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Charting the Composition of British Series of Children's Classics

Abstract

Classic children's literature continues to hold a strong appeal for scholars, publishers, educators and readers in the United Kingdom. This is exemplified by the prominent position that classic texts currently occupy in British educational policy. Since the turn of the twentieth century several British publishers have grouped together individual works and presented them to child readers in series titled classics. Despite the significant role that publishers are acknowledged to play in creating classics and prevalence of British series of children's classics, these series have received a limited amount of critical attention in children's literature scholarship. Therefore, the composition of series in terms of the titles that publishers have regularly presented, and currently present, as children's classics is an unknown entity. This paper reports on a research project that used descriptive statistical analysis with a focus on the frequency of titles, specifically the most regularly occurring titles and non-recurring titles that only appear in a single series, to draw conclusions about the composition of series. This approach and focus necessitated a large data set of information about British series of children's classics from the start of the twentieth century, specifically metadata about the titles included in these series, that was subsequently organized in a database. The findings reveal the extent to which the composition of series is influenced by commercial factors, namely copyright. Furthermore, studying the types of non-recurring titles and their appearance in series over time reveals that British series of children's classics in the twenty-first century are generally more homogenised, as series now focus on a small core of titles from the Golden Age of children's literature and lack diversity. The paper concludes by arguing that a statistical approach to children's literature that involves the

compilation and analysis of large data sets enables researchers to move beyond individual texts and summarise previously unexplored or under explored areas.

Contextualising series of children's classics

The concept of a classic remains of considerable interest and importance within the context of British children's literature. Following policy reforms, classic texts occupy a central position in the English primary curriculum and are recommended as books that should be used in literacy lessons because of their perceived value; successive Education Secretaries have positioned classics as crucial for improving children's literacy skills and reducing educational inequality (Gove; Morgan). Classics are equally valued by publishers, as children's literature departments of British bookshops feature crowded shelves and standalone displays of 'classics' that are populated by different editions of individual texts. The presence, or even dominance, of children's classics reflects the perceived status of this group of texts that stems from the historical origins of the term; classic is derived from the Latin adjective 'classicus' that translates to "belonging to the highest class of citizens" (Hardie). The second-century author Aulus Gellius employed the term in this way when using 'classicus' to describe writers of the highest quality or authority, commenting "any classical or authoritative writer, not one of the common herd" (377). The classic as synonymous with quality is also evident in Matthew Arnold's positioning of classics as works that serve as touchstones for detecting excellence in other texts, though literary quality is a subjective and imprecise concept which has been defined in a multiplicity of ways from originality (Mukherjee) to maturity (Eliot). In addition to quality, endurance or survival across the ages is central to the concept of the classic as reflected in Ankhi Mukherjee's

(1034) analysis of the classic based on lectures given by T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee where Mukherjee argues that the classic defines itself by surviving literary criticism. This criterion is similarly marked by subjectivity and imprecision; whilst it is broadly agreed that “something more than fleeting success” (Paruolo, 15) is required, what this ‘something more’ is has been variously defined from a generation (Jordan, 39) to remaining popular 100 years from the date of publication (Children’s Literature Association).

The prominence of children’s classics in contemporary spaces dedicated to consumption such as bookshops where shelves display various versions of individual works reflects the strong commercial dimension of this group of texts. Peter Hunt ties the term classic to the commercial enterprise of the children’s book business highlighting the huge commercial drive to reproduce classics in new and different ways, the most notable of which is through series. Series of children’s classics can be defined as a collection of two or more books that have been assembled by publishers and marketed under a series title that includes the term “classic”, implying a shared sense of quality and endurance. In the decade since Deborah Stevenson first commented on the expansion of the children’s classic series (122), the practice of presenting different texts under the label classic has grown. Series of classics now constitute a dominant trend in contemporary British children’s publishing (Ramdarshan Bold 427) and consequently, child readers will often encounter texts promoted in the British educational system through series. Such contemporary commercial endeavours, however, are not without their issues, as children’s literature scholars have highlighted how the classic is being stretched and manipulated to apply to an ever-expanding range of products (e.g. Kidd).

Series of children's classics are marked by a tension between commercialism and notions of quality, as in reproducing classic works for sale, some publishers are predominantly driven by the desire to sell their editions as opposed to concerns about literary value. Whilst Lucy Pearson's study of British children's publishing in the 1960s and 1970s that focuses on Puffin and an imprint of Macmillan does not engage with classic specifically, it highlights how the editors of these publishing houses had to negotiate ideological tensions between literary and commercial aspects of publishing and contrasting conceptions of 'quality' in children's books that were broadly centred on the child or the book. In series of classics there is a further tension between the concept of a series and that of a classic. Rather than naturally existing together, books have been collected by publishers only on the basis of their bestowed status as 'classic'. Publishers play a key role in creating and maintaining classics, as evident in Kenneth Kidd's discussion of Louise Seaman Bechtel, the first children's book editor at Macmillan in 1922, who would remarket titles that Macmillan owned the copyright to as classics. She would use the status of existing titles to raise the profile of new books through the inclusion in series of classics. Stevenson argues that the influence of publishers as well as popular audiences on determining classics distinguishes the classic from the connected, yet distinct concept of the canon (113-14).

