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Geoffrey Willans , Ronald Searle (Illustrator) , Philip Hensher (Introduction)

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Comic observations on 1950s British school life complemented by illustrations.

Molesworth Details

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Author : Geoffrey Willans , Ronald Searle (Illustrator) , Philip Hensher (Introduction)

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From Reader Review Molesworth for online ebook

Alex says

You do not review Molesworth, you can only pay homage to one of the funniest creations in English literature. Almost 60 years since Nigel Molesworth, the curse of St. Custards, turned a withering eye on the English public school system, the British class system, and life in general, his four masterpieces, "Down With Skool", "How to be Topp", "Whizz for Atoms", and "Back in the Jug Agane" are still as fresh as the day they were written. The collaboration of Geoffrey Willans who crafted the inimitable prose (and even more inimitable spelling) and Ronald Searle who drew the matchless illustrations, produced a little world of surreal perfection which is still mercifully open to those who can leave their grown-upness outside the creaking gates of St. Custard's.

(Chiz, I think while riting this review I have been chaneling fotherington-tomas you kno he sa Hullo clouds hullo sky he is a girlie and love the scents and sounds of nature, as any fule kno.)

Bobby says

I think if I were a 12 year old British boy attending a boarding school I would have found this hilarious. As it is, this was a pain to finish. When it comes to British humor, I think I'll stick with Douglas Adams or PG Wodehouse.

David says

You can get this book for less than \$20, if you live in the U.S.
So what are you waiting for? I don't give out five-star evaluations without due consideration.

I will have more to say about the genius of "Molesworth" in due course.

Rachel says

[I expected this to be a juvenile Flashman. It's not. Down with Skool! was funny, but the others just harp on the same one-note song. The only reason I kept on was for the delightfully obvious Nigel/Fotherington-Tomas backslash. The dialect is hard to decipher

Rebecca Huston says

Howling funny book on school life. Every teacher dreads Molesworth and for good reason. Some of the slang is a bit confusing to figure out, but this one is worth it to read. Originally published as four books, and illustrated by Roald Searles.

Fiona says

I loved Molesworth when I was in my early teens. He's such a prat but so viciously funny with it. Very clever writing.

Andrew says

I first read the Willans/Searle series of Molesworth books when I was in late primary school and at the time I found 'Down With Skool', 'How to be Topp', 'Whizz for Atomms' and 'Back in Jugg Agane' to be very funny, if a little strange. The slightly alien world of the setting of the books, a fictional English public school, formed a significant part of the comedy, however the behaviours of the boys (including Molesworth, Molesworth 2, Grabber, Peason and Fotherington-Tomas hello birds hello sky) were all familiar enough to allow some degree of identification.

Now, roughly 40 years since I first read these books I find that the Molesworth novels are perhaps a little dated and the quality of the writing is variable through each individual book. Willans was a genius in using the form of writing as if he was Molesworth himself, with the associated misspellings etc, however by 'Back in Jugg Agane' it feels as if he has worked out all the comedic nuggets in this vein. There is no narrative *per se*, and each book is made up of numerous vignettes and sketches. Some work very well, particularly those in the first two books that are part of this anthology. However by the last book they are a little stale, and Willans appears to be reaching further for his subjects or settings to throw Molesworth at or into.

Having said that there is still a lot to enjoy about 'The Compleet Molesworth', including the wonderful illustrations provided by Ronald Searle. I don't think it is too much of a stretch to argue that Willan's comedic prose may have sunk without a trace, or be seen as an artefact from a highly esoteric setting if it hadn't been for Searle's illustrations. The drawings both complement and reinforce the humour of the prose, and in some cases take on a hilarious life of their own.

I may be a little harsh on these books as I am reading them through older, more critical eyes. I'm unsure if Molesworth would find much appeal for children today, however I hope his exploits will still be read for many a year. Willans and Searle have produced a series of classic comedic books that deserve an audience as long as children go to school and as long as they find ways to challenge or undermine the world of adults.

Priscilla says

Read: March 1, 2002

I recommend this book whenever I get the chance. It's hard to get a hold of in the US (you have to buy it from AmazonUK, last I checked), but oh, so brilliant!

