobody can tell, least of all I myself, how much Milne's and Shepard's view of it affected my memories--any more that I can find out whether people played Poohsticks before Pooh did or whether there were stripey cats called Tigger before Christopher's toy tiger.

My first subject, Frances Hodgson Burnett, was also rooted in my own story. *The secret garden* was one of my favourite books as a child though, like the E. Nesbits, and a book *Where the rainbow ends* (which I now know to be a dreadful book), it actually belonged to my brother and I can see them now on the bottom shelf of the bookcase in his bedroom in that strange encapsulated time we call "before the war", though I don't think I actually read *The secret garden* until later. My second subject, Edmund Gosse, had very little to do with children's literature. Edmund was one of those Victorian children who was forbidden fiction--the novel was regarded as a sort of devil's bible. He knew about wolves--real ones as well as the ones that come in sheep's clothing--but had never heard of Red Riding Hood.

I suppose I became a children's writer for the very good reason that I couldn't imagine writing an adult novel that I would want to read myself. But

my first book was a children's book for other reasons. It filled a gap in the *The young traveller* series--published by Phoenix House in England and Dutton in America. They'd done dozens of titles by 1955, the year I left Oxford and my husband got his first job at the University of Tokyo. By a bit of luck there was no *Young traveller in Japan* and the editor of the series agreed that I should do an outline and a couple of sample chapters after I'd been there for six months or so and if they liked them they'd give me a contract. They did like them and the book was duly published exactly thirty years ago.

I had felt the constraints of the form, of course (my invented children had to keep asking boring questions about the height of Mt. Fuji and the population of Kyoto) but it was a useful experience and can still tell me a good deal (that I would otherwise have forgotten) about what it was like to live in Japan in the Fifties, not so long after the end of the devastating war.

That book was a rather crude example of what became, in my books for children, one of my main pleasures--the attempt to preserve. The poet Philip Larkin saw that as his main motive and impulse. "I write" he once wrote "to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art."

There is tremendous enjoyment to be had for both writer and reader in what he calls this "verbal pickling". Nearly all my books start somehow in my own story--my biographies with a vivid personal contact with my subject's books--my fiction almost always in my own experience. In the novels I wrote when my children were themselves young, I had the chance to preserve a great deal of our family life--transformed but recognizable, at least to me. *The Camelthorn papers* (written 20 years ago but still in print in Japanese and recently translated into Greek) has somewhere in it almost everything I saw and thought and felt during the two years we lived with our children in pre-Ghadaffi Libya. I have only to pick up the book to remember vividly what it was like. I don't really even have to *read* it--the very fact of having written it has fixed, has pickled the experiences and preserved them. It is the putting into words that mysteriously saves things from oblivion. I think of Henry James's words: "Write from experience and experience only. Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost."

Books can help children to become themselves people on whom nothing is lost. I rarely give a talk without quoting that well-known statement by Dr. Johnson: "The sole end of literature is to enable us the better to enjoy life and the better to *endure* it." It's very important that books, whether for three-year-olds or thirteen-year-olds, should seem to have something to do with the real world out there--the world even a small child glimpses in the television news. ("*Why* are they fighting?" my two-and-a-half-year-old grandson asks, looking

at Beirut. What does one say?) A six-year-old just having learnt to read is attracted by the bold headlines in the paper: the copy of the *London Standard* gave her these sentences on which to practise her skills:

MAN ON WIFE MURDER CHARGE
HUMAN TORCH DEATH
RAPE CHARGE FAILS ("What is 'rape', Mum?")
NEWBORN BABY FOUND IN PHONE BOX
HUSBAND 'DRAGGED WIFE OUT OF BED BY HAIR'
DEATH AFTER BIRTHPILL

I am *not* suggesting that children's fiction should be full of rape and murder and sudden death. Far from it. But I want children to feel that the world I am writing about, the world they are reading about, is as strong and vital and interesting as this savage world they read about in the papers, and glimpse on television. Grim stuff can sometimes be more helpful than cosy stuff. Children need both. Listen to Dr. Johnson again: "The sole end of literature is to enable us the better to enjoy life and the better to endure it." There may be times when we are so keen to see children enjoy reading, we forget that second, equally important part of the quotation. Children have to come to terms not with some ideal sunlit world but with life as it is.

When I was a child, writers on the whole did not think that matters of life and death had much to do with children's books. I read endless holiday adventures and unlikely school stories--no wonder when finally I got to an age to discover real books (*Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, Greene, Orwell) I was dazzled and amazed. I had not realised the power of words, the excitement, the possibilities. Now the gulf is much less wide. Joan Aitken's *The wolves of Willoughby Chase* is recognisably in the same country as *Jane Eyre*. *The guardians* by John Christopher is in Orwell territory. Even quite young children can listen to stories of a depth and sensitivity to stay with them all their lives--I have read a seven-year-old *When Marnie was there* by Joan Robinson and some eight-year-olds are ready for *The mouse and his child*, Lucy Boston and *Tom's midnight garden*.

