

# Robin Hood Comes of Age

Rebecca Barnhouse

The Robin Hood story has long been a most pliable frame. From its roots in the medieval ballad to its present incarnations as coming-of-age narrative, it has taken a multitude of forms when it has been presented to young readers: adventure-romance, political manifesto, psychological drama, fantasy story. In doing so, it sometimes challenges received notions of children's and young adult literature. While some Robin Hood books are clearly intended for young readers, others blur the boundaries, sometimes in ways we can applaud, since they help break down artificial boundaries dividing fiction for children from that for adults. A look at the legend's long history helps us understand why the story lends itself to such a wide variety of retellings.

## The Legend in English Literature

As R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor have detailed in their study of the legend, Robin Hood has a long history in English literature. Beginning as medieval ballads, Robin Hood stories have also appeared in plays, chronicles, poems, operas, songs, and novels by writers as prolific as Anonymous, and as illustrious as Ben Jonson, John Keats, and Thomas Love Peacock. The tales were known long before the extant ballad versions began to be copied or printed in the mid-fifteenth century. Interestingly, the first two references to them in English literature are negative: in William Langland's poem *Piers Plowman*, composed around 1375, the character Sloth, who doesn't remember his Paternoster very well, knows the "rymes of Robyn hood" (*Piers Plowman* B.5.402). And *Dives and Pauper*, a homily written about 1405, admonishes those who would rather hear a song of Robin Hood than mass or matins (Dobson and Taylor 1). Who were these people shirking church services to listen to outlaw tales? According to historian Barbara Hanawalt, "It is safe to assume that the ballads were recited frequently in villages, towns, and castles of late medieval England," and they were enjoyed across the social spectrum by nobility, gentry, and villagers alike (154).

The medieval ballads contain many of the elements familiar to modern audiences: Robin is an outlawed archer who lives in the forest with his companions Little John, Will Scarlett (or Scathelock), and Much the Miller's son. Maid Marian and Friar Tuck are late arrivals, not joining the band until the sixteenth century. What is most surprising about the medieval ballads is the portrayal of Robin Hood himself: he is no socially conscious outlaw who steals from the rich to give to the poor. Only twice is the medieval Robin shown helping people, and town dwellers fear him. Hanawalt reminds us that "Medieval people did not have a romantic expectation about

the liberality of bandits," (167) and this is reflected in Little John and Much the Miller's rescue of Robin in one ballad. Not only do they kill servants during the rescue, they also "beheaded a monk and killed a little page accompanying him for fear the child would tell who murdered his master" (165). In another ballad, Robin himself slays fifteen foresters and countless villagers. A long way from the ballads are the romantic views of Robin Hood in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. As Stephen Morillo says, "It is doubtful whether the original outlaw would recognize his socially progressive descendant" (571).

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By the sixteenth century, however, Robin has begun to look more familiar to us. John Major's 1521 *History of Great Britain*, a Latin chronicle, reports that Robin Hood would not "spoil the poor, but rather enriched them from the plunder taken from abbots. The robberies of this man I condemn," says Major, "but of all robbers he was the most human and chief" (qtd. in Dobson and Taylor 5). But

not until the publication of *Ivanhoe* in 1819 does Robin Hood become a defender of Saxons against cruel, usurping Normans. Throughout a long history, the legend has gradually gained the characters and characteristics that modern readers (and filmgoers) associate with him, a palette ready for modern writers to choose their colors from.

## Early Children's Versions of Robin Hood

We can assume that the audience for the medieval ballads—the nobility, gentry and villagers—included both children and adults, so in one sense, Robin Hood has always belonged to the young. (In fact Bennet Brockman has argued that children's literature got a bad reputation with academics because of its association with medieval romances, including Robin Hood stories.) Versions of the Robin Hood ballads produced specifically for children appear in the early 1800's, and in 1840 children's novels about the outlaw are first published in England: Joseph Cundall's *Robin Hood and his Merry Foresters* and Pierce Egan's *Robin Hood and Little John*, on which Alexander Dumas based his novels *Le Prince des Voleurs* and *Robin Hood Le Proscrit* (Dobson and Taylor 59-60; 317).

