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CHARLES KINGSLEY

The Water Babies

A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby

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Charles Kingsley, Richard D. Beards (Annotations)

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A timeless Victorian tale of adversity, adventure, and triumph told in the original unabridged edition

Tom, a young chimney sweep, toils under the misery of his horrendous job and cruel boss, Grimes, until fairies turn him into a water-baby - an underwater sprite. Plunged into a fantastical world under the sea, Tom encounters many adventures and learns valuable lessons from all sorts of sea creatures including their rulers, Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and her sister, Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby. Under their tutelage, Tom embarks on a daring rescue and regains his human form once again. Instantly popular upon its initial publication in 1863, *The Water-Babies* is at once a skillfully woven moral allegory and a bewitching childhood fantasy.

The Water Babies Details

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ISBN : 9780143105091

Author : Charles Kingsley , Richard D. Beards (Annotations)

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From Reader Review The Water Babies for online ebook

David Gregg says

Summary: The audiobook narration is truly one of the finest that can be found -- really superb. The book itself is particularly good, and educational, though some caveats must be made.

The Book: Just absolutely delightful! Keenly imaginative, clever, and funny. Interwoven naturally with charming little lessons (which don't feel like lessons) about wildlife, biology, even geology and meteorology. Really very excellent morals throughout the whole tale. Keep Wikipedia and Google near at hand in order to look up all the interesting real-life creatures (some of whose popular or scientific names have changed since 1863), and historical or literary figures. This would make a great book to read *along with a child*, and will not only fascinate them but spark quite a number of good discussions. That said, I read this for the first time as an adult, and without a child to read it to, and I loved it as well.

Disclaimer: You must remember the era in which this was written, and the subsequent changes in the attitudes of society, or you may be taken aback by an occasional comment which we may feel is rather too comfortable with racial and national stereotypes -- the most malicious being one or two to the effect that the Irish tend to lie or be poorly educated. Others include: Jews are rich, blacks know how to dance, and Americans are spoiled due to their comforts. Still -- good occasions for discussion and another good reason to read this along with your children. It is worth it.

The Editions I Read: I listened to the Simon Vance audiobook, which turned out to be, to my surprise, one of the best narrations I've ever had the pleasure to hear (and I listen to lots and lots of audiobooks, many by Simon Vance in fact). I also read along in an illustrated Kindle ebook (though the illustrations appears to be out of sequence), in order to look up the words and make highlights. This method worked very well. But the audiobook really brought the whole thing to life, giving it a vibrant and contextualized character I'm not sure I would have succeeded in matching on my own. I've heard Simon Vance on a number of occasions before, and he's always wonderful, but he really outdid himself this time. It feels as though he really loved the book personally (perhaps from his own childhood) and so gave more of himself to the narration than usual.

Almeta says

I have no idea what edition I read as a child, but I do know that I harbor huge nostalgia about the book's weird adventures and pen and ink illustrations. Every time I see the title at a used book sale, I reflect on my childhood.

Now as an adult, having read Goodreads reviews, I wonder what I would think of it. The implied tone of bigotry and moralist snake oil makes me pause about my rating.

For now it gets my best. When I re-read it, I will likely be angry and ashamed!

ETA: What I believe was designed to be an allegory for his son, was also a treatise of progressive thoughts of the day.

I am so pleased to have re-read this book. I was afraid that I would come to dislike it because of the criticism

it receives for prejudices and moralizing. I think this aspect of the book is a good reflection of nineteenth century philosophical thought. However, Kingsley's scientific references make me believe that he was a progressive thinker for his time.

"The most wonderful and the strongest things in the world, you know, are just the things which no one can see."

I took lots of notes during this read. There are so many good little moral lessons to reflect upon. I wonder how this little boy actually turned out when he became a man? I could't just write them **all** down. It would be like writing the book over again in long-hand.

Guess I'll just have to read it again, perhaps an annotated version!

My rating still stands at five stars!

