

A painting of a woman with a red headscarf and a dark green and yellow patterned dress, pointing at a drawing on a piece of paper. The drawing shows a figure with a head and limbs. The woman has a warm, smiling expression.

**THE LORE AND  
LANGUAGE OF  
SCHOOLCHILDREN**  
IONA & PETER OPIE

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INTRODUCTION BY  
**MARINA WARNER**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
CLASSICS

## THE LORE AND LANGUAGE OF SCHOOLCHILDREN

IONA AND PETER OPIE produced a long series of books on children's lore and literature, ranging from *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* to a trilogy on contemporary children's games and their histories, over the course of forty years of marriage. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, based on contributions from 5,000 schoolchildren all over Britain, was the first book in which children themselves were consulted about their traditions and beliefs. The result was a revelation, and the book has remained the Opies' best known.

MARINA WARNER is a novelist, critic, and cultural historian. Her works include *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairytales and Their Tellers*, *No Go the Bogeyman: On Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock*, and *The Leto Bundle*, a novel.

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## INTRODUCTION

A SCHOOLS inspector going round the Lycée Fontanes in Paris in 1880 entered the English class, where he found the pupils chanting:

Liar liar lick spit  
Your tongue shall be slit  
And all the dogs in the town  
Shall have a little bit.

Disgusted, he recommended in his report that the instructor should abandon forthwith using such nonsense in class, and added the comment that “one is tempted to ask oneself if one is not in the presence of a sick man.”

The teacher was Stéphane Mallarmé, who only four years before had written that key work of fin-de-siècle Symbolism, “L’Après-midi d’un faune.” Far more associated today with hermetic difficulty than with nursery rhymes, Mallarmé turned his gifts to many different modes of writing, and, as well as collecting children’s lore for other teachers’ use, he composed a primer of English etymologies, some of which he seems to have invented.<sup>1</sup> In the commentary he wrote to accompany the nursery rhymes, he nudges his pupils towards a moral; with affectionate, sly humor, he usually comes down on the side of common sense against fantasy. For example, he warns that boys should know better than to toss old women up in a blanket “seventeen times as high as the moon”: “Witch or not,” he writes,

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1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Les Mots Anglais* (Paris, 1877); Stéphane Mallarmé, *Recueil de “Nursery Rhymes,”* edited by Carl Paul Barbier (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

"those clowns should have first considered that they were dealing with an elderly female."

In *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Iona and Peter Opie print the rhyme that riled the inspector but with the variant opening line, "Tell tale tit"; it appears in their chapter "Unpopular Children: Jeers and Torments," where it illustrates the ways schoolboys and girls handle "sneaks," "blabbers," and "snitches." Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, the Opies never voice approval or disapproval of the material amassed from their young correspondents. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, collected in the 1950s and first published in 1959, followed their equally monumental and marvelous *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951); at the time, these two great innovatory works of literary, social, and psychological observation were presented in a spirit of anthropological curiosity, consonant with ideas about necessary scientific objectivity then current. However, in the very nature of their initial enterprise, and throughout these two long, packed volumes, the Opies show a uniquely spirited and unsentimental sympathy, collusion, and fascination with the world of children, and with the rituals, expressions, and laws children make up among themselves.

*The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* explicitly presupposes that a realm of young people exists, distinct and separate from the adult world; in this, the Opies' forerunners are ethnographers such as Bronislaw Malinowski, who, in his account of the Trobriand Islanders, reported on the flourishing existence of what he termed "the republic of children," a free-wheeling, independent social group. The Opies probably overestimate this division, since transmission of all kinds takes place between grownups and youngsters, but that does no harm to the matter or the spirit of their enterprise; it rather brightens the focus on children themselves.