Then, in 1883, Scribner's published Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renown in Nottinghamshire*. For many twentieth-century writers of Robin Hood novels, it has been a source and inspiration. Especially for Americans, it has arguably been the most influential version of the legend (with the more recent exception of film versions), and it remains in print today. Basing his tales and

illustrations on the ballads as they were collected by Joseph Ritson, Pyle wrote a collection of adventure stories connected by characters, and only loosely by a central narrative. As Lucien Agosta has shown, Pyle shapes the ballad material into his own narrative, providing "causal connections and character motivations," and downplaying the sometimes considerable violence found in the ballads (28).

Pyle sets his stories in "the land of Fancy," a "No-man's-land," as he calls it in his Preface (viii). Although historical figures like Queen Eleanor and King Henry II appear in his pages, Pyle in no way tries to recreate medieval England. In Robin's world, each of his merry men is promised three suits of Lincoln green each year, along with a salary, venison, "sweet oaten cakes, and curds and honey" (22). There is no suggestion of where the green suits are manufactured, and the same holds true for the varieties of costume Robin and his men use when they play tricks on the Sheriff of Nottingham and other not-so-worthies—they seem to grow on convenient trees in the greenwood. Like the ballads, most of the stories are set in spring or summer. Although winter does come to Pyle's Sherwood, it's a comfortable kind of winter spent around a roaring fire at the Blue Boar Inn, and no one ever suffers from the cold.

Robin is a young man, eighteen when he first flees to the forest, having killed a king's forester in self-defense. A band of oppressed men gathers around him during the next year. No children or women mar the easy camaraderie of the band, although Robin has loved Maid Marian since we first met him, Alan-a-Dale marries his fair Ellen, and Little John admires various village maidens.

Dobson and Taylor congratulate the "historians and literary critics [who] . . . rescue[d] the greenwood hero from the unreliable clutches of the local enthusiast, the film scriptwriter, and the author of children's stories" (ix). Try as they might, however, neither the historians nor the literary critics have been able to keep Robin Hood safe from "the author of children's stories," often to our considerable advantage. After Pyle, Robin Hood books for young readers proliferated, and even Enid Blyton and Antonia Frasier contributed retellings of the stories. E. C. Vivian's 1927 version was still in print in 1965, while Roger Lancelyn Green's 1956 *The Adventures of Robin Hood* has been even more durable. It has been reprinted thirty four times (Kevin Carpenter 226) and remains in print today. Green returned to the ballads in his careful reworking of the tales, and he includes epigrammatic quotations from them at the beginnings of stories. The ballads themselves, sans stories, were the focus of Anne Malcolmson's *The Song of Robin Hood*, which sets fifteen ballads to music. With Virginia Lee Burton's illustrations, it was a Caldecott Honor Book in 1948. In his *Robin Hood: The Many Faces of that Celebrated English Outlaw* Kevin Carpenter gives an annotated list—with fascinating illustrations—of English Robin Hood books for children from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (218-229).

### The Robin Hood Novel for Young Readers

#### *Bows Against the Barons*

Retellings of the familiar elements of the story continue to be published year after year in both England and the U.S.

However, in the twentieth century, a new kind of book for young readers begins to appear: instead of telling the story of Robin Hood, these novels use the outlaw tale as a vehicle to tell another character's story. The first of these is Geoffrey Trease's 1934 *Bows Against the Barons*. Well-known as for its political leanings (Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard say that Trease's "Robin speaks like a member of the British Communist Party during the 1930s" [541]), *Bows* is a Robin Hood story with a child protagonist. Robin Hood novels themselves were hardly new: Thomas Love Peacock's *Maid Marian* had been published in 1822 and G.P.R. James' *Forest Days: A Romance of Old Times* appeared in 1843. But the story for young readers told from the point of view of a child? That had not been done before.