Bob says

Humphrey Carpenter's "Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature" sounds like something I ought to have read. The period it describes runs from the mid-19th century to the early 20th, placing *The Water-Babies* right near its start and certainly an influence on everything from "Alice In Wonderland", a few years later, to "Peter Pan". It is also one of those children's books which contains "much that is unintelligible to children", as one reviewer put it; Kingsley was an Anglican minister who was nonetheless a follower of Darwin and, it is said, spent much of his intellectual life reconciling the two. The overwhelming multiplicity of the natural world and the persistence of wonder is the dominant theme (as well as a very Anglican kind of moralism). The swirling, rapidly-changing surrealism of the underwater environment and the number of fantastic creatures would make a good subject for the animator Hayao Miyazaki. Alasdair Gray lists it as an influence on *Lanark*. The depiction of most non-English peoples (with particular attention to the Irish) as somewhere between uncivilized and subhuman may have contributed to this no longer being part of the canon - apparently a sanitized Puffin edition was brought out in the early 80s.

Laura says

Free download available at Project Gutenberg.

Bookdragon Sean says

How many people can say that drowning was the best thing that's ever happened to them?

Life is terrible for Tom. He's an ordinary boy and he's in an ordinary situation. Granted, it's a tough situation but it's still rather ordinary for the time. His master beats him and overworks him. This is the only life Tom knows; thus, when he grows old he will follow the same path. It's not his fault; he hasn't known any different. For him, his master is the embodiment of manliness: it's what Tom thinks he has to be. So he's on a dangerous path, and then he drowns.

The real word is escape because Tom gets turned into a Waterbaby and goes on an adventure of discovery. He sees things that many though were mere fictions and in the process learns a little about life in the process. And that's the key here, learning. This is a children's book and all children's books are full of didacticism of some variety. This one is full of Christian dogma and Victorian world values. Tom gets to experience the meaning of life, at least from the perspective of Kingsley and the imperialistic attitude that went with him.

So we have a children's book, an enjoyable book, but there are a few derogatory jibes on a gender and racial level. This book is a product of its time, and it's an excellent text to study, though I can clearly see why it has fallen out of favour with contemporary audiences. I wouldn't hand this to a child today.

Raj says

This is a book that I tried to read many times as a child but could never get through the first chapter. Seeing it on the shelf while visiting my parents I was determined to give it another shot. Although I got through it, to be honest it really wasn't worth it.

Tom is a young chimney sweep who, through a series of improbable events, becomes a water-baby and goes thorough all sorts of adventures, all of which have morals to teach, before becoming a creature of the land again, as a grown man. It is a Victorian moral fable and although it's stated that it's aimed at children, and has a fairly simplistic style, it is interspersed with philosophical tracts and concepts that would go right above the head of most children.

It also has a very dismissive attitude towards Americans, Jews and (particularly) the Irish (although seems keen on the Scots) which makes for some unpleasant reading.

I just couldn't really engage with this book at all, and only its short length got me through it, although my edition does have some fantastic illustrations by Lindsey Sambourne. There's enough other good Victorian literature for children that you don't have to read this one.

Rebecca McNutt says

This book was actually one of the saddest I've ever read. Seemingly a harmless fantasy novel, it carries an underlying allegorical message about the toll that child labour has on kids. I'm surprised it doesn't have a higher overall rating though, because the way the author describes the mystical aquatic world and all its creatures is beautiful and unforgettable.

Debra says

I know this book is pretty controversial, but I enjoyed it in spite of that. As accepted during that time in history, there is definitely some prejudice against other races and nationalities, especially the Irish. The Englishman rules and all others are inferior. But, I just took this as British pride... of course, and Englishman would think his nationality is the best, back in the day. Also, if you aren't Christian, then you are a heathen. No news here, either. However, I was amazed at Kingsley forward-thinking regarding the environment and pollution, and the raising of children in a kind and forgiving manner. No "spare the rod, spoil the child" sentiment here. He doesn't believe in physical, psychological, verbal punishment. It's cute how he talks directly to his 4-year-old, for whom he wrote the book. I can't believe I went this long without reading this lovely little classic. The edition I read had lovely illustrations, too!

Mike Horne says

Wow, that was bad! In college I went through a Charles Kingsley phase (Westward Ho, Hypatia, Alton Locke). I remember reading this and thinking it was good. Probably the most wrong opinion I have ever held. The tone is so smarmy, you just want to slap the author (who is rabidly anti-irish). Here is probably the best quote of the book-which gives you a taste--

"Now you may fancy that Tom was quite good, when he had everything that he could want or wish: but you would be very much mistaken. Being quite comfortable is a very good thing; but it does not make people good. Indeed, it sometimes makes them naughty, as it has made the people in America; and as it made the people in the Bible, who waxed fat and kicked, like horses overfed and underworked."

