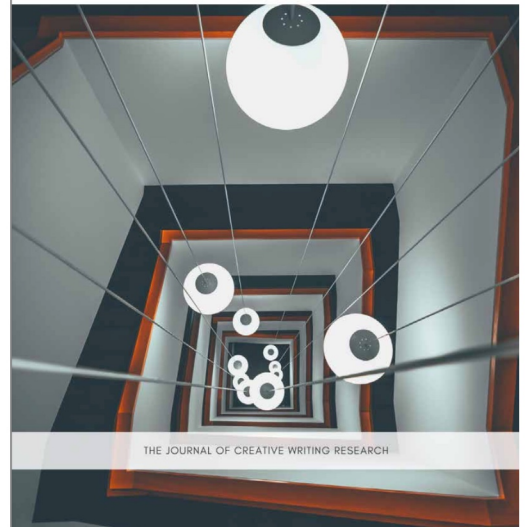# Writing in Practice volume 8
Decolonising Enid Blyton: Writing a post-colonial Enid Blyton mystery novel

Paul Williams

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ABSTRACT

In spite of her elitism, sexism, racism, xenophobia, her abrasive personal life, and her bland, colourless, formulaic writing, Enid Blyton remains one of the best-selling children's writers of all time and still continues to enchant children of all ages. Fifty years after her death, there has been an upsurge of interest in her writing, calling to attention the narrative complexity of her plots, characters and richly imaginative themes that outlive the personal, socio-political context in which the books were written. In this paper I outline a practice I have coined the 'Enid Blyton method', which frames Blyton as an oral storyteller whose writing has been underestimated in terms of its narrative complexity, and which repositions her as a writer who views the world from a child perspective, gives children agency and, like the Pied Piper, lures children into a prelapsarian 'Neverland' where adults are banished. This paper also documents how, using this method, I have written a post-colonial Middle Grade mystery for an African readership where I attempted to decolonise the Eurocentric elitism, sexism, racism and xenophobia associated with her writing.

THE ENID BLYTON PHENOMENON

Enid Blyton is to be admired for her sheer literary output alone: over her 44-year career (1922 -1966), she wrote over 600 novels, poems, plays and short stories, averaging an output of 16 titles per year, sold over 600 million copies of her books, and still has 200 titles continuously in print. If this is not enough, she answered up to 100 fan letters a week by hand, wrote the entire contents of three different magazines – 964 editions in all (Enid Blyton Society 2018). And for most of this time, Enid Blyton was banned from the BBC, won no awards, and was lambasted by critics.

And although she carved a distinctive, instantly recognisable Blyton style, I have observed that her adventure and mystery stories are derivative, garnered from such classics as Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Ballantyne's The Coral Island (The Secret Island), Haggard's King Solomon's Mines (The Secret Mountain) and Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island (Five on a Treasure Island).

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

As a child growing up in Zimbabwe, I fell under the spell of Enid Blyton's world of secret islands and mysterious passages and castles. But I wanted to be more than an escapist reader – I wanted to be a children's writer like her. And so at age 11, I began to write doubly derivative Enid Blyton stories: The Thrilling Three on an Adventure; The Secret of Pirates Cove. I wrote spontaneously, filling up exercise books every week with mysteries and adventures that were copies of copies, rehashed colonial adventures derived from British colonial adult tales. But it was only as an adult that I fulfilled my Enid Blyton ambition. In 1999, my mother was helping out in the library at a primary school in Harare. The newly independent Zimbabwe was flourishing, literacy was the highest in Africa and the post-independence generation of children was consuming books as ferociously as I did as a child. Our libraries and bookstores were flooded with affordable literature, local children's books, stories of the heroes of our time, made possible by local publishers such as College Press, Baobab Books, and Zimbabwe Publishing House; our libraries and bookstores were also filled with Enid Blyton's books.

One day I overheard the Shona teacher at the school, Mrs Makai, complain to my mother: "Mrs Williams, our children are reading, yes, but they're not reading any of the good books I recommend for them in class. No Life of Mandela, no Tsitsi Dangarembga, no Charles Mungoshi, they're all reading… Enid Blyton." Why, she asked, did they want to identify with snobbish middle class English kids who looked down on foreigners and who fought black villains? Why turn their backs on our own rich culture? She railed against what W. E. B. Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk (1903) calls "Double Consciousness" (the psychological state of seeing oneself through the eyes of the coloniser and measuring oneself against those "white" values).