The book (actually four books in one) reads like the journal of a young British schoolboy with a very vivid imagination, a loathing for teachers and schoolwork, and a complete disregard for elementary spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Geoffrey Willans' delightfully mangled words are matched by the exquisitely

cartoonish scribbles of Ronald Searle, illustrating Nigel Molesworth's accounts. The result is screamingly funny and worth twenty times whatever those crazy trans-Atlantic shipping costs work out to be.

Read it. Your life will truly be enriched.

Ivonne Rovira says

I adored *Down With Skool!*, the first of four books featuring observations from that consummate blockhead, Nigel Molesworth, the self-described “curse of St. Custard’s,” an English boarding school in the 1950s. When I had the chance to buy *Molesworth*, an omnibus of all four books for a pittance, I jumped at the chance. “As any fule kno,”* what could be more fun?

Molesworth 1 (so called by his schoolmasters and peers to distinguish him from his younger and stupider brother, Molesworth 2) remains as ignorant, lazy, and pig-headed as ever in *How to Be Topp*, *Whizz for Atomms*, and *Back in the Jug Agane*, *Down With Skool!*’s three sequels. Molesworth’s spelling, punctuation, and syntax remain just as atrocious, too. Chiz, chiz!** What also remains the same 60 years later, thankfully, are author Geoffrey Willans’ hilarious satire and illustrator Ronald Searle’s masterful caricatures from the original books.

Molesworth rants about the lack of importance of Latin, French, maths, and even English in the nuclear age; the perfidy and cruelty of schoolmasters; the disappointment in discovering that Americans aren’t all gangsters and cowboys; and the impertinence of “new bugs” (a.k.a. first-year pupils), who Molesworth feels should tremble in the face of the upperclassmen. He spends much of his time daydreaming about life as a Roman, an Elizabethan, and an evolved egg-shaped being from centuries in the future. He good-naturedly razzes his “grate friend” (and fellow philistine) Timothy Peason and less good-naturedly denigrates that paragon, Basil Fotherington-Tomas*** [sic].

While the sequels aren’t as hilarious as *Down with Skool!*, they’re still pretty good, particularly *Whizz for Atomms*, which is nearly its equal. That book is the most hilarious when Molesworth waxes eloquent about life outside of St. Custard’s: The bits about Christmas, the summer holidays, the dread of “[a]nother weedy party and a lot of weedy little gurls,” and the schizophrenic nature of grandmothers will make readers laugh out loud. Nigel Molesworth, despite being an uncultured, dim-witted slacker, really captured my heart. Here’s to remembering that we, like Molesworth and his “felow oiks, cads, bulies, and dirty rotors,” overcame the superficiality and stupidity of youth, and to cut some slack to the next generation.

* As any fool knows

** Variousy, What an outrage! or What a swindle!

** I cannot tell if Molesworth is misspelling Fotherington-Thomas, or if it’s *actually* Fotherington-Tomas, and Basil has a Portuguese or Spanish ancestor.

John Welsh says

Advanced. Forthright. Significant.

Lachlan Maywood says

So funny and dark, the cynical observations had me coming back to this book time and time again!

Susanna says

This was a wonderful trip down memory lane for me. Molesworth, like me, first appeared in the 1950s, and we had all the books in the house when I was a child. I agree with Philip Hensher (a good 10 years younger than me) who wrote the introduction to this anthology: "I thought they were children's books, when I was a child, and now that I am an adult, think they are books for adults about childhood."

True, it's ostensibly a kind of childhood that at first glance seems very much removed from anything that we know today (post-war, private boarding school, corporal punishment the norm) but that doesn't in any way detract from the books' charms. They are quite simply hilariously funny - and sarcastic and cynical too. Post-war Britain as seen through the jaundiced eye of a child. And so full of quotes! This was the first time I had read Molesworth since at least 35 years ago, and I was tickled to discover how many little things that I say regularly originated in these pages.

Huw Evans says

I first read this book when I was at a school that could have been the model for St Custards and I got into trouble for being unable to control my hysterical laughter. I cannot listen to the march past of the Rifle Brigade without laughing. The writing is beautiful, as are the illustrations. This is a must read for anybody who enjoys a belly laugh and the repeated cocking of snooks at the English and their societies

Caitlin says

One of the funniest books I have ever read. And re-read. And re-re-read times without number. A guaranteed pick-me-up, no matter how down you are. "Do ye ken John Plunk in his tinkle-tinkle-zing" will be with me forever.

Suzannah says

Have you ever sensed a kindred spirit upon hearing the words "as any fule kno"?