Lewis Carrol or George MacDonald is so much better.

Courtney says

written 1862-1863.

Reading this once was enough. Future self, if you ever forget what reading it was like and consider giving it another go? Don't.

A young chimney sweep, who is mistreated by his master accidentally frightens a young girl in the house they are working in. He runs off, fearing he'll be in trouble, and ends up drowning.

I enjoyed it up until this point. It was apparently meant to be a lesson on, amongst other things, child labor and the treatment of the boy by his master would be a good argument against. It actually seemed like it might have been better if the story ended here.

But it doesn't.

So for the next however many pages, we have to follow the kid around as he apparently turns into a baby newt and explores a river, and later an ocean, tormenting the wildlife as he goes. It's also got a pretty heavy-handed focus on him learning to be a good person, and redeeming himself by good behaviour...

Kind of interesting as a look at British attitudes towards the rest of the world during this time period. Would not have wanted to be Irish in England at this time. The English didn't like Americans much either from a couple passages I remember (which was a little funny, just because it seems so *odd*).

Nicole says

Why must you torture the children, Charles?

When I read that Charles Kingsley and Charles Darwin had been friends, I was so disappointed. Why? Why didn't dear Mr. D pull aside Mr. K and gently offer a sort of "I say old boy! This is bananas!" You know. Like they do. Or should have.

I started listening to a librivox recording while I was painting the room that is to become my new office-library. I had read about this author and had seen the title and knew, vaguely, that Mr. K was writing at about the same time as Edith Nesbit and George MacDonald, and I have been aware of their influence on contemporary fiction for children. So why not give it a whirl? The reader's voice was pleasing, which is not always the case, and, heck, it's free!

Chapter One: Social reform on the menu, the old chimney sweep noble poor trope... got it. Chapter Two: I remember a WHAT HECK moment at the very *end* of *At the Back of the North Wind*, so I was a little bit prepared for some whackadoodle, but I did not expect *Babies* to go off the rails so quickly.

Even though it just went from bad to worse from there, I kept listening in a kind of Stockholm Syndrome haze. There are a few chuckle-worthy lines in those early chapters, and I could see that there was a religion-science theme going that was moderately interesting, insofar as it gives an idea of the struggle at that time to reconcile new ideas about the world. But mostly, I felt I was seeing for the first time the primary source material that must have had a great influence on my father when he was a child, and that gave me a sense of morbid fascination. So I pressed onward.

But then I had to listen to chapter five twice, because I was thinking of other things, and by that time I was finished with the second coat of paint, and the weekend was over and listening time, too. I didn't so much feel compelled to finish the book because I was wrapped up in the story; I merely wanted to say I'd finished it. So I nipped over to the library to pick up a print copy, thinking I could read-skim to the end. I found not one but two copies! One version, very old, no publication date, had only been checked out once, in 1926. And the other, a critical edition edited by Richard Kelly, 2008, had never been checked out at all. (Hint.)

Guess what? In print, still not compelling! The appendices, with critical essays, were interesting, but the text itself? I just couldn't do it.

I may never finish those last chapters. If I were writing a dissertation, yes. For pleasure, no. Absolutely not.

On the whole, it's a strange combination of bizarre and tediously morally superior with a dash of charm thrown in now and again. Why would you subject a child to this? Or anyone? Just don't.

D.M. Dutcher says

Wow, this is horrible.

Tom, a chimney-sweep under the drunk, foul-tempered Mr. Grimes, one day goes with him to do a job at the local lord's manor. He by mistake enters the room of a young girl, who is startled by his soot-covered appearance, and raises a fuss. Everyone chases him, and he flees only to die ("changed by a fairy") and be transformed into a water-baby. He then has to become a real man again.

It's just a mess of a book. Apparently, daughters of rich people are naturally perfect and become fairies, while abused chimney sweeps have to do herculean labors to get redemption. Also, the language is horribly treacly and cloying. Kingsley is fond of endless lists of single words, nonsense words, overt racism (especially towards the Irish-a good drinking game is to take a shot when you see the words "Poor Paddy") and endless diatribes against scientists. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind a good anti-scientist diatribe, but a smart 6 year old could eviscerate the things he does. "Hippopotamus in the brain" indeed.

