

May Gibbs's Suburban Space

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May Gibbs's *Complete Adventures of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* contains forceful myths which impress themselves deeply on young minds, but what is most striking to an older reader is the book's engagement with a living culture—an urban culture of a particular time and place—and with a landscape which is able to incorporate modernity unproblematically. A certain open-endedness ensures that the *Complete Adventures* doesn't exist as pure nostalgia; its world is neither enclosed nor utopian.

Gibbs's Gumnut Babies exist, as many characters in children's fiction do, in a world apparently without grown-ups. They are small creatures, to scale with their botanical features, imagined as if they were 'at the other end of a tunnel—distanced, diminutive, and clearly framed' (Stewart 44).

'When I stayed with my cousins in the Bush', wrote Gibbs:

I amused myself and them by telling stories about the little people I imagined to be there. They always took the form of sturdy, common-sense little persons living the same practical busy lives as ants and other intelligent bush creatures. Never did I find the elegant star-browed fairies that my old-world books showed me. The bush suggested things grotesque, mirthful, cunning and quaint. Even the flowers held an eccentric charm for me, rather than an appeal by their beauty.

(Lees 180-181).

Gibbs's first *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* volume appeared in 1918, with its central characters, the Gumnut Babies, originating circa 1914. With this book and its sequels *Little Ragged Blossom* (1920), and *Little Obelia* (1921), Gibbs was to bring together the trope of children in the bush and the genre of botanical illustration.

Her experience as an art student and as a cartoonist led Gibbs to bring to this project elements of gentle satire which tie these books to their political moment. Images of the art school, in 'The Society of Gumnut Artists' (Gibbs 93) and of 'The Picture Gallery' make fun of the salon nude and various styles of portraiture. Scenes of modern life include 'At the Seaside' (123), 'At the Picture Show' (59), and 'Snugglepot and Cuddlepie Meet Lilly Pilly', an image of high-fashion featuring an early 'flapper' (51). Images of poverty like 'In the Park' (53), and of political activism, like 'The Gumnut Strike' (79) show an awareness of class conflict in a world where the rich, like 'Mr and Mrs Bottlenose Schnapper and others' (100) exist underwater and are very queer fish indeed.

The world of *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* is a world in miniature which, while it parodies of the national fascination with 'the bush', does so in a particular manner which aligns it with other attempts to make space and nation comprehensible to urban dwellers. The Gumnuts' bodies give a sense of scale which can measure the branch of a tree as a 'high road' or a lizard as a 'lizard-bridge' (Gibbs 11 & 169). Our knowledge of the actual size of the creatures is, however, only admitted to the tale with the illustration 'Cuddlepie Glared at the Huge Face' (213), in which the Gumnut babies, trapped in a glass jar, are examined by Billy, a boy who has discovered them inside a fish he has caught. This brief breaking of the spell allows us to conjecture that the

world of the Gumnuts is only relationally the world of 'the bush'; most of its actions could take place in a suburban garden or a city park. For the miniature is a cultural product, a conceptual device for dealing with relationships of the physical world, and, like the concept of a city or a 'model factory', it can supposedly be 'planted' anywhere (Stewart 55).

The miniature economy of the Gumnut world may, in part, be an expression of nostalgia for a perfect 'settlement'. Its conflicts are always resolved satisfactorily (even though there is room left for further misadventures). However, along with the figures of adults there is a further notable absence in May Gibbs's creation which limits these conflicts to levels easier to deal with conceptually: that of Aborigines. The Gumnut Babies are all emphatically pale-skinned and at home in their natural surrounds. But the 'bush' (even the 'city in the bush') is not an altogether benign space and it may be that the repressed other in this landscape reappears in the form of the Wicked Banksia Men.

These genuinely frightening figures (if my childhood memory is anything to go by) seem to be almost over-determined images of an evil otherness. While other animal and plant figures are humanised, the Banksia Men in their dusky hairiness seem to indicate 'animality'. The presence of vaginal 'lips' all over their scrotal shapes is both botanically accurate and loaded with sexual menace. Gibbs's biographer Maureen Walsh tells a tale of their origin in the Western Australian bush of May's childhood:

[She] remembered one obviously jarring incident which took place when the three children had been left at home alone ... She and Ivan were racing each other and May, victorious, turned to jeer at her opponent before ducking into a shed. Triumph turned to terror as she was grabbed by 'gnarled hands' and held tight. It was old Isaac, an itinerant carpenter who was at that time employed on the property. Whether or not he intended harm to his small captive is not known but May never forgot her fear of 'the bearded face' with 'strange wild eyes'. She remembered, too, extricating herself, picking up a knife lying on a nearby shelf, and threatening her assailant before fleeing the building. And then Bertie running to the rescue, challenging Isaac 'to come out and fight like a man'. (Walsh 28)

The Banksia Men may, in turn, have located broader fears such as those which Peter Kirkpatrick suggests D.H. Lawrence experienced 'in a lonely place one night in the West Australian bush when he felt the spirit of the land tracking him like a Nyoongah (Kirkpatrick 92). And Gibbs, while resolving her tales happily, leaves an opening for evil to regenerate itself. Towards the end of *Little Obelia*, Mr Lizard 'pull[s] all the Banksia men into a heap in the middle of the cave and set[s] fire to them' (Gibbs 207). She makes no further comment here, though as she would have known well, the 'lips' or follicles of the banksia cob pop open to release seeds within hours of a bushfire's passage through their habitat (Bernhardt 13).