So far, series of classics have received limited in-depth critical attention. Existing scholarship on the classic in children's literature has largely considered issues around power dynamics (Stevenson 109, 117) adaptation (Paruolo 17) and the overlap with canonicity (Kidd 53). An exception is Hunt's critique of children's classics that briefly considers a few examples of British series (14-15), generating questions about the bigger picture of the composition of these series. Series of classics are similarly underrepresented in work on seriality, which is itself an under-researched topic in children's literature (Kümmerling-

Meibauer 167), reflecting a broader trend of how literary fiction “tends to be defined in terms of its singularity” (Reimer et al. 3). Studies of seriality in children’s literature that challenge this trend predominantly focus on series written by the same author and/or focusing on the same characters (Watson 6). Furthermore, histories of British children’s publishing, such as those by Frank Eyre and Kimberley Reynolds and Nicholas Tucker, also engage with the series as books written by the same author and with the classic as individual works of literature. This article explores instead publishers’ involvement with children’s classics through series, asking which titles they routinely present as classics and how this may have changed since these series emerged at the turn of the twentieth century.

Statistically analysing series

The article seeks an answer to the central question: what have been the key trends in the titles that appear in British series of children’s classics since the twentieth century? A statistical approach that focused on descriptive statistics and specifically frequency counts was adopted, as it can provide a summary of a data set (Stubbs), which in this instance draws together multiple series. The approach can also illuminate the composition of series by identifying the titles that are most and least frequently presented and showing how the titles in each group change over time. In using computational tools to compile and statistically analyse a large data set, the approach aligns with Franco Moretti’s concept of “distant reading” that is about “looking at the literary field as a whole...rather than individual cases” (4). Statistical approaches are still relatively novel in children’s literature studies, but recent work demonstrates how they can be used to provide valuable insights into previously unknown fields (Fought and Eisenhauer; Terras; Thompson and Sealy).

Melissa Terras used descriptive statistics to analyse her corpus of academics in illustrated children's books, identifying shifts in the frequency of these characteristics over time. Whilst studying characteristics of children's literature on a large scale using digital tools and statistical methods, as Eugene Giddens argues, "efficiently leads to new, broad-scale knowledge" (306), these methods are not without their limitations. The emphasis on summarisation can mask nuances at the level of individual instances in the data set, though this can be overcome by using such methods in tandem with traditional close reading approaches as exemplified by the work of Katherine Bode and, in the field of children's literature, Wouter Haverals and Lindsey Geybels. Ray Cooksey also highlights the need to contextualise and interpret statistics, which in this project was done through bringing statistics on the frequency of titles in series into a dialogue with key commercial issues such as copyright that have previously been suggested as important for determining the selection of classics.

A research question focused on trends in the composition of series required the construction of a large data set of information about British series of children's classics. The use of the term "data set" as opposed to "corpus" reflects how the research focused on information about the series rather than on a collection of texts. The series were defined as a collection of two or more books that were marketed under a series title that used the term classic, were produced by a British publisher, written in English and aimed at children. Series were found through searching the online marketplace sites Amazon and eBay as well as the websites of the large UK booksellers Waterstones and WHSmith. The term 'children's classics' was used in the field 'series title' where this was available or in the general search field otherwise. In line with the project's parameters results were filtered by restricting the material type to 'Book', the language to 'English' and the publisher to British publishing

houses. Existing histories of British publishing companies and imprints were also reviewed, specifically Lorraine Johnson and Brian Alderson's catalogue of Ladybird's products which identified three series, and Terry Seymour's history of Everyman's Library which detailed the series Everyman's Children's Classics. These sources were supplemented by searches of digital archives and collections that include children's literature, specifically the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum collections and Cambridge University Library, using the previously mentioned searching and filtering process. This data collection work generated a record of series from 1899 up to 2022 and aimed to be as complete as possible by gathering information from the range of sources listed above that spanned booksellers, publishing histories and archives of children's literature.

Each of the filtered records from the online catalogue searches was accessed digitally and metadata was collected that would enable an analysis of trends in the composition of series. This metadata included information about each series of classics, namely the title of the series, the publisher, the size of the series generated from the number of titles that were identified as being part of it and the start and end publishing dates, which were identified by taking the earliest and last publication dates of books included in the series. A code was created as a unique identifier or ID for each series that contained the initials of the series title and the publisher followed by the start publishing date, for example: LCL1994 for the series Ladybird Classics first published by Ladybird in 1994. Metadata was also collected about specific book titles and each of the series of classics that they appeared in. This metadata was organised in a custom-built database constructed using Microsoft Access that included a separate table for information about each series (Fig. 1.) and one that connected information about series and books (Fig. 2.). Their IDs enabled search queries to explore

connections between different data fields, particularly the frequency with which a title appears in series published during different time periods.