The world is inconsistent. The water baby starts out in the sea, but then starts traveling through pure allegorical lands out of pilgrim's progress. He doesn't seem to have any real unifying moral vision that makes sense, and what weird moralizing comes through is syrupy and thick. And I'm some one not opposed to this, enjoying *At the Back of the North Wind!* Which is a far, far superior book, by the way.

It's even horrific at times. A poor, exhausted Tom is led to a stream and transformed into a water-baby by the fairies, feverish and feeling he needs to wash himself to be clean. Mr Grimes is rescued from a fate in his afterlife, but the solution is just as bad if not worse. The fairies drive one kindhearted professor who didn't believe in him near insane. There's a very distasteful undercurrent even beyond the overt things. For good fairies, they do an awful lot of bad things.

So really, pass on this unless you want to read it as a historical curiosity. Even as short as it is, it's a chore to read and an embarrassment to kid's literature and the entire Victorian era.

BookSweetie says

Last line: "But remember always, as I told you at first, that this is all a fairy tale, and only fun and pretence: and, therefore, you are not to believe a word of it, even if it is true."

THE WATER BABIES by the Reverend Charles Kingsley, a Victorian era children's novel first published in book form in England in 1863, achieved a level of popularity for decades in its day that spurred me as an adult to read it a hundred and fifty years later.

Although it occupied a familiar place in British children's literary history, a modern day reader might find parts of the book surprising fare for children -- then or now.

In fact, an adult might appreciate an annotated version of this book about Tom, the chimney sweep who dies and is turned into a water baby, given that the author does more than simply sprinkle into the story philosophical and scientific points and issues, including swirling debates such as that let loose in the late 1850's in Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

.....

Here's a key section from the book that gives a flavor of the writing:

"A water-baby? You never heard of a water-baby. Perhaps not. That is the very reason why this story was written. There are a great many things in the world which you never heard of; and a great many more which nobody ever heard of; and a great many things, too, which nobody will ever hear of, at least until the coming of the Cocqcigrees, when man shall be the measure of all things.

'But there are no such things as water-babies.'

How do you know that? Have you been there to see? And if you had been there to see, and had seen none, that would not prove that there were none. If Mr. Garth does not find a fox in Eversley Wood—as folks sometimes fear he never will—that does not prove that there are no such things as foxes.

And as is Eversley Wood to all the woods in England, so are the waters we know to all the waters in the world. And no one has a right to say that no water-babies exist, till they have seen no water-babies existing; which is quite a different thing, mind, from not seeing water-babies; and a thing which nobody ever did, or perhaps ever will do."

.....

In brief: An important English children's literature example with its didactic-style moral fable... but dated and not particularly recommended for children any longer given some of its weaknesses. Although children do have a way of skipping over parts that interrupt the story pacing to get on with the plot -- which would be necessary with WATER BABIES--, in my opinion, many other better books exist to share with children.

Manny says

Googling around to see if anyone knows who Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid are based on (I have often wondered about this), I discover by chance that the author invented the word 'cuddly', which first appeared in *The Water-Babies*.

Well, there's your useless fact for today.

Nandakishore Varma says

A childhood favourite. I don't know what I'd make of it now.

This was a gift to me by one of my favourite aunts, a highly intellectual lady and an alumnus of the JNU (she is no more, sadly). It gathered dust on my shelf for quite a long time before I picked it up one day and devoured it in a single sitting.

I cannot remember much of the story. The part involving child labour distressed me a lot, even though I wanted to try my hand at chimney-sweeping; also, I loved the part about the water babies and their carefree lifestyle. I remember that towards the end the villain got some kind of retribution, and that the protagonist

forgave him - I forget the details.

There was a comic strip in one of our local weeklies which was a mix of this story and Pinocchio. I remember that vividly. It was called "Mannunni".

Adam Floridia says

In this book, the reader gets to accompany young Tom on a fantastic journey. As the journey progresses, the book gets worse.

First fifty pages or so: 4-5 stars. I'm enjoying this for what it is--a fairy tale ostensibly for children. There's a little chimney sweep, the aforementioned Tom, who works for a cruel master. He encounters a beautiful--and clean--young lady but due to a misunderstanding is chased off her property.