And then she said the thing that began my writing career in earnest: "I wish someone would write an Enid Blyton story for Zimbabwean readers - some gripping story that exposes the whole colonial project, where not all the bad guys are black, and with Zimbabwean children as the heroes."

I took this as an invitation. This had been my childhood ambition after all, to write an Enid Blyton novel. Without realising the problems that beset a "white writer" writing "black" experience, I began re-reading her work, scrutinising her narratives now with the eye of a writer, not a child consumer, with the aim of discovering her secret, what I would come to call the "Enid Blyton Method", and if possible detangling her ideology from her style, transplanting her subject matter and settings to an independent Zimbabwe, and "decolonising" her narratives, so they would be appropriate for an African readership. An impossible task? Maybe. One riddled with ideological contradictions? Certainly.

Even though I agreed with critics who called her writing was "colourless", "bland", "second rate", and that the content was racist, I felt that because of the appeal of her prose and storytelling to young African readers, it was worth working on this project where the political agenda trumped an aesthetic one. But as I wrote the novel and investigated what her method was, I was surprised that the contradictions were not so pronounced.

ELITISM, SEXISM, RACISM, XENOPHOBIA

Before I began then, I needed to examine these accusations against Blyton's work if I was to tackle them. As a child, I had missed these cultural and aesthetic clues, but on an adult reading however, I observed that Enid Blyton's stories and characters embodied blatant racism, xenophobia, and elitism, underpinned by an underlying Imperial ethos – the British were best, foreigners were quaint or stupid or immoral, and villains were very often dark-skinned. Here for example is Jo-Jo, the cruel villain from the Island of Adventure:

The black man appeared, his usual scowl even blacker. "What you doing?" he demanded, his dark eyes rolling, and the whites showing plainly. "That's my boat."

"All right, all right," said Jack impatiently. "Can't I look at it?"

"No," said Jo-Jo, and scowled again.

"Naughty boy," said Kiki, and screeched at Jo-Jo, who looked as if he would like to wring the bird's neck.

"Well, you certainly are a pleasant fellow," said Jack, stepping away from the boat, feeling suddenly afraid of the sullen black man. (Blyton 1944: 16)

Jo-Jo is described in much the same way as Achebe notes that Joseph Conrad describes African characters in *Heart of Darkness*, in terms of their "black limbs…hands clapping… feet stamping… bodies swaying…eyes rolling" (Conrad, qtd in Achebe 1977: 792). It is as if Blyton saturated herself in the racist portrayals of Africans in colonial literature to find her villains. And it seemed that African children responded to such racist portrayals with double consciousness, cheering the white heroes and booing the black villains. And how could I counter such double consciousness?

BLAND, COLOURLESS, FORMULAIC WRITING

But it was not just Blyton's xenophobic racism that was a hurdle to my writing project – it was her poor writing skills. Why would I want to write like Enid Blyton? The BBC called her "a tenacious second-rater" (Hann 2009), her writing "colourless, dead and totally undemanding" (Rudd 2000: 45). "Reading Blyton is like riding a bike with stabilisers down a gentle hill with the wind at your back," complained The Telegraph journalist Toby Clements (2011), railing against her posthumous accolade in the 2011 COSTA awards as Britain's favourite children's writer:

It is a shock to find the British are still reading her books. After all, they are simply terrible. It is not that they are comically jingoistic, luridly snobbish or maniacally racist – hundreds of books are like that – it is just that they are so weirdly bland. In among her 800 odd titles can anyone recall a notable scene, memorable sentence or, other than Noddy, and maybe at a push Big Ears, even a distinctive character? No. It is all five do this and seven do that. (Clements 2011)

Blyton's personal life also took a battering, with one of her own children publicly denouncing her,

and a 2011 BBC series (Enid) portraying her as a cold, manipulative, adulterous, neglectful mother. Nevertheless, she withstood all attacks, and she famously dismissed her critics with one blow of her pen: "I am not interested in the views of critics aged over 12" (Stoney 2011 qtd. in Morris 2008). But then, what was it that made reading Enid Blyton so compelling, not only for British and colonial children, but for generations of Zimbabweans?

THE "ENID BLYTON METHOD"

If I were to write a successful Enid Blyton story, I needed to investigate exactly what narrative elements constituted this "Enid Blyton method".

