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Post-War Place and Displacement in Rumer

Godden's *The Doll's House* and Mary Norton's The Borrowers

# Ursula Dubosarsky

Children are always small, living in a world of large adults, but in some children's books there are people even smaller than they are. In these books, 'little people' books, ordinary-sized children typically find themselves in the company of an individual or group of miniature human beings. The normal experience of the child of being small in the world of the big is therefore reversed and both adult and child are displaced.

Stories about very small human beings recur, of course, in folk and fairy tales and in formal literature, at least from *Gulliver's Travels* onwards. This paper will focus on two novels which appeared in the years following the end of World War II. The first is Rumer Godden's *The Doll's House*, published in 1947, and the second is Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*, published in 1952. Although neither novel directly addresses the issue of the war and its aftermath, apart from brief references, they can both be read as political fables, Swiftian in both their subject matter and their pessimism, expressed in the language and symbolism of children.

The post-war period pivotally heightened the power of the metaphor of the little person, and extended it beyond the displacement of the child and adult to a more specific political and historic displacement. The world after 1945 was filled with displaced persons, diminished by trauma, standing like Paddington Bear on railway platforms, homeless, rootless, and culturally anxious, attempting to find a new place within a dominant big culture at a time of political upheaval.

*The Dolls' House* was Rumer Godden's first children's novel, and the first of several she wrote about dolls. It was completed on her return from India at the end of the war when she was to set up home in a tiny house in a ruined and impoverished London, as she herself put it, 'numbed by loss and restrictions' (1992, p.3). It is the story of a group of dolls without a place of their own and how they come to acquire their dream home and what happens to them as a result.

The children in the novel, Emily and Charlotte, two little girls of the well-intentioned

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London middle-class, are in the business of the social rescue of damaged refugees in the form of lost and abandoned dolls. The first is a male doll who had once been a Highlander dressed in a kilt. Other children had:

dragged the bagpipes off and took some of the painted skin off the palm of his hand as well, and tore his clothes off too and let their puppy bite his foot. (p.11)

Not satisfied with excising his ethnic identity, these children further humiliated and imprisoned him:

One of the boys drew a moustache on his little top lip with indelible pencil ('indelible' means it can never come off); then they threw him into the cold dark toy cupboard where he lay for weeks and months and might have lain for years (p.13)

Emily and Charlotte rescue this doll and proceed with his assimilation into British society. They dress him in a suit, as a father of the house, and give a new, utterly English name, Mr Plantagenet. Psychologically, however, Mr Plantagenet remains terrified and without stable identity:

He could still not quite believe he was Mr Plantagenet. He was still easily made afraid, afraid of being hurt and abused again. (p.12)

The mother doll, Birdie, came out of a Christmas cracker dressed in feathers. Charlotte, for no stated reason, removes the feathers and dresses her in a conservative red skirt and a blue blouse. It is a kinder cruelty, in that the glue is soaked in water so the feathers do not hurt her as they are removed, but the end result is the same, a person denuded of her origins and like her assigned husband, indelibly vulnerable:

There was still something of the cracker and feather look about Mrs Plantagenet as there was still something of the dark toy cupboard about Mr Plantagenet. (p.14)

Now they have a father and mother, Emily and Charlotte gather up from various other places a daughter doll – Tottie, son – Apple, and dog – Darner. But the family is incomplete – there is no house to put them in. This is the chief dilemma of the novel: 'That was the trouble. There was no home' (p.15). The Plantagenet family need a house, that mixture of private and public culture in which to locate themselves and in which to feel safe, to create a boundary between the big and little, like a child's cubby house or room of their own. The dolls, like children, have little privacy, apart from their own thoughts, but in his own house, Mr Plantagenet believes, despite the inevitable passive indignity of a doll's life, being dressed up and taken about and played with at will, he would know who he was:

'And when they had finished playing with us,' said Mr Plantagenet, 'they would shut up the front and we should be alone, quite private in our own house.' (p.27)

But how to get such a place? In post-war London there were too many needy families, and not enough houses and the story directly dramatizes in miniature the contemporary situation in the historic, big world.

At the moment the Plantagenets were as uncomfortable as anyone in London; they had

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to live crowded together in two shoeboxes that were cramped and cold and could not shut; when they hung their washing out to dry, even the smallest pattern duster, it made the cardboard sodden and damp. (p.18)

As they wait in their shoebox they are consoled by the daughter doll, Tottie, with her imaginative visions of another, better place, a place where they would belong and be safe. In a mixture of nostalgia and fantasy, she describes for them the doll's house in which she once lived, with all its distinctly Victorian upper-middle-class trimmings: the blue tin stove, a green carpet, flowered china cups, a sofa of red velvet, and a golden birdcage with a singing bird inside it.

