



THE RAVEN FOUNDATION

The Persistence of Peter Pan

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Peter, seeing this to be a good idea, at once pretended that it was his own.

--J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

When Peter Pan lays claim to one of the Lost Boy's good ideas, he forecasts, very fittingly, the fate of his own fictional self and adventures. For over a hundred years, Peter Pan has been ubiquitous, appearing in a range of cultural locations from the frankly commercial (lending his name to a brand of peanut butter and the East Coast busline that shuttled Clinton wedding guests) to the explanatory (the pop-psychology Peter Pan Syndrome). Those allusions are in addition to the multitudinous full-scale retellings, books, films, stage productions and adaptations.

The creator of Peter Pan, J. M. Barrie, was born in a small town in Scotland in 1860, the ninth of ten children. Commentators have seen his close relationship with his mother, particularly his desire to compensate her for the loss of her favorite son, Barrie's older brother David, who died at age 13, as crucial to his later conception of Peter Pan, the boy who would not grow up. Barrie left Kirriemuir to attend university in Edinburgh, but soon moved to London to better pursue his chosen calling of journalist and writer. Barrie achieved commercial success, married an actress, and set up residence near Kensington Gardens. There he met the Llewellyn Davies family; the five sons and their beautiful mother fascinated Barrie, and he inserted himself into a central role in the family, in spite of the father's dislike for Barrie. Only five feet tall as an adult, Barrie cultivated a special bond with children. Like Charles Dodgson's intense friendship with Alice Liddell (Lewis Carroll), these relationships would lead to an enduring classic of children's literature, one with the richness to appeal to adults as well. Dodgson's brilliant imaginings for the young Liddell daughter, eventually published as *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) are an interesting antecedent and counterpoint to the tales that Barrie dreamed up for the Llewellyn Davies boys, filled with pirates, battles, enchanted lagoons and secret lairs, the stuff of boyish fantasy.

The origin of *Peter Pan* is complex; there are no fewer than 4 key texts: Barrie's stage play (first performed in a London theatre on December 27, 1904, but not published until 1928); his 1911 novel version, originally entitled *Wendy and Peter*; a precursor novel *The Little White Bird* (1902); and his privately-printed collection of photographs, *The Boy Castaways of Black Lake Island* (1901). The complex interrelations among these texts are discussed by Barrie in his 1928 dedication to the published play, and by biographers, critics, and scholars. For those interested in Barrie's thoughts about his work, the novel version can be read as a fleshing out of the ideas behind the stage directions and dialogue in the play version. Barrie revised the play nearly every time it was staged, and his reluctance to set it in stone can be seen in the 24 year delay between initial staging and publication. The elaborate photo album with captions that

Barrie paid to have professionally printed and bound offers visual testimony to the role of the oldest Llewellyn Davies boys in his creation; the fact that their father, who was given the only other copy made, promptly lost his on a train suggests a certain ambivalence about Barrie's role in his family. When Barrie later became the boys' primary guardian after the early deaths of both parents, his conduct was the subject of considerable talk.

The play draws on the English tradition of Christmas-season pantomimes for children. The "panto" is an extravagant theatrical genre that draws on well-known plotlines, slapstick humor, song and dance routines, and audience participation; Barrie's call for the audience to clap hands to save Tinkerbell is one example of how he borrowed from the panto. When he called for flying, however, he went beyond it: at the time, there was no stage apparatus for flying, and without Charles Frohman's commitment to Barrie's vision, the play would probably never have made it to the stage. As it was, it was delayed while technical issues were addressed. When it opened in New York in November, 1905, the actress Maude Adams played the role of Peter, inaugurating the tradition of having a woman in that role, a tradition that Barrie deplored: he wanted a little boy to have the role. (Barrie greatly admired Adams and later gave her the original, heavily annotated draft of *Peter Pan*; it is now held at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.)

So how did Barrie's quirky theatrical vision survive over a century to come before Lookingglass audiences in this new adaptation by Amanda Dehnert? As it has received imaginative treatments from filmmakers and theatre professionals, it has continued to delight audiences; parallel to that attention, *Peter Pan* has undergone scholarly analysis of many kinds, including biographical, psycho-analytical, and feminist approaches. Of particular explanatory power are the large-model scholarly theories such as those of Northrop Frye and René Girard. Works like *Peter Pan* tap into structures that transcend specific times and places; they draw on a historical continuum of images and myths. Frye's archetypal criticism directs our attention fruitfully to Barrie's use of enduring elements of myth and anthropology—recurring movements of time and season, mythological creatures like fairies and Pan (notice that Peter carries both the name and the pipes of that Greek god), and mimetic doubling (we can see one example emphasized by the original London casting of one actor to play the roles of Captain Hook and Mr. Darling). Each re-visioning of Barrie's original concept helps to bind those universals closely to the immediate audience, and Dehnert's version is a version that speaks to us, its audience, right now. Its surprises move us to ponder the central mysteries that *Peter Pan* addresses: the nature of childhood, with its special fears and desires, and the relation of our adult selves to the children we used to be. *Peter Pan* absorbs and beguiles us because it takes up those universals; as Barrie wrote of the play in his dedication to the Llewellyn Davies boys, "I think one remains the same person throughout [life], merely passing, as it were, in these lapses of time from one room to another, but all in the same house. If we unlock the rooms of the far past we can peer in and see ourselves, busily occupied in beginning to become you and me. . . . Perhaps we do change; except a little something in us which is no larger than a mote in the eye, and that, like it, dances in front of us beguiling us all our days."

This article was sponsored by the Raven Foundation for inclusion in the Lookingglass Theatre's Peter Pan study guide. Visit <http://lookingglasstheatre.org> to view the entire study guide.

Suggested Further Reading

- Barrie, J. M. *The Definitive Edition of the Plays of J. M. Barrie* (1942) and *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911).
- Birkin, Andrew. *J. M. Barrie and the Lost Boys* (1979; revised 2003).
- Caird, John, and Trevor Nunn. New Version of *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*, by J. M. Barrie (1993).
- Chaney, Lisa. *Hide-and-Seek with Angels: A Life of J. M. Barrie* (2005).
- Frye, Northrop. *The Educated Imagination* (1964).
- Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred* (1977).
- Jack, R. S. D. *The Road to Never Land: A Reassessment of J. M. Barrie's Dramatic Art* (1991).
- www.jmbarrie.co.uk, a project of Andrew Birkin's, is an excellent resource on Barrie, the Llewellyn Davies family, and *Peter Pan*.