

Taken from <http://cultureandanarchy.wordpress.com/foucault-and-enid-blyton/>

Foucault and Enid Blyton

Trouble in the First Form: Foucauldian discipline and The Naughtiest Girl

“Not even his authority could prevent the hissing; and so strong was the feeling that the four preposters of the week walked up the school with their canes, shouting ‘S-s-s-i-lenc-c-c-c-e’ at the top of their voices. However, the chief offenders for the time were flogged and kept in bounds; but the victorious party had brought a nice hornet’s nest about their ears.”

Tom Brown’s Schooldays (1857)

“It was a kind of school Parliament, where the children made their own rules, heard grumbles and complaints, judged one another, and punished bad behaviour.

It was not pleasant having one’s faults brought before the whole school and discussed, but on the other hand it was much better for everyone to know their own failings and have them brought out into the open, instead of fearing them and keeping them secret, so that they grew bigger. Many a child had been cured for always of such things as cheating or lying by having the sympathy and help of the whole school.”

The Naughtiest Girl Again (1942)

“Children’s books have, and have had, great social and educational influence; they are important both politically and commercially.”¹

Discipline in schools is never far from the headlines today, and relates to the wider context of learning possibilities and outcomes. Comparative methods of dealing with bad behaviour in schools are quoted above, and time has considerably changed society’s outlook on the best way to manage and discipline children. This change reflects the wider changes in society, including revolutionary contemporary workplace practices, and the current ideas of abandoning the traditional notion of the school timetable:

The traditional school timetable should be abandoned and replaced by a radical approach in which subjects are taught together and entire weeks or days are turned over to single topics....²

Discipline and Punish has been used as the basis of many a work on social discourse, and has perhaps gained a rather severe reputation as a result of this. John Dunn’s review of *Utility and Democracy: The Political Thought of Jeremy Bentham*³ suggests that Foucault’s use of Bentham’s “strenuously but vainly touted model prison” has “invested him with a sinister aura”. Perhaps the use of Foucault’s interpretation of panopticism on a rather light-hearted book, one for children, will divest it of this

aura. Alternatively, it may increase the sense of social control promulgated by panoptic discipline. Foucault, however, insisted that discipline in its "gentle" form is always a positive social control, working for the good of both the individual and society, and this is at the centre of my reading. Instead of bending all its subjects into a single uniform mass, it separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units. It 'trains' the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies and forces into a multiplicity of individual elements – small, separate cells, organic structures, organic autonomies, genetic identities and continuities, combinative segments. Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is a specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.⁴

This paper will centre upon the use of panoptic surveillance and Foucauldian discipline in a boarding school – a use to which Foucault himself suggested it was likely to be put – but this is a fictional boarding school, in a text not likely to be appropriated for such purposes. However, if we take as read that children's books are both documents of social history and tools of social control, then it is not difficult to see how this widely read and highly popular book promoted radical educational ideas which at the same time reinforced the social mores of contemporary society. It is not possible to commence this paper without considering the problematic nature of Blyton's work within the canon of children's literature. Though reputed to have been banned from libraries for its simplicity and lack of educational messages, Ray⁵ argues that in fact when first published, the concern with children's literature was more to do with suitability of content. In the 21st century, when concerns are centred on persuading children to read at all, Blyton is still a popular author, and her message remains. As Ray states, Children tend to make moral judgements in terms of good and bad; they have a strong sense of justice and expect goodness to be rewarded and badness to be suitably punished.⁶ Even in the 1960s, when the reputation of her books was at its lowest ebb, *The Naughtiest Girl* books were grudgingly conceded to be 'less insipid' than her others.⁷

