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His long battle was nearly won. Letters were making words for him; words were making sentences. Great pages of print that scarce four weeks ago had seemed no more than a mad patterning of the paper now spoke haltingly to him—even told stories—as if long-dead gentlemen woke up under his struggling eyes, button-holed his mind and breathed their thoughts and dreams into it.

Leon Garfield is describing the effect of the reading process on his character Smith. Garfield is an author who button-holes our minds and breathes his thoughts and dreams into it—or rather his nightmares, for the world of most of his stories is no gentle playpen. He believes in the resilience and robustness of young minds as they become aware of the workings of the adult world. Fiction, he believes, should help the process along. Some books written for the young “have the stringency and bite of a wet nappy. This is because so many authors imagine that the young reader is not only simple in his tastes, but also simple in his mind.” He dislikes the categorisation of his work as “children’s fiction.” “What I try to write is that old-fashioned thing the family novel, accessible to the twelve year old and readable by his elders.” This is the main strength of his fiction. It is a truism of writers on children’s fiction that a good children’s book is quite simply a good book. Its theme and vocabulary must not be beyond their abilities, but they should not be undemanding. A good book should offer some challenge to its reader.

Garfield’s novels appeal to young readers for reasons which should become clear in looking at them individually. All his work has a strong narrative line and his books are worlds of violent adventure. Theatricality and melodrama are part of their fabric. The hero’s search is not only for his identity but also for moral certainties in the shifting sands of good and evil. The hero is usually an adolescent boy, bewildered by the duplicity of the adult world. He is a valuable point of identification for the young reader. The moral
choices he has to make are presented not in terms of psychological analysis (until we come to The Pleasure Garden) but in terms of action and discussion which offer a high level of vicarious experience. Garfield's style also has a wide appeal; its level of complexity varies, and while it is never easy for any other than the literate child the vocabulary is not particularly unusual or difficult. The imagery is strongly visual and colourful and he appreciates children's curiosity for detail. He will thread an idea or an image through a story so that it becomes a signpost of the plot, providing a thrill of recognition or anticipation. Such detail contributes to the vividness of his writing and often to its humour, for even in the grimmest situation—and "the stench of Newgate gaol" pervades almost all the novels—an ironic humour breaks through.

Most of Garfield's fiction is set in the eighteenth century, the better to observe the moral issues he wishes to examine. "It's like science fiction in reverse: you take a moral problem out of context to observe it better; you have the reality of the past to latch on to." He homes in on a small area—mostly London and the South of England—and, within this area, certain institutions—the prisons, the courts, the inns, the households—and in a controllable and documented time and space he is able to examine more clearly the motives and actions of his characters. He writes: "I use large moral issues (in which I feel justified in taking sides) as a sort of skeleton of the work; something to which I can relate varied incidents and thus give them a certain unity." Period and setting are certainly central to the unities he wishes to observe.

The grip that Garfield now has on his plots is something that has come with time. In his first two novels, he told the stories as first person narrations and therefore placed on himself constraints which do not suit his style. In both, the hero is seeking his identity—Jack Holborn, the foundling, completely on his own, and George Treet from a position of unexpected elevation as heir to Sir John Dexter. For both, the theme of identity goes beyond the simple discovery of origin. There is a confusion in Jack Holborn between two brothers, one a judge, the other a pirate captain—but which is good and which is evil? Likewise, in Devil-in-the-Fog, Sir John's brother lurks in the shadows, possibly seeking revenge. Which of the brothers is telling the truth? Exciting though these stories are, the devices are crude compared with later novels. Identical twins and coincidences are cornerstones of the plots. In Jack Holborn particularly, Garfield nudges us along relentlessly; three times Jack must save the Captain's life. There are similar nudgings in Devil-in-the-Fog—the picture missing from the frame for example. They are clumsy devices, and neither of the two novels is fully satisfying. In Jack Holborn the interest level of the story diminishes towards the end apart from the two set pieces—the slave auction and the courtroom climax. The