

**Ridley, Rosalind. 2016. *Peter Pan and the Mind of J. M. Barrie: An Exploration of Cognition and Consciousness*.**

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J. M. Barrie is the writer of the Peter Pan books. The magical story of the boy who can fly to his “Neverland” was published and staged in theatres early in the twentieth century. It brought the writer fame and wealth. The fame certainly relies to a large extent on the universal theme of the stories: the adult search for the lost carelessness and innocence of childhood, for “the child who lives in the heart of the adult” (2). More precisely, one of the stories’ main themes is the search for love, or to quote Ridley from the text, “The sought-after price is always tender loving care” (5). Although Barrie invented the stories to amuse the children of a befriended family, the audiences of the original books were adults. The books were too difficult to be read by children on their own, and were probably too difficult to understand for younger listeners. Later adaptations were made that suited the language skills of younger children. It is fair to say that the adventures of Peter Pan and his friends (and enemies) have become classic stories in our culture. They are passed on from generation to generation via books, television series, and animated films.

The life of Barrie has been the topic of popular and academic interest. The 2004 movie *Finding Neverland* tells the story of how Barrie was inspired by his contact with the sons of the Llewelyn Davies family to write the Peter Pan stories. In her book, Ridley uses part 1 to introduce the content and background in which the books were written and to sketch

the life-course of their writer. Barrie became famous and rich after writing *Peter Pan* and was considered an important cultural figure at the time. At the same time, he wasn’t a beloved person. He had trouble maintaining normal relationships with other adults, and he seems to not have been liked by many of his contemporaries. Ridley quotes from a letter by the already then famous psychologist William James, who had invited Barrie while he was on a trip in the United States: “Yesterday we had J. M. Barrie and his wife . . . and invited a roomful of our fellow citizens to see them. Small was the reward we got from his presence, since Barrie neither smiled nor spoke, in spite of the fact that he, as it were, demanded the invitation and is one of the most exquisite writers of his age” (21).

The description of Barrie and his life is fascinating (in a somewhat depressing sense), as is Ridley’s account of Barrie’s friendships with prepubertal boys, which were considered unproblematic at the time, and they only became the topic of academic (and nonacademic) discourse much later in the twentieth century. The bulk—and most interesting—part of the book is not about the person Barrie, though. The thesis that Ridley sets out to prove is that Barrie was ahead of his time concerning the psychological insights in the Peter Pan books. Barrie expresses his insights more than once in the form of *whimsicalities*, odd and creative usages of language. This reminds us of *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865), but whereas language and logic are topics of interest

in themselves in *Alice*, Barrie uses language play to illustrate insights into the human psyche. An example case is the story of a mother tidying up her children's minds when they are asleep. The story describes how the mother puts memories in the right places, removing some memories while retaining others. It is now believed that sleep indeed serves such a restorative function, with cognitive replay that would serve to keep some memories at the cost of forgetting others.

There are several examples in the book in which Barrie illustrates psychological phenomena that only much later would become part of mainstream (academic) psychology (or cognitive science).

An example is the James–Lange theory of emotion. Although this theory was developed in Barrie's time (partially by William James), it was not commonplace yet. The theory states that we become aware of our mood (or emotional state) via our bodily state. Because we realize that we shiver, we understand that we have a certain emotion. When we cry we understand that we're sad, and so on. Ridley shows how Barrie formulates this position when he states that the fairies don't say that they feel happy, but that they feel "dancey" (78). The bodily state (or action) gives rise to the emotion in this line of thought. Barrie then goes on to describe how the fairies forget how to dance when they are sad. This is an instance of mood-dependent memory, and it underlines the close connection in a James–Lange theory between emotion and bodily state.

A similar story goes for the classification of knowledge and different types of memories. Ridley shows how Barrie illustrates the difference between semantic and procedural memory when Peter Pan asks ducks to teach him how to swim. The ducks are unable to do this effectively since it is a skill they have over-learned so much that they don't have access to the explicit knowledge needed to explain how to swim. This distinction is very important in modern memory research, and it is accepted that different kinds of knowledge are stored

differently in our cognitive system. Barrie shows even more insight when he describes how Peter Pan is unable to remember new facts about the world. He is amnesic in this respect, but he does have access to skill-based, procedural memory—he knows how to do things. Ridley shows how these are insights that seem basic in our current cognitive understanding, but were not in Barrie's time.

The main, and most abstract, insight that Barrie seems to have had is the importance of mental representation in our understanding of the human mind. Mental representations are at the heart of cognitive psychology after the so-called Cognitive Revolution. This is illustrated in extremis by showing that Barrie believed that since Peter Pan does not have mental labels for things around him, he is not really thinking at all: "Peter, you see, just said anything that came into his head. . . . If he thought at all, but I don't believe he ever thought" (109).

Whether it is right to assign a vital role to mental representation for our thinking remains a contested position in psychology. This is, however, not the aim of the book. The aim of the book is not to show whether Barrie was *right* about the workings of the human mind, but that he seems to have been ahead of his time. I feel the book succeeds in showing this. The argument is not a formal proof. There is for instance no discussion of suggestions that Barrie made that science has found not to be true (perhaps those don't exist, but it seems reasonable to suggest that not all his insights later became mainstream in psychology), but this is not at all distracting from the main message of the book. The book is a pleasure to read. Ridley is a lucid, to the point, and entertaining writer. She lets Barrie speak via numerous examples, and at the same time she is not afraid to firmly interpret those examples. One thing I missed is the perspective from developmental psychology. Given that Peter Pan (and many other characters) are children, it would have been interesting to see if Barrie's vision on development was as modern

and insightful as his ideas about cognition. Of special interest would be the awkward social position that Peter Pan grows up in and how this affects his cognitive development. All in all I much enjoyed reading this book. The, at first

impression, quirky examples that Barrie gives, combined with the story of his own shattered life, have remained with me since reading the book, and I suspect they will do so for a long time to come.

## **WORKS CITED**

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Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan and Co.

