

The Enchanted Castle Short Guide

The Enchanted Castle by E. Nesbit

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Overview

The Enchanted Castle is a beautiful and complex tale, with a compelling narrative, appealing characters, and Nesbit's masterful blend of magic and realism. The action is fast-paced and imaginative, with a variety of episodes ranging from comic to terrifying, from adventurous to mystical. The four youthful protagonists are well rounded and totally credible, each with strengths and weaknesses that make them interesting. The movement of the plot from mock-magic to real magic is subtle and persuasive.

The ideas that Nesbit incorporates in her tale are also interesting. Her blend of realism and enchantment offers social history as well as domestic magic. Her picture of Edwardian family life captures that era in abundant detail. Although she is never overtly didactic, Nesbit also includes a moral vision of life with an emphasis on the honor and integrity of the individual. With all of the opportunities conferred on them by the ring of invisibility, they never take advantage of their magical powers to harm or deceive others. Her central, pervasive idea is that magic is available in everyday life for those who are sensitive and imaginative enough to recognize it.

About the Author

Edith Nesbit, born August 19, 1858, in London, was the youngest of four children, and was only three when her father died. Her widowed mother tried for a time to manage the agricultural college of which he had been principal.

When Nesbit was eight, however, her mother moved to Europe, and for the next five years Nesbit was enrolled in a series of continental schools which she hated. Her only happy memories from this period were of her brief stay with a family in Brittany who had a daughter her age. When her family returned to England, she lived for a time in a country house in Kent, but her mother's financial difficulties forced them to move back to London.

When Nesbit was twenty, she met Hubert Bland, a bank clerk, whom she married a year later. The Blands hosted a literary and intellectual group who met regularly at their home, and eventually founded the socialistic Fabian society.

When Bland was stricken with smallpox, and his business partner absconded with his funds, the family was left penniless. Nesbit, who had been publishing verse occasionally, was then forced to support her four children by selling stories. She was a prolific writer, and the poems and short stories she sold to newspapers were very popular. Along with raising a family and earning a living by "hack" writing, Nesbit found time to work for the poor and practice her socialist principles.

Nesbit did not begin writing novels for young adults—considered her greatest literary achievement—until she was in her forties. Many of her best-known works, such as *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, *The House of Arden*, and *Harding's Luck*, appeared serially in magazines before being published as books. In all of her novels for young adult readers, humor, poetry, and mystery combine with realistic setting and convincing characterization.

Never didactic, always entertaining, her fiction has timeless appeal.

A few years after the death of her husband, Nesbit married an old friend, T. T. Tucker, with whom she lived happily during the remainder of her life. She died May 4, 1924, in a small village on the coast of Kent at age sixty-five.

Setting

The story takes place in England near the beginning of the twentieth century.

Three young people, two brothers and a sister, find themselves unable to go home for the school holidays and instead must stay at the girl's school, which is empty except for a French governess. To avoid boredom they go exploring and come upon what appears to be an enchanted castle, complete with a sleeping princess. Together with the "princess" (actually the housekeeper's niece, Mabel), they explore the virtually unoccupied castle, where they discover a room of treasures, including a ring which makes its wearer invisible. The four have a series of adventures in the surrounding countryside but return to the castle for a romantic ending.



Social Sensitivity

Nesbit is concerned with two social subjects, education and class distinction. At the very beginning of the novel, her authorial voice intrudes to lament the separation of boys' and girls' schools: "the sensible habit of having boys and girls at the same school is not yet as common as I hope it will be some day." Kathleen suggests at one point that the students write a book about what their school is really like, but Gerald rejects the idea as a project that would only result in their expulsion. On the other hand, it is clear that the young students are both well-read and articulate. The austerity of school life, intellectual as well as social, is similar to those later expounded by C. S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Throughout the novel Nesbit is concerned with the inequities of class distinction. The fact is central to the romantic element of the plot in that the lovely French governess is unable to marry her beloved Lord Yalding because she is socially beneath him. On his part, the young lord is willing to disguise himself as a bailiff in order to be near the woman he loves. The class snobbery is all the more absurd because of the lord's relative poverty. What finally permits the romance to be fulfilled is a financial boost.

Nesbit cleverly plays with the appearance-reality theme in slyly satirizing class distinctions. The housekeeper's niece Mabel is a convincing princess, even as Lord Yalding is an effective bailiff. Particularly effective is the satire presented in the "Ugly-Wuglies." These figures with nothing inside offer a very presentable exterior. One male figure in particular looks and speaks exactly like a wealthy middle-aged business man.

