



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

On loving childhood reads as an adult

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

I have been recovering from a very long and arduous block in my reading life, a block that could not be broken by the fattest or heaviest book. A block that could not be broken by books with the most lyrical prose or ones tediously detailing the biggest scientific breakthrough in recent years.

It was during a long vacation just a few weeks back that a new strategy dawned on me. And when it did, I was surprised I had not thought of it before. I decided I would go through my childhood favourites all over again. If those books had gotten me into reading once, they could surely get me into reading again.

When I was first given a box full of old hand-me-down books at the age of five or six, I was not a reader by any means. I started late, later than most other voracious readers. Due to a lack of supervision, for various reasons, the first book—which was not a book at all but

rather a comic for teenagers—I picked up was an Archie comic. I remember poring through many a tattered page, so I was duly excited when I picked it up again—only to be sorely disappointed. It was not the fun “book” I remembered it to be. As I flipped the pages, I realised that all the women featured in it had the same physical features—an oval face, a head full of hair, a cinched waist—but only those considered universally desirable. The only time women break this pattern in the comics are if they are undesirable or out of the social order in some way. For example, the character big Ethel is drawn differently, strictly to illustrate that she is undesirable. The comic series, while an easy read when it first hit the shelves in the late 1930s, did not age well at all. The more you go through the pages, the more you come across all that is grossly wrong with the comics—the lack of black characters, the hyper-sexualisation of teenage girls, the idyllic middle-class American society et al.

But there was no reason to feel despair. A comic strip intended for teenagers was not the only childhood read at my disposal. I wiped away the dust and tiny cobwebs from the now rarely visited section of my bookshelf and scoured through memories of childhood—the adventures, the fairy lands, the cosmic power of walking through someone else’s fantastical imagination.

I tried to remember how it felt not having to wake up in the mornings, rush to work, and try and be an adult. When the act of reading became about recommendations given to me by other adults for they would make me “smart” or because they had rave reviews, the inherent joy of reading a book simply vanished. Along with it was gone the ability of a book to impact me deeply, to touch on the very human nature that children’s books did.

But I wanted to bring back some of that childlike wonder and magic into these dreary days of 2019. So, I picked up *Heidi*, yet again—mostly because of all other books, this is the one I remembered most vividly, the one which made me want to travel to the mountains, and eat cheese and bread. Reading it as an adult was both a reawakening of childhood memories and a discovery of new aspects I had earlier not given much thought to. Heidi, an orphan sent to live with her grandfather in the Alps, is a jovial and fun child who makes the most of her situation. As a young reader, however, I failed to acknowledge other emotions she undergoes—homesickness, for one, and later loneliness, isolation, and jealousy. In the end though, Heidi stood the test of time for me because it was impossible not to flip through the pages as quickly as I could finish each page. It also made me

relieve a little bit of that childhood magic but with a dose of adult reality.

I suppose Graham Greene was on to something when he noted, “Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives. In later life we admire, we are entertained, we may modify some views we already hold, but we are more likely to find in books merely a confirmation of what is in our minds already.”

This stumbling into childhood reads also made me wonder how other adults around me treat this genre. Do they still pick up their favourite childhood books, do these stories stand the test of time (especially those of this decade’s political realities), would they recommend children’s literature as an adult read?

The recurring theme of their replies skewed more towards the positive, more towards the ingrained magic that is children’s literature. They discussed in detail how children’s literature is often written in a matter-of-fact manner, making it easy to read. Yet read the same book as an adult and it is full of undertones—along with dialogues, plots and storylines that would draw rebuke in this time and age. They also shared how in a world cluttered with so many real world problems that threaten to overthrow the delicate balance of my neurone network, children’s literature can provide a gateway out of the madness.

A colleague of mine, also a voracious reader, who reads everything from long menus to the classics is also not exempt from this magic spell. “Children’s literature to me are stories that try and help kids make sense of a complicated world. Most often writers tend to use concepts children are naturally drawn towards—something whimsical, full of magic and pop culture references—essentially themes that rely more on the power of imagination. As adults, reading these can be like a bitter-sweet jog down memory lane,” says Sarah.

In fact, writers of children’s literature have also been relegated to this zone and do not often get the acclaim they deserve in a world which is busy acknowledging more “serious” literature.

Bruce Handy’s book *Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children’s Literature as an Adult* highlights this phenomenon aptly. In the book, Handy is found sympathising with children’s book authors who find themselves less revered in the literary world than their serious peers. Maurice Sendak grumbled about being relegated to “kiddiebookland,” mourning his missed shot at bookshelf placement near Norman Mailer or Saul Bellow. Indeed, children’s books don’t score the acclaim—the Man Bookers or Nobel Prizes. They’re wild and unruly and difficult to qualify. “They still retain their rough, strange edges,” Handy writes of fairy tales. “[They] cling to the imagination, like burrs you can’t pry from a sweater.”

Children’s literature does not rely on the already available knowledge at your disposal; rather it works against them, creating a new storyline, injecting new information through vivid storytelling.

“Adult literature relies more on your knowledge of the real world as a reader, even if it’s about cultures and places you aren’t specifically familiar with. But children’s literature works free of those assumptions.

Continued to page 15