As anthropologists of the normal, but unexamined everyday, as psychopathologists of daily life, the Opies were also formed by the marked English and American tradition of storybook heroes and heroines: Huckleberry Finn and Jane Eyre, Jo the crossing sweeper from *Bleak House*, Curdie from George MacDonald's fey epics, Alice, Peter Pan, even the children in Henry James's fiction, from Maisie in *What Maisie Knew* to the eldritch protagonists of "The Turn of the Screw." By contrast, the Opies, in this unique anthology of children's

games, punishments, wishes, beliefs, and regulations, don't project adult yearnings onto the figure of the child, don't cast children as symbols of innocence, lost or otherwise, and don't hanker to enter a wonderland or belong to a never-never land, or indeed even portray the child's world as such a zone of desire at all.

Their book is remarkably poised, brimful of genuine, vibrant affection for the children, but empty of melancholic comparison with adult destinies, of compensatory yearning for children's "savage energies" or "ecstatic tribal innocence," their supposed liberty and anarchy.<sup>2</sup> The Opies are natural heirs to Lewis Carroll, who picked up the wordplay and logic-chopping, the parodies and misprisions, the guying of grownups and the pitilessness of game rules that give the Alice books their singular character, first among his own huge family of sisters, and later among his many "child friends."<sup>3</sup> Almost a century afterwards, the Opies are giving back the authorship (and the credit) to their subjects and allowing children to speak for themselves, for their voices to be heard, without any of those knowing, oblique jokes to the reader or private settlements of accounts which occasionally introduce an uncomfortably adult angle on the Alice stories. In the playgrounds they observed, the ground stands firmly beneath their subjects' feet, and the shoes are scuffed.

Yet in their own way, the Opies are brilliant storytellers: the imaginative organization of *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, under such rubrics as "Just for Fun," "Guile," "Friendship and Fortune," intensifies the vivid portrait they make of a self-regulating and original society. In the chapter called "Code of Oral Legislation," they give a truly mind-boggling list of over fifty "truce terms," including variations on "barlay," "crosses," and "squits," by which children "obtain respite" from one another during a fight or other kind of struggle; a gloss provided by J. R. R. Tolkien himself connects "Fains" (pronounced "Veins" at my convent school in the Sixties) with Old French *se feindre*, and he is able to use it to throw light on a crux in Chaucer, making the term five hundred years old. It must be

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2. Tom Paulin, Introduction, *The Faber Book of Vernacular Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. xi-xxii.

3. See Lewis Carroll's own juvenilia, in *The Rectory Umbrella and Mischmasch* (Frome and London: Cassell, 1932).

said that the beautiful "distribution maps"—no less than six in this chapter alone, here illustrating truce terms' usage—add considerably to the impact of the data; with something of the quality of a hand-drawn treasure map in an adventure story, they reach a high-water mark that published scholarship in this field will probably never attain again.

The truce terms form part of a vast private lexicon, for initiates only, to which the Opies give access throughout the book; even the descriptive terms for the practices under review catch the flavor of the languages the authors are concerned to record: swapping, secret-keeping, jeers, pranks and japes, punning and riddling, diddling and trapping, trumping and tricks, scrimmages, quips, catcalls, reparatee, tongue-twisters and tangletalk, as well as the gobbledygook that's made by adding syllables, such as -aggee or -esies, to words as one speaks, backwards or forwards. Virginia Woolf, inventing a secret way of communicating with her niece Angelica, called this her "pixerina-witcherina" language. It may perhaps have been more common when families were larger and siblings wanted to talk secretly, to the exclusion of strangers, but backslang, or *verlan* (i.e. *l' envers*) is now thriving in France.

What begins with childhood hunger for independence—and freedom from adult surveillance—also quickens the modernist imagination. Tom Paulin comments, in the introduction to *The Faber Book of Vernacular Verse*, that, from Gerard Manley Hopkins's sprung rhythm through to Paul Muldoon's "Quoof," poets have listened to the percussive stresses, the patterns and the knots, the nonce words and doublets of nursery rhymes and like verses made up by children and then handed down. Some of the Opies' gatherings turn into paragraphs of spontaneous Joycean jabberwocky. For example, discussing suffixes, they give: "creep-ass, squall-ass, copy-cat, stare-cat, tease-cat, funny-dick, clever-dick, greedy-guts, grizzle-guts, lazy-guts, scabby-guts, fuss-pot, stink-pot, swank-pot, blubber-puss, sleepy-puss, sour-puss, sobersides, etc."

