

Jenny Balston

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ten

Everyone can, I suppose, claim a 'lucky' birthday, and our tenth birthday, falling as it did on May 10th, would, we were led to believe, be our own. It gained added significance by the fact that we were now entering into our 'double figures' and also that this was the first birthday that we should be celebrating away from home at boarding school. Regarded by the other first formers, for that one day at least, as Very Important People, we anticipated a truly wonderful day, with everyone being particularly nice to us, with cards and little presents from all our new friends, with a bumper post bring more cards and presents from people at home, all culminating with a special birthday tea with the huge birthday cake, sumptuously decorated with pink and white icing and sent down by our mother the day before, taking pride of place.

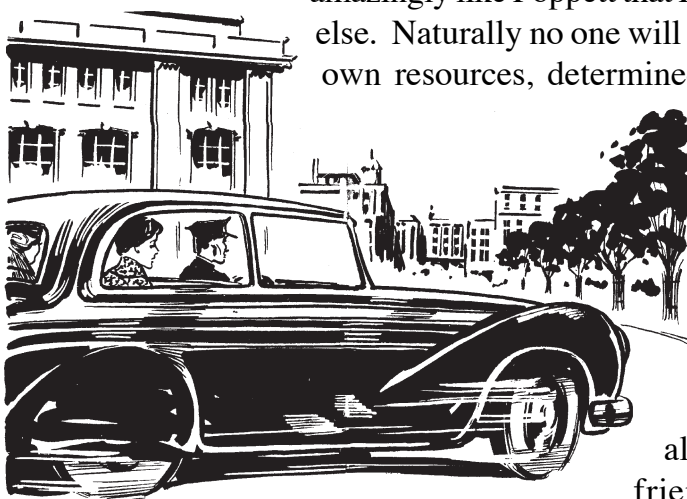
Looking back on it now, it certainly *was* a happy birthday, perhaps one of the happiest I can ever recall. But what I remember most of all about it are the books. Birthdays always *did* bring books, brand new books in their colourful pristine dustwrappers giving a tantalising glimpse into the stories inside. There is nothing so exciting as the untouched freshness, the smell almost, of a new book. But on this tenth birthday, perhaps because we were away from home and well meaning friends and relations decided that books would be the easiest presents to send, books seemed to come in greater abundance than ever before. *All Because of Posy, The Boy and the Donkey, The Twins in the New Forest, Riding with the Lyntons, All the Mowgli stories*, the latest *Pony Club Annual*: eagerly we tore off the dull brown paper covering of each parcel to reveal their respective treasures within. What a host of good reading lay in store.

It would seem appropriate that, after such an auspicious beginning to our first year in 'double figures', the rest of the year should match up to our expectations. I think that it did. It was certainly full of new beginnings. It was that summer that we were given our first very own brand new smart Raleigh bicycles to replace the ancient cast-off relics that had been handed down to us by older members of the family. It was that summer that, joy of joys, we received our first riding lessons. It was that summer too that we joined the local Public Library for the first time. It was that September, when we returned to school for the autumn term, that we took up music and began to have lessons on the piano and violin. But let me say more, before I go any further, about that first visit to the library. Having filled in the appropriate forms, we were each issued with three tickets and informed that we could take out two fiction and one non-fiction book. A little bemused by the sheer wealth of books that filled the shelves, we searched in vain for our beloved Enid Blytons but alas, there was not one of her books to be seen. I should have floundered had not my mother come to my rescue and

pulled out two books that she associated with her own childhood: *Puck of Pook's Hill* and L.M.Montgomery's *Rainbow Valley*. Slightly doubtfully I agreed to try them and then found for myself a story of a girl at the Sadler's Wells ballet school on the non-fiction shelves, *Dancers of Tomorrow* by Naomi Capon, choosing it simply because it was illustrated with lots of photographs and looked less dry and dull than most of its neighbours. Where were those rows of Enid Blytons that we had been assured we should find? But had I known it, one of those books I was now clutching in my hand was to prove the most wonderful find of all my childhood reading. It seems appropriate, looking back on it now, that I should have discovered *Rainbow Valley* at the age of ten — that same year of our 'lucky' birthday, and the year that, for my twin sister and myself, has always been associated with our most loved children's books. For that Christmas brought us yet more books (Christmas for us would not have been Christmas without books). Foremost among these were two more of our favourites, *Black Beauty* for me and *A Stable for Jill* for Sue. It was indeed a wonderful year for books.

