Self-conscious about the fact that adult-produced stories shape children, Golden Age children’s authors represented young people as capable of reshaping stories, of revising rather than simply reenacting the scripts handed to them by adults. Their ground-breaking decision to employ child narrators provides the best concrete illustration of this tendency. In tracing how this technique caught on, this account acknowledges the crucial role played by critically neglected writers such as Dinah Craik and Juliana Ewing, even as it challenges the common assumption that the act of employing a child narrator allows adult authors to obscure their own presence in order to secure the child reader’s unreflective identification with an ideal of innocence. Rather than characterize child storytellers in Romantic terms, as visionary beings who effortlessly produce original work, these writers depict child narrators as highly socialized, hyper-literate subjects who work with grown-ups, peers, and pre-existing texts in composing their stories. The child narrator thus provides Golden Age authors with a vehicle to explore how young people enmeshed in ideology might nevertheless deviate from rather than ventriloquize various social, cultural, and literary protocols—including the imperialistic ethos that often pervades boys’ adventure stories.

Artful Dodgers
Marah Gubar

This book proposes a fundamental reconception of the 19th-century attitude toward the child. The Romantic ideology of innocence spread
more slowly than we think, it contends, and the people whom we assume were most committed to it—children’s authors and members of the infamous “cult of the child”—were actually deeply ambivalent. Writers such as Lewis Carroll, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and J. M. Barrie often resisted the growing cultural pressure to erect a strict barrier between child and adult, innocence and experience. Instead of urging young people to mold themselves to match a static ideal of artless simplicity, they frequently conceived of children as precociously literate, highly socialized beings who—though indisputably shaped by the strictures of civilized life—could nevertheless cope with such influences in creative ways. By entertaining the idea that contact with the adult world does not necessarily victimize children, these authors reacted against Dickensian plots which imply that youngsters who work and play alongside adults (including the so-called Artful Dodger) are not in fact inventive or ingenious enough to avoid a sad fate. To find the truly artful child characters from this era, the book maintains, we must turn to children’s literature, a genre that celebrates the canny resourcefulness of young protagonists without claiming that they enjoy unlimited power and autonomy.

Partners in Crime
Marah Gubar

in Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature

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Like many of the other authors studied here, Nesbit portrays children as marked but not necessarily disabled by the influence of adults and their texts. Blurring the line between child and adult, reader and writer, she characterizes young and old alike as “treasure seekers” who trespass onto other people’s property: grown-ups plunder the realm of childhood for literary material, while children swipe scenarios for their games from storybooks and shape their speech and behavior around texts created by adults. To keep this cycle of cross-colonization pleasurable and productive for both parties, Nesbit suggests, children must learn to become better borrowers, to plunder texts selectively, stealing what appeals to them and rejecting—or revising—the rest. Thus, her child protagonists get into trouble when they adhere too closely to treasured texts, whereas magical adventures begin when they improvise on texts rather than plagiarizing them. Nesbit’s use of a child narrator in The Story of the Treasure Seekers and its sequels provides child readers with an extended lesson in how to deviate from rather than ventriloquize what
they read: Oswald Bastable manages to find his own inimitable style by mimicking, criticizing, and improvising on the work of other authors.