| Series ID | Series Title | Publisher | Start Publishing Date | End Publishing Date | Total titles |
|-------------|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| TCYPJMD1899 | Temple Classics for Young People | J. M. Dent & Sons | 1899 | 1903 | 14 |
| SPCCSPH1903 | Stead's Prose Classics for Children | Stead's Publishing House | 1903 | 1908 | 21 |
| TCCTLP1905 | The Children's Classics | The Library Press | 1905 | 1905 | 4 |
| CCEN1910 | Children's Classics | Ernest Nister | 1910 | 1910 | 7 |
| CCM1922 | The Children's Classics - Illustrated | Macmillan | 1922 | 1925 | 48 |
| MMCM1924 | Methuen's Modern Classics | Methuen | 1924 | 1942 | 24 |
| ICJMD1949 | Illustrated Classics for Older Readers | J. M. Dent & Sons | 1949 | 1975 | 17 |
| CICJMD1949 | Children's Illustrated Classics | J. M. Dent & Sons | 1949 | 1975 | 53 |
| GPCGP1950 | Golden Pleasure Classics | Golden Pleasure Books | 1950 | 1967 | 8 |
| MCM1962 | Macmillan's Classics | Macmillan | 1962 | 1962 | 37 |
| BCBB1966 | Bancroft Classics | Bancroft Books | 1966 | 1969 | 41 |
| BGLCTCP1968 | Boys' and Girls' Library Classics | The Children's Press | 1968 | 1968 | 3 |
| SCRT1973 | Star Classics | Robert Tyndall Ltd | 1973 | 1973 | 3 |
| LCCL1974 | Ladybird Children's Classics | Ladybird | 1974 | 1988 | 30 |
| PCCP1975 | Purnell Children's Classics | Purnell | 1975 | 1986 | 26 |
| AACAP1982 | Award Adventure Classics | Award Publishing | 1982 | 1982 | 7 |
| PCP1983 | Puffin Classics | Puffin | 1983 | 1987 | 62 |
| HCCH1986 | Hamlyn Children's Classics | Hamlyn | 1986 | 1986 | 15 |
| CCCC1986 | Collins Children's Classics | Collins | 1986 | 1987 | 10 |
| GCH1987 | Golden Classics | Hutchinson | 1987 | 1987 | 5 |
| LCL1987 | Longman Classics | Longman | 1987 | 1991 | 37 |
| LOMCE1991 | Little Owl Mini Classics | Egmont | 1991 | 1991 | 4 |

Fig. 1. Extract from the Series table in the database

| Book ID | Book Title | Series ID |
|---------|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | A Christmas Carol | CICJMD1949, ECDK1998, ECEB2010, ECSC2020, ELCCEL1992, HCCCHC2021, LCCL1974, LCL1987, LCL1994 |
| 2 | A Dog So Small | PMCP1993 |
| 3 | A Kind of Wild Justice | OCMCOUP1998 |
| 4 | A Little Princess | ACCA2017, CCHC2000, ECE2015, FCFF2013, FCTT2013, HCCCHC2021, LCCL1974, LCL1994, OCCOUP2007 |
| 5 | A Midsummer Night's Death | OCMCOUP1998 |
| 6 | A Stitch in Time | EMCHC2008 |
| 7 | A Study in Scarlet | ECSC2020, OCCOUP2007 |
| 8 | A Tale of Two Cities | BCBB1966, CCM1922, ECEB2010, ECSC2020, LCCL1974, LCL1987, MCM1962, PCP1994, PCP2008, SCS2008 |
| 9 | A Wizard of Earthsea | PMCP1993 |
| 10 | A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls | CICJMD1949, ELCCEL1992 |
| 11 | A Wrinkle in Time | PMCP1993, PMCP2000 |
| 12 | Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor | LCL1987, TCCTLP1905 |
| 13 | Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse | KCK2001, MCM2014, YPMCP2004 |
| 14 | Aesop's Fables | BCCB1994, CCM1922, CICJMD1949, ELCCEL1992, MCM1962, PCP1994, PCP2008, PCPB1997, SPCCSPH1903 |
| 15 | After the First Death | PMCP2000 |
| 16 | Aladdin | ECDK1998, PCP1994 |
| 17 | Alice's Adventures in Wonderland | ACCA2015, ACCA2017, BCBB1966, BCCB1994, BLCHC2010, CCHC2000, CCM1922, CCMK2020, CCT2008 |
| 18 | Anne Frank | PMCP1993, PMCP2000 |
| 19 | Anne of Avonlea | ACCA2017, BCCB1994, OCCOUP2007, PCP1983, PCP1994, PCP2008, VCRH2012, VMCCV2015, WCCW1994 |
| 20 | Anne of Green Gables | ACCA2015, ACCA2017, BCCB1994, CCHC2000, ELCCEL1992, HCCCHC2021, HVCCHV2008, LCL1987, MLU1987 |
| 21 | Anne of the Island | ACCA2017, PCP1994, PCP2008, VMCCV2015 |
| 22 | Aquila | PMCP2007 |