Next fifty or so pages: 3 stars. Okay, so this has taken an odd turn and seems to no longer have anything to do with the first part. Tom's a water-baby. I knew this was a fairy tale, so maybe this is will be the main/best part and it just took a while to get here. However I need to look up the year this was written because for a children's story it's getting a bit racist: "So you must not trust Dennis, because he is in the habit of [lying]: but, instead of being angry with him, you must remember that he is a poor Paddy, and knows no better...and then he will burst out laughing too, and slave for you...and wonder all the while why poor ould Ireland does not prosper like England and Scotland" (73-4); "The seal put his head and shoulders out of the water, and stared at him, exactly like a fat old greasy Negro with a gray pate" (86); "Being quite comfortable is a very good thing, but it does not make people good. Indeed, it sometimes makes them naughty, as it has made the people in America" (135); "when people live on poor vegetables instead of roast beef and plum-pudding, their jaws grow large, and their lips grow coarse, like the poor Paddies who eat potatoes" (149).

Next fifty odd pages: 2 stars. My god this is starting to just be the most random string of events. Even the blithe narrative voice is wearing on me. I'm still trying to give it the benefit of the doubt. Remember, it's for kids. It does remind me of telling a story to Jameson when he just wants me to keep going on and on and the ideas get more and more ridiculous and completely unconnected because I'm basically rambling randomly. Another thing that reminded me of Jameson, "And he thought of nothing but lollipops by day, and dreamt of nothing else by night" (135).

Final 50 something pages: 1 star. I simply can't take it anymore. I can barely read two pages without completely zoning out, which wouldn't matter since I could jump ahead ten pages and still not be lost in this aimless plot. I'm also getting angry because this was supposed to be my very fast end of 2013 read just to reach 50 books and instead it's already putting me behind on my 2014 challenge!

A thought: I've never read *Alice in Wonderland*, but when I think of the children's movie I recall it being a string of one fantastical event after another. Would I have the same reaction reading that? Or are the worlds and characters created therein enough to carry a haphazard plot?

A Favorite Quotation:

"When all the world is young, lad,
And all the trees are green;
And every goose a swan, lad,

And every lass a queen;
Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
And round the world away!
Young blood must have its course, lad,
And every dog his day.

When all the world is old, lad,
And all the trees are brown;
And all the sport is stale, lad,
And all the wheels run down;
Creep home, and take your place there,
The spent and maimed among;
God grant you find one face there,
16 You loved when all was young" (52-3).

Ivan says

Beautifully written morality tale. The adventures of young Tom the chimney sweep is a classic written in the 1860s. This is fast paced and filled with one memorable scene after another.

wrench says

I literally drop kicked this book into a bin.

Kyriakos Sorokkou says

Μιας και το να αναζητ?σεις τον συγγραφ?α στα ελληνικ? δεν φ?ρνει αποτελ?σματα π?σο μ?λλον να υπ?ρχει το βιβλ?ο του αυτ? μεταφρασμ?νο, θα πω ?,τι ?χω να πω ελληνικ?.

ο συγγραφ?ας

Τσαρλς Κ?νγκσλε?: συγγραφ?ας, αγγλικαν?ς κληρικ?ς, καθηγητ?ς ιστορ?ας στο Κ?μπριτζ, γ?στης ελληνικ?ς μυθολογ?ας (σε αντ?θεση με τον Σαιξπηρ του οπο?ου η μυθολογ?α που ?ξερε ?ταν ?να αιμ?λγαμα ρωμαιοελληνοβρετανικ?ς μυθολογ?ας π?ντα σε δε?τερο χ?ρι) φ?λος του Δαρβ?νου, φυσιοδ?φης που ε?χε δεχτε? τη θεωρ?α της εξ?λιξης των ειδ?ν, μανιακ?ς ψαρ?ς. Η ?λη του προσωπικ?τητα ?να οξ?μωρο σχ?μα, συν τοις ?λοις μοι?ζει αρκετ? στον Φ?σμπεντερ.

Τα μωρ?-του-νερο?

Γρ?φτηκε ως σ?τιρα υπερ?σπισης του ?ργου του Δαρβ?νου, γρ?φτηκε για το μικρ? του γιο, γρ?φτηκε για ?λα τα παιδι??. ?λα ε?ναι πιθαν?.