I was aiming to write a mystery for young adults, so I re- read a selection of my favourite Enid Blyton series – The Barney Series, Famous Five and the Adventure series, all aimed at her older readers (Blyton did not write for anyone over twelve), and I mapped out her formulaic structure. Each series began with a group of four or five children brought together fortuitously and thrown into a mystery or adventure where adults were not present. A typical mystery ensued, with clues, suspects, and investigation by the children, which put them in increasing danger, until they could solve the mystery without the help of adults, sometimes in spite of adults, find the baddies and call for help. I then searched for the appeal of the books, and discovered that, far from being "second-rate", the plots were clever, gripping and engaging, the language complex. The books worked because of what I identified as six elements:

1) Enid Blyton as archetypal storyteller

David Rudd in a recent positive assessment of Blyton's work, positions her as a "storyteller" in an oral tradition, and suggests a reason why she has been so maligned:

Contempt for the more intuitive, spontaneous and simplistic oral tradition reaches as far back as Plato. In The Republic, Plato criticises Homer's work for being, at best, frivolous and at worst, dangerous. He sees it as a "crippling of the mind", a "species of mental poison and an enemy of the truth" (Rudd, 2000, qtd. in Forsyth, 2013).

Others see Enid Blyton occupying the role of the "Wise Woman narrator", the oral storyteller spurned by the establishment. This "proverbial wise woman narrator… could be Othered by regular society by being placed on the outskirts of the village, on the edge of the woods, but retained her irresistible

attraction as an entertainer of undiminishing 'young' audiences" (Warner 1988: 21).

Enid Blyton, it seems, took on the role of oral storyteller deliberately, organising weekly tea parties where she would invite children to her house, tell them stories, and style herself as a children's confidante. As a storyteller she gathered stories eclectically from whatever source she could and communicated with her child readers through letters, magazines and in person, in order to enact her storytelling as an oral practice. She also insisted that she wrote for and about "real children" who she insisted she knew. "When I grow up I will write books about real children," she confessed (Bensoussane 2018).

This I could retroactively align with my own reading experience: what appealed to me as a child had been that oral nature of storytelling and that very strong moral presence of an intrusive narrator. And also retrospectively, when I read these stories aloud to my child, I could hear the cadences and the devices of oral storytelling.

C.S. Lewis in *On Three ways of Writing for Children* argues that one of the best ways to write for children is to engage with real children:

> The printed story grows out of a story told to a particular child with the living voice and perhaps ex tempore… You are dealing with a concrete person, this child who, of course, differs from all other children. There is no question of "children" conceived as a strange species whose habits you have "made up" like an anthropologist or a commercial traveller. Nor I suspect, would it be possible, thus face to face, to regale the child with things calculated to please it but regarded by yourself with indifference or contempt. The child, I am certain, would see through that. (Lewis, 1966: 31)

If I was to write like Enid Blyton then, I would need to incorporate this compelling and entrancing oral style. I did so by osmosis, as the more Blyton I read the easier it was to inhabit her voice and cadence and tone.

2) Thinking and writing as a child

Further, C.S. Lewis argues that in order to write for children, the writer needs to be equal to the child: "We must meet children as equals in that area of our nature where we are their equals [….] An author, as a mere author, is outside all that. He is not even

an uncle. He is a freeman and an equal, like the postman, the butcher, and the dog next door," (Lewis 1966: 44).

Enid Blyton insists on equality with children. It is the "grownups" who are regarded as "other" and are disregarded (except for father figures such as Inspector Jenks in the Secret Seven series and Bill Smugs in the Adventure series who are the moral authority the children appeal to for God-like assurance):

> "You know what grown-ups are," said Dinah. "They don't think the same way as we do. I expect when we grow up, we shall think like them—but let's hope we remember what it was like to think in the way children do, and understand the boys and girls that are growing up when we're men and women."

> "You're talking like a grown-up already," said Philip in disgust. "Stop it."

> (Blyton, 1944: 163)

This view permeates her works and enables children to side with her against the world of fallen adulthood. Nowhere in her books does Blyton "talk like a grownup". She consciously inhabits a particular construction of childhood, and others have regarded her as a child herself, with the developmental age of a pre-pubescent: "She was…a child at heart, a person who never developed emotionally beyond the basic infantile level" (Woods, 1974: 219) and "She was a child, she thought as a child and she wrote as a child" (Woods, 1969: 10). Her novels are her "secret" childhood and writing space, channelled here in the voice of one of her characters: "'If I could live here on this secret island always and always and always, and never grow up at all, I would be quite happy,' said Nora," (Blyton, 1938: 20).

I already knew this as a child reader of Enid Blyton: the major appeal of her books to me was how she understood my childhood. I once tried to explain this to adult friends of my parents when I was asked why I was always absorbed in a Blyton book. "She's on my side." She was one of those rare adults who understood me and could play in my world. To write like Blyton then was to go back into that world, remember what it was like to be that child and write out of that perspective.