Later on, a real life businessman is mistaken for one of the artificial "UglyWuglies." The two "stuffed shirts" are indistinguishable. Occasional remarks throughout the narrative draw the reader's attention to such matters as the low pay of governesses and the arrogance of the wealthy.

For Nesbit, character far outweighs social standing. The honor and integrity of the individual is of utmost value on all levels of society. The four young protagonists interact with people from various walks of life with assurance and independence, derived from individual honor and integrity.



Literary Qualities

Much more than an exciting story, *The Enchanted Castle* is one of the best fantasies written for young adults. The writing styles range from colloquial dialogue to poetic descriptions of magical transformations in moonlight. Each of the main characters is given a distinctive style of speech. Nesbit is also skilled at evoking a scene with apt choice of concrete detail. One of the most effective episodes is the ingenious party the four young people throw for the Mademoiselle, creating make-believe guests out of rags, sticks, and brooms, but magic intervenes and the pretend figures come to life. These "Ugly-Wuglies" are truly terrifying in their non-human malignance. An equally effective scene that evokes beauty rather than terror occurs when the handsome statues of gods and beasts in the castle yard come to life in the moonlight.

Nesbit also uses elements of myth and fairy tale to add depth to her story.

Although Mabel pretends to be a princess sleeping under a spell, the French governess is actually a poor maiden separated from her lover and awaiting liberation. And although the "uglies" are but animated bits and pieces, their arrogance is paralleled by young Jimmy who joins them under the influence of magic. Familiar tales of magic are matched by real events.

The plot of the novel is sophisticated, complex, and suspenseful. Genuinely frightening episodes are vividly related, and the outcome is deftly kept hanging until the last possible moment. Events grow out of the character of the individuals involved. The tightly developed plot, along with convincing characterization and poetic style make this not merely an entertaining book but a richly demanding and rewarding one.

Nesbit's handling of the magic ring is a good example of her original treatment of mythic motifs. The ring initially appears only to confer invisibility on the wearer. A ring of invisibility occurs in the ancient Welsh Mabinogion, in Teutonic myths, and in modern fantasy, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Nesbit cleverly transforms her magic ring into the wishing ring of folklore. As a charm to grant personal wishes, the ring becomes a dimension of character rather than an arbitrary plot device. *The Enchanted Castle* thus transforms the symbols of folklore and legend in its twentieth-century story.



Themes and Characters

The Enchanted Castle features a variety of minor characters alongside the major roles of the four youthful protagonists. The French governess who befriends the young people over their lonely holiday stay at the school also becomes a romantic heroine when the story of her seemingly hopeless love for an aristocrat is revealed. She is a delightful character, whose English is actually literalized French, which adds a comic touch to the story. Thanks to the children, her love story has a happy ending. The cockney policeman Johnson, another minor figure, is baffled by the antics of the young people, but is ultimately grateful to them for helping solve a burglary.

The four protagonists—Gerald, Jimmy, Kathleen, and Mabel—are distinctively drawn. Most important is the older boy, Gerald, who is a born leader with a habit of speaking of himself in the third person. Jimmy, his younger brother, and Kathleen, his sister, are understandably annoyed at times with his recitals of "And then our hero ... "

Gerald is also diplomatic, with a knack for getting his own way with adults, and he is an ingenious detective and resourceful problem solver. There is poetry in his soul and a mischievous gleam in his eye, but he insists on fairness, even to burglars. His adventurous imagination sparks much of the action.

Younger brother Jimmy is the realist, who is skeptical of Gerald's wild plans.

In one magical episode he is transformed into a middle-aged wealthy business man, a role which one can imagine him fulfilling some day. Sister Kathleen is a kind and sensible girl. Unlike Gerald, she tends to accept the surface appearance of things, missing the underlying magic or mystery. She is fiercely loyal to both of her brothers and a practical asset in every emergency. Called "Cathy" by her family, she is an honest girl, who quickly befriends the "princess."

Mabel, the housekeeper's niece who pretends to be an enchanted sleeping beauty, is a highly imaginative girl, worthy even of the self-styled "hero" Gerald.

Mabel is the first to put on the ring which makes her invisible, and is the first to discover that the ring has the power to grant its wearer any wish, at least for a limited time.