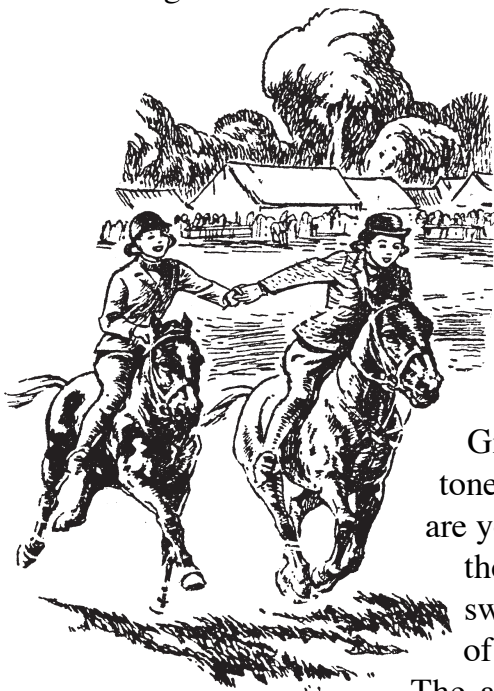
Apart from *Puck of Pook's Hill* which, I confess, I have never been able to get on with, I still have copies today of all those books that I first enjoyed so much at the age of ten, some of them indeed those very same copies, but worn and well read now, their original pristine dustwrappers frayed and faded, but no less magical for all that. They have brought me so much pleasure over the years and yet, though one or two of their titles might have been afforded a brief mention within the pages of *Folly*, I cannot recall any of them being reviewed at length. Perhaps I might now take a closer look at three of my favourites amongst them: *All Because of Posy*, which was my parents' own choice for my tenth birthday present, *The Twins in the New Forest* which, apart of course from *Black Beauty*, has remained unchallenged as our most loved pony story, and *Rainbow Valley* which made such a profound and lasting impression upon us both.

At the beginning of Kathleen O'Farrell's *All Because of Posy*, Posy is utterly miserable, blaming herself for the loss of her adored elder sister, Poppett, who disappeared, presumably drowned, one morning a few months before the story opens. She is listless and depressed, uninterested in everything and everybody. She agrees, however, to go and stay with her Aunt Minnie, who owns a small grocer's shop, not far from the cove where Poppett was drowned and, shortly after her arrival, she is staggered to see, seated at the back of an expensive chauffeur-driven car beside a frail little old lady, a young girl who looks so amazingly like Poppett that Posy is convinced that it cannot be anyone else. Naturally no one will believe her, so she is thrown back on her own resources, determined to get to the bottom of the mystery.



Learning that the frail old lady is a Mrs Melrose, who lives at the Big House in High Coppice, she contrives to get an afternoon job there helping with the sewing. Needless to say, it is not long before she meets Poppett, who is now known as Patsy and is apparently Mrs Melrose's idolised granddaughter, but although the latter seems eager to make friends, it is quite clear that she has no

recollection of Posy at all. Indeed, she is so changed from the old carefree, tomboyish Poppett that she seems almost a stranger to Posy, who concludes that she must have lost her memory. But the mystery seems only to thicken as Posy wonders why this apparently gentle, kind old lady is pretending that 'Patsy' is her granddaughter, and keeping her a virtual prisoner at High Coppice. What sinister role is the frightening old gardener, Jacob Medlar playing in the plot? Who is the girl in the photograph who looks so like Poppett that she could almost be her twin? In addition to all this, who is the mysterious hermit who lives by himself in the middle of the wood, shunning society and yet devoting his care and attention to the welfare of animals? Gradually Posy unravels all these mysteries and pieces together the jigsaw puzzle until, prompted by her little silver locket, the last bit falls into place to provide a perfectly happy conclusion to the story. Highly improbable, full of unlikely coincidences, romantically idealistic—yes, the story could be criticised for being all of these things, when viewed from the sophisticated eye of a new century. But it is very much a story of its time, rooted in the simplicity of the fifties, when children's stories were allowed to be romantic and escapist, set in a world where we could guarantee that in the end everything would turn out all right.



