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Treasure Seekers and Invaders: E. Nesbit's Cross-Writing of the Bastables

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Treasure Seekers and Invaders: E. Nesbit's Cross-Writing of the Bastables

Mavis Reimer (bio)

treasure, verb: 1. transitive *To put away or lay aside (anything of value) for preservation, security, or future use; to hoard or store up* 2. figurative *To keep in store, lay up (e.g., in the mind, in memory).*

Oxford English Dictionary

The power of suggestion which is exerted through things and persons and which, instead of telling the child what he must do, tells him what he is, and thus leads him to become durably what he has to be, is the condition for the effectiveness of all kinds of symbolic power that will subsequently be able to operate on a habitus predisposed to respond to them.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 52

A startling moment in Edwardian children's literature occurs in a book not written for children at all, when a remarkably spelled letter from the Junior Blackheath Society of Antiquaries and Field Club arrives at the breakfast table of Len and Chloe, protagonists of a domestic comedy, *The Red House*, published in 1902 by E. Nesbit. The Antiquaries turn out to be none other than the Bastable children and their friends, who have decided to recast the visit of the Maidstone antiquarian society to the Moat House, a visit that forms the basis of one of the stories in *The Wouldbegoods* (1901). The report of the genesis of the children's plan and Oswald's account of the Red House experience appear in yet another context, one of the stories in the *New Treasure Seekers* collection (1904).

Julia Briggs observes that the Bastables "put in a guest appearance" in Nesbit's adult novel (*WP* 215), a comment implying that the Bastables' presence is somehow incidental to the trajectory of the text. My experience of reading *The Red House*, however, was that the Bastables' eruption into Nesbit's novel radically disrupted the text. Not only does the "free" talk of the children (*RH* 226) generally **[End Page 50]** undercut the conventionally sentimental and coy tone of Nesbit's narrator, Len, but also the children's discovery of the antique cradle "treasure" in the

basement of the house allows the text to introduce, by decorous indirection, the fact of Chloe's pregnancy. Moreover, the Bastables' return by invitation to the Red House at the conclusion of the novel allows readers their first glimpse of the occupant of the cradle—Len's and Chloe's daughter, who is known only as "the pussy kitten" in the text. Nesbit, it seems, uses the Bastables to focus the representation of "the child" for her adult audience. How, I wondered, is that representation the same as and different from the representation of "the child" Nesbit constructs for her audience of children in the three collections of *Treasure Seekers* stories?¹

Recent theories of children's literature suggest that such differences and similarities in the cross-writing of the child may point to significant ideological constructions. Jacqueline Rose (1984), James Kincaid (1992), and Perry Nodelman (1992) have demonstrated that Anglo-American culture sets childhood apart as a site of lost innocence and that children are constructed as Other for the benefit of adults. Those benefits include the exercise of power in various guises: the power to know and conceal desire, to preserve values on the verge of collapse, to reproduce children as commodities, and to define adulthood itself. But although the idea of the child as a site of lost innocence may have been produced for the benefit of adults, the relative stability and the persistence of that idea imply that it is not simply a coercive domination, but rather a domination that also manufactures consent.² Children's literature would seem to be a primary site for the production and reproduction of this complex subjectivity.

Nesbit's work for children fits into the late nineteenth-century "cult of the child" and what Roger Lancelyn Green (1962) named the Golden Age of children's books. Children's books of the period are distinguished in Green's view precisely by their attitude to childhood, an attitude Green—like Rose, Kincaid, and Nodelman after him—describes by borrowing the...

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