



Classics in Short No 115: Poor Cecco

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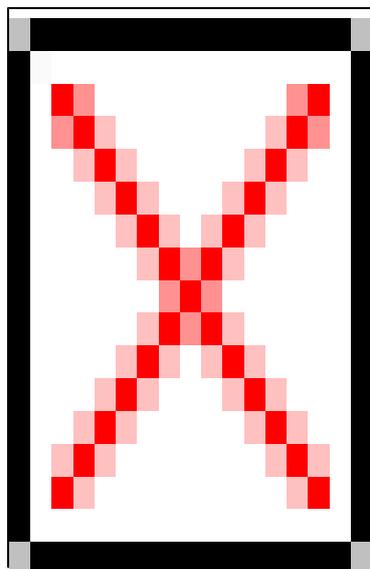
[216](#) [2]

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The cleverest of all the toys



Brian Alderson on an Adventure of 'the Cleverest of all the Toys': **Poor Cecco**

The Velveteen Rabbit

by Margery Williams was first published by Heinemann in 1922, and became a vastly popular story, especially in the United States, where last year it was included in the exhibition of *One Hundred Books Famous in Children's Literature*. To my (some think unbalanced) mind though, it is a meretricious exercise in ontology, making sentimental play with a dud concept of Reality as applied to nursery toys. It is undeserving of any classic status other than in its role, since coming out of copyright, as a commercial con trick.

But see here:

in 1925 that same Margery Williams (who had married Francesco Bianco in London as early as 1904) turned to another account of life among the nursery toys. With **Poor Cecco**, named after her eldest son, she created a masterpiece. Certainly it had a distinctly commercial send-off, being serialised in **Good Housekeeping** in the United States, where much was made of its illustrations by Arthur Rackham. But it did not last (and indeed **The Velveteen Rabbit** was little regarded until after the Second World War) and a biographer of Rackham, writing in 1990, spoke of his drawings having 'sunk with their text'.

That text though

sees the soginess of the Rabbit book turned into narrative strength, a point best made by differentiating the characterisation of the participants. The human agents who forward the action around the colourless Boy in the first book are his nurse, who dumps the rabbit on him in the first place (he has shown no care for it before) and the doctor

who demands its destruction at the end as carrying 'a mass of scarlet fever germs', while the rabbit himself is shown as obsessed with a desire to become Real, an outcome that is brought about by the intervention of 'quite the loveliest fairy in the whole world ... the nursery magic Fairy'. In **Poor Cecco** however, the action lies almost entirely with the inhabitants of the toy cupboard whose depiction gives the book its winning combination of drama and comedy.

Murrum the cat

and a community of rats are the only living creatures of consequence in the story. We meet the first at the start, pursuing a nightly campaign against the toys whose regular post-midnight prancing, singing and partying interfere with his mouse-catching activities. He remains an ominous presence until he triggers the final denouement, but, aside from him and the rats, who also feature at that point, there are only walk-on parts for sundry small animals (so treated that one wonders if Russell Hoban had encountered them before he wrote **The Mouse and his Child**). Only a blind man and his deliciously portrayed black dog, an anonymous automobile driver and what I take to be a postman, play tiny parts *ex machina* as you might say. Of the owner of the toys and the residents of the house in which they live not a word is said.

Margery Bianco

finds in these toys a storyteller's dream. Whether (as is averred) or not they originated in the toy cupboard of her own family, they are a wonderfully miscellaneous bunch acquired from who-knows-where: Bulka and Tubby, battered toy puppies whose marriage will make a climax to the story; a wooden lion who is in love with a lamb on wheels; an Andersenian Money-Pig; two rather sniffy dolls; a Harlequin, much given to saying 'Hey Presto!'; and an engine and an Express Cart, useful for transport ... They are all too busy being themselves to bother with any Reality making twaddle and they are seen in the light of an amused affection for their shortcomings and precarious existence. Their leader is the ever-versatile Poor Cecco, a jointed wooden dog, who outwits Murrum on his midnight prowl and whose picaresque adventure with Bulka forms the centre-piece of the tale.

'We are going for a walk',

says he to Bulka, first thing in the morning after his tail got broken in an attempt to use it as a lever. (He fears that when the others wake up they will want to play at hospitals, which he cannot stand.) Blithely the two of them set off into a world of which they know nothing, where the danger of random incident feeds into a purposive mission through their meeting with Jensina, a wooden doll who has made a home for herself in an ash-dump where she is having trouble from some neighbouring rats. Despite her staunch independence, she sees the wisdom of her returning with the others to the safety of their toy cupboard and, although trailed by rat policemen, they devise a scheme to post themselves back home where Jensina, and indeed the policemen, assist in the final frustration of Murrum.

Tribute must be paid

to Bianco's skill in turning this nonsensical plot into a convincing entertainment. She does so through her discriminating management of her large cast of toys, each sustained with its own comic foibles, and through a voicing of events which brings them to life in the reader's, or perhaps listener's, imagination. (It has been said that the episodic plot owes its shape to bed-time storytelling sessions.) Paramount though that must be, the book also demanded illustrations and Rackham supplied seven full-page colour-plates for its first edition, as well as a succession of often-repeated line vignettes. Although the plates share the imaginative vision of the author they also shared the publishing custom of the time, by being separated from the text behind their own title leaves which announce their subject on one side and give a descriptive quote on the other.

How much more satisfying therefore

was the unheralded re-publication of the book in 1973 after almost half a century of oblivion. Joining the distinguished list that Pamela Royds, following Philippa Pearce, was fashioning for Andre Deutsch, it had a sympathetic Introduction by Margery Fisher and a sequence of pen-drawings by Antony Maitland. Varying between chapter-heads, full-page drawings and drawings placed within the flow of the story (and with built-in, hand-written captions, rather than

Rackham's separated ones) these were perfect examples of narrative illustration. It is a puzzle how public taste has been led to favour its cheap velveteen predecessor over our honest-to-goodness timber dog ? with or without a snapped-off tail.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams, with illustrations by William Nicholson is published by Egmont, 978-1405210546, £6.99 pbk

Poor Cecco by Margery Williams, with illustrations by Arthur Rackham is published by Dover 978-0486492261, £10.99 pbk

Page Number:

30

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