Fig. 2. Screenshot of the Series: Books table in the database

Overview of the data set

The following analysis of trends across British series of children's classics since the turn of the twentieth century focuses on changes in the frequency with which individual titles

appear in series over different time periods and shifts in the proportion of titles that fall into groups such as non-recurring titles, which only appear in a single series). The data collection

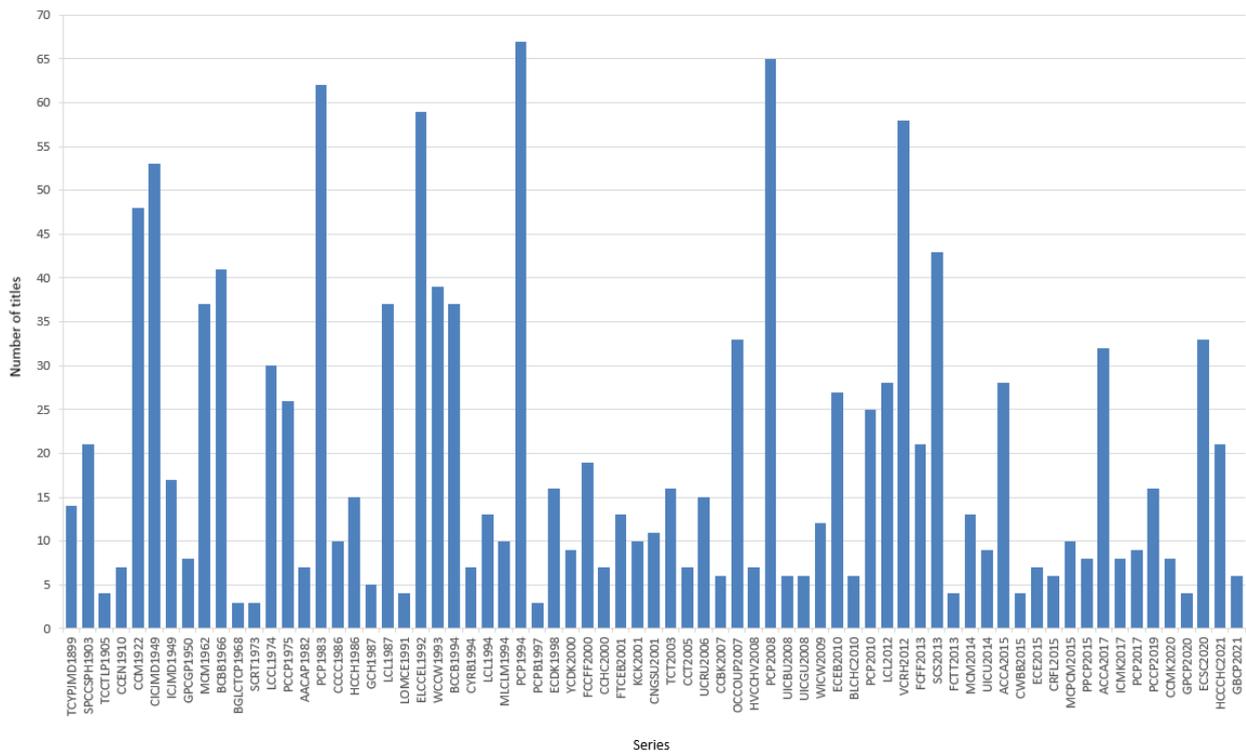


Fig. 3. The number of books per series with series ordered chronologically based on start publication date

work identified a total of 71 series of children’s classics by 44 different publishers that encompass 280 titles. The series under study span a period of 123 years, from J.M. Dent’s Temple Classics for Young People in 1899 to two series that were published by the end of 2022, and vary markedly in their publishing period: whilst almost half of the series (45%) are published in their entirety over the course of a single year, 17% span one or more decades. There is also considerable variation in the size of series across the data set (Fig. 3.); the average series contains 19 titles, but the smallest have fewer than five titles and the largest, Puffin’s 1983, 1994 and 2008 series, each feature more than 60 titles.

Furthermore, series vary considerably by their intended audience and foci, often reflecting the niche that their publishers have targeted as evident from the information on titles' covers. Ladybird's three abridged series of classics are aimed at younger readers and Usborne's Illustrated Classics for Girls and Classics for Boys focus on gender, though following criticism the publisher later replaced these series with a collection titled Illustrated Classics. The expertise of individual publishing houses is apparent in the data set, as demonstrated by how Dorling Kindersley, a renowned publisher of illustrated non-fiction books, presents retellings of texts alongside facts in their series Eyewitness Classics. The drive to create original products out of established texts is particularly evident in the case of Puffin, the most prolific publisher of series. Puffin's five most recent series from 2015-2022 adopt a new angle on classic texts to attract modern consumers; Puffin Pixels Classics, for example, features cover art in the style of video games, and Green Puffin Classics focuses on titles which portray the natural world with introductions by environmental activists. The data set therefore suggests a measure of continuity and flux in British series of children's classics. Series have been, and continue to be, a prevalent publishing practice as evidenced by both the frequency with which they are published and the number of publishing houses that have ventured into this market. Classics are a safe bet for publishers because they sell well and have a long shelf life (O' Sullivan 133). At the same time, however, publishers have increasingly faced the "struggle of being visible" (Thompson 238) in a crowded marketplace, which is particularly acute in the case of children's classics. This struggle for visibility appears to have resulted in the children's classics being taken in new directions to create competitive products distinguished from the variety of series that already exist.

