

THE BOOK AND MAGAZINE COLLECTOR INTERVIEW

MARY CADOGAN

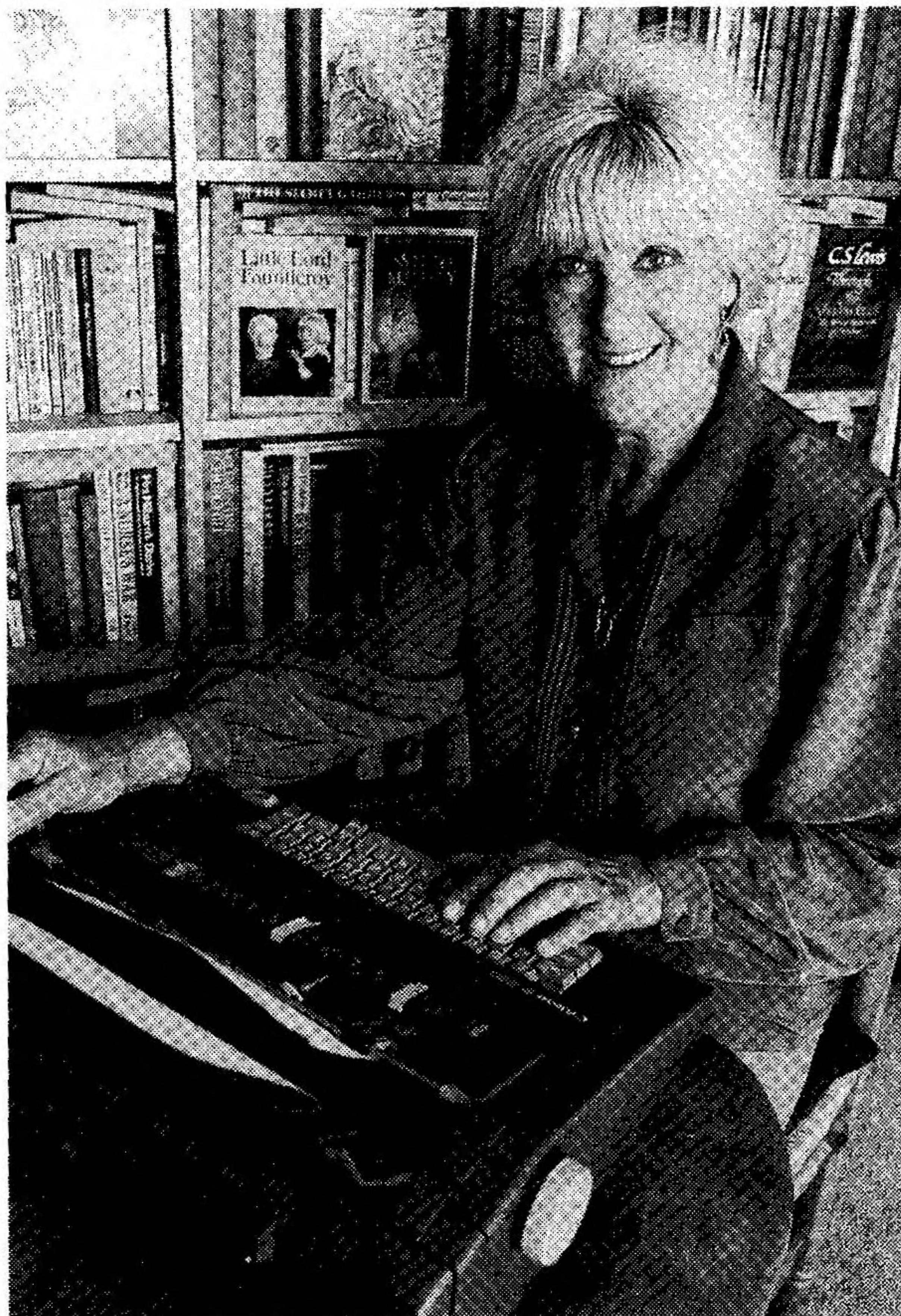
NORMAN WRIGHT TALKS TO THE WRITER AND BROADCASTER

While perhaps best known for her biographies of Richmal Crompton and Frank Richards, Mary Cadogan has written and broadcast widely on many aspects of popular fiction. Her first book, *You're a Brick, Angela!*, written with Patricia Craig, is the standard work on girls' fiction (and is soon to be reprinted) and other titles from her pen, including *And Then Their Hearts Stood Still* and *Women with Wings*, give some indication of the breadth of her expertise. Here Norman Wright chats to her about her life, her writing and her vast collection of books and magazines.

What did you read when you were very young?

"I suppose I started reading in a big way with the Amalgamated Press nursery comics, particularly *Tiger Tim's Weekly*, *Rainbow* and *Playbox*. These were lovely comics, beautifully illustrated with quite a lot of reading in them, too. By the time I was seven I'd started to read my brother's *Magnet*, and a year or so later my mother bought me *The Schoolgirl*. I was very much influenced by these papers because, as you know, they were a really good read. They were not comics: one had to give energy to reading them.

"At the same time I would have been reading a lot of the hardback schoolgirls books. My particular favourite was Dorita Fairlie Bruce, who wrote a long series about a boarding school girl called Dimsie, which was eternally popular; and also a very interesting series



Mary Cadogan at her trusty typewriter. Behind her are just a few of the books in her massive collection.

about a girl called Nancy, who started off in boarding school, then became a day school girl, and then went back to boarding school. That was a fascinating series with which I identified. Nancy and I had a lot in common."

Did you have any other favourite authors at this time?