It was probably because of the encircling lightness that *The secret garden* made so much impression on me as a child. The Victorians let children read about the darker side of life of course. My youngest daughter once wept happily over *Froggy's little brother*. But Froggy and Benny were noble little fellows in spite of their poverty and ragged clothes. And the Birds' Christmas Carol died unstained by any selfish greedy thoughts. Cedric Errol and Sara Crewe were also noble children--real but entirely admirable. What was so surprising about *The secret garden* was that Mary and Colin were thoroughly disagreeable. After the cheerful "madcaps", the bright chattering heroes and heroines of the other books I read, Mary and Colin were something different altogether. From the very first sentence the reader is gripped: "When Mary

Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle, everybody said she was the most disagreeable looking child ever seen."

It is natural to be interested in the origins of the books we enjoy, to wonder what triggered them off, which ingredients are based on fact, which on pure imagination--though of course as W.H Auden once put it: "*No* knowledge of the raw ingredient will explain the peculiar flavours of the verbal dishes" the writer "invites the public to taste." This is true of course, but we are still curious. It was not however this curiosity that led me to start my research into the life of Frances Hodgson Burnett--not even John Rowe Townsend's drawing my attention to a description of Mrs. Burnett as "aggressively domineering, offensively whimsical and abominably self-centred and conceited." How could the author of *The secret garden* be such a person? I could not believe it and I wanted ot find out what she was really like.

But I have to confess that probably my main motive for turning to biography was a need to be taken seriously as a writer in the circles in which I moved. At conferences such as the London Summer Institute *of course* children's books are taken seriously but, in the wider world, sadly they are not. Joan Aiken, the very distinguished children's novelist, has told a story of the look of blank horror she often sees on people's faces at a party if she answers the perennial question "What do you do?" with the simple statement, "I write books for children." Blank horror--"They obviously expect me to start reciting poetry about fairies in a high piping voice. They are struck dumb. They cannot think of anything to say." I used to know exactly how she felt. How much more respectable, how much more admirable it sounds to say "I'm writing a biography." And how much easier the next bit of the conversation is now I can add "of A.A. Milne."

When I signed the contract for the Milne book, one of my daughters said, "Thank goodness Mom's writing about someone people have heard of at last." She had got tired of explaining about Edmund Gosse--and even Frances Hodgson Burnett is not a name to bring an instant response from everyone. I try this out in schools. Most children have heard of *The secret garden*, lots have heard of *A little Princess* and even *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (the film with Alec Guiness as the Earl is regularly seen on English television) but if I introduce the name Frances Hodgson Burnett, without the names of any of her books, I'm lucky to get a single hand raised. I use this as a way of encouraging teachers to encourage children to think more about writers. There is Mrs. Burnett --the *only* writer born before 1850 to have three books that are never out of print--one of the most famous children's writers who has ever lived--and hardly any child knows her name. Sometimes I despair.

There are some interesting parallels between Mrs. Burnett and A.A. Milne. They both started out as writers for adults and had considerable fame and success as such. Mrs Burnett's first novel *That Lass O'Lowrie's* was greeted as a triumph by the critics. *The Boston Transcript* declared "We know of no

more powerful work from a woman's hand, not even excepting the best of George Eliot." By 1883 (6 years and 15 books later) she was considered one of the most important writers in America in a short list that included Henry James. Then came *Fauntleroy* and everything changed. The extraordinary overwhelming success of that book seemed to make it impossible for her ever to be taken seriously as an adult novelist again, and she herself changed her own attitude to writing. A contemporary wrote of *Fauntleroy*: "It caused a public delirium of joy. Young and old laughed and thrilled and wept over it together." Mothers read it and longed for their children to be like Cedric--exactly as forty years later mothers would long for their sons to be like Christopher Robin. Cedric--Little Lord Fauntleroy--was based closely on Mrs. Burnett's son Vivian and Vivian never escaped the identification. When he died in 1937 (aged 61) the newspaper headlines read: "ORIGINAL 'FAUNTLEROY' DIES IN BOAT. . .Vivian Burnett, Author's Son, who Devoted Life to Escaping Sissified Role, is Stricken at Helm." Christopher Robin has also spent a lifetime escaping the "sissified role". He tells in his autobiography something of the pain of being Christopher Robin and I will tell more of the pain the books caused his father.

Milne was an immensely successful playwright and *Punch* humorist before he wrote the children's books. The children's books, in spite of Dorothy Parker, made him richer and more famous than he would have believed possible. They have sold in millions and been translated into 22 languages. But, after them nothing seemed to go right. No one took him seriously--"When I wrote them little thinking all my years of pen-and-inking would be almost lost among those four trifles for the young."

A.A. Milne was a professional writer for nearly 50 years--the famous children's books were written over a mere 5 of them. In the preface to his play *The ivory door*, Milne wrote with something like despair: "It seems to me now that if I write anything less realistic, less straightforward than 'the cat sat on the mat', I am 'indulging in a whimsy'. Indeed, if I did say that the cat sat on the mat (as well I might), I should be accused of being whimsical about cats; not a real cat, but just a little make-believe pussy, such as the author invents so charmingly for our delectation."