Borrowing the ready-made setting and familiar characters, but jettisoning the standard episodic structure of Robin Hood tales, Trease tells the story of the peasant boy Dickon, who, forced into the forest after shooting a deer, quickly finds himself a full participant in the outlaw band, valued for his skill with the bow and entrusted with weighty errands. In Dickon's eyes, the outlaw is hardly the laughing, jesting merry man found in Pyle's version. Instead, Robin Hood "was quite old. He did not look like the wonderful hero of whom the songs and stories told." But his "steel-blue eyes" and his "hands, friendly but strong," tell Dickon that "This was a man among men" (23). This Robin Hood is a real outlaw whose actions have consequences, not an imposter lounging lazily on the greensward and plucking venison, oat-cakes, and suits of Lincoln green off convenient trees. Instead of locating Sherwood in Pyle's "land of Fancy," Trease attempts to create a realistic setting. In the end, however, Trease's medieval England is "as unrealistic in its total negativity as the

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sentimental image he was hoping to destroy," as Suzanne Rahn has argued (27). Because Trease was so intent on writing political propaganda, his portrayal of the rich as bad, the poor as good, and the cry for a classless society ringing loudly through Sherwood and medieval Nottingham is as unhistorical as is Pyle's comfortable Sherwood.

In her study of real medieval outlaws, Barbara Hanawalt finds that not only did outlaws steal from the poor, but their social hierarchy reflected actual social class instead of being the classless society often portrayed in retellings such as Trease's (161, 164).

Yet what Trease created has become a genre unto itself: the Robin Hood novel with a young protagonist. Trease's novel and those that follow its format shed the episodic structure and the shifting focus, and employ instead a single protagonist whose point of view guides readers through the narrative. Unlike Pyle's version and its many followers, these novels conform to current notions of middle grade and young adult literature: they are coming-of-age stories in which protagonists overcome some difficulty or begin to understand their places in the world.

#### *Robin's Country*

Consider, for example, Monica Furlong's 1995 novel for younger readers, *Robin's Country*. Her protagonist has been (like a variety of characters in recent literature for young people) traumatized into muteness. Unable to remember who he is, and known only as Dummy, the boy escapes his evil

master, Farmer Jordan, by running to Sherwood Forest and to Robin Hood. Dummy quickly becomes the favorite of all the greenwood heroes, especially Robin, who is portrayed as kind and responsible, a "handsome" man with "the most brilliant blue eyes Dummy had ever seen" (24). Only Marian distrusts Dummy, fearing he is a spy. But after he becomes an excellent archer and saves Robin's life not once, but twice, Marian warms to him. Slowly, Dummy regains both his voice and his confidence, and finally, in a fairy-tale ending, even his identity when King Richard recognizes him as his long-lost godson. The tale is saccharine, but it accords more closely with the coming-of-age model so prevalent in today's novels for young readers than does Pyle's collection of stories where nobody ever grows up.

#### Girls in the Greenwood: *The Forestwife*, *Child of the May*, and *Rowan Hood*

Girls have also begun to grow up in the greenwood.

Female protagonists have appeared in three recent novels, and in each, the idea of the female as a nurturer and healer is set against male as fighter. Theresa Tomlinson's 1993 *The Forestwife* gives us a fifteen-year old female protagonist who, like so many girls in novels with romantic-medieval settings, is to be married off to an odious old man. Like Dummy, she escapes to the forest. However, Tomlinson's Sherwood is far more dangerous than either Pyle's or Furlong's, and her Robin is far less heroic. A brash, thoughtless young man called Robert, he has little understanding of the sufferings of the common folk and the hard work of women until Marian teaches him by example. The novel focuses on Marian's growth to adulthood and her reluctant acceptance of her fate: she is to be the new Forestwife, the healer who lives alone in the greenwood and tends to those who need bodily and spiritual renewal. As Marian comes of age, readers also witness Robert's maturation and his transformation into a hooded character dedicated to helping the poor who have fled to the woods to seek out the Forestwife. Far more like Furlong's book than Pyle's, Tomlinson's novel tells of a young person's struggles against an oppressive society and of her search for her own identity, a description that could be applied to many of the young adult novels published each year.