Ο Τομ δ?κα χρον?ν καπνοδοχοκαθαριστ?ς π?φτει στον ποταμ? και πν?γεται, (γ?νεται στο πρ?το κεφ?λαιο ?ποτε δεν ε?ναι μεγ?λο σπ?ιλερ) και μεταμορφ?νεται σε νερο-μωρ? και εδ? ξεκιν? η περιπ?τει? του. Απ? ρυ?κι, σε ποτ?μι, σε θ?λασσα, σε ωκεαν? ?που θα μ?θει πολλ?, θα μ?θει τη

συγχρεση θα σταματ?σει τις κακ?ς συν?θειες θα ?ρθει στη λ?τρωση και στην τελικ? εξιλεωση. Συναντ? και ?λλα νερομωρ? που π?θαναν απ? ατ?χημα ? απ? αμ?λεια γονι?ν, παραμ?νων κλπ. (παρ?μοιο με τα χαμ?να αγ?ρια στο Π?τερ Παν που εκδ?θηκε περ?που 40 χρ?νια αργ?τερα)

Η ιστορ?α ακο?γεται απλ? αλλ? ο συγγραφ?ας κ?θε λ?γο με την ιδι?τητα του αφηγητ? σταματ? την αφ?γηση για να σου μιλ?σει κατευθε?αν στα μο?τρα, να κ?νει εμβ?λιμη κριτικ? για οτιδ?ποτε τον ενοχλε? στην εποχ? του, ?χρηστοι δ?σκαλοι, παιδικ? εργασ?α, την κατ?ντια της εποχ?ς του, καθ?ς και επιστημονικ? ερωτ?ματα, μαθ?ματα ιχθυολογ?ας, σωστ? καθαρι?τητα, και πολλ? ?λλα.

Πολλο? βαθμολ?γησαν το βιβλ?ο χαμηλ? επειδ? χρησιμοποιε? προκατειλημ?νους ?ρους για τους Ιρλανδο?ς (φτωχο? πατατοφ?γοι) τους Αμερικ?νους (?τακτοι) τους μα?ρους (χορε?ον με φασαρ?α) τους Εβρα?ους(πλο?σιοι), τους καθολικο?ς (μπαμπο?λες). Τι περιμ?νατε δηλαδ? απ? ?να βικτοριαν? συγγραφ?α κληρικ? να γρ?ψει 150 τ?σα χρ?νια πριν; Εξ?λλου 1-2 αναφορ?ς το καθ?να ?χουν οι οπο?ες χ?νονται π?σω απ? τη μαγικ? εμπειρ?α της περιπ?τειας του Τομ. Μ?πως γ?ναμε υπεραντιδραστικ?/υπερευα?σθητοι τελευτα?ως και ?λα μας φτα?νε; και βαθμολογ?με με τα κριτ?ρια της εποχ?ς μας. Το οπο?ο το βρ?σκω λ?θος.

Σε αυτ? το βιβλ?ο δεν βρ?κα κ?τι να με ενοχλ?σει σε τ?σο μεγ?λο βαθμ? που να μειωθε? η βαθμολογ?α ?πως συν?βηκε με το Το λημ?ρι του Λευκο? Σκουληκιο? του Στ?ουκερ. Απ? τα πιο κουλ? βιβλ?α που δι?βασα.

?ταν μια παρ?ξενη εκκεντρικ? ιστορ?α με (χριστιανικ?) ηθικ? δ?δαγμα που καθ?λουν παρ?λογο δε μου φ?νηκε.

«Μην πειρ?ζετε και μην σκοτ?νετε τα μικρ? ζω?κια του νερο? χωρ?ς λ?γο, να ε?στε π?ντα καθαρο?, να διαβ?ζετε, και να ευχαριστ?στε το θε? που ?χετε καθαρ? νερ? να πλ?νεστε.» Εγ? δεν ε?δα καν?να φασιστικ? ? φαρισα?κ? τ?νο στο βιβλ?ο ?πως τ?σοι ρηβιο?ερς αν?φεραν.