"Frank Richards, obviously. And Richmal Crompton. I felt a strong identification with William. I think he appealed to me because he was the archetypal extroverted outdoor child. Like me! I also liked the books because they were very, very funny. I have to say that I appreciate the wit and humour of Richmal Crompton even more since I've been an adult. Most of the stories by her that we loved so much as children were written for adult magazines, which is probably why they continue to appeal to us throughout our lives."

Who else did you read as a child?

"I was very fond of Louisa M. Alcott, whose *Little Women* I won as a school prize at Elementary School. I remember going through a very strong Robert Louis Stevenson phase, and I loved *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which I read when I was about nine or ten. Another author whom I read as a child was Edith Nesbit, although I appreciate her work more now as an adult. I also read one or two of Frances Hodgson Burnett's books, particularly *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, which I thought then, and I still think, is a wonderful story about a very likeable boy who is not a sissy as he is sometimes portrayed. She was a marvellous writer. Although I didn't read it in childhood, I think her book, *The Secret Garden*, is one of the best children's stories ever written.

"I also, through my father's set of 'Fifty Classics', introduced myself to Shakespeare when I was probably only eight or nine. I don't claim to have understood Shakespeare then, but it gave me some sort of feeling for poetry. And, of course, poetry was also quite a strong influence from school, particularly elementary school, where we were introduced to many of the lyrical and narrative poets."

When and how did you actually start collecting books?

"It was in the mid-1960s when I was living in Horsham. There happened to be a rather good secondhand bookshop where I found myself picking up quite nice copies of the 'William' stories and one or two of the schoolgirls annuals I used to have as a child. I think I really started collecting because my nostalgia buds were awakened

by looking at some of the things that my daughter, Theresa, was reading."

Which books are your favourites?

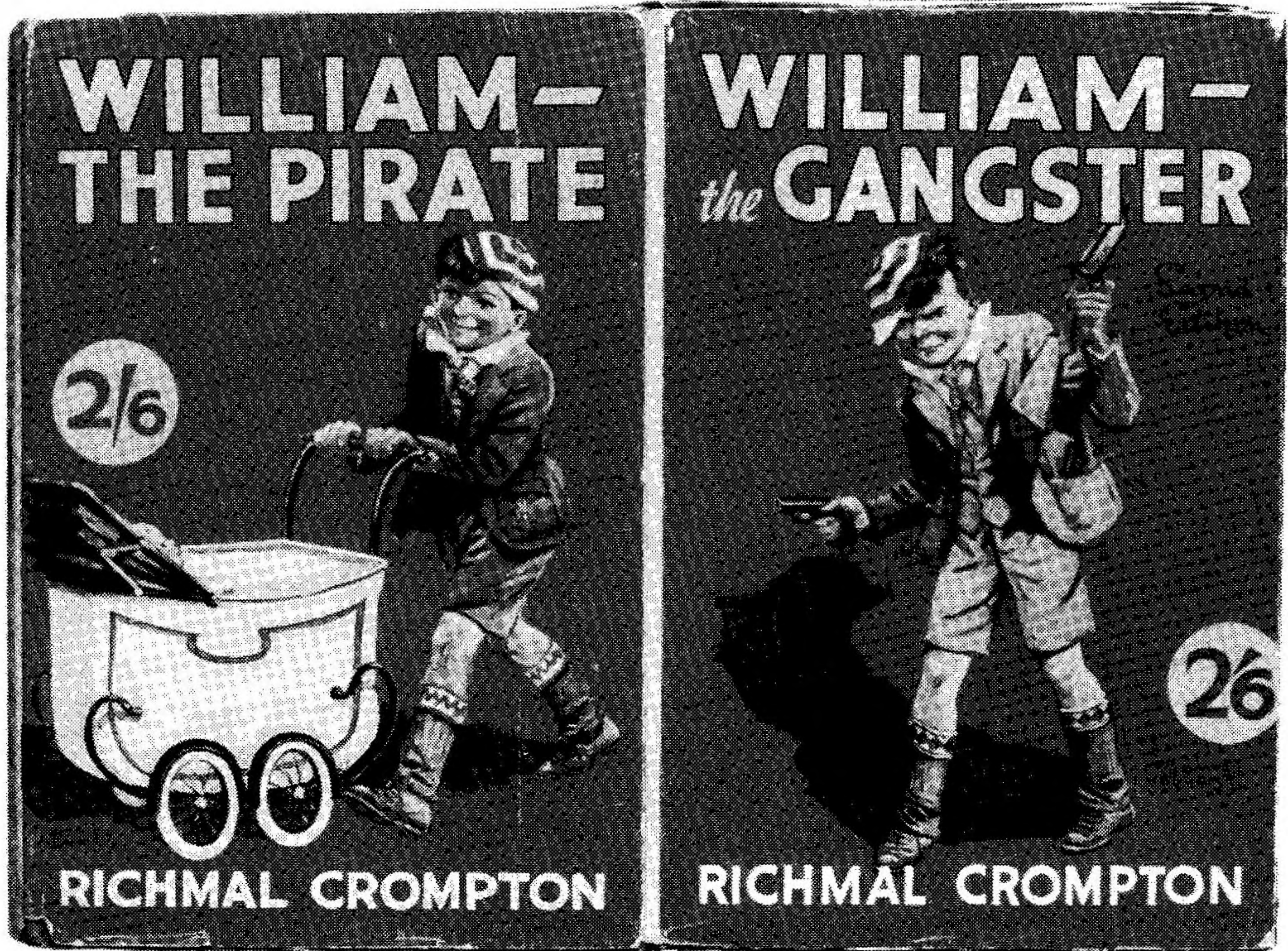
"*Pride and Prejudice*—actually everything by Jane Austen; Richmal Crompton's 'William' books; Frank Richards, of course, his *Magnet* stories in particular; *The Scarlet Pimpernel*; all Dorita Fairlie Bruce's school stories; and *Jane Eyre*, which I think is one of the perfect romantic/gothic stories in the language. Of all the detective writers, the one I most enjoy and go back to again and again is Dorothy Sayers — the 'Lord Peter Wimsey' books. I also like stories that combine romance with a mystery element, particularly the works of Mary Stewart and Evelyn Anthony."

