



Helene Ehriander, *Edith Nesbit and time travel*

It was Edith Nesbit who laid the foundation for the modern fantasy story. At the start of the twentieth century she created a new kind of fantasy in which the confrontation between, on the one hand, the magical and the unexpected and, on the other hand, everyday realism, was fundamental. Children go on an adventure and most decidedly experience the fantastic in the great outdoors, with the outdoors depicted as a safe space in which to explore the fantastic, which would dominate fantasy for children in the twentieth century. Most later fantasy writers in the twentieth century were influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by the works of Edith Nesbit. Nesbit also wrote for adults, including eleven novels, short stories and four collections of horror stories.

Edith Nesbit was born in London in 1858. Her sister Mary suffered from tuberculosis, which meant that the family travelled around for some years, living variously in France, Spain and Germany. At 17 her family finally settled in London and Nesbit met Hubert Bland, a political activist and writer. They became lovers and when Nesbit found she was pregnant they became engaged, marrying in April 1880. After this scandalous (for Victorian society) beginning, the marriage would be an unconventional one. Initially, the couple lived separately, Nesbit with her family and Bland with his mother. In 1886, Bland met Alice Hoatson, a friend of Edith, and in 1886 she became his mistress for the rest of his life. Bland had two children by Hoatson and they were raised by Edith as her own. Nesbit was a follower of the Marxist socialist William Morris and she and her husband Hubert Bland were among the founders of the socialist Fabian Society in 1884. In February 1917, some three years after Bland died, Nesbit married Thomas “the Skipper” Tucker. She died in 1924 and was buried in the churchyard of St Mary in the Marsh in St Mary’s Bay, New Romney, East Kent.

Edith had begun writing in her teens and her artistic talents were needed to bring in money when she and Hubert Bland were first married. She wrote poems, articles, plays and children's stories. According to her biographer, Julia Briggs, Nesbit was "the first modern writer for children": Nesbit "helped to reverse the great tradition of children's literature inaugurated by Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald and Kenneth Grahame, in turning away from their secondary worlds to the tough truths to be won from encounters with things-as-they-are, previously the province of adult novels." Briggs also credits Nesbit with having invented the children's adventure story.

Nesbit published approximately 40 books for children, including novels, collections of stories and picture books, and in collaboration with other authors she published almost as many more. Among her best-known books are *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1898), the Psammead series (1902–1906), *The Railway Children* (1906) and *The House of Arden* (1908). In the first of the Psammead stories, *Five Children and It* (1902), there is no presence of the secondary world. The whole narrative takes place in the primary world, but the magic Psammead is there to fulfil the wishes of the children. In 1906 she wrote the fantasy story *The Story of The Amulet*, the last book in the Psammead series. Like many other women and fantasy writers, she published her books for children under the name of E. Nesbit (not Edith).

Edith Nesbit's pioneer contribution to children's literature is not confined to fantasy alone. For instance, she rejected Victorian didacticism with its manner of talking down to children. She started using the real, spoken language which makes her books readable today. She portrayed real human characters instead of the earlier absolutely virtuous, angelic children. She took the children's story out of the nursery into the streets of London and the countryside. In this she created an essentially new kind of children's novel.

For further reading of Edith Nesbit's life, look for a copy of the biography *A Woman of Passion* written by Julia Briggs. The book was first published in 1987, but is still available in paperback.

At the beginning of *The Story of the Amulet*, the journalist father of Robert, Anthea, Cyril, and Jane has gone overseas to cover the war in Manchuria. Their mother has gone to Madeira to recover from an illness, taking with her their younger brother, the Lamb. The children are living with an old nurse who has set up a boarding house in central London. Her only remaining boarder is a scholarly Egyptologist who has filled his room with ancient artefacts.

During the course of the book, the children get to know the “poor learned gentleman” and befriend him and call him Jimmy.

In a shop near the British Museum the children find their old friend from the two previous books in the sequel, the Psammead. It had been captured by a trapper, who failed to recognise it as a magical being. The terrified creature cannot escape, for it can only grant wishes to others, not to itself. The children persuade the shopkeeper to sell them the “old monkey” and they free their friend. Guided by this magic helper, the Psammead, the children purchase an ancient amulet in the shape of an Egyptian Tyet which should be able to grant them their hearts’ desire: the safe return of their parents and baby brother. But this amulet is only the surviving half of an original whole. By itself, it cannot grant their hearts’ desire. Yet it can serve as a portal, enabling time travel to find the other half. The children are also assisted in their time travel by the Psammead. Though he is not a messenger from a secondary world or time, the Psammead has the function of a guide, protector, instructor on the journey. But it is the amulet’s magic, not the messenger’s that takes the children into the secondary time. Magic helpers are rarely omnipotent. The Psammead cannot make wishes for himself and if it has been decided that he can not grant any more wishes to the children it is definite. The Psammead also has to follow some unwritten laws, for example he knows where the amulet is but he may not tell.

