

They Wove a Web in Childhood

Glass Town: The Secret World of the Brontë Children. Michael Bedard. Illus. Laura Fernandez and Rick Jacobson. Stoddart, 1997. 40 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2997-6. *A Romance, or The Twelve Adventurers.* Charlotte Brontë. Edited as a class project under general editorship of instructor Juliet McMaster. Juvenilia Press [Department of English, University of Alberta], 1993. 46 pp. No price given. No ISBN assigned. *Branwell's Blackwood Magazine: The Glass Town Magazine.* Branwell Brontë with contributions from Charlotte Brontë. Edited by Christine Alexander and Vanessa Benson. Juvenilia Press, 1995. 64 pp. No price given. ISBN 0-9698271-1-3.

Chafing at the dull drudgery of her job as schoolmistress at the Misses Wooler's School at Roe Head, nineteen-year-old Charlotte Brontë wrote the following in her journal in August 1835: "All this day I have been in a dream, half-miserable and half-ecstatic — miserable because I could not follow it out uninterruptedly, ecstatic because it showed almost in the vivid light of reality the ongoings of the infernal world." (Fanny E. Ratchford, *The Brontës' Web of Childhood*, 1964, 107). The "infernal world" was Charlotte's term for the secret domain which the four Brontë children dreamed into an existence so powerful that it held sway over their imaginations for the rest of their lives. According to Charlotte's account, which is quoted in the Introduction to the Juvenilia Press edition of *The Twelve Adventurers*, the starting point for this shared imaginative life was a box of twelve wooden soldiers that Reverend Patrick Brontë brought back from Leeds for his son Branwell in June 1826, just short of Branwell's ninth birthday:

next morning Branwell came to our door with a box of soldiers. Emily and I jumped out of bed and I snatched up one and exclaimed, 'This is the Duke of Wellington! It shall be mine!' When I had said this, Emily likewise took one and said it should be hers.... Mine was the prettiest of the whole and perfect in every part. Emily's was a grave-looking fellow. We called him 'Gravey.' Anne's was a queer little thing, very much like herself. He was called 'Waiting Boy.' Branwell chose 'Bonaparte.'

These twelve soldiers became the Twelve Adventurers, and their exploits were elaborated by the four children into the invented landscape of Glass Town and, later, Angria and Gondol — brightly embroidered worlds of imperial conquest, rebellion and civil war eventually peopled by Byronic seducers, mad rejected heroines, cast-off children, and dark doubles locked in bitter rivalry.

The three books under review all deal with the earliest period of the Brontës' imaginative life — the year 1829 when the two oldest children, Charlotte, age thirteen, and Branwell, age eleven, were just beginning to record their fictive characters' activities in books and periodicals the size of large postage stamps (proportionate in size to the wooden soldiers). During this period, Charlotte wrote *The Twelve Adventurers*. The story records a crew of twelve's storm-wracked voyage of discovery in the 74-gun ship *Invincible*,

their finding harbour in West Africa, their defeat under Arthur Wellesley's command of the native Ashantee people, the founding of the capital city Glass Town at the mouth of the Niger River, the intervention into Glass Town affairs by the Genii (giants who were the avatars of the four Brontë children themselves), a sudden attack on the city by "an immense army of Ashantees," and the celebratory translation of Arthur Wellesley into His Grace the Duke of Wellington. Meanwhile, with Charlotte's help, Branwell produced issues of Branwell's *Blackwood's Magazine*, three issues of which have survived and are included in the Juvenilia Press edition. Modelled on *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Branwell's miniature periodical contained ingeniously developed examples of a great many literary forms: accounts of natural history; travellers' tales; poetry including "The Dirge of the Genii"; a critical review of the poetry of Ossian; a story by Charlotte called "The Enfant"; a symposium set at Bravey's Inn modelled on Blackwood's "Noctes Ambrosianae"; Letters to the Editor; advertisements; and a valedictory leave-taking by the editor ("we hav[e] found it expedient to relenquish the editorship of this Magazine" to the new editor "Cheif Genius Charlotte.")

These two lively productions by Charlotte and Branwell have been made accessible in annotated editions produced by students in Juliet McMaster's senior honours English class at the University of Alberta. Between the Alberta students' production of *The Twelve Adventurers* in 1993 in a stapled folio format and the 1995 publication of Branwell's *Blackwood's Magazine* in perfect binding with an assigned ISBN number, the output of the Juvenilia Press has evolved from a creditable class project to a polished and assured production. The last page of the Juvenilia Press edition of Branwell's *Blackwood's Magazine* explains that The Juvenilia Press "is designed to publish editions of early works of known writers, in a simple format, with student involvement. Each volume, besides the text by the young author (of any age up to 20), includes light-hearted illustration, scholarly annotation, and an introduction that relates this work to the author's mature writing."

While the Juvenilia Press editions will be useful to literary students wanting direct access to the early Brontë material, award-winning Michael Bedard's dazzling picture book *Glass Town* is intended to introduce the Brontë legend to young North American readers. It is a compelling story, and writers as diverse as James Reaney (*Listen to the Wind*, 1972) and A.S. Byatt (*The Game*, 1967) have been intrigued by the idea of the four Brontës in the children's study of Haworth parsonage dreaming into existence a secret world more brightly coloured, passionate, and intense than the everyday life around them. The problem facing author Michael Bedard and illustrators Laura Fernandes and Rick Jacobs is that contemporary children will probably find the lives of the Brontës on the edge of the Yorkshire moors as unfamiliar, not to say as exotic, as the geography of Glass Town. So to ease the entry into the main narrative, which is told in the first person by Charlotte, Bedard uses a series of framing devices. To start with, he provides a Foreword explaining who the Brontë sisters are and suggesting that a key to their astonishing literary achievement may be found in the more than one hundred miniature

books and magazines found among Charlotte Brontë's papers. Then, in a page set off from the rest of the text by italics, he sets the scene in 1829 in Haworth, placing the four children in the upper room of the parsonage but naming only Charlotte: "The fourth sits on a low stool by the door. Her name is Charlotte. Her writing box lies open on her lap and she is writing busily. She bends low to her work, for her eyes are weak." The central narrative, as told by Charlotte, interweaves details of daily life in Haworth Parsonage with details of the Brontës' imagined world.