3) Idealising nature and childhood as a prelapsarian state

In all of her books, Blyton strives to create and demarcate prelapsarian childhood innocence, and

fights fiercely to protect it. Adult concerns such as sex or politics are banned from her world. Blyton creates an idealised British childhood, an escapist, Romantic construction where nature and childhood coalesce in a Blakean Innocence to form the perfect Enid Blyton world:

> "Heaps of people have never seen the sun rise. Hardly any of the girls at my school have. They've missed something! I think there ought to be a law that says everyone must watch a sunrise, and everyone must see a bluebell wood, and a buttercup field, and..." (Blyton, 1947: 6)

This constructed childhood is strictly morally prescribed: not only does she wish to keep the serpent out of her paradise; she also wishes to instruct children how to live:

> My books give children a feeling of security as well as pleasure - they know that they will never find anything wrong, hideous, horrible, murderous or vulgar in my books, although there is always plenty of excitement, mystery and fun…. I am not out only to tell stories…. I am out to inculcate decent thinking, loyalty, honesty, kindliness, and all the things that children should be taught. (Blyton in Stoney 1992: 212)

The reader is embraced in a tight space of moral certainty, within the class and colonial structures she demarcated, a sanctified space for children only, where adults are banned. Blyton's first novel, *The Secret Island* (1938), embodies this philosophy – children flee the cruel abuse of step-parents and find an enchanted, magic island away from the adult world where they become self-sufficient Robinson Crusoes and create a world of their own.

> "If I knew some place where we would never be found, I would run away –and take the two girls with me. I hate to see them bullied and worked so hard by Aunt Harriet."

> "Now listen to me," said Jack suddenly, in such an earnest voice that all three children turned to him at once… "I know a place where nobody can find us – if we ran away!" (Blyton, 1938: 9)

This "safe space" of childhood, however, is very white, middle class, English: the bands of children in Blyton's books (the Secret Seven, Adventurous Four, Famous Five, etc.) exclude other types of children from their world: The Welsh girl Tassie is mocked in *The Castle of Adventure*, the pudgy Greek boy Lucian shunned in *The Ship of Adventure*, and

other foreign children often seen as "bad" and in need of moral correction. Readers are steered very tightly by Blyton's moral compass: everything is fundamentalistically black and white, with no moral uncertainty. Evil for the most part comes in the form of foreign, dark skinned adult men with strange accents, and most grownup men are either to be ridiculed (the policeman Old Clear Orf, for example, for his 'working-class' accent, or PC Plod), or feared.

As a child I related to this escapist fantasy safe space, a retreat from the adult world into moral certitude and values. And to write like this, I would need to provide this unwavering sense of right and wrong too.

An essential ingredient of this Edenic space too is the relation children have with animals and insects. The secret societies of children include the mandatory pet, which is a fully-fledged member of their group (the Five Find Outers' dog Buster, Barney's monkey Miranda, Jack's parrot Kiki, the Secret Seven's dog Loony, the Famous Five's dog Timmy, etc.). Philip Mannering from the Adventure series is a St Francis of Assisi in this regard: he attracts a special power over all animals, including snakes, bears, foxes, mice, penguins, lizards and beetles.

In the Enid Blyton mystery I wrote, the child characters had a dog Mhondoro as a companion, and they made friends with a local bush-tracker in touch with nature, who could guide these "city kids" through the countryside and become their mentor in how to reconnect to the natural world.

4) Narrative complexity

Related to her role as wise woman storyteller and in light of her role as keeper of the sacred space of childhood, Blyton's "bad" writing has been re-examined by Peter Hunt who discovers a hidden complexity to her works, a criss-cross of oral storytelling techniques, particularly "the way in which … characters' thoughts and perceptions are mediated to the reader – directly, indirectly, tagged and untagged, and using free indirect discourse in which it is not clear whether we are reading the character or the narrator" (Hunt 2001: 37). He cites a passage from *Five Fall into Adventure* (1950), to illustrate this:

> He looked up at the tower. A small, forlorn face was looking out of the window there. Julian's heart jumped and beat fast. That must be poor old George up there. He wondered if she had seen them. He hoped not, for she would know

that he and Dick had been captured and she would be very upset. Where was Timmy? There seemed no sign of him. But wait a minute – what was that lying inside what looked like a summer house on the opposite side of the yard? Was it Timmy? (Blyton 1950: 133)

This passage is narratively sophisticated, using free indirect discourse, intrusive narration, direct address to the reader, this weaving the narrator, character and reader into one narrative bond. Hunt concludes that Enid Blyton "writes uncompromisingly for a single audience, not winking over the children's heads at other adults for approbation: it is the "transferred storyteller" who forms the adult part of the contract, not the adult reader" (Hunt 2001: 37-8).