Δ?ο χρονι? μετ? γρ?φτηκε Η Αλ?κη στη χ?ρα των Θαυμ?των, το οπο?ο σαν βιβλ?ο ε?ναι πιο ενδιαφ?ρον αλλ? ?χι λιγ?τερο τρελ?, παρ?λογο, και αλλ?κοτα μαγικ? ?πως αυτ?, με χαρακτ?ρες ?πως την Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby (Κ?νεαυτοπουθεσνασουκανουν), την Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid (Π?θεαυτοπουεκανες), μια στρατι? απ? ε?δη ψαρι?ν, πουλι?ν, οστρακ?δερμων, αμφιβ?ων, πετρωμ?των, που πρ?πει να ?χεις ανοικτ? ?να λεξικ? ζωλογ?ας/γεωλογ?ας για να καταλ?βεις τι ε?ναι. Παρ?ξενα επαγγ?λματα ?πως Δρ. Βλττσσ?λς (Β?λτε τους σε γυ?λες) καθηγητ?ς νεκροβιονεοπαλαιουδροχθονανθρωποπιθηκολογ?ας και ?λλα πολλ?. Αν σας ?ρεσε το παρ?ξενο και σουρεαλιστικ? στην Αλ?κη τ?τε πιθαν?ν να σας αρ?σει κι αυτ?, αν ?μως ?χι προχωρ?στε με προσοχ? ? απλ? throw in the towel που λ?νε και στα μ?ρη μου. 3,6 ?τσι για να π?ρει 4 αστ?ρια.

Chris says

The Water-Babies first appeared in book form in May 1863, exactly a century-and-a-half ago. Though I was probably aware of it when younger, I must have read it for myself pretty much a half-century ago in one of those cheap Dent's children's classics editions. A decade later I was re-reading it and taking notes, spurred on by the challenge Kingsley issues in his dedication:

Come read me my riddle, each good little man:

If you cannot read it, no grown-up folk can.

Of course, *The Water-Babies* was written for his youngest son, Grenville Arthur, who was just five when the last chapter was serialised in *Macmillan's Magazine*, but I felt that I was included amongst the 'all other good little boys' of the dedication. But being from a hundred and more years later I could hardly be expected to get all the references, and so began decades of intermittent desultory research. This 1995 issue with Brian Alderson's introduction, extensive notes, select bibliography and chronology of Kingsley's life both confirmed and hugely expanded my understanding of the novel; but to be honest I still feel I've barely scratched the surface of this fascinating if flawed masterpiece. This review, therefore, can only hint at the solution to Kingsley's sly riddle.

Its serialisation in eight monthly instalments works in favour of *The Water-Babies'* structure. The first chapter is mostly set in Harthover Place, which we must now imagine as a grand pile somewhere in North Yorkshire (though its principal model is Bramshill House in Hampshire, on the market in 2013 for £25 million). Kingsley's own contradictory character is aptly matched by the Place's topsy-turvy architecture where the most ancient parts are the attics and wings and the core of the building the most recent. On a midsummer morning Tom the climbing boy – whose name and nature is derived from a multitude of sources, from Mesopotamian god Thammuz to William Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper' – gets lost in its maze of chimneys and emerges into the bedroom of Miss Ellie, the young sleeping beauty of Harthover. The resulting hue-and-cry after the presumed thief through woods and moors and up to Lewthwaite Crag (a thinly-disguised Malham Cove) is wonderfully narrated, and gives rein to Kingsley's impassioned evocation of nature.

Chapter II takes Tom down into Vendale, a fictional river valley – later purloined by novelist William Mayne in, for example, *The Twelve Dancers*. Tom comes into contact with the first of many mysterious feminine archetypes who guide his way through to maturity, a mysterious Irishwoman, and then an older woman who runs a Dame School; this theme must reflect Kingsley's experience, typical of the age, of a loving mother and a distant or aloof father. What then happens to the unfortunate Tom breaks the heart, based as it must be on the distressing experience Kingsley had when at boarding school in Devon. His younger brother Herbert foolishly stole a silver spoon to sell before running away from school and spending the night in the open. After being arrested Herbert became ill with rheumatic fever and died, to Charles' great anguish. Though his death was attributed to a heart condition exacerbated by the fever, there is a Helston tradition that he drowned himself in Looe Pool. Whatever the truth of the matter, knowing that his younger brother died in a misadventure following a theft adds real poignancy to Kingsley's tale. Before 1862 Charles was also to suffer the loss of a sister in infancy, another brother at sea and, most recently, his father.