Children also inspired the Surrealists, who tried to imitate their instinctive candor and transgressiveness, and adopted deliberately childlike methods of making sense of the world. The Opies' sections on magic and superstition include passages of far-fetched divination; in the case of bus tickets as oracles, these are even illustrated,



just as, in André Breton's *Nadja*, the principle of *hasard objectif* inspired a scatter of photographs of found objects and other adventitious wonders. One of the Opies' informants gives a straightforward interpretation of his ticket number: "6609 = marry when you are 6, have 6 wives, no children, and live 9 more years—Boy, 13, Croydon."

A great deal of the material the Opies print is fun as well as funny; it's canny and rude, silly but quick-witted, playfully springing acoustic surprises that can't help but bring a chuckle: one of the oldest perennials among the skipping-rope rhymes included here goes "Julius Caesar the Roman geezer/Squashed his wife/In a lemon squeezer." This playground tone, irreverent, daring, laced in equal parts with blitheness, morbidity, and callousness, continues to survive. The daughter of a friend of mine reports to me a current favorite skipping rhyme:

How is your mother?  
All Right.  
Died in the fish shop  
Last night.  
What'd she die of?  
Raw fish.  
How'd she die?  
Like this.

(The child imitates, falling towards the ground; another player catches her.)<sup>4</sup>

Spirited nonsense of this sort ("Jack the Ripper stole a kipper . . .") draws deeply on the language of pre-Gutenberg culture, of oral literature and its links with memorization. The typical sounds of children's vernacular belong in the street, not the parlor, and they tap into demotic Anglo-Saxon, not Greek or Latin; musically plosive and

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4. With my thanks to Sophie Cragg. See Elizabeth Grugeon, "We Like Singing Spice Girl Songs . . . And We Like Tig and Stuck in the Mud': Traditional Games on Two Playgrounds," in *Play Today in the Primary School Playground*, edited by Julia C. Bishop and Mavis Curtis, with a foreword by Iona Opie (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001).

guttural, with end-stopped consonants rather than mellifluous, open, “feminine” rhymes, the lore and language of children recorded by the Opies seems so spontaneous, so unmeditated and fresh, that it sparks laughter as if naturally. In their preface, the Opies italicize the phrase *taken direct from oral tradition*, because their material’s unmediated orality seemed to them both valuable and unprecedented. But the oral character of children’s language, its internal jangles and jingles, its springy patter, helps imprint on the developing mind the typical features and internal structure of language, rather in the same way that songbirds learn to sing. As Hugh Haughton writes in his splendid anthology *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* (a true inheritor of the Opies’ legacy), “If anything, nonsense is more shapely, more brazenly formalized and patterned than other kinds of language—not the reverse as is often assumed.”<sup>5</sup> Jokes and conundrums and double entendres and puns and “either-way tricks” are designed to trap the poor new boy or girl and establish the pecking order of the playground:

What is the difference between a big black cloud and a lion  
with toothache?

One pours with rain and the other roars with pain.

But such posers and teasers happen also to clarify the dangers of homonyms, point out spoken language’s ambiguities, the lurking of latent meanings and other phonetic pitfalls (such as the favorite trick of eliciting the answer “Iced ink”). They make verbal nimbleness a prerequisite for survival—alongside guile, truce terms, bonds, and friendships (aptly “SWALK-ed”—i.e. Sealed With A Loving Kiss).