Blyton thus creates a story telling web in which the characters, readers and author are all colluding in a conspiratorial circle of inclusion. The crucial word here is "we", an inclusive narrator who gathers into her arms the child characters, child audience and herself:

> Anne gazed out of her bedroom window over the moor. It looked so peaceful and serene under the April sun. No mystery about it now!
>
> "All the same, it's a good name for you," said Anne. "You're full of mystery and adventure, and your last adventure waited for us to come and share it. I really think I'd call this adventure "Five Go to Mystery Moor".
>
> It's a good name, Anne. We'll call it that too! (Blyton 1997: 170)

Again, this collusion was a crucial element I needed to bring to my story if I was to connect to child readers, that "inclusive" narrator who embraces child readers and does not talk down to them or write stories "for children."

5) The "undermind": Unmediated mystical writing

"I have just finished a book for Macmillans – the 8th in a popular series that has been translated into many languages. I began it on Monday, and finished it this afternoon (Friday). It is 60 000 words long and flowed like its title (River of Adventure)" (Blyton in Stoney 1992: 203).

I have read and re-read the *River of Adventure* and find it to have a well-structured plot, with gripping tension, consistent characters. So how did she write it in five days? Blyton herself has been quite vocal as to how she writes, but her explanation is problematically mystical:

I could not possibly invent a lot of characters and write them down before I begin a book. As for planning out my chapters, that would be impossible too - I don't even know what the book will be about till I begin it! I do not think these stories… they come out all ready-made, as it were, pouring out complete. The only way I can partly explain it is by using the "private cinema screen" idea… It is as if I were watching a story being unfolded on a bright screen… the whole story sparkles on my private screen inside my head, and I simply put down what I see and hear (Bensoussane 2018).

In her mystery and adventure novels, it seems that Blyton's formula has been so established by this point that the characters write themselves – and the plot formula has changed very little since her first novel - four children go on holiday (always the summer hols!), the adults are dispatched, leaving the children embroiled in some mystery or adventure where they discover bad men doing bad things, and (in Eileen Colwell's words) "what hope has a band of desperate men against four children?" (Forsyth 2013).

Blyton calls her writing method an invisible process that occurs in the unconscious, in what she calls her "undermind":

> [These ideas] sank down into my "under-mind" and simmered there, waiting for the time to come when they would be needed again for a book—changed, transmuted, made perfect, finely-wrought—quite different from when they were packed away. And yet the essence of them was exactly the same. Something had been at work, adapting, altering, deleting here and there, polishing brightly—but still the heart, the essence of the original thing was there, and I could almost always recognise it. (Bensoussane 2018)

It is consistent then that Blyton's writing method mirrors her readers' escapist experience into the secret islands of imagination, away from the adult world, colluding together as writer/ narrator/ oral storyteller in a constructed childhood world. Her books are told in the language of the unconscious, unmediated, unrefined, and mostly unedited.

Reading Blyton's description of her writing method was liberating to me, giving me permission as Peter Elbow does in *Writing without Teachers* to write from a spontaneous, imaginative space and to trust the creative process. I had done this as an eleven-year-old, filling up whole exercise books with my stories,

unedited, free-flowing, uninhibited by the censor or editor (Elbow 1973:1).

6) Escapism

 "I've got such a lovely feeling," said Lucy-Ann, looking the picture of happiness. "You know, that feeling you get at the very beginning of a lovely holiday—when all the days spread out before you, sunny and lazy and sort of enchanted." (Blyton 1948: 54-55)

When children read an Enid Blyton book, they expect escapism: and for Blyton, this meant sunny days, summer holidays, outdoors, an abundance of picnics and high teas… and lashings of ginger beer. Readers also expect a clear moral structure where bad characters are punished and flawed characters learn their lesson, and of course an absence of grown-ups. Children are free agents, and in an era before social media or close parental supervision, Blyton's children protagonists climb mountains, explore ruined castles, and drive motorboats, in what The Independent calls "a vicarious sense of independence and control":

> Blyton's worlds feel safe. Pleasantly safe. Blyton's dark side is not very highly developed… and though there is often the threat of danger in the books, the threat never materialises. It's enough to add spice to the adventure, but never enough to disturb - and this, when you think back to how easily and often children get scared in real life, must be immensely comforting. (Hurrah! 2004)