My twin and I both responded to the romance of this story but in practical terms it remained far outside our own realm of experience. Much more easily could we identify with *The Twins in the New Forest* by E.H. Parsons. Immediately Sue was Susan (naturally) and I was her twin sister Gillian, who tells the story, going to stay for most of the summer (their school having conveniently been burned down) with their young and likeable Aunt Judith in that wonderful haven of wild ponies and deer, the New Forest. Gillian relates their experiences in a friendly conversational tone, which has the effect of making you feel that they really are your friends, or 'your sort of people', and the sort of things they enjoy doing, riding in the forest, playing tennis and swimming and going to tea with friends, were just the sorts of things we should have enjoyed if we had had the chance.

The additional excitements of actually taking part in a real gymkhana, of being given a year old New Forest pony for their own after opportunely rendering the necessary first aid after it has been hit by a car, and of dramatically managing to unmask a nest of pony thieves, were adventures more likely to remain confined to the world of fiction—we probably conceded that, albeit reluctantly, even then. As for the twins' amazing good fortune in the secret that is revealed to them in the closing pages of the book, well, that was a fantasy for us that could never be realised. The story, nevertheless, provided us with a wonderful world of imagination with which we could easily identify and as easily adopt as our own and, if we were not actually blessed with the wonderful good fortune of the twins, at least when the summer holidays arrived and we had our first riding lessons at our local riding school, we took our first step towards realising our dream.

Those same summer holidays brought also, as I mentioned earlier, our first visit to our local public library, and my discovery of *Rainbow Valley*. Obviously I began at the wrong end and my first acquaintance with Anne was as a grown up woman, married to Dr Blythe and

the mother of six children. As I became immersed in the story I viewed her as a lovely mother but rather peripheral to the main events, which centre not so much on her own children, but on the four young Merediths who have recently come to live at the Manse. Perhaps that is why most followers of the ‘Anne’ books are inclined to overlook *Rainbow Valley*, often disregarding it altogether in their reviews of the series, but from that first wonderful discovery of the world of Glen St Mary at the age of ten, its sheer magic has, for us, never dimmed. Yet, I remember so well, opening those final pages and feeling a complete outsider as a Mrs Blythe carried on a long and unwilling conversation with another woman called alternately Miss Cornelia or Mrs Marshall Elliott, concerning a whole host of unknown characters and names, leaving me utterly confused and uninterested. Already feeling disillusioned by *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, which I had struggled to complete only by dint of forcing myself to read two chapters a day, I had little hope that this would prove much better.

But then, in the third chapter I met the four eldest Blythe children, Jem, Walter, Nan and Di, frying trout in their favourite haunt, that magically described Rainbow Valley, and I was suddenly drawn in, captivated. In the next chapter I was plunged into this little family circle of the four Merediths, Jerry, Faith, Una and Carl, sitting on the tombstones and chatting inconsequentially in their favourite haunt—the Methodist graveyard—and I knew this was ‘my’ book. It is curious, perhaps, having identified so strongly with the thoroughly English, middle class twins with their ponies and adventures in the New Forest, that both Sue and I should have felt equally at home with this motherless, neglected family living in a Presbyterian manse on the other side of the world, in a place we had never heard of and at a time set some fifty years before our own. Yet we both felt an immediate affinity to the four children and their experiences, hopes and fears, fortunes and misfortunes—and there were many of these—were as real and involving for us as those of the New Forest twins. We shared Faith’s indignation when she and Una were blamed for spring cleaning the Manse on a Sunday; we were as terrified as both Carl and the girls were when they fled from the ‘ghost’ on the dyke; we suffered with Carl when he sat alone in the graveyard doing penance until midnight, and we prayed fervently that he would not die when he succumbed to double pneumonia as a result. We cried with Una when she bravely begged Rosemary West to marry her father and we sympathised with them all as they made up their rules for their Good Conduct Club. It all seemed so real to us, and so beautifully and poetically written. Who was the Pied Piper, we wondered, and we shivered a little with an indefinable sense of fear as Walter cried, ‘The Piper is coming nearer...He pipes—he pipes—and we must follow—Jem and Carl and Jerry and I – round and round the world...’ We did not understand the significance of this then, not until later when we came to read *Rilla of Ingleside*.



For us, at the age of ten, these closing words of the book remained simply a part of its magic. It is a moving and haunting book, demanding in many ways for a ten year old, and certainly more complex and sophisticated than those two other favourites of our tenth birthday, but it helped to pave the way, as a stepping stone to all the other books that lay ahead of us, still to be discovered, just as our tenth birthday had seemed to herald a year of new beginnings as we entered excitedly into our double figures.