

Preface

Emil and the Detectives was a groundbreaking book in many ways. It is probably the first of the child-detective books, a genre taken up and adapted so successfully by Enid Blyton and, more recently, Anthony Horowitz and Charlie Higson. It is one of the first books for children that gives us a rounded, unpatronizing picture of a child in a single-parent family of very little means. It is also one of the first books for children which treats the city as a place of excitement and worth. It supports the actions of children working together for a common purpose without the guidance of adults, and through its representation of dreams as a site of anxiety it draws on an awareness of Freud. Then, as if all this weren't enough, by way of innovation, the book tells its story in two different ways. A conventional stand-alone narrative is told to us in the third person by a knowing narrator, whilst interleaved amongst it are single-page commentaries on people appearing in the main story. They are written as if they are the narrator's

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soliloquys, who is thinking aloud for our benefit. In the original German, but not usually reproduced in translation, there is also an interesting sub-text running through the book in relation to language itself. Local urban speech, usually employed by writers to typify speakers as lower class and therefore stupid, incompetent or fatally flawed, is used in the book to support and strengthen the vigour and resourcefulness of the boys from Berlin who Emil meets. Though most, if not all, of these features of the book have been visited many times since in fiction for children, it's worth bearing in mind that in 1929 they were extremely rare or absent. To combine them all in one book is really quite remarkable.

So what kind of person could have produced such a piece of literature, and what sort of era did he live through? Erich Kästner was born in 1899 in Dresden, a sizeable city famous for its traditional porcelain works. His father was a saddler but Kästner didn't follow him into the milieu of skilled craftsmanship, but took the route to college, teacher-training and a PhD in German literature. This path into the arts was

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interrupted by an event that would affect Kästner's life and work from then on: the First World War. For those of us born into a time with no national conscription and no experience of huge battles or civilian casualties, it is not only difficult to imagine the intense training, the horror and devastation of the battles, but even harder to imagine the kind of intellectual effort and courage required to take a critical stance against the patriotic fervour and militaristic pride that supports the making of war. This is precisely what Kästner did; he became a pacifist and devoted his early years of writing to producing poetry and song lyrics that examined and mocked militarism.

The time between the end of the War and the writing of *Emil* was a period of massive upheaval in Germany. The experience of rapid industrialization, extreme inequality and war produced a huge working-class movement that was deeply hostile to the status quo. A serious consequence of the First World War was a crippling reparations programme that Britain, France and the United States imposed on Germany, requiring huge amounts of money to be transferred from

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Germany to the allies for years ahead. Even so, in the political turmoil of those years, Germany created a society where there was universal suffrage for everyone over the age of twenty, proportional representation and strong regional government, and its provision of education, pensions and trade union rights was unequalled. Meanwhile, Berlin was going through a mini-renaissance, becoming a place of cultural and artistic innovation. It was in this context that the young Kästner was approached by the head of a Berlin publishing house, Edith Jacobsen, with the suggestion that he might write a detective novel for children.

It's not immediately clear why people with Kästner's views should be interested in children – at this stage of his life he wasn't a father – but it should be remembered that one of the legacies of romanticism in particular is the notion that children are the carriers of hope and an uncorrupted wisdom. After all, it isn't them who have conducted the wars or created the poverty, it was argued. In England the young William Wordsworth put forth the now familiar idea that 'the child is father of the man', and

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in Germany the Brothers Grimm gave great strength to the complementary idea that there was, as they implied, some kind of pure and long-lasting wisdom to be found in those human beings who were closest to nature: children and those who worked the land. One of the reasons for the lasting popularity of *Emil* is that versions of these ideas have held sway, particularly in artistic circles, throughout the twentieth century.

So, there we have Kästner, brushing shoulders with the artistic community of cosmopolitan Berlin while all around them political argument raged. He is making a name for himself as a poet, song-writer and book reviewer and he sits down to write a novel for children. He tells the story of Emil Tischbein. Emil's surname translates literally as 'table-leg', which is a real German surname, but perhaps, in a Dickensian way, encapsulates the notion that Emil is no taller than a table. His father was a plumber but died, and his mother, as our narrator makes clear, has to work. She is a decidedly un-posh hairdresser, and she 'is glad that she can work and earn enough money'. In a touch of realism, we

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learn that, ‘Sometimes she is ill, and then Emil fries eggs for her and for himself.’ This is a person Kästner wants us to believe in, so we are taken to yet one more level or realism: ‘For he can fry them very well. He also knows how to fry a steak, chipped potatoes, onions and all.’ For all our modernity and our attention to detail, there aren’t many books for children that construct an image of a child who we are introduced to in a way that tells us exactly where he has pitched up in the social ladder, and what he has to do himself to support this place. In Emil’s conversations with the boys in Berlin, this becomes even clearer.