The Enid Blyton "method" then can be summarised as follows: she takes her position in the oral storyteller tradition, "intuitive, spontaneous and simplistic" as it is, occupies the position of "Wise Woman narrator", a pied piper who creates an anti-adult alliance with children and leads them to never-never lands of mystery and adventure where they are agential. She achieves this by weaving a story-telling web in which the characters, readers and author all collude in a conspiratorial huddle. She claims her writing is unmediated and mystical, but on close examination, it is a formula which she uses repeatedly. This combination of factors helps explain the appeal of what is otherwise bland, outdated, moralistic and formulaic writing (but then, maybe I am thinking like an adult here).

WRITING A POST-COLONIAL ENID BLYTON MYSTERY NOVEL FROM THE "UNDERMIND"

Armed with all these tools, I set to work. I had read so many Blyton books that the plots were all internalised - the moralising voice, the intrusive narrator, the collusive "we", the Blytonesque tropes already in my "undermind". All I had to do, I naively thought, was set the adventure in Zimbabwe, and create a group of Zimbabwean children to make it happen. I had grown up in a small copper mining town (Mhangura) and had been fascinated by a mysterious abandoned house on the hill which we had explored as children, imagining we had seen torchlights flashing secret messages from its roof one night. I had my plot and setting.

The Secret of Old Mukiwa wrote itself. Surprisingly, it poured out of me in three days of solid work, and hardly needed revising or editing. Yes, it was over-written, but flowed well, spun out in that frenzy John Braine calls "writing white hot" (Braine, 1975: 21). And it began in typical Blyton fashion, with two children visiting a town (away from their parents) sighting an incongruous castle, not in an English setting, but in the middle of the African bush:

> "Oh," interrupted Sarah, "what's that?"
>
> She was leaning over him to point out of the window at a large house on a hill. It was difficult to see through the grimy grit that had stuck to the large windowpane, but on a green hill, surrounded by at thick growth of tangled Msasa trees, was a white building, that towered over the surrounding landscape.
>
> "Looks like a castle."
>
> As the road veered around the kopje, the building came more into view, then it was behind them in the dust. It had turrets, a tower with a pointed roof and a large whitewashed wall around it. They couldn't see any windows.
>
> "Maybe," said Sarah, her eyes bright with merriment, "that's where Uncle Magadzwe lives."
>
> Mubuso shook his head. "Probably some rich [white] farmer's house. Or miner. You can get rich from copper mining, I think." But he was also fascinated by the house. It looked uninhabited, and the tangled dirt road looked like it hadn't been used in years. Branches had fallen onto it, and grass had grown in bright green tufts everywhere. (Williams 2001:1)

The two main characters were modelled on real children I knew from the school my father taught at, where I saw the social engineering of an emerging new black middle class in a flourishing post-independent Zimbabwe, and where children were leapfrogging over the working-class conditions of their parents and aspiring to professional careers, in spite of the stumbling economy that was beginning to thwart this up classing. Here were my characters: two city children (Sarah and Mubuso) with aspirations to become lawyers and doctors until the economic realities of neo-colonial Zimbabwe hit them - sent to their uncle in Mhangura because their parents could not afford to keep them anymore, taken out of school and farmed off to their relatives to become servants to the new black elite.

"I want to be a doctor," said Sarah.

"A doctor?"

"And me a lawyer," said Mubuso.

Their uncle laughed. "Doctors? Lawyers? Of course, you do. Doesn't everyone? Everyone wants to win the State Lottery, too, but not everyone can. To train in those professions it takes money, hundreds of thousands of dollars. Here we are offering you jobs that pay immediately and train you on the spot. Mubuso, if you work hard, you can even rise to my position. In those forty years, I put away any childish dreams of being a doctor or a lawyer. I worked hard and look where I am today!" (Williams 2001)

So *The Secret of Old Mukiwa* was born, a mystery where an old abandoned white farmhouse became the focus for the goings on of a gang who was smuggling drugs into the country and using the house as a transfer point. The children (with help from their dog) discover the secret dealings, capture the evil men and are rewarded with a return to school and a promising future. The underlying ideology of the novel is deliberately postcolonial: the abandoned farmhouse belongs to a white colonialist Rhodesian farmer, and the novel features a war veteran who has fought in the struggle for independence against Ian Smith and who gives lectures to the children about the recent Zimbabwean liberation struggle.