The Naughtiest Girl in the School was the first of Enid Blyton's boarding-school stories, published in 1940, with two further volumes following, *The Naughtiest Girl Again* and *The Naughtiest Girl is a Monitor*. Reductively, it is the story of a ten year old girl, Elizabeth, who does not wish to go to Whyteleafe boarding school, but is so badly behaved and spoilt that no governess will teach her. She is sent to school, and is determined to behave so badly she will be expelled. Unsurprisingly, she begins to love the school, and at the end of term decides she will stay and be good. So far, so true to type. However, there are many subtle differences at this boarding school, which makes this a radically different story from Blyton's later school stories. The story effectively follows the curve of Elizabeth's progression from well-educated but disobedient child to disciplined and useful subject, and it is how that transformation is wrought that is of note here. It is parallel to the process by which an adult criminal can be absorbed into society as a useful and productive, or 'disciplined', adult. Alison Lurie claims that children's books usually 'portray an ideal world of perfectible beings, free of the necessity

for survival and reproduction: not only a pastoral but a paradisaal universe'⁸. Adults in children's books, she suggests, are inflexible and do not change, but children can become perfect atoms of society. Freedom, however, remains the dream of most children:

What Blyton understood very well, even in her *Noddy* books for the very young, was the universal desire of children to escape from the sovereignty of adults. And so, the fact that Noddy had his own car, which, like him, was an animated toy, and that he made off in it with Big Ears, his friend, or that later, in Blyton's pre-adolescent novels, *Five Go Off in a Caravan*, *Hollow Tree House*, *The Naughtiest Girl in the School*, there were rebels and runaways and naughty children finding adventure beyond the pale-this freedom was a wonderful thing⁹

At the start of the novel, Elizabeth knows nothing of discipline. She has loving (and wealthy) parents who want to do the best they can for her, and have ensured that she is proficient in academic discipline, but her behaviour is woeful, though modified for the occasion (i.e. she behaves well when it suits her purposes). From the moment she reluctantly puts on her school uniform, and her mother congratulates her for looking like 'a real schoolgirl'¹⁰, her transformation begins. The uniform acts as a outward signifier for the inward discipline she is to undergo, and although she rebels against it on arriving at Whyteleafe, by wearing coloured socks, she is ridiculed for 'being a baby', and quickly changes back. Her outward appearance, then, conforms; it is her rebellious behaviour which must be transformed.

Foucault's comments about the use of discipline in institutions such as boarding schools, factories and prisons divide the methods of discipline into four sections, each of which has its own application here. Distribution, or the segregation and partitioning of the space in which the children are to live, is not exceptional: separated cubicles in the single-sex dormitories, allowing the children some solitary time (during which some cry or look at photographs of home, as they confront the issues which are standing in the way of their transformation); 'coded' spaces where different activities may take place, such as the music room, the garden and the gym, where the school council meets. Since 'discipline organises an analytical space'¹¹, then, the ordering of the children's lives is more easily carried out and misdemeanours identified by this. When Elizabeth rebels against her bed-time and goes into the garden on her first night at school, she is quickly missed and reprimanded.

Control of activity, derived from monastic life, is apparent in the school timetable, which is used to 'establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition...'¹². Elizabeth finds herself caught up in many activities which involve her ensuring for herself that she makes the best use of her time, since so many of the activities on offer are appealing to her. Other children complain that their favourite activities clash, and the teachers willingly reschedule, offering an ideality of the system which is part of its appeal but also increases the disciplinary motivation of the children.

Organisation of geneses is at the heart of successful schooling, working to increase the productivity of pupils by dividing not only their time (in the timetable) but also the subjects (into classes or forms) to ensure their training is graduated and appropriate. The concept of examination is vital here, in that the students can then demonstrate their skills at a specific end-point. Blyton makes no mention of conventional examinations, but the children's work is continuously assessed, and since for Elizabeth academic discipline is not the problem, little is made of assessment of these skills. The examination takes another form here, in *The Meeting*, capitalised with an Orwellian sinisteress, which I will discuss later.