Of the authors you collect, whom do you regard as the 'best' writer?

"I suppose it has to be Jane Austen and Richmal Crompton. They were both



Mary began reading nursery comics like *Rainbow* and *Playbox* before graduating to *Magnet* at the age of seven.



As a child, Mary "felt a strong identification" with Richmal Crompton's William.

extraordinarily skilled in their use of the English language and they were also amazingly perceptive: very, very witty, and their humour has never gone stale. Those two I would probably put above everybody else, with Frank Richards a very close second."

Which books in your collection were the hardest to find?

"Well that's very simple. One of my most difficult tasks was to build a complete set of Dorita Fairlie Bruce. I've now managed it — all the books and all the short stories, which I'm very thrilled about. It took me over a quarter of a century. One or two of the schoolgirl stories were difficult to find, for some reason. *Nancy in the Sixth* was very difficult. But the book of Dorita Fairlie Bruce's which constantly eluded me was one of her historical novels called *Mistress-Mariner*, which is by no means her best book, as I discovered when I did eventually acquire it. But I think that was the hardest one, and I paid more money for that

book than any other book I've ever bought. In one sense it wasn't worth it, but, of course, it *was* worth it because it completed my Dorita Fairlie Bruce collection, and the extraordinary sense of achievement I got after a quarter of a century of searching made it worth having and worth paying for!"

How extensive is your collection?

"I have absolutely thousands of books, and if you count the weekly and the monthly papers and magazines, it's many thousands. I do actually discard books, especially books I've bought for research. I find myself saying, 'No the time has come, I'm never going to read these again.' I have to say that it seems to make no difference at all to the size of my collection. It still seems to be vast!"

Is condition important to you?

"If I can get first editions in dustjackets, that is absolutely wonderful. But otherwise I would opt for a battered copy as long as it was not actually physically dirty or horrible. If they're

just research tools, I'll accept them in almost any condition as long as they're complete. I know I might well be discarding them afterwards."

So dustjackets are important to you?

"Yes. In fact I think I'd prefer a second or third edition of a book with a nice dustjacket than a first edition without a jacket. You see I'm not really in the collecting business as an investment. Primarily I'm in it for the joy that the books give me."

How do you add to your collection?

"In recent years, most of the things I've bought are from dealers' catalogues. I find very little from browsing through secondhand bookshops. Dealers who know my wants are much more likely to come up with what I need."

Have you ever come across any real bargains?

"No, not really. But I have been given some fine and valuable gifts by other authors and collectors: signed editions, jacketed editions, first editions, things that I would probably not otherwise have acquired. Generally speaking, the world of book collecting is a remarkably generous one."

Have you read most of the books in your collection?

"No. It's absolutely impossible. I would love to read them all but I know I never could. My collection is probably ten, or possibly twenty, lifetimes' reading. But I do a great deal of browsing."

Which contemporary children's writers do you particularly enjoy?

"Alan Garner: very innovative, very imaginative. Anne Fine: a great command of language and extremely perceptive, touching on the wit of someone like Richmal Crompton. Joan Aiken, who has written some extremely good adventure/suspense stories."