Did *The Secret of Old Mukiwa* work as a novel? A leading Zimbabwe publisher accepted it, published it six months later, it won the Young Teen Fiction Award at the International Book Fair in 2001, sold in the hundreds of thousands, and was set in schools all over Zimbabwe as part of the popular Pacesetter series. And I was invited to write a series of seven books with the same characters, same post-colonial understory.

BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASK, OR THIRD SPACE?

Retrospectively, the reception and popularity of T*he Secret of Old Mukiwa* proved to me that the "Enid Blyton method" worked to help create a compelling narrative: I had indeed written an "African Enid Blyton novel" that African children loved; but as I examined the project subsequently, after studying postcolonial theory for a Masters degree, and teaching in a newly formed African Literature Department in a university, questions began to emerge: had I, as I had hoped, really decolonised an Enid Blyton narrative? Or had I simply perpetuated another form of colonialism, imposing a "white" view of what I thought African children should read? Had I appropriated African children's voices and fitted a reverse Fanonian black mask onto a white skin? Who was I, of white invader-settler heritage, to speak on behalf of African children, or the liberation struggle? And was the act of Blytonising African literature itself an act of colonisation, of appropriating African voices and speaking over/ on top of them using colonial language, even essentialising them?

I had been aware before embarking on the project that the Blytonesque language needed to be purged and transformed. Following Ayi Kwei Armah's example in his five novels, all references that associated the word 'black' with evil and 'white' with good were reversed, in order to disassociate those Blytonesque racist connotations with colour. I had also consciously written the narrative using colloquial Zimbabwean language and slang eschewing Blyton's middle-class style and her very mid-twentieth century colloquialisms (Gosh! Horrid!). In the foreword to *House of Hunger* (1979) the Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera admits that by writing in English, he was "a keen accomplice and student in [his] own mental colonization" but in order to counter what he calls a "very racist English language", "you have to have harrowing fights and hair-rising panga duels with the language before you can make it do all that you want it to do" (Marechera 1978: 7). I aimed to do the same. In the early 2000s, when my novel was published, Zimbabwe boasted the highest literacy rate in Africa at 91% from ages 15 to 24 (Education Policy and Data Center 2014). The lingua franca was English, and the pressing need of the new government was

1) to provide teachers and educational materials to sustain this phenomenal literacy rate, which was building a new middle-class intelligentsia, and 2) to forge a new Zimbabwean identity based on new narratives of nation building, smashing the old myths of racial inferiority and disempowerment. As a 'cultural worker' in the new Zimbabwe government (I worked as a Production Manager in the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation), I readily aligned with this aim.

Notwithstanding Ngugi wa Thiong'o's indictment of "European tongues", most Zimbabweans "took to the English language as a duck takes to water," (Veit-Wild 1988:7). Achebe, and most Zimbabwe writers at the time viewed English as the language of liberation, not oppression, though it needed some repairs, by "discarding grammar, throwing syntax out, subverting images from within, beating the drum and cymbals of rhythm," (Veit-Wild: 3-4).

I was aware too as I began writing that I needed to remedy what Kate Law has called social amnesia in Zimbabwean white writers (Godwin, Lessing, Fuller) who "construct their own personal narratives based on an extremely teleological and narrow interpretation of the history of Zimbabwe…as a mechanism to uphold an idealised (i.e. powerful) white [utopian] identity" (Law, 2016: 297). My aim in writing the novel was to dissect a "white" view of history and adopt a liberation counter-narrative which as one critic argues, supersedes "white" or "black" identity and has been the "single most important factor in defining who belongs, and who does not, to the Zimbabwean nation…and this liberation meta-narrative…provides the 'official' script for the war in Zimbabwe" (Tagwerei 2014: 40).

> "You know the Chimurenga war started near here?"
>
> Mubuso nodded. He and his sister were too young to have been in the war, but they had heard so many stories about it, the war against Ian Smith and the Rhodesians before this country was called Zimbabwe. They had both studied it at school. Sarah sharply said, "The Battle of Chinhoyi?"   Her uncle nodded and for the first time, he smiled. It was like the sun coming out after a dark thunderstorm. His eyebrows vanished somewhere under his hat and his face lit up with a cheerful expression that resembled Sarah's. "So you do know a little," he said. "I was in that war. But that's another story. In the war, a lot of white people left the country. This rich man stayed

for most of the war, built higher and higher walls, employed guards and built electric fences around and planted landmines so no one could get in or out. Then he vanished. We thought he must have secretly fled the country, taking all his valuable gold and diamonds and statues with him, but no one saw him go. But he must have. . ." (Williams 2001)