Emil is set a task: take some money by train to his grandmother in Berlin. So, having been shown what money means to this family, we are able to enter into any anxieties about its fate through the eyes of Emil and his mother. One other crucial aspect of Emil’s character is that he has committed a crime. As readers we may not feel it’s a crime – the key point here is that Emil thinks that it is. In league with his friends he has drawn a moustache on the face of the town statue of the Grand Duke Charles – shades

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of Dada and the moustache on the Mona Lisa, perhaps! So, hovering over Emil and us, the sympathetic readers, is this crime against the state. Surely, in a children's book, this won't go unpunished?

On the train to Berlin, Emil sits in a carriage with Herr Grundeis (Mr Ground-ice, surely a name with menace), but against his best intentions, Emil falls asleep. When he wakes up, his money has gone and so has Herr Grundeis. This occurs not long after a quarter of the way through the book, so for the rest of the narrative we are dealing with Emil's emotions, encounters, plans and eventual capture of Grundeis. So far, I have accepted the notion that this is a detective novel, but to tell the truth it isn't, as strictly speaking it isn't a whodunit and so doesn't involve the classic tropes of the form, the slow piecing together of evidence in order to entrap the villain. In a way this is a detective novel in reverse, as it requires Emil, and the boys he meets in Berlin, to ensnare the man they know has done it, and prove his guilt after the capture rather than before. There is also another level at which the book reverses the

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conventional detective narrative. The whole point of adult detective fiction is that it creates a form of super-human who will make the world safer for us ordinary mortals. He (and rarely, she) will be able to make that last brilliant link that will foil the threat to our orderly existence. It is, then, surely a contradiction in terms, that a child (or children), who are the symbolic bearers of innocence, can commit the same deed as their adult fictional counterparts. They must therefore be super-super-human. But no, the whole point of Kästner's book is that these are real children, with flaws (they might fall asleep on the phone, fib to their parents, be prone to vanity), who manage this super-human deed.

Now, many adults reading the book to their children (as I have done on several delightful occasions) might be inclined at key moments in the story to stick their tongue firmly in their cheek and soldier on. We should remember, however, that children's fiction is particularly intent on appealing to a child's longing for omnipotence. As the smaller members of the human race, and the least powerful in very nearly all acts of decision-making going on around

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them, it's hardly surprising that the fiction that often appears to them the most delicious and the most tempting is precisely the one that implies that its heroes (and for that narrative moment, the readers) are capable of acts that go well beyond a child's usual capabilities. Again, Kästner's superb trick is to do this without the assistance of superguns, superpowers, magical assistants or a divinity. It is all done through the collective wisdom and energy of the all-too-human boys.

One last word. It is not only the boys, their families and the material of their lives that are drawn with painstaking care, there is also Berlin itself. Just as other great writers for children have lavished attention on landscape and house interiors, here for the first time are loving descriptions of what Kästner's contemporaries called 'street-noise' (*strassenrausch*). With all the optimism of the milieu that Kästner belonged to, we meet a Berlin where even the passing buses are exciting. Here is one of my favourite pieces in all of literature, taking its place alongside the flowering of German expressionist painting of this time:

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It had already grown dark. Electric signs flared up everywhere. The elevated railway thundered past. The underground railway rumbled and the noise from the trams and buses and cycles joined together in a wild concert. Dance music was being played in the Café Woerz. The cinemas, in the Nollendorf Square, began their last performance of the evening. And crowds of people pushed their way into them.

The fact that this optimism was ill-founded for Kästner himself – something he came to realize only too well as he watched his own books being burnt – should be no reason to withhold or dampen that optimism as we share this book with children. Following Kästner, we can quite legitimately read with our children in the hope that the world may heal itself through the actions of its citizens acting in co-operation for each other.