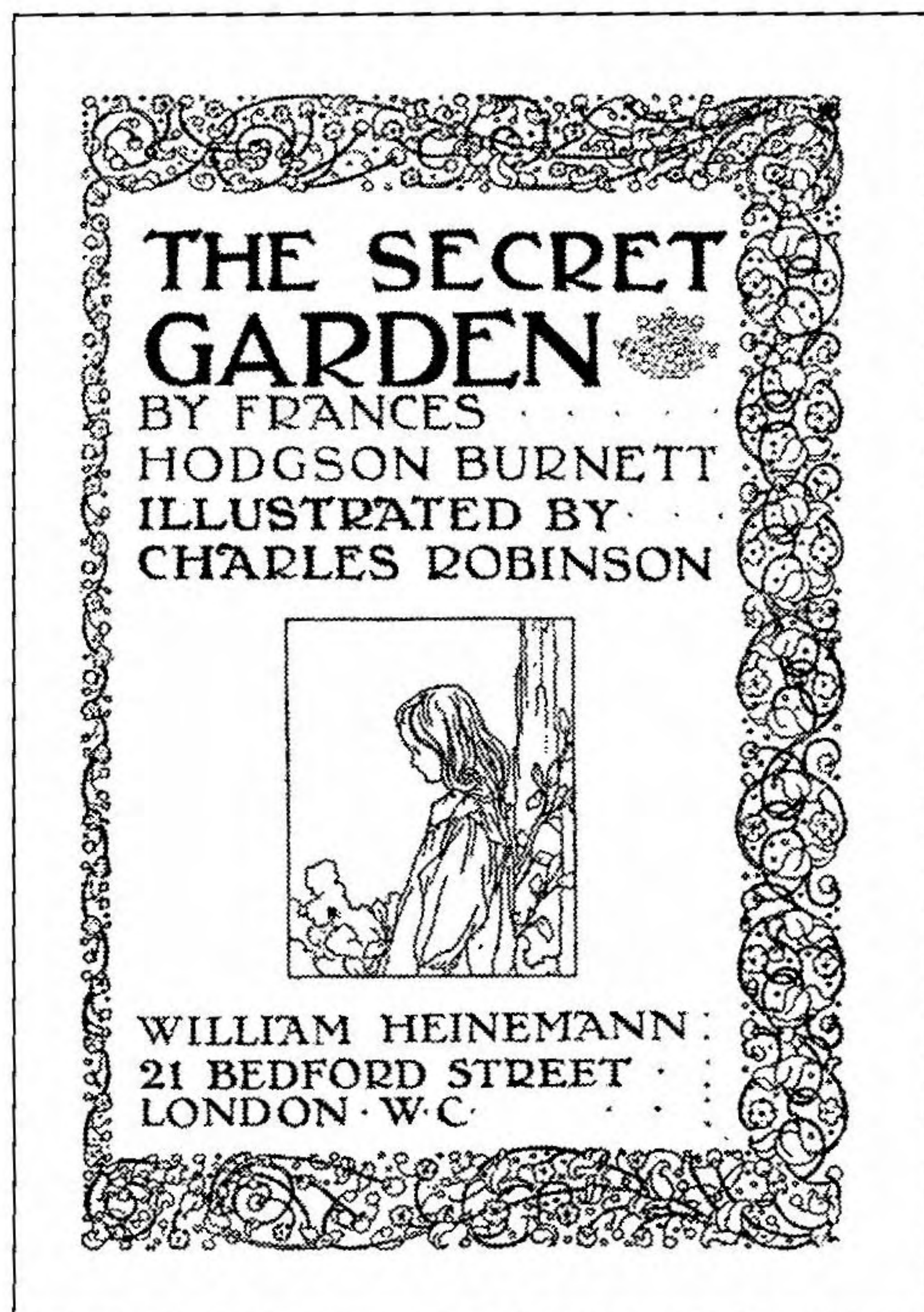
What do you think about the politically correct editorial changes sometimes made to classic children's books from the 1930s, '40s and '50s?

"I think it is totally and absolutely over the top and unnecessary. I do agree that occasionally certain changes might be made to avoid hurting the feelings of contemporary readers, bearing in mind that we now live in a very ethnically mixed society. But I feel that these changes should be made with great discretion

and not in a heavy censorship way. Sometimes I feel it can even be covered in a short foreword, which may be better than changing the atmosphere of the story.

"There is also the question of the class censorship where there was a feeling that books should never be middle class any more; they