Has your trained ear been able to detect the difference between "No!" and "Noe!"?*

Have you ever seen a gerund cut a gerundive?

Or puzzled out the meaning of "Caesar adsum jam forte"?

Or cried, "THE PRUNES ARE REVOLTING!"?

If not, you need to read these books.

* "Crie you mercie, Mowlesworth!" "Noe!"

F.R. says

Nigel Molesworth himself would be horrified to see himself described in such a way, but there is something quintessentially English and beautifully vintage about Molesworth's take on public school life. The terror of 3B would no doubt be disgusted that we saw him in such a wet and weedy way, but I guess it often happens that something intent on mocking the establishment becomes, eventually, part of the establishment. Through a series of vignettes, sketches and wild fancies of imagination, Molesworth skewers the regiment and routine of an English public school – taking apart the Masters, the subjects themselves, other pupils and even parents. This is a blunderbuss approach to satire, so some of it is quite hit or miss, but at its best it's hilarious. One would probably get more out of it if one has been to an English public school (I was state school educated, so The Bash Street Kids will always be closer to my heart), but with the smell of chalk-dust and semolina entwined throughout, this is a pure English classic.

Cheyenne Blue says

I first read "How to be Topp" when I was very young. It was on my father's bookshelf, pushed haphazardly in among the more erudite and literary offerings of George Orwell and the poetry of Byron. My father, an English teacher, loved that book. I loved it too, and revisited it many times.

Until I chanced upon this compilation of the three "Molesworth" books jammed into one volume, I had no idea that they were so popular. I thought dad's book was a quirky obscure little volume.

I've been reading "Molesworth" over the past few weeks, picking it up and putting it down, laughing at the lines, appreciative of its comedic genius. Simply a great series of books.

I'm not marking this as a kid's book -- I think it is best appreciated by adults.

David Bell says

As good as ever. A book to skim, laugh at, then put away for another few years/ Not a gud way to lurn to spel.

Alan Smith says

According to the listing in "Goodreads", this book is by Geoffrey Willans. In fact, it's a dual effort, Ronald Searle being the other contributor, and the latter's zany, way-out illustrations contribute as much as the text to this work being one of the all-time classics of school comedy.

The Molesworth stories deal with the (obviously) fictitious St Custard's school (or "skool", for Nigel's spelling is not especially accurate), essentially a highly satarised version of what a typical English boarding school was like in the 1950s. It appears that the authors took as their model the many school series around at that time, such as Billy Bunter, Jennings, 5th Form at St Dominic's and such, and then proceeded to stand them on their head, taking the concepts to a wild and hilarious conclusion!

Ostensibly a series of essays, written by the titular character, on various aspect of what it's like to be a "young Elizabethan" (Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the *second*, in case you were wondering) the books are actually a romp that will leave anyone with a sense of the absurd helpless with laughter.

The canon abounds with amazing characters, such as Grabber, the Head Boy, who has won every prize going (including the "Miss Joyful Prize For Raffia Work"), Fotherington-Thomas, the utterly wet "skool swot" who goes around talking to the clouds and flowers, Nigel's brother "Molesworth II", "mi grate freind Peason", and various sadistic masters, "new bugs", bemused civilians and not to mention Prudence Entwistle, the glamorous under-matron!

But best of all is Nigel himself, a gentle, detached scribe, content merely to pass melancholy and philosophical observations on the absurdities of "skool" life - complete with ink blots from his crossed pen-nib!

This is that rare thing, a true treasure of comedy. And since this book brings together all the works in one anthology, who could resist it? Particularly rib-tickling are Nigel's account of playing in the school football match, told in the manner of an existentialist philosopher, the account of a visit to the museum (where the pupils hijack a "trane" and spend the whole afternoon singing the "Davy Crockett" theme), Nigel's love affair with the Under-Matron, and the tale of the visiting French exchange student, Armand. But really, you can dip anywhere into this volume and find something utterly brilliant.

Given that they made a series of movies about Searle's girls' school, St Trinians, (recently remade), surely a Molesworth movie is way overdue. I for one would queue all night for tickets!

Linden says

Nostalgia and fun. Superb illustrations by Searle. First read In the Jug Again as a boy. My introduction to satire and I was thrilled. Revisiting it now I wonder how I filtered out all the private school in jokes. Cave!