But Tom's accidental drowning in the Vendale stream is not the end of the matter. Here he is reborn as a water-baby less than four inches long, with a set of external gills to help him survive underwater. Now, you might think that as a clergyman Kingsley would expect innocents to go to heaven. However, Tom was not a Christian and had never been to church, so the author's solution is to turn Tom into the aquatic version of a fairy or elf, with a chance of redemption through intentions and actions. Here begins Kingsley's morphing of

the *fairy tale for a land-baby* into something much more complex, a transformation which can leave modern readers cold as they are subjected to his many digressions on social and scientific issues, his references to contemporary events and people, his moralising and his prejudices. Without the homework that could help enlighten Kingsley's obscurities *The Water-Babies* is a tough climb, and here Brian Alderson is a top-notch guide.

Tom's rehabilitation starts in the trout stream, where he learns a live-and-let-live existence with his fellow creatures, has a fright involving his former master Grimes and then catches his first sight of other water-babies like himself. By Chapter IV he has moved down to the sea where, as luck will have had it, he has a close encounter with Miss Ellie and her pedantic tutor. Kingsley's love of lists in the manner of Rabelais comes to the fore here, a distraction from the tragedy-in-waiting which will profoundly affect Tom's future. In Chapter V Tom finally meets andmingles with other water-babies before encountering two more feminine archetypes, Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and her sister fairy Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid, personifications of the Golden Rule from the Sermon on the Mount, *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. He has more life lessons to learn if he is to achieve his desire, especially that those who want to go to a better place "must go first where they do not like, and do what they do not like, and help somebody they do not like." And thus he embarks on his journey to the Other-end-of-Nowhere, a kaleidoscopic quest that takes up most of the remainder of the book.

Kingsley was such a complex character, full of contradictions. Modern sensibilities are quite rightly uncomfortable with comments he makes on Jews, the Irish, Catholics and Africans, and it's no real defence to say that these attitudes were commonplace in his day. And yet we know, for example, that he happily entertained the Queen of the Sandwich Islands in his rectory, and that he regarded the treatment of blacks in the Confederate States during the American Civil War as inhumane. He was a chaplain to Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales' tutor at Cambridge, and yet as a Christian Socialist he was ever mindful of and sympathetic to the needs of ordinary people, such as city-dwellers succumbing to avoidable disease, and the gypsies of his parish. As an Anglican clergyman he was deeply religious and yet he fully agreed with the evolutionary principles in Darwin's *Origin of Species* published in 1859. He combined a bookishness (sermons, novels, lectures, poems, reviews and scientific papers poured from his pen) with a love of athleticism and the outdoors – he loved cold baths in streams – so much so that his approach gave rise to the popular term 'muscular Christianity'.

So it's not surprising that *The Water-Babies* – with its ramblings, enthusiasms, sensibilities, love of nature, empathy, wide reading, poetry and humour – perfectly reflects the man. Kingsley's novel antedated the first *Alice* book by a couple of years and anticipated many of the features that are normally associated with Lewis Carroll's two children's classics, as many a commentator has noted before now. References to a lobster, Cheshire cat and March hare occur in both, for example, but the Cheshire Cat wasn't in Carroll's original 1862-3 draft for Alice Liddell. There is little room here to note other parallels in detail – both authors were called Charles, were clergymen (though Carroll was only a deacon), suffered from stammers, were passable artists and were feted by royalty, for instance – but as only one of these classics has remained in the popular consciousness one has to assume that Kingsley's moralising asides haven't gone down well with subsequent generations. Compared with the handsome Victorian line illustrations of Linley Sambourne the later sentimental illustrations of Mabel Lucie Attwell and her ilk have not served the fortunes of the story well either.

It's a shame, as for all his contradictions Kingsley comes across in this novel as both a sympathetic figure and a very modern writer. The last chapter includes a critique of Victorian examination-led schooling which is sadly applicable to contemporary fears of a cramming culture in UK state education. Much of his prose hymn to Nature in *The Water-Babies* has a Green tinge not out of place in debates about biodiversity and

climate change. And his dispassionate description of the conditions climbing boys suffered led directly to a law banning the practice, a parallel to present-day concerns about child abuse and moves towards more effective child protection.

It's impossible to do justice to this captivating fairy tale in a short review. But 150 years after its publication *The Water-Babies* is surely due a reassessment and a new appreciation of its messages and beauties. Maybe I need to dig out and update those old notes of mine and attempt a proper answer to Kingsley's riddle.

<http://wp.me/s2oNj1-wb>