Finally, the composition of forces is where the element of social cohesion within the school comes into play. The school is determinedly a society of its own, with its own laws and principles, and each individual subject is required to submit to this in order to become an element of its machinery. The 'precise system of command'¹³ which this involves rests upon the signals (such as bells denoting the end of lessons) but is primarily derived from an unseen system, which remains unexplained, as indeed does the framework of the school day in all children's comprehension. We do not know who rings the bells, or sets bed-times, or arranges the activities of the school day, and thus can only assume that it is the head-teachers who do so. That we have no knowledge of this, however, allows the power to appear more in the hands of the children.

The move away from corporal punishment, Foucault states, has much to do with the notion that violence begets violence, and that a more covert form of power thus operates in a more stable manner:

This discourse provided, in effect, by means of the theory of interests, representations and signs, by the series and geneses that it reconstituted, a sort of general recipe for the exercise of power over men: the 'mind' as a surface of inscription for power, with semiology as its tool; the submission of bodies through the control of ideas; the analysis of representations as a principle in a politics of bodies that was much more effective than the ritual anatomy of torture and execution.¹⁴

Discipline thus dissociates power from the body by subjugating its subjects. Herein lies the ultimate success, and paradox, of this book. A key aspect of children's literature with which children genuinely engage is that children are always ruled by adults, constantly subjugated, and freedom from this is what they desire. Thus, by creating a court of peers, who set rules and offer rewards and punishments, the book presents a utopian vision of an (almost) adult-free world, run by and for children – yet where the children are well-behaved, disciplined and useful members of society. Of course this is presented in a manner designed to appeal to young readers, where bad behaviour is sometimes humorous and retribution not overly pious. Gradually self-discipline is instituted in the children, with a result that they are rewarded by becoming monitors, or even Head Boy or Girl, thus becoming a part of the system itself. As Foucault describes, those who break the law become subject to it, but those who internalise it become a part of its function, supervising and maintaining it within

the liminal space of the school. The process of self-discipline is traced throughout Elizabeth's first year at Whyteleafe, and culminates when she begins to moderate her behaviour, at first in order to have privileges previously withdrawn, but increasingly because she understands that it is for her own good and the good of the society of which she is beginning to feel a part.

One cannot ignore the occasional hint of the old system of punishment, which appears to act as a restrained threat rather than an active apparatus of discipline. Physical violence, in the form of 'spanking with a hairbrush', is threatened, but never carried out. At one point, when her behaviour is beginning to improve but shows signs of lapsing, a sign is stuck onto her back which reads, 'I'm the bold bad girl', which acts as a signifier to other pupils that to behave badly is to stand out in a way that will not be treated kindly. With its reverberations of branding, marking out the criminal from the rest of society, it is an uncomfortable moment, but one which passes with the apology of the perpetrator.

The nature of the disciplinary aspect of the school, then, is the prime focus here, and is highly effective. When Elizabeth first behaves badly, she does not expect retribution, since all her bad behaviour is aimed at getting sent home. However, as Foucault explicitly states, the law is undermined most by hopes of going unpunished, and indeed she is duly punished. In order for punishment to be meted out, surveillance is necessary in order for no crime to go unreported, and this is where the panoptic system begins to operate.

...minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation, an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man.¹⁵

Since teachers are not all-seeing (and indeed barely present here), the power devolves onto monitors and other children, who may report 'complaints and grumbles' at the school Meeting. The pressure of peers is particularly conducive to good behaviour:

"Oh, we leave any naughty person to the rest of the children to deal with," said Miss Best. "Every week the school holds a meeting, you know, and the children themselves decide what is to be done with boys and girls who don't behave themselves. It won't bother us if you are naughty – but you may perhaps find that you make the children angry."¹⁶

The punishment is always designed to fit the crime; for example where a boy has been cheating in arithmetic, he is 'sentenced' to extra lessons to prevent the need for further cheating, which bears out the 'technology of representation' necessary in effective discipline. Foucault argues that punishment should be public, which requirement the Meeting fulfils, and that it should fit the crime in order for the punishment and the crime to become linked in the minds of those who see it and thus act as a preventative. Self-discipline thus becomes the central feature of the subjugated body, and yet individuality remains and is still paramount. Through the process of her time at school, Elizabeth as heroine becomes no less an individual, though the stages of her lessons learnt are clearly delineated,

and despite the changes in her behaviour that bring her in line with her peers.