The main theme of the book is enchantment—the potential magic that underlies daily life for those who are receptive and who have not been inured to it by greed or selfishness. The four young people seek out magic and find it, but the magic also awaits the French governess in her unfulfilled love, the police constable who deserves a reward, and the housekeeper's niece in need of love and companionship. Closely related is the theme of the dream. A few of the episodes are dreamlike, and Nesbit coyly suggests at the end that perhaps it was all a dream. But then, some dreams do come true.



Topics for Discussion

1. The author occasionally interrupts the story to put in comments of her own.

Do you find that the authorial voice adds to the reader's enjoyment of the novel or does it detract from it?

2. How does the author make the relationship among the two brothers and their sister seem true to life?

3. The four protagonists in the story are for the most part free from adult intervention, or even knowledge, in their various adventures with the magic ring.

How does this influence their activities?

4. Mabel's aunt seems a rather unsympathetic character. What is wrong in her relationship with her niece?

5. In the scene where Gerald disguises himself as a conjuror, he plays the role with considerable effectiveness. What traits of his personality help him to succeed?

6. Why is it that only some of the characters see the statues come to life in the garden at night?

7. How does each of the characters who becomes invisible behave during his or her invisibility? How does this behavior relate to the personality of the individual?

8. In what way does the episode of the "Ugly-Wuglies" seem frightening as well as comic?

9. What do you consider the most dangerous adventure which the four young people get into because of the ring?

10. In the final episode in the Hall of Granted Wishes, presided over by the statue of Psyche, why do the words spoken by Mademoiselle not sound like her at all? And why does the statue disappear?

11. Do you think the ring will keep some of its magic as the plain gold wedding ring of Lord and Lady Yalding?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. There are no "villains" among the characters in this book. How does Nesbit deal with evil, or does she simply omit it from the world of her story?
2. How are attitudes toward magic and actions under the influence of magic related to the character? Gerald's behavior while invisible, for example, is quite different from that of the maid Eliza, or of his sister, Kathleen.
3. How does Nesbit achieve credibility in her magic scenes? How does she make the various transformations seem convincing? The protagonists become invisible, or they are turned into statues.

What literary techniques make these scenes convincing to the reader?

4. Two of the most imaginative episodes in the book are the one involving the creation of the Ugly-Wuglies out of scraps and the one involving the animation of the statues in the garden.

In what ways are these two episodes parallel in style, structure, and meaning? How are they different in their effect on the reader?

5. By the end of the story, what have the four protagonists learned from their experiences with the magic ring? Will their many adventures have meaning for them in the future?
6. Nesbit draws on fairy tale motifs to enhance her story. What fairy tale elements do you find in the book and how does Nesbit incorporate them into her realistic setting?

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Related Titles

Five Children and It is the first book in a trilogy dealing with magic. Four London Children, with their baby brother, while on a holiday unearth a Psammead, or sand fairy, who has the power to grant them a new wish every day. Fortunately, every wish is suspended at sunset. In the sequel, The Phoenix and the Carpet, the children discover that the secondhand rug in their basement is actually a flying carpet, and rolled up in it is a phoenix to travel with them as guardian.

The adventures in both of these works are comic and lighthearted. The final book in the trilogy, The Story of the Amulet, has more depth. It concerns the same four children who come across their old friend, the Psammead, in a pet shop. They buy him and take him home.

The grateful creature is now eager to grant their wishes, although he has lost none of the testiness and brusqueness that characterized him in the earlier work. The children also find a half amulet, which leads them back in time where they unite the person of a modern Egyptologist with the soul of an Egyptian priest from the distant past. The merger becomes possible when the missing half of the amulet is found. "The learned gentleman," as the scholar is always called, is then enriched with the intimate knowledge of the past.

The House of Arden and Harding's Luck are also companion volumes, dealing with characters from the same family. In each work the young protagonists go back to their own family past and find a long-lost heir. In The House of Arden the two young last descendants of the Arden line find a family history bearing the stamp of the white mole, which then materializes as the Mouldiwarp, a guardian of the house. When they put on the clothes of the past, which they find in the attic, they journey back in time with the Mouldiwarp. Harding's Luck concerns their cousin, Dickie, whom they meet on one of their journeys to the past.

Unhappy in this life but happy in the seventeenth century, Dickie decides to return to that time period. In all of these novels, Nesbit combines realism and enchantment with enormous success.

These works offer magic, adventure, humor, and memorable characters, human and otherwise.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996