should be working class so that every child identified with them. I think this is ridiculous. We all grew up reading about children in very different circumstances from our own and loved it because it widened our horizons. If you took that to the ultimate extreme you'd never produce stories about magic, because magic doesn't really exist in ordinary life and so you could say we should never have magical stories for children — which, in fact, some of the Victorian writers *did* say, and I think it's absolutely wrong. Fortunately 'politically correct' censorship seems to be slowing down now."

On the subject of magic stories, what do you think of Harry Potter?



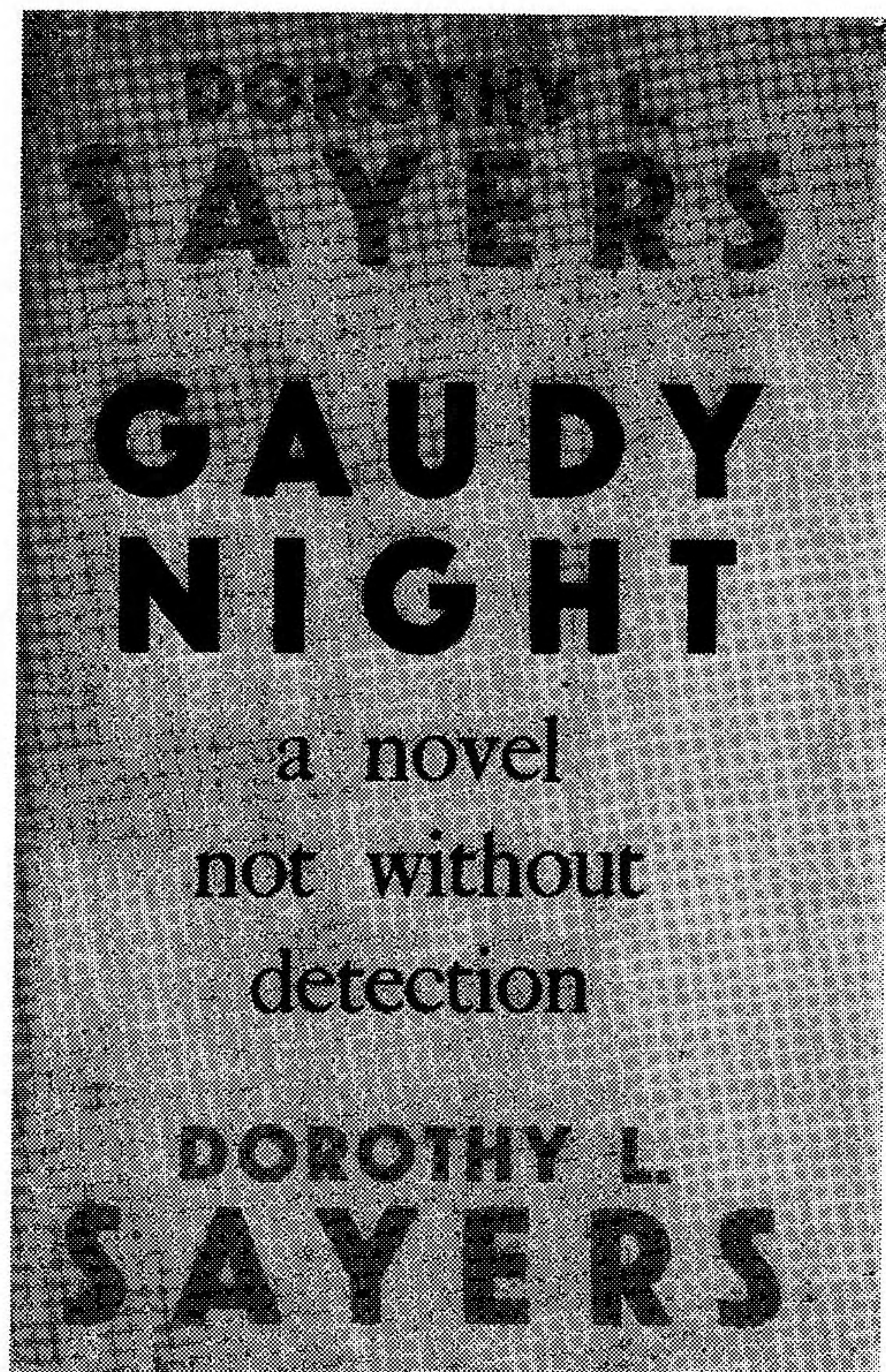
*She considers **The Secret Garden** "one of the best children's stories ever written".*

