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BOOK
O F
DRAGONS

E . N E S B I T



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Edith Nesbit, *The Book of Dragons*

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*To Rosamund,
Chief among those for whom these tales are told,
The Book of Dragons is dedicated
in the confident hope
that she, one of these days, will dedicate a book
of her very own making
to the one who now bids
eight dreadful dragons
crouch in all humbleness
at those little brown feet.*

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INTRODUCTION

ONE OF E. NESBIT'S STRENGTHS IS HER ABILITY to couch strong moral messaging in light, humorous packaging. Many of the authors of her time had similar witty styles, but even in her day, the vise of moral relativism was already taking hold. Something surprisingly unique about *The Book of Dragons* is that the dragons are always varying degrees of evil. That might baffle the modern reader. No misunderstood, discriminated-against softies, these beasts do bad things for bad reasons, and the heroes of each tale must rise up and defeat them. Of course, they're not always the villain of the story—that would be a bit predictable—but they're never up to any good.

Along those same lines, each of these fairy tales has a moral buried deep inside it—which you would never know unless you looked closely. So many children—especially those of a stubborn nature—discount a story once they realize it's trying to

teach them something. It gets downgraded from “interesting” to “homework.” Say what you will about Mrs. Nesbit’s relationship with children, she certainly understood them very well, having raised five herself. She has buried these lessons so deep in wit and drama that they remain near-indetectable to the naked eye, or even better, are disguised as a joke. Take this for example:

“[A]nd though she was not very clever, for a Princess, she always tried to do her lessons. Even if you know perfectly well that you can’t do your lessons, you may as well try, and sometimes you find that by some fortunate accident they really *are* done” (p. 20).

Not only that, but her morals are actually *useful*—not “Don’t be bad,” and certainly not the self-centered follow-your-heart “morals” often found in modern children’s media. So many fables are shot in the foot before they can even start because they’re terrified of seeming “judgy.” No negative statements, only light suggestions—not “Don’t hit your brother,” but “Think about how he *feels*.” Nesbit blatantly points out in each one of these tales what is good and what is bad. There’s no mistaking it.

On the other hand, she doesn’t tack on vague, hand wave-y warnings about being naughty. Not to say there’s anything wrong with simple moral tales, but most good children *know* those things, and if every story repeats the same wishy-washy lessons where the bar is so low it’s on the floor, they can be tricked into thinking they’re much better behaved than they actually are. Good children are still tempted to disobedience—when they are told not to go outside, like Harry and Effie in *The*

Deliverers of their Country, not to leave the garden, like George and Jane in *The Ice Dragon*, or not to open a magic book, like the little king in *The Book of Beasts*. Many children might be deceived by someone who seems nice, but who has nasty intentions, like the Princess in *Uncle James*. And they need to learn that curiosity is not *always* a good thing, like Edmund in *Kind Little Edmund*.

These morals only land on the strength of Mrs. Nesbit's style. If Nesbit had just come out and said, "The little king tried to blame books for the consequences of his own disobedience," any child would sense they were being preached at. So she says:

[T]he minute he got on his throne and set his crown on his head, he became infallible—which means that everything he said was right, and that he couldn't possibly make a mistake. So when he said: "There is to be a law forbidding people to open books in schools or elsewhere"—he had the support of at least half of his subjects, and the other half—the grown-up half—pretended to think he was quite right. (p. 10)

She is often referenced as a large source of inspiration for the likes of C. S. Lewis, and it's never more obvious than in these short, comedic stories. (Except, of course, when Nesbit's heroine enters a magical land by means of a wardrobe in her book *The Aunt and Amabel*...) Each tale is eminently *fun* to read, and she utilizes arch British humor to perfection:

And was the nation grateful? Well—the nation was very wet. And by the time the nation had gotten dry again it was interested in the new invention for toasting muffins by electricity, and all the dragons were almost forgotten. Dragons do not seem so important when they are dead and gone, and, you know, there never was a reward offered. (p. 56)

With each story set in wildly different places and times—some in 19th century England, some in vague fantasy-land, one on a Wonderland-esque island—these stories are a perfect, bite-sized sampling of E. Nesbit’s style and method of storytelling. If you aren’t already in love with Nesbit, by the end of *The Book of Dragons*, you will be.

Belle Iverson

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I

THE BOOK OF BEASTS

HE HAPPENED TO BE BUILDING A PALACE WHEN the news came, and he left all the bricks kicking about the floor for Nurse to clear up—but then the news was rather remarkable news. You see, there was a knock at the front door and voices talking downstairs, and Lionel thought it was the man come to see about the gas, which had not been allowed to be lighted since the day when Lionel made a swing by tying his skipping rope to the gas bracket.

And then, quite suddenly, Nurse came in and said, “Master Lionel, dear, they’ve come to fetch you to go and be King.”