Variation and historical shifts in the composition of series

The most frequently occurring titles in series of children's classics were initially defined as those that appear in 50% or more of all series (36 series), which reflects some consensus between multiple publishers and over different decades about the classic status of these titles. However, frequency counts showed that only three titles met this threshold: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (42 series), *Black Beauty* (39) and *The Secret Garden* (36).

Lowering the threshold to 25% (18 series or more), a figure which still encompasses the output of multiple publishing houses, reveals an additional 18 titles (Fig. 4.).

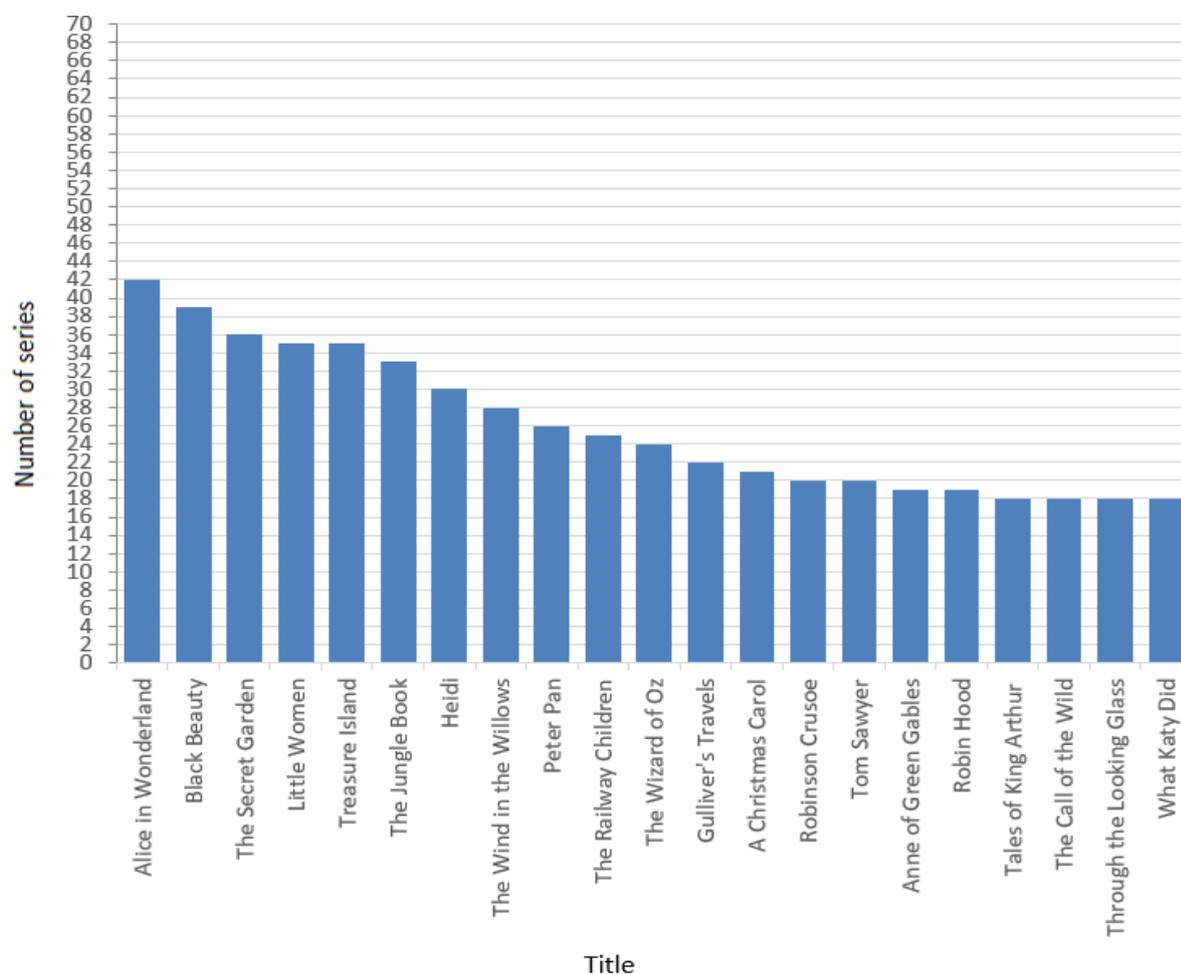


Fig. 4. Titles that appear in 25% or more of all series of children's classics

This group of texts is characterised by the dominance of works from the Golden Age of children's literature, which Carpenter defines as ranging from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) and which is designated as 'golden' because of the number of high-quality children's books. A quarter of the titles were also originally published for adults but have come to be included in, and furthermore dominate, series of *children's* classics. This group of texts encompasses long adult narratives like *Robinson Crusoe* and *A Christmas Carol* which are routinely adapted for child readers. Hunt categorises such works as books intended for adults that have been "adopted" (14) by children but this 'adoption' refers more accurately to publishers of children's literature than child readers. The most notable trend that data reveals relates to variation as opposed to consensus. That only three out of the 280 titles in series of classics (less than 2%) appear in half or more of these series shows that there is not a large core of widely agreed upon children's classics; instead, series draw from a broad range of potential classics. This data inverts the assumption often apparent in political discourse about classics and in publishers' marketing material for series that the classic is self-evident, while scholars have frequently deconstructed the idea that the classic is a straightforward concept (Kidd; Stevenson). It appears that series select different titles that meet a specific understanding of the classic and consequently perpetuate issues with the term by keeping it confused.