"Well, of course, the books are excellent. J.K. Rowling is extremely clever. She's put together wonderful characters and wonderful backgrounds, and she's used the microcosmic, enclosed world of the boarding school story to brilliant effect. She's carried on a great tradition of school stories which we had all through the twentieth century and added to it these marvellous magical elements which children still respond to. She's done it well enough for children to find it believable as, indeed, did writers like Edith Nesbit, Enid Blyton and others in their time. I still don't understand why the stories have this across-the-board cult appeal, not only to children but also to adults. Is it because some adults never read magical stories when they were young and that they are now discovering them for the first time? Is it that the generation that grew up on politically correct literature is now being exposed to something else and is really beginning to enjoy it?"

Do you think the Harry Potter phenomenon will last?



Mary loves "everything by Jane Austen", and considers her "amazingly perceptive" and "very, very witty".



"Of all the detective writers, the one I most enjoy and go back to again and again is Dorothy Sayers."

"Yes I do, but not nearly as obsessively as now. It will be very interesting to see, in fifty years time, whether he's still as popular."

What other book interests have you apart from children's books and those you have already mentioned?

"I am intrigued by certain stories on aviation mainly because during the war I read W.E. Johns' stories of Worrals of the WAAF in the *Girl's Own Paper*. This tied in with everybody's interest in aviation because of the Battle of Britain and the flying heroes of the RAF. I still have my 'Worrals' books and enjoy re-reading them from time to time. Some of the 'Biggles' books I occasionally read and enjoy.

"I love beautiful picture books. There are so many lovely examples from the 1920s and '30s, whether it's the annuals or ordinary books of stories illustrated by people like Margaret Tarrant, Mabel Lucie Attwell and H.R. Millar. I never tire of looking at those.

"I'm very interested in film and old radio programmes, so I have a vast collection of film and radio books, annuals and particularly magazines like *Picturegoer*, *Picture Show* and so on. These are fascinating for browsing. Those of us who grew up in the 1930s and '40s were very influenced by Hollywood and British films and, of course, by radio.

Did you want to be a writer when you were a child?

"Yes. I was always scribbling stories in exercise books but I have to say that as soon as I reached the age of ten I thought there were so many wonderful books written that I had nothing special or new to say. It wasn't until I was in my late forties that I found that I had something very particular to say and suddenly found myself writing *You're a Brick, Angela!* — a book about girl's fiction I did with Pat Craig in 1977 — and since then I've never, never stopped writing books, articles, reviews, features, and so on. But it was quite extraordinary to discover this then, and what an absolute joy it has been."

How did you begin writing?

"I started to go to the London Old Boys' Book Club just over thirty years ago. I found myself being very quickly asked to give a talk about the girls' papers that I used to read which wetted my appetite to do further research into the subject. Before I knew it, I was writing articles for *Collector's Digest*, a magazine associated with the Old Boys' Book Clubs. Now I actually edit that magazine and produce it regularly. That really got me going as a writer and it was that which helped me to realise that I *did* have something to say.

"I've written about fifteen books in all. Two books about schoolgirls fiction: *You're a Brick, Angela!* and an anthology of girls' fiction called *Chin Up, Chest Out, Jemima!*, which I enjoyed doing. My biographies, *Richmal Crompton: The Woman Behind William* and *Frank Richards: The Chap Behind the Chums*, seem to be continually in demand. I enjoyed researching them. I've also written, with Pat Craig, a book on women detectives called *The Lady Investigates*, and one on women and children in wartime called *Women and Children First*. I enjoyed writing my biographies but I still think that a book I did on romantic fiction, *And*



As well as books, Mary's collection includes hundreds of weekly story-papers like *The School Friend*.

Then Their Hearts Stood Still, was one of my best books. I also did a book about women aviators in fact and fiction called *Women with Wings*, and that too has rather a special place for me."

Do any of your books hold special memories for you?

"I have to say *You're a Brick, Angela!* because it was the first book that I wrote and it had such a tremendous response and opened the door to so much else in my writing, broadcasting and lecturing life.

You mentioned lecturing. Do you do much of this?