Then she made haste to change his smock and to wash his face and hands and brush his hair, and all the time she was doing it Lionel kept wriggling and fidgeting and saying, "Oh, don't, Nurse," and, "I'm sure my ears are quite clean," or, "Never mind my hair, it's all right," and, "That'll do."

"You're going on as if you was going to be an eel instead of a King," said Nurse.

The minute Nurse let go for a moment Lionel bolted off without waiting for his clean handkerchief, and in the drawing room there were two very grave-looking gentlemen in red robes with fur, and gold coronets with velvet sticking up out of the middle like the cream in the very expensive jam tarts.

They bowed low to Lionel, and the gravest one said: "Sire, your great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, the King of this country, is dead, and now you have got to come and be King."

"Yes, please, sir," said Lionel, "when does it begin?"

"You will be crowned this afternoon," said the grave gentleman who was not quite so grave-looking as the other.

"Would you like me to bring Nurse, or what time would you like me to be fetched, and hadn't I better put on my velvet suit with the lace collar?" said Lionel, who had often been out to tea.

"Your Nurse will be removed to the Palace later. No, never mind about changing your suit; the Royal robes will cover all that up."

The grave gentlemen led the way to a coach with eight white horses, which was drawn up in front of the house where

Lionel lived. It was No. 7, on the left-hand side of the street as you go up.

Lionel ran upstairs at the last minute, and he kissed Nurse and said: "Thank you for washing me. I wish I'd let you do the other ear. No—there's no time now. Give me the hanky. Good-bye, Nurse."

"Good-bye, ducky," said Nurse. "Be a good little King now, and say 'please' and 'thank you,' and remember to pass the cake to the little girls, and don't have more than two helps of anything."

So off went Lionel to be made a King. He had never expected to be a King any more than you have, so it was all quite new to him—so new that he had never even thought of it. And as the coach went through the town he had to bite his tongue to be quite sure it was real, because if his tongue was real it showed he wasn't dreaming. Half an hour before he had been building with bricks in the nursery; and now—the streets were all fluttering with flags; every window was crowded with people waving handkerchiefs and scattering flowers; there were scarlet soldiers everywhere along the pavements, and all the bells of all the churches were ringing like mad, and like a great song to the music of their ringing he heard thousands of people shouting, "Long live Lionel! Long live our little King!"

He was a little sorry at first that he had not put on his best clothes, but he soon forgot to think about that. If he had been a girl he would very likely have bothered about it the whole time.

As they went along, the grave gentlemen, who were the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, explained the things which Lionel did not understand.

“I thought we were a Republic,” said Lionel. “I’m sure there hasn’t been a King for some time.”

“Sire, your great-great-great-great-great-grandfather’s death happened when my grandfather was a little boy,” said the Prime Minister, “and since then your loyal people have been saving up to buy you a crown—so much a week, you know, according to people’s means—sixpence a week from those who have first-rate pocket money, down to a halfpenny a week from those who haven’t so much. You know it’s the rule that the crown must be paid for by the people.”

“But hadn’t my great-great-however-much-it-is-grandfather a crown?”

“Yes, but he sent it to be tinned over, for fear of vanity, and he had had all the jewels taken out, and sold them to buy books. He was a strange man; a very good King he was, but he had his faults—he was fond of books. Almost with his last breath he sent the crown to be tinned—and he never lived to pay the tinsmith’s bill.”

Here the Prime Minister wiped away a tear, and just then the carriage stopped and Lionel was taken out of the carriage to be crowned. Being crowned is much more tiring work than you would suppose, and by the time it was over, and Lionel had worn the Royal robes for an hour or two and had had his hand

kissed by everybody whose business it was to do it, he was quite worn out, and was very glad to get into the Palace nursery.

Nurse was there, and tea was ready: seedy cake and plummy cake, and jam and hot buttered toast, and the prettiest china with red and gold and blue flowers on it, and real tea, and as many cups of it as you liked.

After tea Lionel said: "I think I should like a book. Will you get me one, Nurse?"

"Bless the child," said Nurse. "You don't suppose you've lost the use of your legs with just being a King? Run along, do, and get your books yourself."

So Lionel went down into the library. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor were there, and when Lionel came in they bowed very low, and were beginning to ask Lionel most politely what on earth he was coming bothering for now—when Lionel cried out: "Oh, what a worldful of books! Are they yours?"

"They are yours, Your Majesty," answered the Chancellor. "They were the property of the late King, your great-great—"

"Yes, I know," Lionel interrupted. "Well, I shall read them all. I love to read. I am so glad I learned to read."

"If I might venture to advise Your Majesty," said the Prime Minister, "I should not read these books. Your great—"

"Yes?" said Lionel, quickly.

"He was a very good King—oh, yes, really a very superior King in his way, but he was a little—well, strange."

"Mad?" asked Lionel, cheerfully.