But I want to bring this paper back to children themselves. I have worn at different times almost every possible hat in the children's book world: writer, reviewer and critic, librarian, bookseller, publisher's reader, editor, anthologist. Books have nourished my life and I want every child to have the chance of finding the sort of pleasure I've had from books. I want children to have the sort of books that will help them *not* to drift through life, books that will help to make them the sort of people on whom nothing is lost. In this noisy television dominated world, as Ted Hughes has put it, "We develop lazy habits of not really listening and not really looking, just letting it all slide off us, knowing that it does not really matter whether we see these things or not . . . we

shall not get hurt and we shall not go hungry. And so most of us drift through life not really attending to anything, like fat grampuses in an aquarium, where there are no sharks and no killer whales, where the keeper brings all the food we need, where the people on the other side of the glass are creatures from another world, and do not matter at all. That is the way most of us are by he time we are 18 or 19 or so, and the only thing that troubles us then is boredom." (I apologise if by using that quotation from Ted hughes I seem to be making the rather simplistic suggestion that reading books can stop football hooliganism, but it's certainly worth thinking about, and particularly the way the poet uses "we" instead of "they" . . .).

And what were they like when they started out, those bored young adults? Unless they are already spoilt and blunted by bad handling or indiscriminate television, small children--those just-about-to-be readers--are extremely aware of the oddness and excitement of the world.

Is it inevitable, this change in children at 11 or so, from illogical, imaginative, curious, lively creatures into mini-adults anxious not to "sound silly", preoccupied with getting their homework done on time, with escaping unfavourable attention? In art it happens even earlier unless the teaching is very good: painful exasperation because "it doesn't look right: replacing the joyful splodges of a few years earlier. One way we can make sure that children's imaginations are not stereotyped, dominated by commercial jingles and values, is to make sure they go on reading widely and richly. It is children's literature that will nourish and maintain those eager imaginations. And it is just at this stage that so many children are faced with the mindless boredom of reading schemes. My final story is not one of my own but somehow it seems to have a real relevance.

Lina Waterfield is recalling in middle-age how she learnt to read a hundred years ago. It is a story worth pondering for lots of different reasons:

I am ashamed to say that in spite of encouragement from Mother, and delightful hours spent with Aunt Fanny listening to poetry, I was a very backward child and could not read at 6 years old. . . .Mother failed to make me study, and one day she said: "I am going to bring someone to talk to you. He is a great poet, and perhaps he could persuade you to learn to read."This was Matthew Arnold, a friend of Aunt Fanny, whose poems she used to read to me. I was thrilled to see him, and after all these years I can still see his tall, angular figure, as he stood with his back to the fire looking down upon me from what seemed to me an immense height. He never smiled that day. His whiskers were thicker and longer than any I had seen; and I was glad that Father wore a neatly trimmed beard. This stern-looking man then sat down and took me on his knee while he talked to me about books, seeking to fire my interest; and in this he succeeded, for I could have listened to him all day. Then he stopped talking of poetry, and said very seriously: "Your mother tells me that you do not know how to read, and are refusing to learn. It surprises me very much that a little girl of six should not know how to read, and expects to be read to. It is disgraceful, and you must promise me to learn at once; if you don't, I shall have to put your father and mother in prison." I was startled and frightened by his threat,

mother in prison." I was startled and frightened by his threat, and at the same time very puzzled that a poet could put people in prison. I asked Father whether he could put him in prison.
Father hesitated: "No, I don't think he could, although he *is* a Government Inspector of Schools." I still felt mystified, but his threat made me start in earnest to work with my nursery governess, and, to my surprise and pleasure, I found I could read *Grimm's fairy tales* within a few weeks.

Putting aside speculation on the changing powers of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, the thing that strikes me most is the child's tackling of Grimm's Fairy Tales within a few weeks of learning to read. There is no suggestion that it was the sort of truncated version of a fairy tale the modern child may find sandwiched between paler stuff--Chicken Licken in words of mostly one syllable--between John Finds Janet and At the Farm. No, Lina Waterfield in the 1880's was probably reading the 1884 two volume edition of Grimm translated by Margaret Hunt with an Introduction by Andrew Lang. In other words this sort of thing: "The queen went home to her glass and trembled with rage when she received exactly the same answer as before; and she said 'Snowdrop shall die, if it cost me my life.' So she went secretly into a chamber and prepared a poisoned apple: the outside looked very rosy and tempting, but whoever tasted it was sure to die." A far cry from the sort of thing many six-year-olds are reading today,

Rag put the ball
on Fred's head.
He does not like it.
He jumps up and the
ball falls down.

And what is the main difference between those two extracts? In the first --but not the second--*we want to know what happens next*. It is this wanting to know what happens next which is at the heart of all good stories--biographies, autobiographies, fiction. It is the heart of my own story and I look forward eagerly to the next chapter.

Ann Thwaite,*the biographer of F.H. Burnett, is now working on a life of A.A. Milne.*