Tomlinson continues her story in her 1998 *Child of the May*, set fifteen years after *The Forestwife*. Here we see the coming-of-age of Magda, the teenaged daughter of Little John, who has been raised in the forest by Marian. She, too, fits the template of the young adult novel's protagonist; she longs for something different and rankles at her role as Marian's helper, but by novel's end she has matured enough to understand her place in the forest: she, too, is a healer who must sacrifice her own desires to the needs of the people who seek her aid. Along the way, however, Magda gets to have the adventures denied Marian, by chopping off her hair, dressing as a boy, and accompanying other outlaws on rescues and raids. Tomlinson's Robin Hood figure, Robert, has fully matured by this time. He has become almost legendary, and he still serves the troubled people who flock to Marian for help. Known as The Hooded One, Robert is the most wanted man "in the north" (16).

Although both Tomlinson's books and Furlong's strive for psychological realism, their presentation of the Middle Ages is as unrealistic as Pyle's and Trease's. Mary H. McNulty places them, along with Robin McKinley's *The Outlaws of Sherwood* amongst her "Adolescent Novels Set in the Middle Ages" (20). Although she briefly notes that *The Forestwife* is "not strictly historical fiction," she also tells readers that the novel takes place "in the last decade of the twelfth century" and that it "depicts the lifestyle and roles of nobility and peasants at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century" (23), thereby undermining her earlier statement. To my mind, however, Tomlinson's novels, like Furlong's, are more adventure-romance than historical fiction because they use settings with some medieval characteristics to evoke a romantic milieu in which someone like Robin Hood just might have shot his bow. Inconvenient facts about medieval life are erased or glossed over, just as winter is in Pyle's *Merry Adventures*.

The books are not *about* the Middle Ages, they are about characters from medieval legends. As Thomas J. Garbáty reminds us, the Robin Hood ballads borrowed from medieval romance, which frequently included fantasy elements such as stories of "outlaws, fairies, [and] revenants (the dead returning to life)" (98). Thus, it seems appropriate for a novelist retelling a Robin Hood tale to use a fantasy setting that draws on the Middle Ages rather than a strictly historical setting.

In *Rowan Hood: Outlaw Girl of Sherwood Forest* (2001), Nancy Springer does just that. Her fantasy adventure novel is about a thirteen-year-old girl whose mother was an "aelfin" healer, a woodwife. After her mother is murdered, Rowan cuts her hair, dresses as a boy, and seeks out her father, Robin Hood. When she finds him, however, she realizes she's uncomfortable in the rough, masculine band of outlaws. It takes the help of her mother's kin, the aelfe, who are spirits of the woods, for Rowan to understand her fear of her own identity: "I am afraid of being a woodwife like my mother," she admits (153). Like Tomlinson's Marian and Magda, Rowan comes of age when she accepts the healing, nurturing side of her that she has long denied and becomes a woodwife. And like Magda, she also gets to have boy's adventures, saving a princess who is escaping a forced marriage, and rescuing Robin Hood, as well. Springer's decision to include fantasy elements such as the aelfe allows her to alternate freely between medieval history and medieval legend, while in Tomlinson's books, the tension between the two can be uncomfortable: it's not historical fiction, but sometimes it's presented as if it were.

Springer's Robin Hood is a thoroughly romantic hero, an understanding friend and father who happens to be remarkably handsome—but in the spirit of contemporary heroes, vulnerable as well. Like most modern Robin Hoods, his eyes are blue and merry, and he carries himself proudly. "He was so handsome, manly, strong, brave . . . His smile was so droll and sweet," Rowan thinks about him (61). As part of her maturation, she must find a way to reveal her identity to him and to be his daughter without being part of his band. The answer to both comes when she first rescues and then heals him. At the same time, of course, she accepts her elvish powers and her role as healer.

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presented it is undercut by a feminine perspective. The female protagonists are just as brave (and often braver) than the male outlaws, but they are much faster to recognize and respond to suffering. In their eyes, forests are places of hardship where hunger is never far away, not sunny glades with venison picnics awaiting all comers. Springer and Tomlinson both paint the male outlaws as gangs of thoughtless roughhousers whose antics the women watch with wary eyes, anticipating the resulting bruises and broken limbs they, the healers, will have to mend. Nevertheless, Robin Hood himself is still heroic in each of these works (although he must mature into heroism in *The Forestwife*).