Analysing titles in terms of the publishing date of series reveals that this variation also exists over time with historical shifts in the composition of series. This analysis identified the most frequently occurring titles in series published in each decade from 1899 to 2019, with the total number of series produced in the decade acting as a reference point.

Comparatively fewer series were published in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century, a period that encompasses both World Wars and an economic recession. There has

been a sustained increase in the number of series published since the 1980s with 20 produced in the last decade. Figure 5 shows the trajectory of the most frequently occurring titles from Figure 4 that are presented in terms of their presence in series over time.

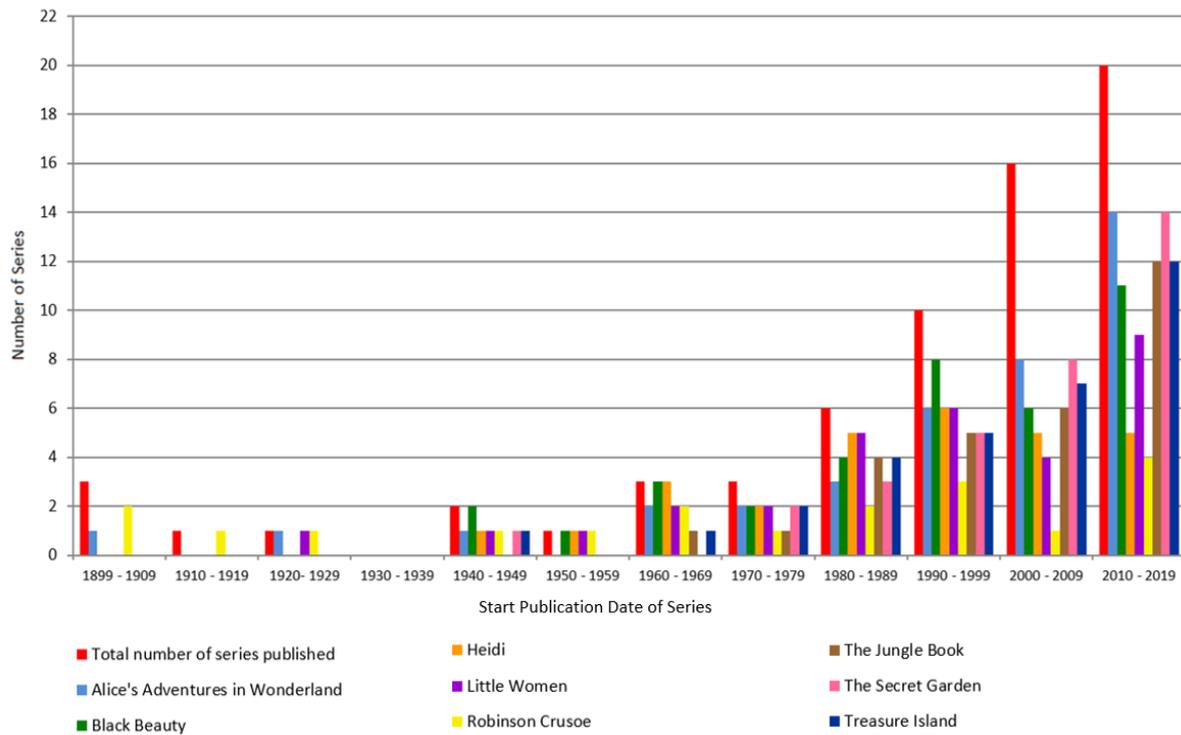


Fig. 5. The trajectory of selected titles in series of children’s classics from 1899 - 2019

Whilst the composition of series varies from 1899 to 2019, there are some pockets of stability apparent with three different groups of titles that dominate series from 1899 to 1920s, from 1940 to 1990s and from 2000 to 2019. Bringing the data in Figure 5 into a dialogue with copyright information highlights a clear connection between titles’ presence in series and expiration of copyright, when works can be cheaply reproduced without licence and paying royalties. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is a key title in the earliest identified series through to the 1970s, when it starts to decline in popularity. This title has been out of copyright in the UK since 1774 therefore it was freely available to publishers for their series in the first half of the twentieth century, when many of the books from the Golden Age of

children's literature (1865-1926) were still in copyright. The prominence of *Robinson Crusoe* in the earliest series provides evidential support for Bechtel's argument that series of classics draw heavily on out of copyright material and thus "create many rival editions of older books" (167-8). The trajectory of the titles that replace *Robinson Crusoe* in the 1940s and remain popular until the 1990s (*Black Beauty*, *Little Women* and *Heidi*) also reflects a change in their copyright status as well as a thematic shift: the postwar publishing industry focused on works about the relative safety of the domestic space (Eyre 22). There is a notable decline in the popularity of these titles after the 1990s when titles published in the second half of the Golden Age fall out of copyright providing publishers with new and lucrative options for their series of classics.