One 'world' explored by the Gumnuts is less easy to navigate, due to its plurality of scale and its confusion of distances: this is the undersea world first encountered in *Little Ragged Blossom*. Images of the depths occupy a large part of both this book and its sequel, *Little Obelia*, after which they disappear from Gibbs's work. And some of these undersea images, like the Banksia men, have a resonance lacking in most examples of danger in children's literature.

It is significant that the gumnuts have no problem breathing in the underwater realm, yet it is a realm with a completely different set of dangers and intimacies from those of surface life. Once plunged below the surface, Snugglepot and Ragged Blossom

enter a highly socialised world. 'They [go] gently to the bottom, upside down, and two old [gossiping] Fish Wives ... scream ... with fright and [swim] away' (Gibbs 91). Before long they encounter, at a 'grand affair':

All the important Fish Folk ... Mr and Mrs Bottlenose Schnapper and their daughters—Mr Leather Jacket—Mr and Mrs Flathead—The Hon. Mrs Rock Whiting—Mr Pigfish and Mr Spotted Pigfish, his cousin—the Groper family—stout little Mrs Butterfish—the Red Mulletts—the Breams—Lord Giant Boarfish—the Salmon—Mr Jewfish—several of the Kingfish family—Mrs Murray Cod—Mrs Beardie—members of the Mullet family—slender Long Tom, with his aristocratic relations, the Lardy Garfish and exclusive Mrs Sergeant Baker—Ann's cousin, Mrs Oxeye Herring—the Rev. Sardine—and many others. (103)

This social register represents another set of dimensions—a point on the 'social scale'—which may be a parody of the Sydney papers' society pages or may hark back further to the England of Gibbs's childhood and her years of apprenticeship. This world exhibits a class rigidity which is nowhere near as apparent on the 'surface'. It is a world which can be dipped back into, but this usually occurs through events which are in themselves dangerous (such as falling from a height). The language describing this other world differs too, through its extensive use of puns (fishwives, a 'fish sauce' shop, seahorses, dogfish and catfish). It is a difficult world to navigate because most of it is not fixed. The ornaments and decorations at the society dance shift about, as do the 'plants' in Ann Chovy's garden.

From the surface world, the undersea world may be entirely perceived as a danger, an 'abyss' like the one Nietzsche suggests 'man is a rope ... over ... A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping' (Nietzsche 126). The vertigo Nietzsche alludes to is visible in an image like 'The Terrible Fight' (Gibbs 144) which, with its cliff-top struggle, appears as a parody of a Victorian melodramatic 'Arabian Nights' illustration. But beneath the surface, the stark and dualistic determinacies break up. Once below the surface, a garden world is entered in which measurement loses its certainty and where shapes float like disconnected bodily organs. Parts of this world become like the arcades and lanes (the location of the 'Fish Sauce' shop): auratic spaces of an older city. Hal Foster writes of these spaces 'associated with the fantasy of maternal intimacy, even of intrauterine existence', that they are:

evoked less in images than in texts regarding architectural forms and urban *dérives*, though [they are] sometimes projected upon nature as well. Highly ambiguous—for death is involved in this reunion with the maternal, this return to the material, as much as life—these spaces are often represented as subterranean or submarine. Thus the typical surrealist portrait, influenced by Baudelaire, of Paris as a 'human aquarium' ... (Foster 203)

This hallucinatory sense of the city which Foster observes in the work of Walter Benjamin and, through him, the French Surrealist writer Louis Aragon, is very much present in the underwater episodes of *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*. So much so that a passage from Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (*Le Paysan de Paris*, first published in 1926) could almost be a gloss on portions of Gibbs's text:

The sphere of notion is similar to the bottom of the sea. It enriches itself, it gains extra dimension from the stratifications due to the very movement of thought, and in its reefs it embodies treasures, ships, skeletons, all desires that have gone astray, all alien purposes. How strange the path followed by this medallion

presented by a white hand in the night, from a glittering shop in a landscape of mist and music, as far as this blond sediment where it lies side by side with a jelly-fish and the defeated gear and tackle of some anonymous Armada. (Aragon 212)

The sea's depths become 'innumerable thin, shining layers' says Luce Irigaray, '[a]nd these surfaces are all equally deep and superficial. Unless one of them is made into a bridge that holds a person up, prevents him from sinking ... It is artifice to spell the depths out one by one ...' (Irigaray 46). And yet distinctions of a kind can be made. Deep beneath the surface a space exists known as 'The Bottomless Sea'; a futuristic world of creatures with lit 'portholes', more like the underwater vessels of Vernean fantasy than the mundane shapes of early submarines (Gibbs 202). This space exists as a further hierarchy. Scale here is close to indeterminate, lacking the familiar metaphors of gardens and city life, and shapes in these depths are constructed mostly of light. The undersea, it seems, has an undersea of its own, though this place is visited only for a brief episode, devoid as it is of comparisons.

There is a nostalgic interplay between the two worlds above and below water level and a narrative shift between them which leads to the presence of a sense of loss in both realms, like the sense a migrant has, who has adapted to his or her new country. '[T]he realisation of re-union imagined by the nostalgic,' says Susan Stewart, 'is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure: nostalgia is the desire for desire'. Its prevailing motif, Stewart adds, 'is the erasure of the gap between nature and culture, and hence a return to the utopia of biology and symbol united within the walled city of the maternal' (Stewart 23).

Snugglepot and Cuddlepie partakes of these most urban resonances precisely because May Gibbs's 'nostalgia' contains and addresses the modern and its social mores. Its abundance is more like that of *Gulliver's Travels* than the thinner atmosphere of other works for children which deal in the miniature. There is room in Gibbs's work for accident and mutation to occur: she operates in *time*, and, unlike Norman Lindsay, who banishes the rest of the world from his pageant, there is always room in her work for something other than a surfeit of the same.

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