Verbal play and trickery also define borders; they impart discrimination in alliances and they pass on prohibitions, building the scaffolding of social identity, and the sense of belonging. As children set about testing the limits of the forbidden, they learn the social axioms that govern their community and to distinguish purity and impurity. They find out when dirt is in the right place and when it is not (to borrow the famous phrase of Mary Douglas, in her fundamen-

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5. Hugh Haughton, Introduction, *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus 1988), p. 6.

tal study of social structures, *Purity and Danger* (1966)). The results are often hilarious in the playground—and reassuringly absurd (and mild) to parents:

Butterflies are dopes,  
They eat bars of soap.  
Bubbles here, bubbles there,  
Bubbles up their underwear.<sup>6</sup>

What is permitted or otherwise does however change over time, and the Opies' own historical context—what they call, with quaint period optimism, the new Elizabethan world of the postwar United Kingdom—can show on occasions, for new codes of conduct have changed values and, in several cases, imposed sanctions. They report that in the preliminary approaches to schools, they did not include requests for examples of sectarian abuse, as they considered this would be unwise. They do however include several anti-Catholic and anti-Protestant rhymes.<sup>7</sup> They also explore, with less manifest perturbation, a catalogue of children's "tortures." Many of these I recognized from my own schooldays, and friends, younger than I, as well as the children of friends, corroborate that they are still in effect. Now that corporal punishment has at last been banned in school in the UK, children's own tribunals and penalties no longer reflect adult discipline and punishment, and are consequently no longer tolerated but treated instead as bullying behavior. Recognition of the horrors and dangers of bullying has finally led to campaigns to change attitudes among children, who are now encouraged to report it (no more taunts of the "tell tale tit" variety), as well as among teachers, who once, by long custom, would turn a blind eye.

What is far more important to note, in this regard, is that the

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6. *Miss Mary Mac All Dressed in Black: Tongue Twisters, Jump Rope Rhymes, and Other Children's Lore from New England*, edited by Scott E. Hastings Jr.; (Little Rock: August House, 1990), p. 110.

7. See Georgina Boyes, "The Legacy of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie: The Lore and Language of Today's Children," in *Rhyme, Reason and Writing*, edited by Roger Beard (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), pp. 131–146, for a discussion of the Opies' methods compared to today's researchers.

Opies' study offers a luminous section through the many-chambered nautilus of children's minds, but it does so during a certain era and bears its traces, as they themselves fully acknowledge in their section on "Topical Rhymes." The cast of characters—Charlie Chaplin, Deanna Durbin, Shirley Temple—has been replaced of course, as surely as discarded idols in the waxworks museum. But the rhymes, the patterns, and the themes hold on: today it's the Spice Girls, Mel Gibson, and Madonna who are the kids' stuff of dreams.

This leads to the question, how perennial is the lore and language that the Opies chronicled? Much of the material is ancient, reported in the first printed records of children's sayings and doings, with echoes reverberating much further back; certain themes and attitudes, certain rhythms and prosody, especially the humor and the daring, are eternal and inextinguishable. The Opies themselves invoke the bugbear of the mass media, which was already, even in the 1950s, accused of extinguishing children's spontaneity in play and expressiveness. The sociologist David Holbrook, in his book *Children's Games*, lamented the disappearance of traditional play, citing as causes "recent developments in television, in the mass-production of toys, in family life, and the tone of our ways of living,"<sup>8</sup> but for their own time at least the Opies confidently refuted this.

In the forty years since they published this book, the sense of crisis around children's culture has however deepened, and their picture of witty, playful, imaginative youngsters inventing rhymes and passing on chants and riddles seems to belong in another universe. The solitude of Gameboy and computer learning, the growing fear of letting children play alone together outside the home, the soaring number of only children inside the home, the dislocation of families and peoples have cut the threads that connect the past and the present; we are in danger of cultural illiteracy, of losing the past. If nestlings are deprived of their parents' song during a certain "window" at the beginning, they will not learn to sing. This sounds uncomfortably recognizable. In England, "dinner ladies" who can re-

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8. Quoted by June Factor, "Three Myths About Children's Folklore," in *Play Today in the Primary School Playground*, pp. 24–36, reviewing the pessimism expressed by David Holbrook in *Children's Games* (Bedford, England: Gordon Fraser, 1957), and, more recently, by Neil Postman in *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacourte, 1982).

member the playground games of their youth have been drafted in to revive them for young children, while there are campaigns such as the Voices Foundation for encouraging music in schools that circulate teachers with forgotten skipping and clapping songs ("Ding, Dong, I've got the rhythm in my head, Hot Dog, I've got the rhythm in my head"); in the US, Maya Angelou performs her own childhood traditions on television in order to pass them on to city kids who are out of touch with lore and language that were hers spontaneously, in spite of the deprivations of her upbringing.