A third group of titles - *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Jungle Book* and *Treasure Island* - increase in popularity from around the 1980s. Figure 5 shows that *Alice* is a perennial favourite; copyright expired relatively quickly after the book was first published and it entered the public domain in 1907. It is present in the earliest series and remains one of the most popular titles throughout the twentieth century as well as into the twenty-first century. The impact of copyright on the titles included in (or excluded from) series of classics is particularly evident in the case of *The Jungle Book*. The title markedly increases in popularity during the 1980s and appears in 67% series published in this decade, which aligns with how its copyright expired in 1986. Copyright, however, was then revived from 1996 to 2006 under the Duration of Copyright and Rights in Performances Regulations 1995. During the 1990s and 2000s, when *The Jungle Book* is back in copyright, its presence declines relative to the number of series produced; from inclusion in 50% of series published in the 1990s to 38% of series in the 2000s. Conversely, in the decade after *The Jungle Book* enters the public domain once again, it appears in 60% of series produced from 2010-2019.

Copyright has previously been positioned as an important factor in the commercial reprinting of classic books (Bechtel; Hunt) and these findings confirm its significance to series of children’s classics. Copyright accounts for why the composition of series of children’s classics as a whole is characterised by periods of continuity within a broader trend of variation over time.

Non-recurring titles and homogenisation

At the other extreme of the data set are the non-recurring titles that only appear in a single series. Such titles would conventionally be termed outliers, but as this group equals 126 out of 280 titles in series of classics (45%), it represents almost the majority of titles in the data set which further emphasises that there is a considerable measure of variation. Using the metadata collected when building the data set, these non-recurring titles can be grouped into broad categories based on information about their publication history, such as their intended audience, their reception, first publication date and genre. Whilst categories are not mutually exclusive, each title has been assigned to the category that appears to best account for its status as an outlier (Table 1.).

| Category | Number of titles |
|--|-------------------------|
| Fairy Tales and folktales | 29 |
| Books originally published for adults | 21 |
| Children's books that fell out of popularity | 21 |
| Books attached to their own series | 12 |
| Lesser-known children's books | 12 |
| Christian classics | 11 |
| Books linked to an adaptation | 10 |
| Modern titles | 5 |
| Poetry | 5 |

Table 1. Non-recurring titles in series of children’s classics grouped by type

The largest category of non-recurring titles consists of fairy tales and folktales, a genre that has always had a fuzzy relationship with series of classics (Hunt 22). While fairy tales have an enduring popularity like classics, they are a distinct genre of children's literature. Most of the non-recurring titles in the fairy tale category appear in series published before 1960. This skewed distribution reflects Matthew Grenby's (5) observation that fairy tales had an important place in children's literature more broadly from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century. It also reflects contemporary trends in children's publishing, where fairy tales are largely published separate from classics. While various non-recurring titles, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1740), are still in publication, they are now largely found in the fairy tale section of publishers' products rather than within the classics section alongside works from the Golden Age. Similarly, books that belong to their own series, such as C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* books, are now routinely published as collections themselves, often accompanied by merchandise. Children's publishing has become more compartmentalised in the twenty-first century and genres that were once part of the classics are now often treated as distinct entities, allowing publishers greater opportunities to profit from existing works and tie-in products (Mackey).

Three additional categories of non-recurring titles highlight the significant commercial dimension of series. Some titles have enjoyed popularity during a specific period because of an acclaimed adaptation. *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, for example, was published in 1964 but only appears in Macmillan's 2014 series, which followed the national tour of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* the musical from 2010 onwards. This case shows how external factors, termed 'accelerants' by Stevenson (118), can re-energise the status of a text that publishers exploit by remarketing the book in a series of classics. Titles categorised as lesser-known children's books are predominantly written by lesser-known children's authors, such as *Charlotte*

Sometimes (1969) by Penelope Farmer, or lesser-known works by established authors, such as *Rose in Bloom* (1876) by Louisa May Alcott. The majority appear in Random House’s series Vintage Classics (2012) that “features perennial favourites such as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* alongside much-loved contemporary classics exclusive to Random House” (Random House 2). The publisher therefore draws heavily on their back catalogue, elevating the profile of previously unremarkable titles by positioning them among more established classics. This commercial dimension of series creates a potentially problematic discord: while politicians and educators direct children to the classics as representing ‘the best’ children’s books, examples from the data set confirm O’Sullivan’s argument (135) that titles labelled classics cannot be equated with literary quality, at least within the context of commercial series.