The feminine power of healing shared by Marian, Magda, and Rowan comes with a price. Each protagonist recognizes that the role of healer means a life outside of marriage. The novels imply that marriage—but not sex—diminishes the female healer's power. Although Marian's predecessor as Forestwife and Rowan's mother, the woodwife, lived lives of solitude, Marian, Magda after her, and Rowan all surround themselves with friends, and Marian takes Robin to her bed when he returns from long trips. Here and in the use of cross-dressing, the novels posit girls' lack of freedom: when they are disguised as boys, girls gain freedom, but when they accept their roles as healers, they are constricted in many ways.

These three novels, along with Furlong's, fit easily into recent ideas about fiction for young readers. In each, a motherless—and sometimes fatherless—child is alone in the world, facing danger, and searching for an identity. In each, the protagonist is confronted by both physical and psychological difficulties, passes some kind of test, and emerges having—sometimes reluctantly—accepted a particular role in the world. In each, a young person comes of age. Ironically, however, although death is present in each of these novels, only in Pyle's never-never land and in Trease's early novel, where we never see him as a youth, does Robin Hood himself die.

### *The Outlaws of Sherwood, In a Dark Wood, and Forbidden Forest*

While Furlong, Tomlinson, and Springer use the Robin Hood milieu as the background for the story of a child character who doesn't appear in the traditional stories, Robin McKinley and Michael Cadnum choose characters from the ballads for their protagonists. Their novels call into question some conventions generally associated with young adult literature.

McKinley places Robin himself at the forefront of the *The Outlaws of Sherwood*. Writing about Robin Hood novels in general, Stephen Knight notes that Robin Hood "lacks the inner tension and the personal trajectory which the novel constructs as central" (172). McKinley gives Robin both inner tension and a personal trajectory: he is eighteen when he kills a man in self-defense. Howard Pyle's Robin Hood also flees to the forest after an accidental killing, but he suffers no angst, unlike McKinley's hero, who must come to terms with his action. Like a character in a Chris Crutcher sports novel, McKinley's Robin is supported by his close friends, and his girlfriend stands by him, too. These qualities seem to place *The Outlaws of Sherwood* squarely within the young adult genre and indeed, the novel was first published by children's book publisher Greenwillow at a time when McKinley was already known for her award-winning books for young readers. The subject matter, too, seems appropriate for young readers, even if her characters and story are equally, or perhaps

more attractive to adults. The subsequent publication of the paperback edition as an Ace fantasy title for adults (although McKinley keeps fantastic elements out of her Sherwood) and the shelving of the title in the science fiction/fantasy sections of bookstores demonstrates this dual audience.

Whereas McKinley's novel enjoys a wide readership because of its marketing, Michael Cadnum's Robin Hood books are marketed strictly for a young adult audience. Although he has also written for adults, Cadnum, like McKinley, is well-known for his prize-winning books for teenagers, and therefore, his recent novels have been packaged for teens, whether or not they would appeal to adults. Further, the traditional association of Robin Hood stories with children makes his books seem appropriate for young readers.

However, Cadnum's first Robin Hood novel, *In a Dark Wood*, features adult characters. In a turn on traditional expectations, Cadnum makes the Sheriff of Nottingham his protagonist. The sheriff is a solitary, introspective adult when we meet him, and he suffers few of the traditional woes that afflict teens in modern young adult novels. No adolescent angst plagues him; his inner turmoil looks more like a midlife crisis. And Robin Hood himself is a forest philosopher in Cadnum's version, a clever man who enjoys pondering a story's meaning. Cadnum's spare, allusive style also seems aimed at an adult audience; it shares more characteristics with Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play* than it does with the style of many of today's young adult novels. It's a shame that because of its marketing, Cadnum's novel will not be widely read by adults. Yet, at the same time, the presence of the novel in the young adult section of libraries and bookstores helps to broaden conceptions of what young adult novels can be, perhaps breaking down some of the confining formulas that have recently held sway in children's book publishing that insist that young adult novels must be about teenagers who have problems with which readers can easily identify.