Miraculously, in the course of the novel, this marvellous house is found, restored, and the newly formed Plantagenet family move in. But there are dangers signposted. The house is filled with false things: a pot of pretend geraniums, a piano with glued on paper notes. It is only a façade of happiness, a place of material plenty so different to post-Blitz London, but which will lead to disillusionment and eventually death. There is a rival claimant to the house, a wealthy and beautiful doll called Marchpane, also a dispossessed refugee, but from a higher social class. While it seems clear that Tottie's claim on the house predates Marchpane's, her assertion of it brings a devastating response from the more socially powerful Marchpane: 'Don't you believe her,' cried Marchpane in a loud voice. 'That isn't her house. It's mine' (p.84).

Through a series of social exclusions orchestrated by Marchpane, virtually parodying the Nuremberg laws, the Plantagenets are gradually displaced and made marginal visitors and, indeed, slaves in their own house. This is all the while observed by Emily and Charlotte, who, although uneasy, do nothing to stop it, until the climactic murder of Birdie by fire, where the banality of the death as observed by Marchpane is emphasized by the tinkling of mechanical culture in the form of a music box, and Marchpane's emotionally controlled reaction:

There was a flash, a bright light, a white flame, and where Birdie had been there was no more Birdie, no sign of Birdie at all, only sinking gradually down on the carpet ... floated Birdie's clothes, burning, slowly turning brown, and going into holes; last of all, the fire ran up the pink embroidery cotton of her apron strings and they waved up in the air, as they used to wave on Birdie, and then were burnt right up. 'Tinkle. Tinkle. Tinkle,' said the musical box. Marchpane smiled. (p.130)

The dolls, it turns out, are no safer inside a solid upper-middle-class house than they were in the shoebox. In this novel, attachment to place, or finding identity and safety through place – past or future, real or imaginative – ends in a kind of death and diminution.

The same distrust or rejection of place as a source of safety and identity is echoed in Mary Norton's 1952 novel *The Borrowers*. This novel also concerns the experiences of a miniature family without a place of their own, living at the margins of the societies of others, in this case secretly beneath the floorboards of a big house.

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Like *The Doll's House*, *The Borrowers* is very much a novel of the post-World War II period, with its themes of minority persecution, forced emigration and displacement, ghettoes, loss of rights, and a life in hiding until discovery and extermination, and their hidden life inside someone else's house inevitably recalls Anne Frank's famous diary published four years previously (Frank 1954; Kuznets 1985).

However the Borrowers, unlike the Jews, have none of the aspirations for political independence taken for granted in the twentieth century. They do not yearn for a homeland with geopolitical boundaries and corresponding rights of self- determination with others like themselves. Rather, they accept and even embrace a culture of eternal displacement, to be forever nomads and wanderers. Yet, in contrast to the demoralised refugee Plantagenet dolls of *The Doll's House*, the Borrowers are an independent people, able to act at will. They are proud and culturally resistant. They are not dressed up and played with by those bigger than them, although they are child-like in other ways. Like children, they have no money, no means of earning money, nowhere to buy anything or sell anything, they produce nothing, and have no desire to produce anything, or grow anything. Like children, they conduct no measurable economic activity at all other than scavenging or what they call 'borrowing' from the leavings of the economy big house.

However, while children in a house may be seen but not heard, the Borrowers can be neither seen nor heard. They survive on the prosperity of the big house only on condition that they remain unseen. Contact between the big and little is fatal. The friendship between the child of the big house and teenage Arrietty brings disaster, foreshadowed early in the novel when Arrietty's mother is woken by the sight of a screwdriver coming down from the ceiling into her bedroom. It is only the boy from upstairs, wanting to help them, but the violating image of the descending screwdriver is hard to shake off.

There is no possibility of harmonious open multiculturalism presented in *The Borrowers*. The Borrowers survive only by being unseen and unknown to the big. When the big housekeeper, Mrs Driver, learns that the Borrowers are in the house, she immediately sets about their deliberate extermination by gas. The Borrowers, displaced once more, flee from the gas chambers, to find a new home, yet another secret ghetto, this time alongside gas pipes with only an air hole to the upper world to keep them alive.

The Borrowers' pragmatic life of invisible segregation and continual displacement is however, in the end, only a short-term survival strategy. If Arrietty remains hidden even from her own people, she will not find a mate and there will be no more Borrowers. As the human boy from the big house says:

'And you'll be the very last because you're the youngest. One day,' he told her smiling triumphantly, 'you'll be the only Borrower left in the world.' (p.76)

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This is the chief irony proposed in this deeply pessimistic tale: that the very coping mechanism of the Borrowers is destroying them, literally diminishing them, making them smaller and smaller until they will eventually disappear, unseen and unknown to anyone at all.

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