The adventure story tradition dates back to antiquity, with epics such as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* charting the daring exploits of flawed heroes. While children have always had an appetite for adventure, stories written specifically for the child-reader are a more recent development, with contested origins. John Locke’s influential *Some thoughts concerning education* (1693) played a pivotal role in rethinking notions of childhood and also in transforming the publishing industry. As childhood—for the privileged classes, at least—became a time for exploration through play, so books aimed specifically at young readers began to appear, with John Newbery’s *Little pretty pocket-book* (1744) often cited as one of the first examples to appear in English.

While they were not specifically written for the young, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s travels* (1726) are often regarded as founding texts of the children’s adventure genre and, as such, they have frequently been adapted and abridged. These two popular works will form the starting point for *Reading adventures*, an exhibition that will open at the Noel Shaw Gallery in the Baillieu Library on 16 July. With three major collections of literature for children (the Ian McLaren, Frederick Morgan and Public Schools collections), the University of Melbourne Library offers a treasure trove of rare texts, with particular strengths in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

By the final third of the 19th century, reading in Britain was no longer the preserve of the wealthy, with W.E. Forster’s *Education Act* (1870) mandating primary education for all children under the age of 12 in England and Wales. The literary world was keen to capitalise on this new wave of working-class readers and the adventure story became one of the most popular forms for children and adolescents. The success of the genre was at least partly owing to its cross-class appeal, and while many of the stories were aimed at young boys—disseminating moral values such as honour and ‘manliness’—increasing numbers of adventures for girls also appeared, especially in colonial settings.

*Reading adventures* will map the development of the adventure story, celebrating both the rise in adventure plots and the aesthetics of the books themselves. With their vivid primary-coloured covers and brilliant gold lettering, novels by authors such as R.M. Ballantyne, G.A. Henty and W.H.G. Kingston seem almost to jump from the shelves, so one can only imagine their appeal to their very first readers. Developments in the mass-production of books in the final decades of the 19th century meant that, for the first time, these beautifully bound and exquisitely decorated volumes were widely available. Increasingly cheaper paper, moreover, allowed even the most socially disadvantaged of readers to follow narratives in serial form through publications like the *Boy’s Own* and *Girl’s Own* papers.

While each of the University of Melbourne Library’s three children’s collections has strong holdings in tales of adventure, the Frederick Morgan Collection in particular is underpinned by a great love for the genre. When it was donated to the university in 1954 by a respected English librarian, Frederick Morgan, and his daughter Penelope (also a librarian), the collection preserved over 1000 rare children’s books (today the collection stands at more than 4000) at a time when such volumes were generally not considered worthy of serious attention. Morgan, in a memoir of his boyhood, wrote with great animation and affection of stories by Ballantyne, Kingston and Marryat, remarking, ‘What a great period the 19th Century was for the publication of exciting books …

Has anything approaching it happened since?2 Certainly, Morgan was right to identify the 19th century as the adventure story’s heyday, with tales of pioneers, outdoor escapades, exploration and seafaring gaining popularity at that time. His comments also superbly capture the imaginative appeal that adventure stories of the past continue to hold today.

Dennis Butts has suggested that the Napoleonic Wars generated enthusiasm for naval and military dramas among British readers, with writers such as Captain Frederick Marryat, a retired naval officer, recognising the attraction of exotic overseas adventures for children.3 The growth of the British Empire broadened the horizons for adventure writers in terms of their settings, while at the same time offering new markets for readers in settler colonies where cultural ties to the ‘mother country’ remained important. The exhibition will examine the adventure narrative’s appeal to the child and also its nostalgic charm for the adult reader. It will distinguish between the tales of colonial derring-do in which the exploits of real-life figures such as General Gordon were transposed into fiction, and stories featuring vulnerable child protagonists. Drawing on works such as Ethel C. Pedley’s Dot and the kangaroo (1899) it will
consider how the adventure genre empowers the child. It will also pay attention to conventions like the orphan story (in which young people unencumbered by familial ties venture forth to seek their fortunes) and the ‘lost in the wilderness’ formula, which harks back to *Robinson Crusoe* and depicts the child thrown upon her or his own resources.

Combining old favourites like Ballantyne and Henty with comparatively neglected works like T.T. Jeans’ *On foreign service* (1911) and Ellen Bosworth’s *Shelley and the bushfire mystery* (1972), *Reading adventures* will showcase the versatility of the adventure story genre, while revealing its transformation in the 20th century. The exhibition will consider how these stories promoted socially approved forms of behaviour. Yet it will also explore the glee with which such stories licensed transgression, through thrilling tales like pirate adventures. The display will range from airborne adventures to exploits in the snow, while taking in tales of travel, exploration and chivalry. With its vibrant selection of books, offering a taster of the much broader riches on offer in the Rare Books Collection, University of Melbourne Library, the exhibition will demonstrate that reading can offer great adventures indeed.
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