In *Forbidden Forest: The Story of Little John and Robin Hood*, Cadnum returns to a more traditional young adult format. Despite the book's title, Robin Hood remains a secondary character. The focus on Little John has a familiar trajectory: like Robin in McKinley's novel, Little John is eighteen when he flees to the forest after accidentally killing a man. The second protagonist, Margaret, a sixteen-year-old merchant's daughter, also escapes to the forest when she is accused of murder. The book is part adventure story, part romance. Sherwood is almost as comfortable a shelter as Howard Pyle made it, not a harsh landscape where people struggle to survive. Little John and Margaret are drawn to each other despite the chasm between their social classes—he is a tanner's son of no means at all while she is accustomed to life with servants and social amenities.

What makes *Forbidden Forest* a young adult novel, besides the characters' ages, is their coming of age. John is an orphan who must decide who to trust and how to live in this world; he rejects a cruel outlaw leader before joining the benevolent, fun-loving Robin Hood, whose philosophical bent isn't as apparent as it was in *In a Dark Wood*. Margaret, who is motherless but protected by a loyal servant, faces marriage to a man she doesn't respect, but she plans to go through with the wedding in order to save her beloved father from financial ruin. Like so many young adult protagonists, both Margaret and John struggle against the confines of an oppressive society, maturing as they make difficult decisions. In the end, however, they seem to sacrifice little to achieve freedom; were this a realistic historical novel, the life of hard-

ship they choose would be far more apparent.

### Robin Hood and Young Readers

In some ways, the presence of all these books, from Trease's to Springer's to McKinley's to Cadnum's, side-by-side in the children's and young adult shelves of libraries causes us to question definitions of literature for young people. Are young readers more likely to be drawn to books with characters their age? Does the presence of a single protagonist allow these readers a stronger sense of identification? Or does this focus on the viewpoint of a single child character, so prevalent in recent fiction, rob readers of some of the richness and complexity that a novel with a more expanded viewpoint could offer them? One wonders whether Pyle's version, with its complicated language, third-person omniscient viewpoint, and adult characters, would be published for children were the manuscript submitted for consideration today.

Just why is Robin Hood considered children's literature? Bennett Brockman has shown how, by their association with medieval romance, Robin Hood ballads became the property of servants, children, and old women. Dobson and Taylor have said that the Robin Hood story, the one with adult characters, appeals to children because of "the ability of children throughout the world to identify with the forest outlaw hero-figure" and because of the story's "loose and episodic structure, its lack of pronounced characterization, [and] the absence of any strong sexual connotations" (58). Few readers would consider a "lack of pronounced characterization" a mark of good children's literature. However, other writers have sidestepped the question of why the outlaw tales are appropriate for children by simply assuming that Robin Hood does belong to children. Taimi Ranta calls Pyle's version the "quintessential children's story" without ever really telling why it is so; she sees it as good storytelling "regardless of a reader's age" (213), yet her primary concern is with the book's didactic qualities and its efficacy in the classroom. Jill May laments the absence of girls in Pyle's version, but nevertheless recognizes the story as one written for children—because, after all, Pyle wrote and illustrated it with children in mind. She notes that there is no "fear of growing up and facing adult responsibility" in "Pyle's elusive romantic woods [that are] full of adventure" (200). But like connotations of the word *lusty*, a favorite of Pyle's, conceptions of children's literature have changed, and growing up and facing responsibility are now a distinct part of modern novels for young readers.

Reflecting the kinds of changes in fiction for children, Robin Hood books have moved from Pyle's episodic version featuring the adventures of many adult characters, to narratives focused on the psychological development of a young protagonist. Although episodic versions continue to be published, they share shelf-space with quasi-historical coming-of-age novels often featuring female characters. The legend lends itself to so many genres that it moves back and forth easily among them, allowing writers to add political, feminist, psychological, fantastic, or other elements. For over six hundred years the legend has captivated both adults and children, and its allure has not dimmed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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