In a disciplinary regime...individualization is 'descending': as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized.¹⁷

Where individuality of discipline becomes most concentrated is in the examination. *The Naughtiest Girl* does not mention traditional academic examination, but here the examination is represented in the Meeting of the school. Here, all the functions of discipline come together. Observations on bad behaviour are reported, and punishments and rewards meted out. When a child has behaved badly, he or she will be expected to give an account of the bad behaviour, and it is this public oral examination that represents the culmination of the disciplinary process, and indeed the Meetings act as a central focus of the book as a whole, since it is here that Elizabeth declares her intention to be sent home, and finally announces that she has decided to stay. The changing behaviour of the subjects is at its most pronounced under the spotlight of the Meeting.

At the heart of the procedures of discipline, [examination] manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected.¹⁸

Interestingly, the Meeting has its own documentation, a Book which documents cases from terms gone by, which acts as a useful precedent where advice is needed. This form of documentation is discussed by Foucault as a necessary aspect of the disciplinary process, becoming part of the apparatus of power, relegating the individual to the position of an anonymous 'case'.

There is no doubt that the operations of power, particularly those that explicitly aim to subjugate the body, can seem sinister and unnecessary. However, the serious point behind my slightly facetious reading is that the discipline which leads to self-discipline and the subjugation of mass bodies which leads to an orderly society is fact rather than science fiction, and while 'Big Brother' may be watching, it can, it appears, be in a benevolent way. Certainly, discipline has never presented such a kindly face as at Whyteleaf, and the transformation of the Naughtiest Girl seems painless enough, and even enjoyable enough, to make young readers wish to share the experience. Only later will they realise that

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called 'discipline'. We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.¹⁹

Maintaining the balance, however, is the secret of *The Naughtiest Girl*. Alison Lurie argues that the children's literature that remains popular throughout the years is that which subverts adult values of the time period in which it is written. Hence, subversive children's texts make fun of adults and adult-valued institutions such as church, school and the workplace. They also celebrate what adults want to

train children out of, such as “daydreaming, disobedience, answering back, running away from home, and concealing one’s private thoughts and feelings from unsympathetic grown-ups”²⁰.

By de-valuing the adult world and valuing a world in which children create their own rules, these texts are often controversial. Most importantly, in these texts, children have power, especially power over themselves, their surroundings, and adults. To read these texts, one must be able to respect children for who they are and who they want to be.

1 Hunt, Peter, *Criticism and Children’s Literature*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p17.

2 *The Times*, February 5th 2007

3 Schofield, P., *Utility and Democracy: The Political Thought of Jeremy Bentham*, OUP 2007, reviewed in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, January 26th 2007

4 Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin 1972, p.170

5 Ray, S., *The Blyton Phenomenon*, Andre Deutsch, 1982

6 *ibid.*, p. 118

7 *ibid.*, p. 66

8 Lurie, A., *Not in Front of the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children’s Literature*, Cardinal, 1991

9 Freed, Lynn , *Reading, Writing and Leaving Home: Life on the Page*, Harcourt, 2005

10 Blyton, E., *The Naughtiest Girl in the School*, Dean & Son Ltd., 1973, p.15

11 Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin 1972, p.143

12 *ibid.*, p. 156

13 *ibid.*, p. 166

14 *ibid.*, p. 102

15 *ibid.*, p. 171

16 Blyton, E., *The Naughtiest Girl in the School*, Dean & Son Ltd., 1973, p.35

17 Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin 1972, p.193

18 *ibid.*, p. 185

19 *ibid.*, p194

20 Lurie, A., *Not in Front of the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children’s Literature*, Cardinal, 1991