If You Go Down to the Woods Today

*The Haunted Wood. A History of Childhood Reading*, Sam Leith (Oneworld)

This is an engaging and highly readable survey of books for children, but in the end I remain unclear about what Leith is actually trying to achieve. It's rarely undertakes literary criticism as such, and is prone to endless summarising and a lot of biographical information. Although Leith can be witty and opinionated, he also slips up sometimes: having discussed representation, specifically with regard to race in Malorie Blackman's novels, he then uses the phrase 'digital natives'; when discussing Arthur Ransome's Swallows and Amazons series he talks about the Lake District being the main setting and that later books use the Norfolk Broads as a location. In actual fact only four out of twelve books happen in the Lakes, two in the series in Norfolk (including the fifth in the series) with others being set in the China Seas, the Caribbean, Suffolk, Essex, the Outer Hebrides and in the fantasy world of *Peter Duck*.

I note this not to be difficult or show off but because it makes me wonder what other errors, assumptions and generalisations have been made on the long trawl through the centuries since *Aesop's Fables* that Leith undertakes. Although the books under review or study are thematically clustered by genre[s] and socio-historical norms of the time, Leith is in the main fairly accepting of everything he discusses. This extends to his dismissal of (as far as I am concerned well-founded) accusations of J.K. Rowling's unoriginality and bad writing as being besides the point; for Leith the remixing of boarding school stories and fantasy is justified by the huge audience engagement with the books. (His other contemporary example is Philip Pullman, whose His Dark Materials trilogy I find totally unreadable; earlier novellas are much more interesting and accomplished.)

Of course, Leith discusses the effects of nostalgia, the rise of books written specifically for children, the blurring of adult and child readerships, escapism, realism and issues-based books but apart from some negative remarks about Enid Blyton's golliwogs, *Little Black Sambo* and the clearcut racist judgements that Biggles makes, he embraces it all, albeit occasionally with asides noting that they are a product of their time.

He's at his best when he does respond and comment rather than simply summarise plots and characters, and when he finds something new to say. His discussion of the importance of food in books for children deserves a whole book to itself; the section on Late Victorian authors, 'Man-Cubs and Naughty Bunnies', makes interesting links between books by Rudyard Kipling, George MacDonald, Robert Louis Stevenson, Beatrix Potter and others, noting how the likes of *Pinocchio* lay the ground for fantasy; and it's intriguing to see the homogenised Edwardian world evidenced by *Peter Pan*, *The Wind in the Willows* and the work of Frances Hodgson Burnett and E. Nesbit, especially the otherworldliness and occasional occult tendencies present in Neverland and the River Bank.

Elsewhere it's strange to find 'Our Friends in the North' highlighting two imported writers (one is Tove Jansson, creator of The Moomins) or the pairing of T.H. White and Tolkien, whose books couldn't be more different: one the overlong result of lumbering pseudo-historical myth- and language- driven self-importance, the other a deft reworking of the tales of King Arthur. It's also queer (as Blyton would say) to find Blyton's simplistic but engaging plot-driven books grouped with much more accomplished work by Lucy Boston and Philippa Pearce.

But then Leith compares and contrasts how different authors and different styles of writing arise from what is going on in the world, be that social change, world wars, feminism, perception of landscape, class, aspirations and expectations. His final chapter briefly but intelligently dips into the world of picture books and, once again, made me wish there was more of this astute, focussed writing.

This is an enjoyable and wide-ranging read. I hope it will pave the way for more books by Leith picking up on specifics and not afraid to discuss the dynamics, structures and styles of the actual texts he chooses. Oh, and please can Jennings and Rupert Bear be included next time?

Rupert Loydell

(700 words)