"I'm asked to give about twenty talks every year. I can't always manage so many. This year I did about fifteen, and I'm already booked for six or seven for next year. These are mostly talks to local organisations, book clubs, women's groups, occasionally to universities and to literary societies. And, of course, these also include broadcasts."

What are you working on at present?

"As you know, Norman Wright and I have recently put together a treasury of Enid Blyton school stories for Hodder, which came out this autumn. Pat Craig and I wrote a new piece for the revised edition of *You're a Brick, Angela!*, which appeared earlier this year. I'm working on an autobiographical book, which is taking some time, and I am planning to do a book on my working life with Krishnamurti, the spiritual leader and philosopher. I want to do quite a lot more travelling. I still haven't visited New York or Venice and I plan to see them both before I die."

Finally, what would your three 'desert island' books be?

"An omnibus edition of Jane Austen, containing all her six novels. I would have to take at least one book by Richmal Crompton, probably *Still William*, which I think is her very best. My third book would be an omnibus of the 'Lord Peter Wimsey' stories."

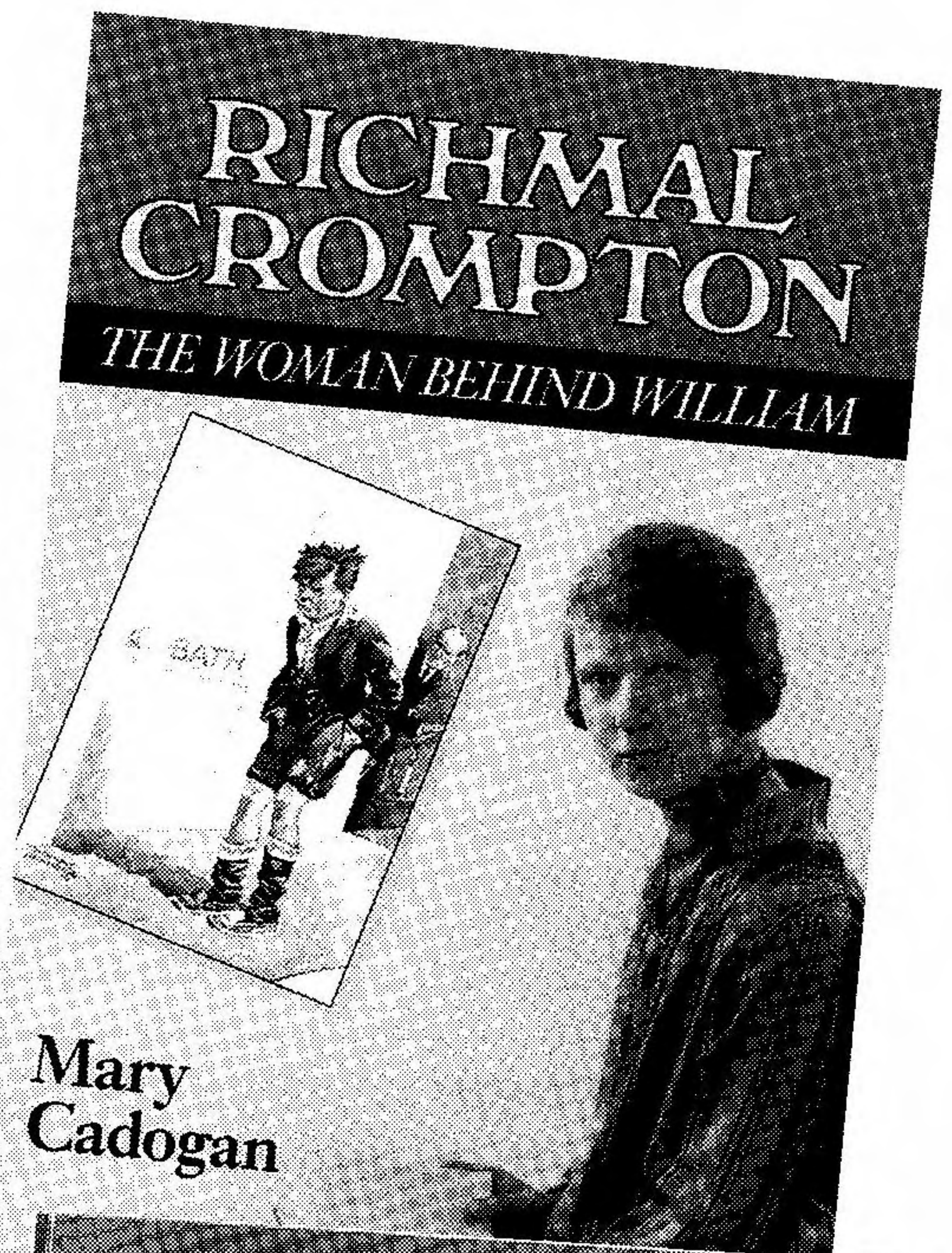
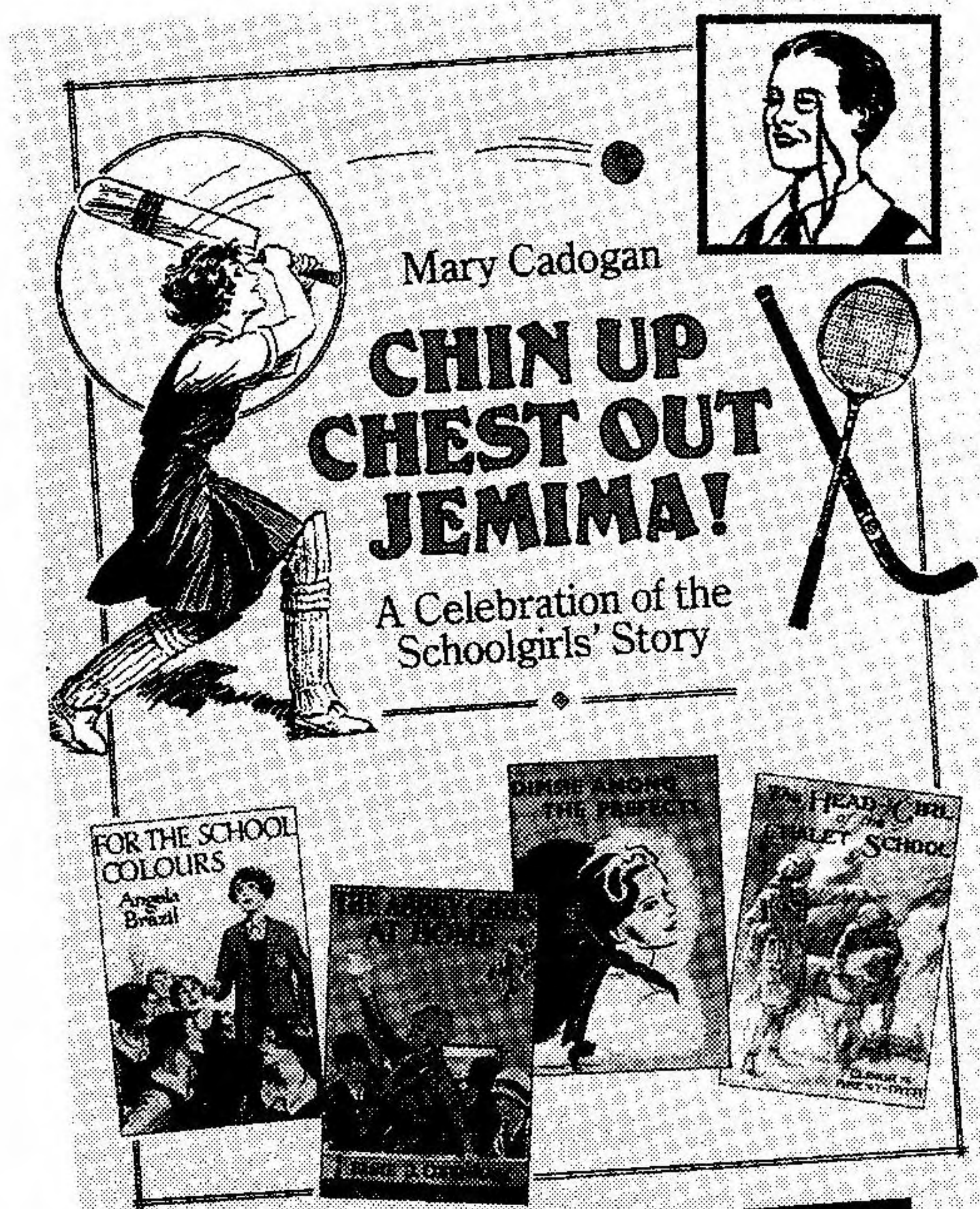
Mary discovered the 'Worrals' books of W.E. Johns during the war and still enjoys re-reading them.