Yet, from my personal observation, children haven't forgotten how to play, not altogether, not if given the opportunities to gather safely together. Commercialization of their collecting manias, the marketing of current crazes—for Tamagotchis or Pokémon cards or even Harry Potter—may wear holes in parental purses, but they also furnish lots of raw material for slang, backchat, comic turns, parody, shared secrets, lexical fantasy, and communication in general. Advertising jingles were already shaping the Opies' data—or perhaps the process was happening the other way around? Still, there is a strong case, I believe, for supporting the campaign, started in Britain by the Children's Society, to curtail television's targeting of pester power, though for many other reasons besides the muting of children's play and patter.

The husband-and-wife team of Peter and Iona Opie worked independently, from their house in Alton, Hampshire; they received no grants, no publishers' advances. At the same time as they collected oral games and verses from the everyday, living society around them, they became the foremost antiquarians of children's literature in the world, and reproduced a series of rare, illustrated versions of stories, toybooks, and other play literature, beginning with their spirited edition of *The Classic Fairy Tales* (1974). They continued to work on both the past and the present of children's imaginations in another series of volumes, including a brilliant anthology, *The Singing Game* (1985), in which they reflect on the differences between boys and girls in the making of nonsense rhymes and songs. The incomparable Opie Collection is now housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Peter Opie died in 1982; his widow, Iona Opie, still continues their

work, more recently collaborating with the folklorist Moira Tatem on *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (1989), a topic of interest clearly prefigured in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*.

When the Opies were gathering this material, few people accorded serious attention to the world of children, let alone to fantastic, cheeky, mischievous child's play. That has changed, and many aspects of childish fantasy have been studied from within different disciplines; some remarkable documents of the past have been unearthed, putting paid to the once fashionable theory, argued by Philippe Ariès, that childhood was a modern invention. In Papua New Guinea, the anthropologist L.R. Goldman observed wonderfully lively storytelling games, filled with cannibal monsters and tricksters and roly-polies and other familiar devices and motifs<sup>9</sup>; in Holland, where investigators of childhood are highly committed, an unusual album has recently been published. Made around 1800 by a family doctor to chronicle his three sons as they grew up, the book contains pen-and-wash sketches of the boys jousting, playing "house" and "hospital," imitating their elders preaching, as well as swimming, climbing trees, sledding, and suffering grievously from toothache, in what is a most loving and charming picture of children's fantasy and independence.<sup>10</sup>

The Opies inspired a new sensitivity to their subjects, they retuned an unheard, overlooked music so that it could be heard by adult ears, and they helped uncover unexpected resources for historians, as well as psychologists, among other disciplines. Simultaneously, the gap between child and grownup has started shrinking, and what was once considered a separate kingdom, a mysterious prelude to modernity, has come to seem prophetic, even epiphanic of pervasive human needs and desiderata, at all ages and stages. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* belongs vividly to its young cast, but its protagonists reveal, sharply, even discomfitingly, through the wit, humor, brilliance, and cruelty of their words and rituals and play, a deeper complexity: these children don't act as "father to the

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9. L. R. Goldman, *Child's Play: Myth, Mimesis and Make-Believe* (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

10. Jacob de Vos Wzn. (1774–1844), *Vader en zoons en de getekende dagboekjes voor zijn kinderen*, edited by Eveline Koolhaas-Grosfeld (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2000).

man" in the Romantic, prelapsarian fashion Wordsworth proposed. Their games check any damaging sentimentality about the state of childhood; they show us, as in Emily Dickinson's sharp-edged, cautionary lyric about the haunted self, "Ourself behind ourself, concealed—"11

—MARINA WARNER

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11. Emily Dickinson, # 670, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 333.

My thanks to Dr. Malcolm Jones, of Sheffield University, for help with references and examples of today's playground songs.