In the course of the novel the Amulet transports the children and the Psammead to times and places where the Amulet has previously existed, in the hope that – somewhere in time – the children can find the Amulet’s missing half. Among the ancient realms they visit are Babylon, Egypt, the Phoenician city of Tyre, a ship to “the Tin Islands” (ancient Cornwall), and Atlantis just before the flood. In each of their time-journeys, the children are magically able to speak and comprehend the contemporary language:

Now, once for all, I am not going to be bothered to tell you how it was that the girl could understand Anthea and Anthea could understand the girl. YOU, at any rate, would not understand ME, if I tried to explain it, any more than you can understand about time and space being only forms of thought. You may think what you like. Perhaps the children had found out the universal language which everyone can understand, and which wise men so far have not found. You will have noticed long ago that they were singularly lucky children, and they may have had this piece of luck as well as others. Or it may have been that ... but why pursue the question further? The fact remains that in all their adventures the muddle-headed inventions which we call foreign languages never bothered them in the least. They could always understand and be understood. If you can explain this, please

do. I daresay I could understand your explanation, though you could never understand mine. (Chapter 4, Eight Thousand Years Ago”)

The five children also keep their full identity in the past, never ceasing to be modern children with a modern way of thinking and full consciousness of their own time and place. Nesbit acknowledges this in her narration, without offering any explanation. The children eventually bring “Jimmy” (the “Learned Gentleman”) along with them on some of their time trips. For some reason, Jimmy does not share the children’s magical gift of fluency in the local language: he can only understand (for example) Latin based on his own studies. In *The Story of the Amulet* the children manage to bring the Queen of Babylon from the secondary world into modern London – and they take her back afterwards! They also bring small things into the past to trade and they leave these things there. They fetch a flower from the primary chronotope to impress an Egyptian guard. But most important thing is that they go into the past to find the amulet and bring it back home with them. One half of the amulet exists in the primary time.

Edith Nesbit was one of the first authors (maybe the first!) to serve an object, the amulet, as a kind of time machine. The amulet is an object that connects the primary world with a secondary chronotope. The magic stone enables the children to go on journeys in time willingly and consciously, but they cannot themselves choose the destination: it is the amulet that is attracted to its other half. In order to let the children go into the past the amulet turns into a huge arch – the magic object fantasme and the door fantasme are interchangeable. The amulet has a double function in the story: it is both the means and the goal of the magic quest.

The “return home” is a common motif in modern fantastic stories, but to return home one has to leave it, and many of the early fantasies the characters do not. Travelling in order to change as a person is also a common motif, whether the character travels through time or geographically in his or her own time. Travel invites a person to reflect and develop. The encounter with something new changes a person’s outlook on everything old, and new perspectives mean that the traveller changes and matures. The children in *The Story of the Amulet* gain many insights on their travels, and in the end their wish is also fulfilled.

The direction of time travel in fantasy is mostly into the past. Travelling into the future brings fantasy closer to science fiction. In one chapter the children also come to the future, visiting a British utopia in which H. G. Wells is venerated as a prophet. Wells and E. Nesbit were both members of the Fabian political movement and his story *The Time Machine*

(1895) gave her inspiration for *The Story of the Amulet*. This chapter in *The Story of the Amulet* is essentially different from all the other trips in the narrative: whereas all the other adventures in this novel contain scrupulously detailed accounts of past civilisations, the children's trip into the future represents Nesbit's vision of utopia.

'How is it we can remember all about the future, NOW?' Anthea woke the Psammead with laborious gentleness to put the question.

'How is it we can remember what we saw in the future, and yet, when we WERE in the future, we could not remember the bit of the future that was past then, the time of finding the Amulet?'

'Why, what a silly question!' said the Psammead, 'of course you cannot remember what hasn't happened yet.'

'But the FUTURE hasn't happened yet,' Anthea persisted, 'and we remember that all right.'