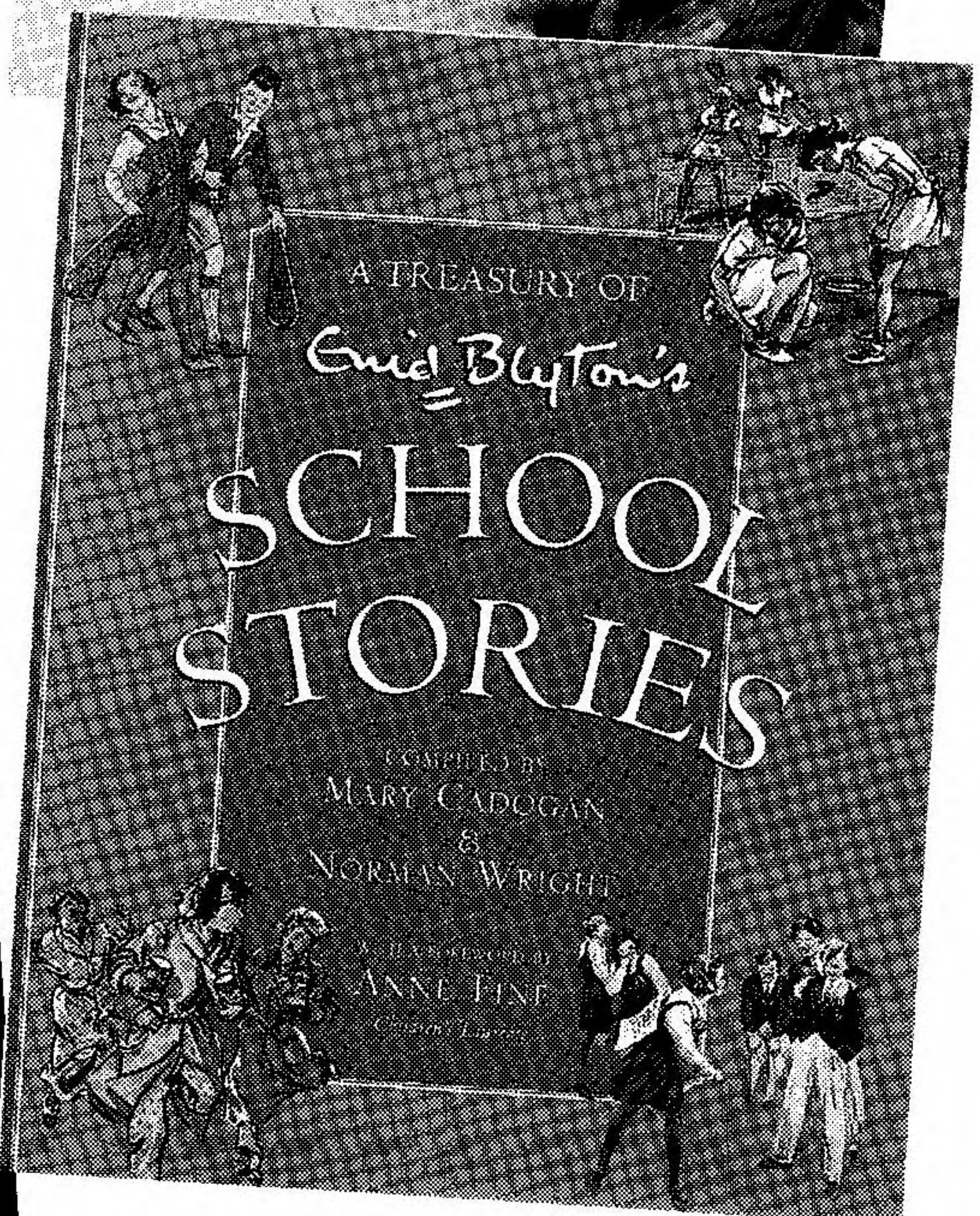
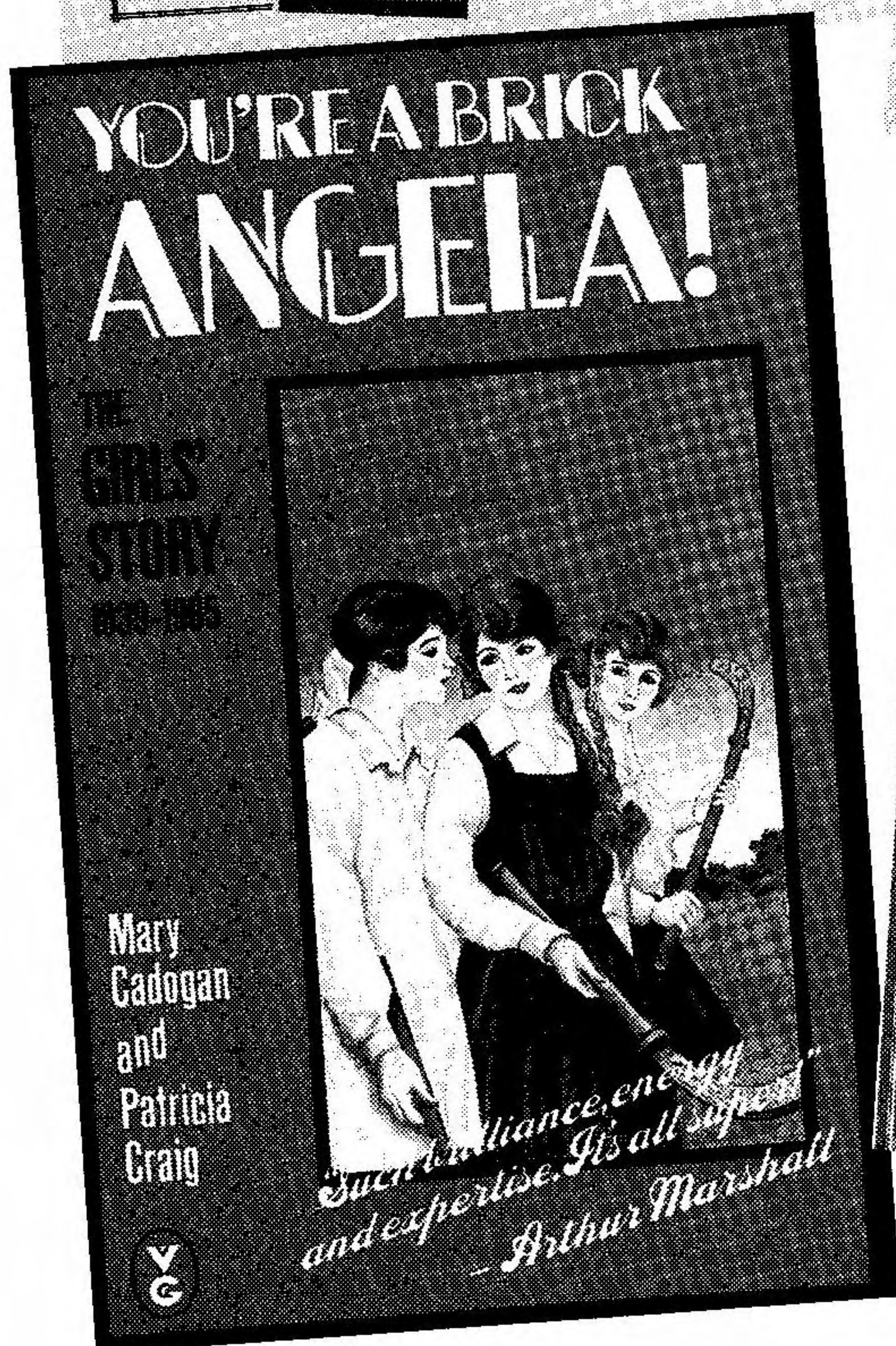
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Mary Cadogan



A selection of Mary Cadogan's many books, including her recently-published collection of Enid Blyton's *School Stories* (above).