

“Wild flowers don’t have such deep meanings, I’m certain”: Reading Practices in Edith Nesbit’s *The Wonderful Garden*

This paper seeks to examine and place in context Edith Nesbit’s novel *The Wonderful Garden; or, The Three C’s* (1911). This lesser-known Nesbit novel features the titular “Three C’s”—Claudia, Charles and Caroline—who take the Victorian custom of coded bouquet-giving to humorous extremes and into equally comical spell making. Published in the late stage of Nesbit’s career, *The Wonderful Garden* remained in print for several decades after publication and was reviewed favorably alongside Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* when both of these “garden” texts appeared in 1911; however, *The Wonderful Garden* is no longer in print and has received little, if any, critical attention. In this paper, I will argue for the resuscitation of this novel as, if not a key text, at least a notable one for understanding Nesbit’s trademark narrative approach which, as Marah Gubar has argued, encourages her child readers (if not always her child characters) to employ complex critical reading skills. Furthermore, I will extend to *The Wonderful Garden* Gubar’s reading of Nesbit’s narrative method which “incites young people to commandeer more completely the scripts they are given, revise rather than simply reenact them” (411). Specifically, I will argue that, unlike the romanticized use of the nourishing garden motif in Burnett’s text, Nesbit’s deployment of the inter-text *The Language of Flowers* invites child readers to be suspicious of simple symbolic views of nature, demonstrates the failures that may result from reading symbolic meaning literally, and asks child readers to develop a healthy skepticism towards both sentimental texts and social practices.