

June Factor

June Factor is both a teacher and an author. She has taught in secondary schools and, at present, teaches at the Institute of Early Childhood Development, State College of Victoria, Australia. She has written many radio scripts, short stories, and books for children. Children's folklore is one of her major interests.

Joyce Lankester Brisley: an appreciation

Joyce Lankester Brisley was born in 1896. She grew up in London, but she frequently visited the countryside, and her memories of childhood country walks are reflected in her Milly-Molly-Mandy stories. At sixteen, she began to earn her living as an illustrator, including some work for The Christian Science Monitor, who were the first publishers of the Milly-Molly-Mandy stories. Her first collection of stories was published by Harraps in 1928. The six collections of Milly-Molly-Mandy stories—the last of which appeared in 1967—have now been translated into Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Polish, Dutch, German and French; they are published in the United States by David McKay.

Miss Brisley died in September 1978. Shortly before her death, June Factor visited her while doing research work on aspects of the writing process; the following article draws upon their conversation. Cle is pleased to publish this essay in tribute to a writer of continuing popularity among very young readers.

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One way of structuring literature is to say that there are major works and lesser works. That is the distinction drawn, for example, by Whitehead when, in his study of children's reading preferences, he divides their choices into "quality" and "nonquality" books. Though acknowledging the inadequacy of such a division, he nevertheless continues to use it. He defines "non-quality" children's literature as "those (books) whose production has been essentially a commercial operation, a matter of catering for a market. . . ." "Quality" literature, on the other hand, is literature "in which the involvement of the writer with his subject-matter and his audience has been such as to generate a texture of imaginative experience which rises above the merely routine and derivative."¹ Much the same distinction was made earlier by Townsend, who wrote: "The books that are worth discussing, and that on past experience are likely to survive, are those that have engaged the whole heart and skill of writer or artist."² Both Whitehead and Townsend are using rather unreliable criteria which rest on the intention of the writer and the

interpretation of his commitment. A writer such as Enid Blyton (who tops Whitehead's popularity poll but is categorised as "nonquality"), although undoubtedly "catering for a market," was also immensely involved in her subject matter and her audience. Conversely, *Little Women*, regarded as "quality," was written by a most reluctant author who was very interested in the financial success of her writing. These criteria do not go far in explaining why some works are valued more than others.

A much more interesting differentiation is suggested by Inglis, who says:

It is an extremely rare children's novel—only a novel of genius like *Huckleberry Finn*—which registers an authentic change of consciousness. What lesser novels will do at their best is define a certain view of the world in the most coherent and memorable way possible . . . they will express the old consciousness as well as it can be done.³

That stands as a fine introduction to the work of Joyce Lankester Brisley. Her stories, particularly the widely known *Milly-Molly-Mandy* books, depict a world of childhood "coherent and memorable" enough to be regarded as an outstanding exemplar of certain traditional values. Her work suggests a rich amalgam of the Rousseauian faith in the "natural" development of the child, the Romantic faith in his essential virtue and wisdom, and the Puritan faith in moral precept and right practice. This has proved to be a remarkably enduring mixture, and Grylls' prediction that "it may not survive much longer"⁴ seems premature.

Joyce Brisley, born in 1896, did not begin her professional life as a writer. She began as an illustrator of Christmas cards, postcards, and children's Annuals. Drawing was her only saleable skill, and from the age of sixteen she worked to help support herself and her sisters. "It was bread and margarine for a good many years" (*Liverpool Daily Post*, Dec. 4, 1972). The now well-known story of how *Milly-Molly-Mandy* came into being—a family group doodled on an envelope, then a story written to match—hides the desperation of Joyce Brisley's struggle to find a "speciality" which would "earn something or other" (*The Sunday Times*, July 2, 1972). It was only after she had written two or three more stories about Milly-Molly-Mandy, with illustrations, and they had been published in the United States by the *Christian Science Monitor*, that "young readers from all parts of the world began writing in to the Monitor asking for more and more stories of M-M-M; which gradually launched her (and me [Brisley]) firmly on our way" (Interview with the writer).

But it was some time before Milly-Molly-Mandy dominated Joyce Brisley's working life:

I found I liked working for children much more than commercial adver-