'Oh, that isn't what's happened, my good child,' said the Psammead, rather crossly, 'that's prophetic vision. And you remember dreams, don't you? So why not visions? You never do seem to understand the simplest thing.' (Chapter 12, "The Sorry-Present and the Expelled Little Boy")

Most fantasy writers assume that time is not linear, that all different times and epochs exist simultaneously, like a multitude of parallel worlds. Edith Nesbit postulated this in *The Story of the Amulet* as "time and space are only forms of thought". Nesbit never explains how magic works. The readers must come to the conclusions themselves – or neglect them. Magic in Nesbit's books is so logical and consistent that it does not need explanation, and many of them have been accepted by future authors. The fundamental law in Nesbit's books is that magic must have a limit. The Psammead can only grant one wish a day and he cannot take back his wishes. The children have to learn a smart way of telling their wishes and they have to think before they waste the wishes away.

In Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* the characters visit different times and different countries. They travel in both time and space. This type of time travel Nikolajeva calls "global travelling". One of the most important laws introduced by Edith Nesbit in her time fantasies is that the magic adventure does not take any of "real", primary time. In *The Story of the Amulet* the children come back from Egypt, Babylon and other journeys in time at exactly the same moment they went through the arch of the amulet. Primary time stands still in their absence.

'Still there? silly!' said Cyril. 'Don't you see, if we go back into the Past it won't be thousands of years ago. It will be NOW for us – won't it?' (Chapter 3, "The Past")

One important principle in Nesbit's books is that the grown-ups do not notice anything caused by magic, because "people do not notice much, anyway", as the Psammead puts it when granting a wish. In this way Nesbit avoids complications that may arise when servants notice strange things about their children. This too, has been accepted by Nesbit's followers.

Edith Nesbit wrote about children in her own times who could travel back in history. Historical fantasy can be regarded as a hybrid between two genres that are actually diametrical opposites, writes Veronica Schanoes (2012). Historical novels are not infrequently based on the author's own research or diligent collecting of material to make the account as authentic as possible. Fantasy, on the other hand, consists of worlds that have their own laws and are limited only by the author's imagination. Despite this difference between the genres, they are nevertheless similar in that the authors of both historical novels and fantasy must engage in the construction of a world which they explain to their readers in such a way that they feel at home there. It is a world that is supposed to constitute a whole, with parts that cohere well enough to be credible to the reader. For the reader it is not always obvious whether the world described is a true historical world (as in *The Story of the Amulet*), an alternative historical world, or a secondary world, because magic is a common feature both in historical fantasy and in fantasy. Historical fantasy integrates non-realistic elements in historical time, often with speculation about what history might have been like if circumstances had been otherwise. Travel forward in time is not really problematic, as we will get to the future sooner or later just by waiting, and it is well attested that the waiting time can be shortened depending on our experience of time according to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. What is problematic and controversial is whether it is possible to travel backwards in time and if so whether it is possible to change what has already happened.

There are two central questions when it comes to time travel which can be exemplified with "the grandfather paradox" and what is known in Swedish as "the orphan paradox" (*föräldralösparadoxen*), in English as "the bootstrap paradox", after a short story by Robert A Heinlein in which the author plays with the structure of this paradox. The grandfather paradox concerns whether it would be possible to go back in time and kill your own grandfather before your father was born. If you could succeed in this you would prevent your own birth, which in turn would mean that you could never travel back in time thus would be unable to kill your grandfather. With the bootstrap paradox, time travel causes something to exist without it having an origin. Also closely connected with time travel is the question of what time actually is and what exists behind what we call past, present and future.

Time travel appears to be more common in fantasy for young readers than for adults, writes Maria Nikolajeva (2012). She believes that this has to do with a pedagogical intention to teach history to child readers and acquaint them with famous historical figures. Also, there is rich potential to raise questions about whether humans have free will or are predestined to a certain fate; this is thought to be particularly relevant to young people who have their lives before them.

Chronotope refers to the unit of time and space that characterizes and constitutes a genre. The concept was developed by the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin.

Fantaseme is, according to Nikolajeva, the smallest (magical) unit of a fantasy narrative. The term was created by analogy with the concept of mytheme, as used in the study of mythology, coined by the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi- Strauss. A mytheme is the smallest unit of a myth – by analogy with the phoneme and morpheme in linguistics – and according to Lévi-Strauss a myth consists of a few basic types of mytheme.

Psammead series

1902 *Five Children and It*

1904 *The Phoenix and the Carpet*

1906 *The Story of the Amulet*

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