Non-recurring titles can also be analysed in terms of historical shifts and thus give insight into the question whether series appear to have become more homogenised. This analysis compares the first five series in the data set with the more recent series, with the latter restricted to the ones that are complete (Table 2). A defined number of series is better basis for comparison than a period given the uneven distribution of series over time. Additionally restricting the comparison to five series limits the earliest group to the period at the start of the twentieth century, when the classic series emerged.

| Series | Number of non-recurring titles |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| First five series (1899-1922) | 42/62 titles (68%) |
| Most recent five series (2017-2021) | 0/26 titles (0%) |

Table 2. The number of non-recurring titles in the first five and most recent five series from the data set

The earliest five series are markedly more varied in terms of size and the proportion of non-recurring titles, with over two thirds of titles appearing in just one series. In contrast there is a lack of variation in the five most recent examples, which contain no outliers, as all titles appear in two or more series. These contemporary series, however, are dominated by Puffin which published three out of five of the series, each of which largely reproduce the same titles. The five series (2015-2017) that were published before the most recent ones encompass a wider range of publishers and while they are characterised by a greater proportion of non-recurring titles (17/41 titles – 41%), there is still less variation than the earliest series. It appears that British series of children’s classics are more homogenised in the twenty-first century and centre around a small core of titles that are predominantly from the Golden Age of children’s literature; *Alice* and *Peter Pan* appear in eight of the ten most recent series, *The Jungle Book* in seven and *The Wind in the Willows* in six.

This homogenisation of series of classics with an emphasis on Golden Age texts can partly be explained by the commercial concerns previously mentioned, notably greater compartmentalisation within children’s publishing and the copyright status of titles. In addition, the popularity and cultural position of Golden Age titles that dominate the most recent series mean that these stories are widely known outside of the context of series; they are continually remade in various media aimed at different generations and considered part of British culture. The dominance of Golden Age works reflects how series of children’s classics balance ideals of literary quality and notions of popularity, as series are commercial ventures and the titles within them must appeal to the wider public. These findings about contemporary series align with critiques of the classic by children’s literature scholars that highlight this tension between quality and marketability (Hunt; O’Sullivan; Stevenson). Audiences seek books such as renown titles from the Golden Age that “are cherished

legacies from previous generations and gifts of love to the next” (Stevenson 113) which publishers can capitalise on through series of classics. There are evidently implications for diversity as series are dominated by British, generally male authors and draw heavily on Golden Age texts despite issues of racism and colonialism (Ramdarshan Bold 433) such as in *The Secret Garden* and *Peter Pan* that remain popular titles in contemporary series. It is important that children can see themselves in the texts that they encounter at the start of their reading lives so that they do not come to view reading as an activity that lacks meaning for them (Meek), but Rudine Sims Bishop highlights there is a lack of books that act as mirrors for children of colour. The current privileging of children’s classics in British educational contexts may therefore narrow children’s experience of literature and impact upon their attitudes towards reading during a formative period.

Conclusions

A statistical approach towards studying children’s literature that entails the analysis of large data sets using descriptive statistics can generate new knowledge and provide insight into aspects of this field that transcend individual texts by identifying broader trends such as historical shifts. The data sets created by such research are also of value in themselves as a historical record of phenomena such as series, in addition to containing information that facilitates an analysis of these phenomena. Furthermore, Hoey argues that the data sets can serve as “a kind of laboratory for conducting experiments” (14), as they provide unlimited possibilities to investigate potential connections between fields and test out hypotheses. This type of research can be used to comprehensively study genres and literary periods, both in relation to a country’s literature and internationally. In the case of children’s classics, it

could enable an exploration of how British series compare to their international counterparts that would illuminate the extent to which children's classics can be conceived of as international.

My descriptive statistical analysis of a data set containing information about British series of children's classics aimed to identify trends in the composition of these series and address a gap in knowledge about British publishers' involvement. The analysis reveals historical variation in the titles that publishers have labelled classics, as there are clear shifts in the frequency with which individual titles have appeared in series from the start of the twentieth century to the present decade. However, the analysis also points to periods of relative stability or continuity in the most frequently occurring titles and suggests that series have become more homogenised in the twenty-first century. The contextualisation and interpretation of statistics highlights the substantial commercial dimension of these series, particularly the extent to which copyright, broader trends in the children's publishing industry and the popularity of titles can determine the books that publishers present as classics and that consequently are perceived as such by politicians, educators and readers. Contemporary series can also provide different understandings of a classic for commercial reasons by selecting titles that align with a specific focus to create a novel product in a crowded marketplace. A statistical analysis of the composition of British series of children's classics since the previous century therefore suggests that series commercialise, and subsequently confuse, the concept of a classic. These findings point to the existence of a gulf between the idea of a classic, which has historically been tied to notions of quality, and the commercial use of this term in children's publishing. Consequently, there is a need to adopt a critical approach towards children's classics that acknowledges the commercial nature of this group of texts and the impact of serialisation.

Notes

The full findings from the research project will be discussed in the book *Serialisation, Commercialism and the Children's Classics: British Series from the 20th Century* (in preparation) in Bloomsbury's Perspectives on Children's Literature series.

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