The challenge, as always with biography, is one of selection and arrangement of details, but it's a challenge made more difficult here by the constraints of a children's picture book — how to convey the essentials to a young readership who may be entirely unfamiliar with the biographical subjects and their context. Although entitled *Glass Town*, the book locates its main focus in the loving and accurate presentation of the lives and environs of the Brontë children themselves. All but three of Fernandez and Jacobson's full colour illustrations (originals are rendered in oil on canvas) depict life in Haworth, starting with a sombre depiction of the village with the cemetery and gravestones in the foreground and followed by a picture of Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne in the children's study. Bedard's ably-illustrated narrative includes the essential details of the Brontë children's biography: the older sisters Maria and Elizabeth who are buried in Haworth Church; the children's voracious reading of Scott, Milton, Cowper, Byron, Bewick's *History of British Birds*, Goldsmith's *Grammar of General Geography* and of course *Blackwood's Magazine*; portraits of the individual children (Emily is "a child of the moors, a friend of all things wild and free"), Papa who feared fire and permitted no curtains, and Aunt Elizabeth ("Order is her love"). The story of the toy soldiers from Leeds is also told, but in a version curiously flatter than Charlotte's own account written at age thirteen:

Emily and I each took one up. Mine was the prettiest of all. 'This is the Duke of Wellington,' I said. Emily's had a grave-looking face, so she named him 'Gravey.' Then Anne came in and took one for herself. This one she called 'Waiting Boy.' Branwell chose last and said his would be Bonaparte.

For me, the only disappointment about this otherwise successful picture book was its handling of the imagined world of *Glass Town*, which is represented through three full colour illustrations and a paraphrase of part of Charlotte's text of *The Twelve Adventurers*. As is apparent from the summary above, Charlotte's story involves too much turbulent drama to be accommodated as an interior world within the scope of a children's picture book, and some simplification is clearly needed. The solution has been to eliminate the people — the Twelve, the Ashantee, and the genii — and present instead three tableaux: one of the storm-tossed *Invincible* against a romantic setting of churning waves and dramatic sky, like the waves and sky in Gricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*; one a picture of the ship in full rigging in a harbour of glassy calmness with desert, palm trees and mountains in the

middle distance; and finally an empty cityscape showing Glass Town as an assemblage of monuments that declare themselves to be artifices, including a colonnade facade, a pyramid, and a tower with an exterior spiral staircase resembling the Mosque at Samarra. Maybe the problem of presenting the bright intensity of the Brontës' imagined world is insurmountable. In any case, it is a high success that *Glass Town* depicts the processes of the imagination so clearly, allowing the contemporary readers to dream the dream onward.

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In the Flush of Youth: Offerings from the Juvenilia Press

Norna or, the Witch's Curse. Louisa May Alcott. Eds. Nicole Lafrenire, Michael Londry, Catriona Martyn, and Erika Rothwell. Juvenilia P, 1994. 73 pp. \$7 paper. ISBN 0-9698271-3. *A Quiet Game and Other Early Works.* Margaret Atwood. Eds. Kathy Chung and Sherrill Grace. Juvenilia P, 1997. 23 pp. paper. ISBN 0-9698271-8-0. *My Angria and the Angrians.* Charlotte Brontë. Eds. Juliet McMaster and Leslie Robertson. Juvenilia P, 1997. 83 pp. paper. ISBN 0-9681961-0-1. *Edward Neville.* Marianne Evans (George Eliot). Ed. Juliet McMaster and others. Juvenilia P, 1995. 30 pp. \$7 paper. ISBN 0-9698271-4-8. *Embryo Words: Margaret Laurence's Early Writings.* Margaret Laurence. Ed. Nora Foster Stovel. Juvenilia P, 1997. 65 pp. paper. ISBN 0-9681961-1-X. *Indamora to Lindamira.* Lady Mary Pierrepont (later Wortley Montagu). Ed. Isobel Grundy. Juvenilia P, 1994. 37 pp. \$7 paper. ISBN 0-9298271-0-5. *Pockets Full of Stars.* Alison White. Ed. Arlette Zinck. Juvenilia P, 1994. 59 pp. \$5 paper. ISBN 0-9698271-2-1.

Most of us look at our juvenile writing with a jaded eye. Did we really write that? (Somewhere in a box lies my imitation Nancy Drew mystery, "Irene Belle and the Case of the Dognappers.") However, as the Juvenilia Press has proven, the juvenile efforts of famous writers are a type of literature that deserves more attention. This review covers recently published juvenilia written by Lady Mary Pierrepont (later Wortley Montagu), Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott, Alison White, Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood. In these selections we can see the under-25 writer learning how to write, and having fun at the same time. For the English teacher in high school and university, juvenilia offer an exciting way of teaching literary traditions, and of introducing students to canonical writers in a way that is noncanonical.

The Juvenilia Press began as a project in Dr. Juliet McMaster's Austen course at the University of Alberta. By having students edit, annotate, illus-