The publishers (taking seriously their mandate to both delight and instruct) added a glossary at the back of the book which guided students gently into the history of the struggle against white colonial rule:

> Glossary
>
> Battle of Chinhoyi: the first clash between Nationalist guerrillas and white police in the Chimurenga war, 1966.
>
> Chimurenga war - name of the war against colonial rule (1966-l980). (Ibid: 87)

I employed various other strategies in order to undo any act of recolonisation: I took seriously Mikhail Bakhtin's mandate to disrupt the monolithic linguistic domination of the coloniser and consciously sought to reverse the tropes of xenophobia, sexism and racism placing white men as the "bad guys" and dark-skinned working-class children as the heroes. I endeavoured to create characters who were not stereotypes, to portray the "total living conditions of real people" (Gordimer 1983: 27), and expose the realities of colonialism, by working with real children I knew, and with first-hand accounts of xenophobic racism I had witnessed in my childhood:

> This [white] man stayed for most of the war, built higher and higher walls, employed guards and put electric fences around and planted landmines so no one could get in or out…. In the war, if he caught any guerrillas, he tortured them. (Williams 2001)

This was in tension with the prelapsarian condition of my Enid Blyton method, yet I felt that by giving voice to real children and the real political issues they were facing, I was still advocating for a safe space for childhood that was being threatened.

In this way, I sought to consider how my work could create a "Third Space", following Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the crossbreeding or cross-pollination of two species (Bhabha 2004: 55), positioning myself as a disrupter of a colonial space and the hegemonic discourse of a conventional Enid Blyton narrative. Although there are issues with this

concept, Bhabha argues that such a hybrid third space discourse provides the possibility of "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (Bhabha 1994: 1) and my novel sought to perform a counter-narrative and open up debates about issues of class, race, gender and neo-colonialism rather than deliver a reversed binary "truth".

Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* provided my model example of a third space, where western form (the novel) and western underpinnings (Greek tragedy) are inhabited by African oral traditions and storytelling to produce a hybrid novel. I sought as a "white" African writer and to become (in Memmi's phrase) a "coloniser-who-refuses". Memmi maintains that the coloniser cannot surrender his identity and privilege, but can overturn his or her position and identity by self-sacrifice (1990: 107). In my novel, it is the white man whose colonial enterprise is exposed, and he (me/ white settler) is viewed from the outside, as a xenophobic, cruel, racist coloniser who has amassed the wealth of the land, occupied the land, built a fortress against its local people, achieved notoriety, haunted the land for thirty years, and is a ghost of the past that needs to be exorcised by the acts of the empowered African children protagonists: "Was it Sarah's imagination, or did [Mukiwa House] look peaceful and at rest now, not haunted and foreboding as before? Its curse had been lifted and the man in his golden bed had finally been laid to rest" (Williams 2001).

Ultimately, I realised as I was writing this book that my attempt to decolonise Enid Blyton and to use the narrative strategies necessary to write a Zimbabwean Enid Blyton novel was more the act of decolonising myself, dismantling my 'white self' and disassociating from a white tribe.

CONCLUSION

Not only then did I consciously seek to appropriate or "bowerbird" whatever elements I could from Enid Blyton's work – I strove to prioritise orality, storytelling and an intimate relation to the audience, side with the children against the adult conspiracy against them, escape into a prelapsarian childhood space, employ a writing method that was not overwroughtly conscious, and dip into the "undermind" – but I also sought to consciously decolonise Enid Blyton with deliberate intention, to reverse the tropes of xenophobia, sexism, racism and class that are so endemic in Blyton's work and turn them in on themselves: the villain of the novel is the racist, xenophobic white man, the neo-colonial manager of the mine is sexist, and Uncle Magadzwe firmly refuses to entertain the thought of up classing. But these men are defeated by the courage and moral uprightness of the children protagonists. And what hope does a band of desperate men and their retrogressive ideologies have against three plucky dark-skinned children (and dog)?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Paul Williams is Program Coordinator of Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. He has published prize-winning fiction, young adult novels, a memoir, non-fiction, short stories and critical articles, including the memoir *Soldier Blue* (New Africa Books 2007), *Cokcraco* (Lacuna 2013), *Playing with Words* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016), *Fail Brilliantly* (Familius 2017) and his short story collection *The Art of Losing* (Bridgehouse 2019). His latest books are *Novel Ideas: Writing Innovative Fiction* (Red Globe Press 2020) and the crime thrillers *Twelve Days* and *Don't Tell* (Bloodhound Books 2019, 2020)